

Nigeria: History, Identity, and Change



THE
CHOICES
PROGRAM
BROWN UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

A number of questions often arise when thinking about Nigeria. What is the country's history? What will be its future? What does it mean to be Nigerian? What historical events and experiences have shaped the country that we call Nigeria today? How should the country balance its diverse range of cultures and religions with calls for greater peace and unity? While these are not new questions, their answers remain contested.

Today, with a population of about 187 million people, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa. Nigeria is also the eighth largest country in the world—and the country with the largest population of Black people. People from more than 250 ethnic groups make up Nigeria's population. The three largest ethnic groups are the Hausa and Fulani (29 percent), Yoruba (21 percent), and Igbo (18 percent). Other ethnic groups include the Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio, and Tiv. Hundreds of languages are spoken in Nigeria, including English, Fulfude, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, and Nigerian pidgin.

Nigeria is located in West Africa and is bordered by Niger, Benin, Chad, and Cameroon. In area, it is about twice the size of the U.S. state of California. Nigerians practice various religions. The majority of people are either Muslim (50 percent) or Christian (40 percent). Others practice indigenous religions. Nigeria's diversity and the coexistence of people of different religions has given rise to vibrant and rich cultures. It is also a country with many resources—both natural and human.

Today, nearly 48 percent of Nigerians live in urban areas, such as Lagos and Kano, with the rest living in rural areas. People often think of Nigeria as divided into three main regions—the North, the East (often referred to as the Southeast), and the West (often referred to as the Southwest).

Like the history of any country, the history of Nigeria is complex. When people think

of Nigeria's past, they often think of slavery, colonialism, corruption, ethnic tensions, and military dictatorships. While these events and ideas are certainly integral to understanding Nigeria's past—and therefore its present and future—they only reveal part of a more complicated story. It is important to examine the responses of different Nigerians to them, the many ways that these ideas affected Nigerians in the past, and how their legacies continue to affect Nigerians in the present. In addition, a number of other factors, such as Nigeria's complex cultures, often go unnoticed when studying the country's history. Exploring these important factors also helps to paint a more complete picture of Nigeria.

In the coming days, you will dig deeper into the history of Nigeria and the histories of those living there. The readings will provide you with a broad overview of the country's past and challenge you to think about its future. In Part I, you will examine the relations of precolonial Nigerian societies with one another and with outsiders. In Part II, you will analyze Nigeria's colonial period, the movements that led to independence, and independent Nigeria's early days. You will then complete a role play activity in which you study some of the options that people considered on the eve of secession and civil war in 1966. Part III explores Nigeria after independence and during the years of military rule. Finally, in Part IV, you will consider Nigeria's history since democratization and the forces that will likely shape its future. Throughout the text, you will need to consider a number of questions and themes.

- What historical events and forces have shaped Nigeria's past and present?
- How have Nigerians experienced and responded to historical and current events?
- How do Nigerians envision their future?

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Teacher Resource Book

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Cultural Responses to Dictatorship

Objectives:

Students will: Analyze the attitudes and ideas expressed in a variety of artistic and cultural sources about Nigerian dictatorships.

Assess what social and political factors contributed to opposition to dictatorship in Nigeria.

Consider the value of analyzing literature, music, and other artistic sources to learn about history.

Required Reading:

Students should have read Part III of the student text and completed “Study Guide—Part III” (TRB 45-46) or the “Advanced Study Guide—Part III” (TRB-47).

Videos:

Short, free videos for use with this lesson can be found at <<https://video.choices.edu/curriculum/Nigeria>>.

Handouts:

“Nigerian Cultural Responses to Dictatorship” (TRB 51-55)

“Source Analysis Worksheet” (TRB-56)

In the Classroom:

1. Discuss the Politics of Art—Have students brainstorm songs and musicians they think are political. Challenge students to recite specific lyrics or recall another element of the song they found striking. What makes these songs or artists political? What specific things can these songs teach us about society? What about other cultural sources, such as murals, poems, stories, or cartoons? What could a future historian learn about our society by looking at these types of sources?

Play the video of Fela Kuti’s song “Sorrow, Tears, and Blood.” While they watch, ask students to write down three reasons why they think this song might be political. <<https://youtu.be/F4ZUnPWxgvc>>. (Tell them that they

will have a chance to analyze the lyrics more carefully later.) Ask the class to share their reasons. What reasons might be relevant to analyzing other cultural sources for a political point of view? How can students tell when a source has a political point of view?

2. Analyze Responses to the Nigerian Dictatorship—Distribute “Nigerian Cultural Responses to Dictatorship” and “Source Analysis Worksheet” to each student and divide the class into groups of three or four. Have students recall what they know about the era of military dictatorship in Nigeria. When was it? What were the political, economic, and social conditions of Nigeria? Tell students that in this lesson they will act as cultural historians, seeing what kinds of information they can gather from a variety of cultural sources. Have students carefully follow the instructions on the handout.

3. Make Connections—After the small groups have gone through the sources and completed the worksheet, reconvene the class. Call on groups to share their responses to the questions. What kinds of information were students able to get from each source? What perspectives were expressed in different sources? What did students learn about the political situation in Nigeria from these sources? Which source do students think provided the most information? The least?

How might an historian use art and cultural sources such as these? What can art teach us about society? Have students think about the intended audiences for these different pieces. For example, do students think the sources were produced for friends? Strangers? Fellow Nigerians? Foreigners? How might an artist shape a piece according to his or her intended audience? How might the pieces be different if they were for different audiences?

Extra Challenge:

Ask students to read a novel by a Nigerian author. Have students write a short essay that identifies the time period of the novel and its

significance in Nigerian history. What events and political ideas does the author emphasize? Require students to cite the text to show how the author demonstrates his or her political ideas and point of view. Here are a few suggestions:

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*;
- Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*;
- Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*;
- Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel: A Novel*; and
- Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come*.

Homework:

Students should read Part IV of the student text and complete the “Study Guide—Part IV” (TRB 57-58) or the “Advanced Study Guide—Part IV” (TRB-59).

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Nigerian Cultural Responses to Dictatorship

Instructions: In this activity, you will interpret sources from six different artists that will help you consider Nigerian attitudes and concerns during the military dictatorship. Imagine that you are a historian looking to gather as much information as you can from the sources. Go through each source carefully with your group and underline sections that you think are important or interesting. (For the cartoon, jot down notes about what you and your group members think is important or interesting.) After examining each source, answer the questions on the worksheet.

Source 1: Wole Soyinka

Wole Soyinka (1934-) is a Nigerian novelist and poet who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986. Soyinka has been politically active throughout his life. He participated in the campaign for Nigeria's independence and criticized Nigeria's military rulers. Many of his writings explore the theme of oppression. The government of General Yakubu Gowon imprisoned him during the Nigerian Civil War. He fled Nigeria in the 1990s and was sentenced to death in absentia by the government of General Sani Abacha. He returned to Nigeria after the return of civilian rule in 1999.

Excerpt: Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 292.

Treachery and deceit are part and parcel of the art of staying in power; a studied hypocrisy and Christian unctuousness are additional aids to a power-style which is grounded on the image of humility.

He has a trick, does Yakubu Gowon. It has worked only too well with small inadequate men and, it must be admitted, with intelligent men of a generous cast of mind. There is hardly need to mention the third and largest group, the foreign visitors and ex-colonial masters who are only too pleased to patronize an obvious simpleton, failing however to recognize the workings of the shrewd puppet-masters at his back, and his own native cunning. Uniformly all are thrilled to receive confidences of great men, to have been declared men worthy to receive an intimate moment with a military dictator.

Excerpt: Wole Soyinka, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn: A Memoir*, (New York: Random House, 2006), 142.

Two years and four months later—a year and ten months of it spent in solitary confinement—I emerged from Kaduna prison, armed with a rehearsed slogan. It was my chosen antidote to the national jingle, which continued to set my teeth on edge: “To keep Nigeria one/Is a task that must be done.” I had nothing against the oneness of the nation called Nigeria.... What I did contest was the basis on which a nation calls itself one, a crucial debate that was easily obscured by cheap meaningless slogans. I had resolved that this basis could be one thing only: equity among the constituent parts—in short, political parity, also known as political justice for the parts within the whole. And so, as I descended from the plane at Ibadan airport in January 1969 and found myself confronted by the press, I had only one statement for them: “To keep Nigeria one/Justice must be done.”

Source 2: Fela Kuti

Fela Kuti (1938-1997) was a Nigerian musician and composer. He used his music to call attention to the effects of colonialism, dictatorship, and human rights abuses to name a few themes. He was severely beaten and his mother sustained injuries that would later kill her when the army raided his home in 1977. He was arrested and imprisoned on several occasions by the military dictatorship. Many of his song lyrics are in the language Nigerian pidgin.

Fela Kuti, "Sorrow, Tears, and Blood," 1977
 <<https://youtu.be/F4ZUnPWxgvc>>

Everybody run run run
 Everybody scatter scatter
 Some people lost some bread
 Someone nearly die
 Someone just die
 Police they come, army they come
 Confusion everywhere

Seven minutes later
 All don cool down, brother
 Police don go away
 Army don disappear
 Them leave sorrow, tears and blood
 Them regular trademark!
 Them leave sorrow, tears and blood

Them regular trademark
 Them regular trademark
 Them regular trademark

That is why

Everybody run run run
 Everybody scatter scatter
 Some people lost some bread
 Someone nearly die
 Someone just die
 Police they come
 Army they come
 Confusion everywhere
 Eh-ya!

My people self they fear too much
 We fear for the thing we no see
 We fear for the air around us
 We fear to fight for freedom

We fear to fight for liberty
 We fear to fight for justice
 We fear to fight for happiness
 We always get reason to fear

We no want die
 We no want wound
 We no want quench
 We no want go

I get one child
 Mama dey for house
 Papa dey for house
 I want build house
 I don't build house
 I no want quench
 I want enjoy
 I no want go
 Ah!

So policeman go slap your face
 You no go talk
 Army man go whip your yansh
 You go they look like donkey
 Rhodesia they do them own
 Our leaders they yab for nothing
 South Africa they do them own
 Them leave sorrow, tears and blood
 Ah, na so
 Time will they go
 Time no wait for nobody
 Like that: choo, choo, choo, choo, ah
 But police go they come, army go they come
 With confusion, in style: like this

Name: _____

Source 3: Ken Saro-Wiwa

Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-1995) was a Nigerian environmental and human rights activist and writer who organized a campaign in the Niger Delta to protect the Ogoni people and their lands against exploitation and environmental damage by the oil industry. He was arrested and imprisoned several times by the military dictatorship. In 1995, the Abacha government tried and hanged him after a trial based on criminal charges that many believe were fraudulent.

Onookome Okome, ed. *Before I am Hanged; Ken Saro-Wiwa, Literature, Politics, and Dissent*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2000), 7.

Ken Saro-Wiwa, "The True Prison," 1983

It is not the leaking roof
Nor the singing mosquitoes
In the damp, wretched cell.
It is not the clank of the key
As the warder locks you in.
It is not the measly rations
Unfit for man or beast
Nor yet the emptiness of day
Dipping into the blankness of night
It is not
It is not
It is not
It is the lies that have been drummed
Into your ears for one generation
It is the security agent running amok

Executing callous calamitous orders
In exchange for a wretched meal a day
The magistrate writing in her book
Punishment she knows is undeserved
The moral decrepitude
Mental ineptitude
Lending dictatorship spurious legitimacy
Cowardice asked as obedience.
Lurking in our denigrated souls
It is fear damping trousers
We dare not wash of our urine
It is this
It is this
Dear friend, turns our free world
Into a dreary prison.

Source 4: Mabel Segun

Mabel Segun (1930-) is a Nigerian poet, author, broadcaster, and educator. She has written a series of books for children as well as short stories for adults. She was also a competitive ping pong player earning the title of Nigerian National Champion.

Mabel Segun, "Wrong Destination," 1986

I hired an aeroplane
And put my thoughts on it.
"Take us" I told the pilot
"To that place where I believe
Thoughts can develop,
Watered by imagination,
Nourished in freedom."

But the plane was hijacked
And taken to a place
Where nothing grew but weeds.
My thoughts strove ever so bravely

To grow among the weeds,
But they were choked to death,
The weeds choked them, My God!

Now I'm without my thoughts;
They've given me new ones,
But we do not get along —
They're someone else's thoughts,
Not mine.

Source 5: Tunde Thompson

Tunde Thompson (1951-) is a Nigerian journalist who wrote for the Guardian newspaper in Nigeria. In 1984, the government of General Muhammadu Buhari arrested and tried Thompson and a colleague. They were charged with violating a government decree against publishing false statements or statements that subject the government to ridicule or disrepute, a law that was meant to limit press freedom. Thompson and his colleague were convicted and sentenced to a year in prison. Thompson recounted his experiences and advocated for the importance of a free press in his book Fractured Jail Sentence.

Excerpts: Tunde Thompson, *Fractured Jail Sentence*, (Enegu: Fourth Dimension Publishing, 1988), 7, 9, and 21.

Except during the Independence Day celebration in October and a few other occasions, one does not often hear martial music over the airwaves in Nigeria. Whenever it is played, something must have gone wrong—or right—somewhere. Such was the situation on December 31, 1983, when Nigerians rose at dawn to learn that while they were in their slumber, some armed forces personnel led by Major-General Muhammadu Buhari...[had] wrested power from Aljajii Shehu Usman Aliya Shagari....

It was like a drama. A group of soldiers had seized power; it was now the turn of another to act; to tell the world who were involved in the putsch; why, and how they did it.... The newsroom filled up gradually, soon there were enough hands to make the production of an emergency edition possible....

A team of journalists from the National Concord which had to interview the new leader asked him about his opinion on press freedom and his answer was frightfully uncompromising: “Press freedom? What’s that? I’ll step on it,” he said.

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Source 6: Tayo Fatunle

Tayo Fatunle (1961-) is a cartoonist who was born in England and grew up in Nigeria. During the 1980s and 1990s, his cartoons focused on the military dictatorship, political corruption, and ineffective governance. Today, Fatunle’s cartoons focus on West Africa and Black history. This cartoon was first published in 1998, in the London-based magazine, New Africa.

Tayo Fatunle, “General Abacha’s Gulag!” 1998



Tayo Fatunle, “General Abacha’s Gulag!” 1998. Used with permission.

Name: _____

Source Analysis Worksheet

	Source 1	Source 2	Source 3	Source 4	Source 5	Source 6
Author of source(s) & date created						
Type of source						
Dictator in power						
What is the primary political point this source makes about the dictatorship?						
What is the most interesting or important idea in this source?						

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