



## September 2022 Newsletter

### Multifaceted Terrains of Nigeria's Heritage

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#### Introduction

Nigeria, with a human population of over 200 million today, has a landmass of more than 900,000 square kilometres. This makes it the most populous country in the Black world. The coastal status of Nigeria coupled with numerous river networks, paved the way for cultural flows and exchanges at the local and global levels in antiquity. This scenario is critical to the formation and reshaping of the morphology and content of the grammar of numerous ethnicities, sub-ethnicities, languages, and epistemologies characterising this geo-polity. The ethnicities or nations include the Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Edo, Ijaw, Urhobo, Tiv, Idoma, Igala, Nupe, Berom, and Kanuri, among others (Balogun 2000; Ogundele 2021; Fagg 1977). The region was a prominent source of African descendant populations across the Atlantic. Many also returned from the Americas to Nigeria in the 19th century C.E. (e.g., Gomez 2005).



Archaeology, in conjunction with other close historical sciences such as cultural anthropology, art history, history, linguistics, and sociology, has a critical role to play in developing a new understanding and knowledge of the many facets of humanity, despite a multiplicity of racial, ethnic, cultural, and geographical categories and factors. Therefore, the conceptual and methodological domain of archaeology needs to be enlarged and enriched. This will enable the discipline to have an advantage in our competitive world of sustainable modern education and development (Bruchac et. al. 2010; Ogundele 2010).

## **An Ontology of Nigeria's Heritage Record**

Nigeria's heritage record is an encapsulation of archaeological, ethnographic, oral traditional, art historical, historical, linguistic, and sociological actions and behaviours of a number of human groups, from the earliest decipherable time-period to the present. In other words, this heritage record is the abode of multiples which can be understood properly from a multi-scalar perspective. This is located in the domain of transformation and continuity (Ogundele 2004; Andah 1990; Rusell 2006). By this token, the Nigerian heritage record is not mired in immutability.

Archaeological artifacts and to their contexts are about multiples, often at macro-historical and micro-historical levels. Archaeological materialities are usually a reflection of networked pasts (Shaw 1970; Bruchac et. al. 2010; Afigbo 1971). A lot of fascinating insights into the kingdoms of the human spirit are lost whenever the heritage record is not comprehensively studied and interpreted, using a broad range of methods and techniques. Sometimes, a trans-border research methodology is necessary, despite the logistical challenges.

Macro-historical transformations were anchored in cultural flows and inter-connections on a trans-national scale. This led to a number of new group and sub-group identities. On the other hand, micro-historical changes occurred within a given geo-polity involving cultural exchanges at the ethnic and sub-ethnic levels. Both forms of transformation have always defined and shaped the contemporary Nigerian thoughtscape and by extension, landscape. For instance, what did such ethnicities as Idoma and Igala contribute materially and socially to the evolution of Tiv culture, especially in art forms and the architecture of buildings? The Idoma and Igala are two of the Tiv's neighbours in the Benue Valley Region of Nigeria. Again, what did the Tiv donate to their neighbours with the passage of time? No ethnic group is an island in terms of socio-cultural exchanges. The global village is rooted in an intricate web of relationships despite elements of socio-cultural diversities (Idowu 1996; Mawere 2016).

Given the above existential reality, heritage understanding, especially at the archaeological level, has to be amplified and enriched by creating a substantial space for Nigerian indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). IKS include oral traditions, art history, and

linguistics. Thus, for example, praise songs are a component of oral traditions. They are full of settlement histories, migrations, and cultural legacies, especially of extended family groupings. Similarly, toponyms (place names) can provide information about the social and material environments. For instance, Igbo Elerin (“forest of elephants”) is a popular area within Ibadan, the capital of Oyo State in the south western region of Nigeria. The name shows that elephants once were a prominent presence in that part of the city in the remote past (J. A. Ogundele, pers. comm., 2021).

### **Triple Heritage: Asianisation, Arabisation, and Europeanisation**

The territory later named Nigeria in 1914 experienced three cases of internationalisation or globalization at different time-periods. These were Asianisation, Arabisation, and Europeanisation in order of chronological depth. Each epoch and its socio-cultural influences have been etched on the heritage record. However, these cultural traits are very difficult to decipher without using a trans-disciplinary approach in a rigorous manner. In this connection, the impact of Southeast Asian farming techniques and crops on the Nigerian agricultural and culinary landscape is too profound to be glossed over. Such crops as water yam (*Dioscoreaalata*), Asian rice (*Oryzasativa*), coco yam (*Colocasiasculenta*), and some varieties of bananas (*Musa sapientum* and *Musa parasidiaca*) were incorporated into the Nigerian food producing culture (Vogel 1993; Harlan 1993).

This Asian phenomenon started more than 2,000 years before the present (Sowunmi 1999). They were cultivating food crops like white yam (*Dioscorea rotundata*), yellow yam (*Dioscoreacayenensis*), African rice (*Oryza glaberrima*), and oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*). Coco yam and water yam gradually enriched and enlarged a substantial portion of Yoruba gastronomy. Thus, for example, a local delicacy called *ikokore* among the Ijebu sub-group of the Yoruba ethnicity is a product of water yam and other ingredients (Ogundele 2021).

Arabisation started (with the trans-Saharan trade) about the 8th century C.E. This encounter also brought about a new reconstitution of the grammar of Nigeria’s group identities with regard to religion, modes of dress, and culinary tastes and preferences. The third epoch or phase of reculturalisation and reformation of the country’s ethnic identities was Europeanisation.

It started with a slave trade as from the middle of the 15th century C.E. This was followed by colonisation in August 1861. By 1800, maize (*Zeamays*) from the Americas had become a well established secondary crop in Nigeria.

Cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), another South American crop, was introduced into the region of Nigeria during the second half of the 19th century C.E. Unlike maize, the spread of cassava was much slower, because it could not be directly consumed without preparation due to ostensibly toxic element of the plant. Today, these two foreign crops, introduced by missionaries, traders, explorers, and colonialists, have been successfully incorporated into the Nigerian food culture. This development led to the evolution of new cultural identities at the ethnic and sub-ethnic levels. For instance, *ikokore* (prepared from water yam) is well associated with the Ijebu-Yoruba. Nigerian foods and languages are to some degree about inherited wisdom with a multiplicity of origins largely traceable Southeast Asia, Arabia, and the Americas.

Therefore, Nigeria has always been a part of the world historical environment as far back in time as 2,000 years ago. However, these foreign influences were not a one-way affair or development. Indeed, Nigeria also contributed substantially to global civilisation and culture. This is true particularly with respect to agriculture. Thus, for example, guinea corn (Sorghum) and oil palm were some of the African crops that were exported to Asia in antiquity. The Nigerian heritage record is basically centred on donating and receiving (Rodney 2009; Ogundele 2004, 2010, 2021).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The numerous Nigerian ethnicities as well as sub-ethnicities were interacting with one another long before the advent of outsiders. Therefore, both intra- and trans-national flows and exchanges brought about mixed or shared cultural traits. Such cultural influences have been etched in the heritage record. These social and material cultural traits started with the Southeast Asian explorers and traders at least 2,000 years ago. The development was followed by the trans-Saharan trade involving some Arabs, more than 1,000 years ago. The third phase was Europeanisation including slave trade, from about 600 years ago.

Each of these historical and cultural scenarios played profound roles in shaping and reshaping the various group identities in Nigeria. One good example in this connection concerns

food cultures and culinary tastes and preferences. Nigerian cultures represent a melting pot of diverse behaviours and geographies on the local and trans-national scales. But this kaleidoscopic experience did not erode the authenticity or originality of a given group of people. This brings into question the concept of indigeneity in cultural heritage. In other words, who owns a cultural heritage? Who donated what, and at what time as well as how? Heritage formation is a fluid human experience often in layered patterns, and by extension, time-periods. Therefore, a heritage record is ontologically too complex to be addressed in a non-rigorous manner.

Heritage research (if meticulously handled) can create a new global order rooted in sustainable peace and progress. Archaeologists as inter-disciplinarians must minimize talking to themselves and start communicating with wider audiences. This is absolutely imperative now that many parts of the world are in racial, ethnic, and political turmoil of unprecedented dimensions, largely traceable to historical ignorance about the historical commonalities of humanity.

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