**Nigerians**

**PRONUNCIATION:** nigh-JEER-ee-uhns

**LOCATION:** Nigeria

**POPULATION:** 111.7 million

**LANGUAGE:** English; English Creole; Bantu; and Chadic languages

**RELIGION:** [Traditional African religion](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Traditional_African_religion.html); Islam; Christianity

**1 • INTRODUCTION**

The territory that is now Nigeria has witnessed the rise and decline of many different kingdoms and empires since AD 600.

In the 1880s, the British took control of the palm oil plantations at the mouth of the Niger River and created the colony of Nigeria by combining the territories of a number of local kingdoms and chiefdoms. They established a capital at Lagos in 1914. In 1960, Nigeria won its independence from the British. Since then, the government of Nigeria has been challenged to unite a diverse group of peoples. The three major groups are the Hausa and [Fulani](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Fula_people.html) in the north, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east.

**2 • LOCATION**

Nigeria shares borders with Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. From the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean in the south, plateaus and plains cover much of the country. To the east, the Gotel and Mandara Mountains form a border with Cameroon. With the equator just to the south, the climate is tropical in the central regions and arid in the north.

With nearly 112 million people, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and the sixth most populous in the world. It is also one of the world's most ethnically diverse countries, with more than 250 distinct groups.

**3 • LANGUAGE**

English is the official language, but English Creole is the language most people speak. Each of the ethnic groups has its own language also. These include Bantu and Chadic languages.

**4 • FOLKLORE**

Proverbs, chants, folk stories, and riddles are popular.

**5 • RELIGION**

Almost 50 percent of all Nigerians are Muslim (followers of Islam), and about 40 percent are Christian. Many also continue some traditional African religious practices. As a part of their traditional religions, most ethnic groups have names for a supreme being who they believe created the universe. The Yoruba call him Olorun (Lord of Heaven) and the Hausas call him Ubangiji (God). Lesser gods and deities act as contacts between humans and the supreme being.

**6 • MAJOR HOLIDAYS**

The main secular (nonreligious) holiday is National Day (October 1). Muslim holidays include *Tabaski* (commemorating Abraham's sacrifice) and Eid al-Adha (the end of Ramadan). Christians celebrate Easter and Good Friday (in March or April).

Nigerians also celebrate many cultural festivals throughout the year. One example is the Argungu Fish and Cultural Festival on the banks of the Sokoto River. During this celebration, hundreds of fishermen jump into the river at once. This scares the fish into the air, and into their nets.

**7 • RITES OF PASSAGE**

Nigerians typically celebrate rites of passage with music, dance, and ceremony. At his or her naming ceremony a child becomes a member of the community. At initiation, an adolescent assumes the responsibilities of adulthood. A woman becomes part of her husband's family after marriage. At death, a community member joins the spirit world.

A 1993 documentary film ( *Monday's Girls* ) illustrates one ethnic group's initiation rite for girls. The young women (initiates) participate in a five-week coming-ofage ceremony ( *Iria* ), which transforms them into marriageable women. They are secluded in a house and "fattened up" for the ceremony. The initiates are pampered and must do no work. Elderly women shear the initiates' hair. They are taught how to be mothers and take care of their husbands. The old women paint the initiates' bodies. The initiates then appear in public to be inspected by the elders.

**8 • RELATIONSHIPS**

The equivalent of "good morning" is *Isalachi* in the Igbo language, and *Yayadei* in Hausa. As elsewhere in Africa, two men may hold hands and stand near each other when talking. Their sense of personal space is closer than that of Americans.

As in most parts of Africa south of the Sahara Desert, passing an object with the left hand or with only one hand is considered impolite. Children learn to offer and accept objects with both hands. Some Nigerians consider waving to be an insult, particularly if it is done close to the face.

**9 • LIVING CONDITIONS**

About 70 percent of Nigerians live in villages without [indoor plumbing](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Tap_water.html) and electricity. Women and children have to walk up to half a mile to draw drinking water from a water source.

Nigerians build simple rectangular or cylindrical houses of reed, mud brick, or cinder block. Several families of migrant workers often live together in a few rooms, sharing common cooking areas and latrines. Lower-and middle-income workers can afford small-to medium-sized houses. Some have indoor plumbing. The more prosperous Nigerians have Western-style furniture, as well as refrigerators and televisions.

**10 • FAMILY LIFE**

Most Nigerian families live together in compounds (living areas). Nuclear families (parents and their children) share the same hut. The father is generally the head of the household. Family members respect their elders.

Under Islamic law, a Muslim man can have up to four wives if he can support them. The groom will pay a bride price to the family of his bride. In the cities young people date, much as they do in the West, but this type of dating is rare in the villages. Because weddings are expensive, many couples live together until they can afford to give a proper wedding feast.

There are some Nigerian women who are internationally respected leaders in academia and business. However, Nigerians still regard single (unmarried) women as an oddity.

**11 • CLOTHING**

Western-style clothes are increasingly replacing traditional garments. This is especially true in the cities. In rural areas, many women and men wear long loose robes in either white or bright colors. Women often wear scarves or turbans.

European [fabrics](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Textile.html) have replaced hand-woven cloth. European makeup and costume jewelry, too, are replacing traditional [cosmetics](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Cosmetics.html) and ornaments.

**12 • FOOD**

Nigerians rise early, and therefore may eat a number of times a day. Early breakfast begins at 5:00 AM and late dinner is eaten at 9:00 PM . Breakfast may consist of rice and [mango](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Mango.html) or fried plantains. At around 11:00 AM people might eat *efo* (stew) or *moyinmoyin* , bean pudding made with steamed black-eyed peas.

Nigerians generally like their food hot and spicy. Cooks use plenty of red hot peppers in the dishes themselves or on the side. Typically, stews or sauces are made from greens or fish and, if one can afford it, meat or chicken. These are eaten with rice or yams. [Cassava](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Cassava.html) and corn are popular too. Nigerians in the coastal regions drink palm wine and locally brewed beer. Muslims are great tea drinkers. In the cities, coffee houses and pubs are very popular.

**13 • EDUCATION**

The Nigerian formal educational system is patterned after the British school system. At the age of six or seven, children begin primary school. Muslim children learn Arabic and religious teachings in [Koranic](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Quran.html) schools (schools where teaching is based on the Koran, the Muslim scriptures). Young people in rural areas receive basic instruction in farming and other skills through apprenticeships. Nigeria also has preschools, special education, adult education, and classes for the gifted and talented.

Nigeria has one of Africa's most developed systems of higher education. There are at least twenty-five institutes of higher learning, including six universities. Many Nigerians still view advanced education as unnecessary for girls. As of the late 1990s, more than 60 percent of males could read and write, compared with only 40 percent of females.

**14 • CULTURAL HERITAGE**

Nigerians have a long history of music, traditional dancing, visual art, and oral literature. Modern drama, opera, cinema, films, and written literature build on this heritage.

Traditional dancing at festivals combines music, drama, poetry, storytelling, and elaborate masks, costumes, and body painting. Music and dance accompany child-naming, marriage, burial, housewarming, and harvesting. Dramatic dances are performed at initiations.

Modern Nigerian authors are gaining international recognition. Nigeria's most famous author is Chinua Achebe. His novels *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People* provide harsh critiques of [colonialism](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Colonialism.html) and contemporary Nigerian society. Both works are often taught in American college classrooms.

**15 • EMPLOYMENT**

Most of the labor force works in service jobs, while about 42 percent work in agriculture. Occupations in the cities vary greatly. Unskilled workers carry water, sell cooked food on the street, wash clothes, and peddle household items. Many people work in trade and retail, and small, informal businesses.

**16 • SPORTS**

Traditionally Nigerians have taken part in wrestling, archery, foot and horse races, and gymnastics. Soccer now tops the list of modern competitive sports. Nigeria has produced three world [boxing](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Boxing.html) champions. Other sports include table tennis, basketball, polo (especially in the north), cricket, and swimming.

**17 • RECREATION**

Visiting friends and relatives is a popular form of recreation. Many middle-class Nigerians have televisions and stereos. City dwellers enjoy watching films on video and in movie theaters. For music and dancing, the older generation still appreciates live bands. Younger people prefer Afro-Beat and Juju music. These two contemporary styles originated in the Nigerian capital city, Lagos.

**18 • CRAFTS AND HOBBIES**

Nigerian folk art ranges from ivory carvings to body painting to wall decoration. In the northern plains, craftspeople use long grasses to weave colorful and durable baskets, fans, tables, and floor mats. Wood carvers make figures for shrines, portraits, and masks. Artists cast sculptures in bronze and brass, produce glass and metal work, and make quality leatherwork and calabash (gourd) carvings. Nigerian pottery is valued all around the world.

**19 • SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

Problems facing Nigeria include a corrupt government and business community. Embezzlement of oil revenues, bribery, and ethnic favoritism are all common practices. Nigeria has been a center for drug trafficking to Europe and the United States. Crime afflicts its cities. Regional ethnic rivalries exist between the people who are Muslim in the north and those who are Christians in the south.