

CHAPTER 6 EARLY CENTRES OF CIVILIZATION IN NIGERIA

Objectives

At the end of this chapter, students should be able to:

- locate Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin on a map of Nigeria;
- identify the main feature of the civilization of Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin;
- describe some of the artistic works of Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin;
- examine the relations between the peoples of Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin.

Introduction

In Nigeria, Nok, Daimia, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin are described as early centres of civilization. The age and varieties of artworks found in these centres suggest that Nigerian groups from the distant past had well organized societies and cultures just like people in other parts of the world. They can also help to correct any wrong impression that Nigerian groups did not have a rich cultural past.

This chapter will consider the main features of these civilizations, their relationships with each other and their significance in Nigerian history.

6.1 Nok

Nok is the name of a village located in Taba local government area, in the Southern part of Kaduna state. Today, Nok is known all over the world especially in academic circles. Artefacts from Nok are found in many museums in different parts of the world.

Nok culture covers such areas as Kaduna, Plateau, Taruga (south-east, Abuja). Objects discovered in the Nok culture area included terracotta figurines or models of human heads, human legs, monkey heads etc. These materials are of great antiquity or very old. The excavated studied by the archaeologist Benard Fagg are dated to 500 BC and 200 AD.

Nok Civilization is the oldest recorded culture in Nigeria and is believed to have influenced other culture centres North and South of River Niger.

Groups found in Nok culture area had knowledge of iron technology early as 300 BC. In Taruga, one of the places where terracotta models were found, there were also traces of very old smelting finances.

These discoveries at Nok suggest that those who produced them had knowledge of iron works. This means that there must have been people among them who were involved in smithing and in the production of the iron tools.

Iron tools produced in the Nok culture area were used in agriculture and food production. Historians and archaeologists believe that the Nok people were involved in subsistence farming.

It is also possible that there were professional sculptors and carvers who made a living producing the popular terracotta sculptures.



Fig. 6.1: Nok terracotta head

6.2 Daima

Daima is located close to the Nigerian-Cameroon border, East of Dikwa in Borno state. It is a settlement mound with the appearance of a small hill. It has a long history of human habitation. The mound itself is believed to have been in existence since the 6th century BC.

Excavation carried out in the area by Graham Connah, between 1965 and 1966, show that Daima passed through three cultural periods.

Archaeological findings show that the earliest people lived in the stone age and made use of cultural materials common in the age such as stone axe, grinders, clay and wood implements.

Artifacts discovered above this level indicate that the stone age culture gave way to an iron age culture. At this level, they made use of iron implements such as iron axes, knives and swords.

At the third level, there is evidence of activities in copper and bronze works in addition to production of iron implements.

Trade relations appeared to have increased which was evident in the presence of new products in copper and bronze vessels.

The introduction of iron works might have affected agriculture by ensuring more effective production due to improved implements. Other iron tools such as sword and cutlasses must have been produced for hunting and for defence.

Dima shows a progressive development of a society from the stone period to the iron age culture. The iron age being a time when men began to use iron implements in place of stone implements.

6.3 Igbo-Ukwu

Igbo-Ukwu is a village located thirty kilometers, South East of Onitsha, Anambra state. The site was accidentally discovered in 1939 by artisans working for the Isaiah Anozii who unearthed a collection of very old bronze objects in the Anozii family compound in Igbo Ukwu.

The colonial government got interested in the findings and planned to excavate the areas. This plan was probably delayed by the Second World War (1939 – 1945). Actual excavations took place between 1959 and 1964 and was carried out by Professor Thirstan Shaw. The area was organized into three sites to ensure a thorough excavation. The first site produced decorated bronze water pots, ornaments, bronzed bells and anklets.

The second site yielded a bronzed leopard skill, a crown, ivory tasks and wrist ornaments and human skeletal remains.

The third site was excavated in 1964 and yielded thirty five wristlets and six small staff ornaments.

One of the features of the Igbo-Ukwu findings is that many of the items represent ceremonial wears and vessels such as a crown wristlets and anklets.

Many of the items were artistically designed and decorated. One examples of this was the Igbo-Ukwu bronze vase.

The Igbo-Ukwu collection has many items that are made of bronze. The leopard head, the altar stand and the vase were all bronzed materials.

There were also, among the collection, many materials made of copper such as copper wristlets, anklets and crown.

The Igbo-Ukwu discoveries show a knowledge of iron works by the people that developed the culture. They must have produced professional blacksmiths and sculptors.

The blacksmiths produced not only luxury art works but also practical agricultural tools used for farming the forest environment and for cultivation.

Igbo-Ukwu civilization reveals the development of kingship institution. This is supported by the presence of the crown and ceremonial clothes. For this reason, Igbo-Ukwu is said to have been influenced by the Nri kingship institution.

Some of the materials like lead and copper used in bronze casting must have come from other Igbo groups or outside Igbo land with which Igbo-Ukwu had social and economic relations.



Fig. 6.2: Igbo-Ukwu bronze vase

6.4 Ile-Ife

Ile-Ife an ancient town, located in Oyo State Nigeria, is regarded as the place of origin of Yoruba civilization. Ife has a long history of human settlement. Ife's civilization is famous for its life size terracotta and bronze forms which represent a form of human heads, some of which were found at Olokun grave.

These art works are portraits of real human beings, especially those of Ife rulers. For this reason, Ife arts are described as naturalistic. Objects are presented in their natural appearance and not in stylised forms.

One of the prominent features of Ife art works is the bead design around the neck, ankles and wrists of the figures. Archaeologists and historians are of the opinion that Ife art culture originated from Nok because of they had in common bead designs.

Today, bronze and terracotta heads from Ife are found in popular museums around the world. Some are found in Ile-Ife itself and in the Lagos museum.

Ife artistic works in bronze and terracotta are evidence of a well developed and organized society that developed in this area long ago. They portray an organized kingship institution and a creative population involved in the production of iron implements and hard works. Blacksmithing must have been well developed.

Professional sculptors in bronze and terracotta must have emerged and developed among the Ife people. These people must have continued to improve and perfect their skills to be able to produce such quality works.

Iron implements produced by the blacksmiths were used to exploit the forest environment more effectively than wood or stone implements.

The use of this iron implements in productive activities must have allowed the people to engage in farming and to produce food and other materials needed to support the rulers and other groups not directly involved in food production.



Fig. 6.3: Ife terracotta head

6.5 Benin

Benin is today located in Edo state of Nigeria. It is one of the most important archaeological sites in Nigeria. Many archaeological sites have been worked in Benin by such archaeologists as Graham Gonnah and William Fagg.

In the pre-colonial period, Benin art came to international attention after the British military expedition against Benin in 1897. The invading British colonial soldiers carted away from Benin important art works including the famous Benin ivory mask.

Today, Benin art works are found in different parts of the world, in museum and in art galleries.

Benin craftsmen were involved in ivory carving, copper and bronze casting. It is believed that Benin craftsmen carved the famous FESTAC '77 ivory mask. Benin craftsmen used all the lost wax technique in production.

Benin had a very rich art history. The craftsmen were organized in guilds or trade associations. Benin art works remained an important source of revenue for the state. European traders brought ivory and bronze products from Benin.



Fig. 6.4: Benin bronze head of a queen mother

6.6 The Life of Man in Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin

Human beings found in the early centres of civilization were involved in different activities. One common activity among them is craft-making. As far back as 300 BC, Nok civilization was able to acquire knowledge of iron and from here it is believed iron technology spread to the other centres.

Iron technology produced professional groups of crafts men who worked in iron, bronze and copper. They produced iron tools and weapons with which the people were able to farm the environment and improve agricultural production. They produced such goods as iron-headed axe, iron-headed hoe and spears which they used for farm work and for the defence of their communities.

People were also involved in agriculture. It is believed that people in the Nok culture area practiced agriculture in forms of crop production and animal husbandry.

The farmers produced the food and other material needs for the rulers and those who were not directly involved in agriculture such as the sculptors. They therefore occupied a very important place in the society.

Trade was another major economic activity undertaken by human beings in these early centres of civilization. There were those involved in trade. This trade took place in two forms namely short distance trade and long distance trade. Agricultural commodities and manufacturers were the main items exchanged. It was through long distance trade that the knowledge of iron technology was transferred from the centres of iron production to other areas.

6.7 Relationships between the Peoples of Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin

There was significant relationship between the peoples of Nok, Ife, Benin and Igbo-Ukwu. One common feature among these groups was that they all developed into iron-producing societies. This level of development is higher than stone age culture because iron culture produces better tools and weapons.

It has been established by archaeological studies that Nok is the oldest iron age culture in Nigeria. It became iron producing in 300 AD, which Daima in the Borno area became iron producing in 500 AD. For this reason, it is believed that iron technology must have been transferred to other parts of Nigeria north and south of Niger from Nok. So there is a relationship between Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin.

This relationship is also emphasized in Nok and Ife culture which share the bead designs on their terracotta. Also Benin art in bronze sculpture is said to have been transferred from Ife through Owo.

From Benin, bronze pieces are distributed to parts of the Delta and Igala. From Igala bronze casting techniques might have spread to Nupe.

Another common feature among these peoples is the spread of the bronze regalia or ceremonial wears. This is found not only among Ife and Benin culture but in the Igbo-Ukwu excavations.

All these examples suggest that there was significant relationship between the peoples of these civilizations. These relationship might been established and maintained through long distance trade.

6.8 Significance of Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin for Nigerian History

The early centres of civilization are significant in Nigerian history. Evidence from these centres show that groups in Nigeria passed from one stage of development to the other. Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, Nok and Daima transited from the stone age to the iron age and were able to develop economic and social organizations that enabled them live a settled life. This knowledge also will make use to have respect for our history.

The development of iron culture gave these early settlers better tools and weapons to control their environment. For instance, spears, iron-headed axes, iron-headed hoes and cutlasses were produced and used in agriculture to increase food production.

Discoveries made in these early centres of civilization reveal striking similarities between the art works produced in them. For instance, artefacts found in Nok closely resemble those collected in Ife. This fact emphasizes the economic and cultural exchange that had existed among various groups in Nigeria.

The history of these cultural centres had revealed that Nigerian groups were involved in various productive activities: manufacturing, commerce and farming. Ritual and ceremonial objects were also produced and exchanged.

Artworks from these countries are now found in popular museums and art galleries around the globe. This is a recognition of the important achievements of these groups in the area of arts. In addition, Ife, Nok and Igbo-Ukwu remain important tourism and resource centres. Foreign tourists and scholars visit Nok's archaeological sites and museums for sight seeing and research.

Nigeria has a culturally rich past. These early centres of civilization help to emphasize this point and to show that sometime in the past, Nigerian groups through individual and collective creativity passed from one level of development to another.

It is also comforting to know that all about the Nigerian past was not only one of wars but people were also involved in production and recreation.

Summary

- In Nigeria, Nok, Daima, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin are described as early centres of civilization.
- Nok is the name of a village located in Taba local government area, Kaduna state.
- Artifacts from Nok are found in many museums and art gallery in different parts of the world.
- Nok culture covers such areas as Kaduna, Plateau and Taruga.
- Terracotta figurines were discovered in the Nok culture area.
- Daima is located close to the Nigerian-Cameroon border in Borno state.

- Archaeological findings show that Daima passed through the Stone Age and the Iron Age stages of development.
- Igbo-Ukwu is a village located thirty kilometres south east of Onitsha.
- One of the features of the Igbo-Ukwu findings is that many of the items represent ceremonial wears.
- Ife is located in Oyo state and is regarded as the place of origin of the Yoruba.
- Ife civilization is famous for its life size terracotta and bronze human heads.
- A district bead design is one of the important features of Ife art.
- Benin is located in Edo state of Nigeria.
- In Benin the crafts men were organized in guilds or trade associations.
- There is close relationship between the early centres of civilization in Nigeria.

Revision Questions

Objectives

1. One of these is an early centre of civilization in Nigeria:
 - A. Lagos
 - B. Owerri
 - C. Umuahia
 - D. Nok
2. Objects discovered in the Nok culture area included _____.
 - A. terracotta figurines
 - B. vehicle parts
 - C. elephant tusks
 - D. leopard skin
3. Daima is found in _____.
 - A. Kaduna state
 - B. Oyo state
 - C. Osun state
 - D. Borno state
4. People that lived in iron age culture made use of _____.
 - A. bronze implements
 - B. stone implements
 - C. wood implements
 - D. inferior implements
5. Igbo-Ukwu is located in _____.
 - A. Anambra state
 - B. Imo state

- C. Igbo state
 - D. Delta state
6. Excavation work at Igbo-Ukwu took place between _____ and _____.
- A. 1959 – 1964
 - B. 1960 – 1970
 - C. 2001 – 2005
 - D. 1999 – 2000
7. Ife civilization is famous for its _____.
- A. terracotta and bronze objects
 - B. Wood and paper materials
 - C. stylized materials
 - D. mechanical designs
8. Ile-Ife is located in _____.
- A. Abia State
 - B. Anambra State
 - C. Oyo State
 - D. Osun State
9. Benin civilization is located in _____.
- A. Edo state
 - B. Delta state
 - C. Lagos state
 - D. Kaduna state
10. In 1897, Benin art was looted by _____.
- A. Nigerian soldiers
 - B. British soldiers
 - C. federal police
 - D. national defence

Essay Questions

1. Explain the significance of Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin for Nigerian history.
2. Discuss the main features of Ife civilization.
3. Consider the relationship between the peoples of Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin.
4. Outline the main features of Igbo-Ukwu civilization.
5. Locate Nok, Ife, Igbo-Ukwu and Benin on a map of Nigeria.