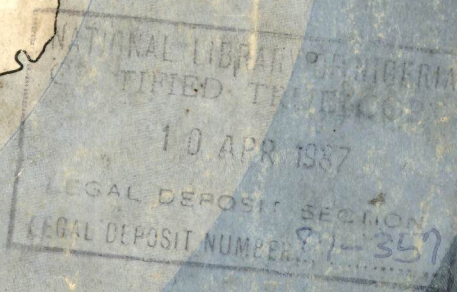




# A Brief History of Nigeria



**External publicity series 2**

Published by the External Publicity Division,  
Federal Ministry of Information and Culture,

Ikoyi Road, Lagos, Nigeria.

updated 1986

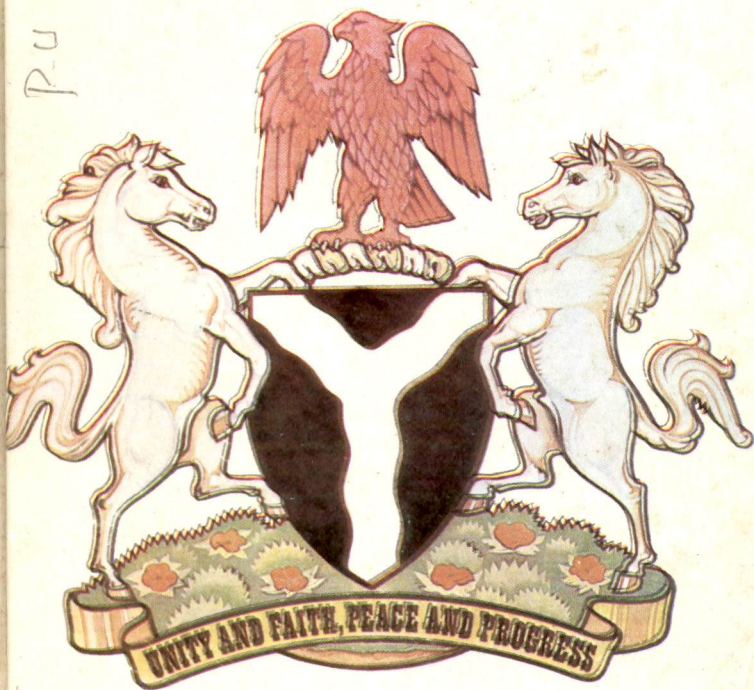
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## Pre-colonial Nigeria

Prior to the advent of colonial rule, the peoples of Nigeria had a long and varied history.

In Northern Nigeria, the Kanem Borno empire was established in the eighth century in the Lake Chad region and remained a major power in the Western Sudan for several centuries.

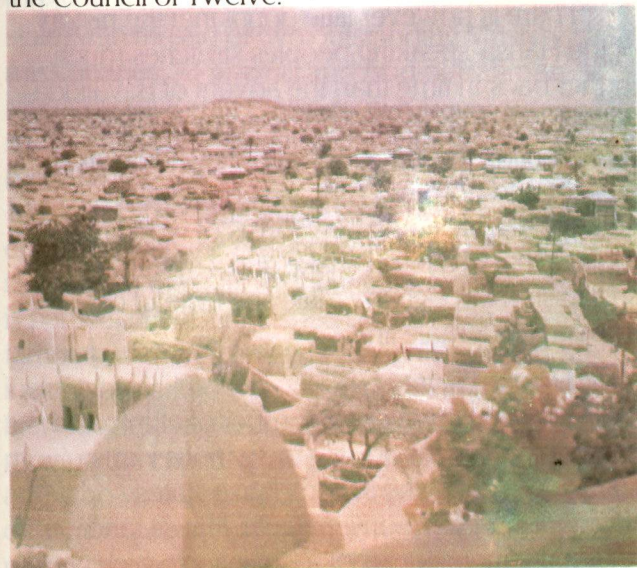
In 1067, the Spanish Arab historian El Bekri described Kanem as extending from Lake Chad to the River Niger in the West. An emissary from Kanem is also recorded as having visited Tunis in 1237, during the reign of *Mai* Dunama Dabalemi, who raised Kanem to an unprecedented height of influence and power.

Under *Mai* Dunama, the Kanem empire dominated the entire eastern trade route across the Sahara desert almost to the fringes of Tripoli, as well as the Wadai region as far east as the Upper Nile, all in addition to the home base in the Lake Chad area.

After the ensuing period of decline that lasted until the fifteenth century, the fortunes of Kanem Borno were restored by another famous ruler, *Mai* Ali Ghaji, who founded a new capital at Ngazargamu, west of Lake Chad. The most famous of all Borno rulers was *Mai* Idris Alooma, (who ruled from 1572 to 1603) under whose leadership the Kanem Borno empire reached new heights of achievement.

In the course of several centuries of development, the Kanuri speaking peoples, who constitute the main ethnic component of the Borno empire, distinguished themselves by evolving a brilliant civilisation that produced elaborate political institutions. Thus the hereditary

ruler of Borno, the *Mai*, was assisted by a council of twelve state officials, who served as his advisers, while the three important positions of *Nagira* (Queen Mother), *Magara* (the *Mai*'s eldest sister) and *Gumsu* (the *Mai*'s senior wife) ensured that considerable influence was exercised by appropriate ladies of the royal family. Administrative supervision of the provinces of the empire was entrusted to four leading members of the Council of Twelve.



*The old walled city of Kano stood at the centre of ancient trade routes. The new city of today remains a centre of commerce.*

To the west of Borno were the seven Hausa states, Daura, Kano, Zau Zau (Zaria), Gobir, Katsina, Rano and Biram, which had a history only a little less ancient than that of Borno itself. Each of the Hausa states traces its origin to a common mythical ancestor, named Bayajidda (or Abuyazidu) who is said to have come across the

desert to Borno from Arabia and thence to Daura where he killed a sacred snake that had long prevented the people of Daura from drawing water from the local well.

The Queen of Daura then married him and bore him a son, Bawo, who in turn had six sons who became the kings of Daura, Kano, Zau Zau, Gobir, Katsina and Rano. These were known as the Hausa *bokwoi* (the seven Hausa states), the seventh being Biram.

There is however little doubt that the history of the Hausa-speaking peoples stretches much further back in time than the advent of Bayajidda, whose legend is explained by some sources as representing the introduction of new ideas from eastern and northern Africa in about the tenth century AD, including new forms of worship to replace that of a fetish snake and a system of succession through the male line instead of through the female line.

### *The Hausa States*

Although there are a number of ethnic and cultural differences among the various Hausa-speaking groups, the seven Hausa states developed a common language, Hausa, and retained various forms of association which were only occasionally marred by internecine struggles. Each state was however independent of the others although they shared certain characteristics, such as similar kinship institutions and a pattern of organisation based on the dominance of a surrounding territory by a central walled city which was the seat of the government.

Among the Hausa city states, Kano rose to a position of commercial prominence in the

Western Sudan, achieving its zenith during the reign of Muhammed Rimfa (1463 to 1499), the greatest of Habe (Hausa) rulers of Kano. During his reign, Kano expanded considerably beyond its original size, and was able to increase its share of the trans-Saharan trade.

Muhammed Rimfa is noted for having laid out the site of the famous Kurmi market, which is still the principal market within Kano's city walls today, and for transforming Kano into an Islamic state, with the aid of two outstanding Muslim missionaries, Al-Maghili and Abd-al-Rahman. Muhammed Rimfa is also remembered for successfully strengthening the authority of the monarchy.

Zaria, the Hausa state which was traditionally entrusted with the task of protecting the other states from the military incursions from the South, is particularly distinguished by the reign of two famous women rulers whose achievements are ineluctably linked with the expansion of Zaria. The first was Bakwa Turunku, who is credited with moving the capital to its present site in about 1536 and who was eventually succeeded by her eldest daughter Queen Amina, renowned for her military prowess and for extending Zaria's domination over a wide area extending to the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers.

Katsina, which lies to the west of Kano and Daura, was Kano's major rival for the domination of commerce in Hausaland. Although Katsina was conquered by the great ruler of the Songhai Empire Askia Mohammed Touré in the early years of the sixteenth century, it had developed into a leading trading emporium and centre for the manufacture of leather products and

metalwork by the time it regained its independence from Songhai, half a century later. Katsina also became a noted centre of Islamic learning, exemplified by the widespread fame achieved by the Katsina scholar Dan Marina in the seventeenth century.

### Sokoto

The western reaches of Hausaland were at various times dominated by the rival states of Kebbi, Zamfara, and Gobir in the period extending to the eighteenth century. Situated in the vicinity of the Sokoto river, Kebbi distinguished itself by revolting against the overlordship of Songhai under the rule of the famous *Sarkin* (king) Muhamed Kanta, who defeated a large Songhai army in about 1516 at Tara.



*Dwellings typical of the period in which Shehu Usman Dan Fodio came to eminence*

Kanta of Kebbi not only contributed decisively to checking Songhai power in Hausaland, but he also considerably expanded Kebbi's area of dominance. Muhamed Kanta is also reputed to have built the imposing fortified

cities of Surame, Gungu and Leka, the ruins of which still exist today. Following Kanta's demise, Zamfara rose to a position of influence in the region originally dominated by Kebbi, followed by Gobir, which eventually became the dominant power in western Hausaland, having achieved a period of considerable expansion under the reign of *Sarkin* Barbari (1742-1770), culminating in the establishment of a new Gobir capital at Alkalawa in about 1756.

It was in the state of Gobir that an event of far reaching importance occurred in the early nineteenth century, following the emergence of Shehu Usman Dan Fodio, an Islamic teacher of Fulani origin who was destined to lead a successful armed uprising against the lukewarm religious faith of the Habe ruling dynasties in Hausaland.

The great reformer Shehu Usman Dan Fodio was born in 1754 at Marata in Gobir, and eventually settled in the region of Degel after a lifetime of study and teaching of the Islamic faith. As a result of many years of travelling and preaching, he won a considerable following among various peoples who regarded him as a saviour from Habe misrule, but he was eventually forced to flee from Degel to a town named Gudu, in order to escape persecution from *Sarkin* Yunfu of Gobir. From there, he declared a *Jihad* or holy war against the Habe rulers which eventually led to the conquest of virtually all of Hausaland by the Shehu's followers, who established new Fulani ruling dynasties in the conquered lands, under the overall suzerainty of Shehu Usman's descendants in Sokoto, the capital of the Fulani empire.

The Nupe kingdom, situated in the region of

the confluence of the River Niger and the Kaduna River, was originally subjected to the overlordship of Igala, an ancient kingdom which once dominated large areas of central Nigeria. The Nupe people won their independence under the leadership of Tsoede, a famed Nupe hero who is also known as Edegi. Said to be an illegitimate son of the *Ata* (king) of Igala and of a Nupe mother, Tsoede was brought up in the Igala capital, but had to flee to Nupeland to escape assassination at the hands of his jealous half-brothers on the death of their father.

Tsoede successfully established himself as ruler of the Nupe, subsequently embarking on a career of territorial expansion which led to the subjugation of a number of neighbouring tribes. He is also credited with the introduction of a number of manufacturing skills into Nupeland, for which the Nupe are still famous, notably in the field of bronzecasting, blacksmithing, and glass manufacture.

Nupeland eventually came under Fulani sway following the *Jihad* of Usman Dan Fodio which began in 1804. The Kwararafa (Jukun) and Borgu kingdoms are two other major states that wielded great influence over several centuries in the River Benue and River Niger regions.

### *The Yoruba*

Immediately south of the River Niger lay the Yoruba kingdoms, also with a very long historical past. The Yoruba would appear to be the descendants of two main groups of people, one was an older indigenous stock, whose religious centre was the city of Ile-Ife, who may have been conquered at some stage by a migratory wave led



*The Birikisu Sugbo Shrine is in Oke-eri, Ogun State*

by the legendary king Oduduwa, widely acknowledged to be the founder of the Yoruba tribes. According to Yoruba oral history, Oduduwa's children are said to have founded ruling dynasties in the various Yoruba states.

From Ile-Ife, Oduduwa's descendants spread out to other parts of Yorubaland. Among the states they established were Ijesha, Ekiti and Ondo to the east; Ketu Sebe and Egbado to the west; Oyo to the north; and Ijebu to the south. In Ile-Ife itself, Oduduwa is said to have been succeeded by a son named Oranmiyan who also founded the ruling dynasty in Oyo which later became the best known of the Yoruba states by virtue of its military and political dominance of a large portion of south-western Nigeria and parts of the present day Republic of Benin.

Oyo's northward expansion was however halted in the sixteenth century by the emergence of a powerful Nupe state under Tsoede, and Oyo subsequently achieved its greatest territorial gains towards the west and the south. Oyo is famous in Yoruba history for having evolved a remarkable political and military structure, which has

sometimes been cited as a model of organization. At the centre of Oyo's political and military organization was the *Alafin* or king, who was considered to be a divine ruler whose position on earth was comparable to that of the Supreme Being in Heaven. The *Alafin* ruled with the aid of a council of powerful advisers, the *Oyo Mesi*, who were seven in number, and who were also entrusted with the task of choosing each new *Alafin* from the sons of the preceding ruler. The chief among the *Oyo Mesi*, the *Basorun*, carried out the duties of Chief Executive Officer of the state and principal adviser to the *Alafin*, while the Oyo army was led to war by a body of noblemen known as *Eso*, chief of whom was the *Are-Onakakanfo* or generalissimo of the army.

Oyo achieved its greatest expansion between the reigns of Ojigi in the late seventeenth century and *Alafin* Abiodun whose reign in the mid-eighteenth century is remembered as a period of prosperity and plenty.

The other Yoruba states likewise evolved in a similar pattern during several centuries of harmonious development, which witnessed the growth of trade and agriculture over wide portions of Yorubaland. In the nineteenth century however, the Yoruba states became increasingly embroiled in a series of internecine wars and civil strife resulting from the demands of the slave trade on the one hand, and from pressure from the Fulani *Jihadists* on the other hand.

### *The Benin Kingdom*

Situated further to the south, though not to be confused with the present day Republic of Benin, the Benin Kingdom gave rise to one of the best known areas of civilisation in pre-colonial Nigeria.

The founding of Benin is believed to have taken place sometime between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. Following the overthrow of an initial line of kings known as the Ogiso dynasty, a period of republican administration finally gave way to the introduction of a dynasty of kings who traced their origins to the Yoruba sacred city of Ile-Ife.

Under the reign of Ewuare the great, who is justly renowned as one of the greatest of the Benin rulers, Benin achieved a series of territorial conquests which extended its domination over a considerable area of land. A widely travelled and politically sagacious king, Oba Ewuare greatly strengthened the institution of kingship in Benin, and was assisted by a Council of State consisting of seven high ranking chiefs known collectively as the *Uzama*, as well as by the *Eghaevon Ogbe*, a separate category of chiefs directly connected with the Oba's household and palace.

Under Ewuare's successor Oba Ozolua, who ruled in the closing decades of the fifteenth century, the boundaries of the Benin kingdom continued to expand. It was during Oba Ozolua's reign that a Portuguese merchant, Afonso d'Aveiro, first visited Benin between 1485-1486, establishing commercial relations between his country and Benin.

D'Aveiro was accompanied back to Lisbon by an ambassador from the Oba of Benin, the chief of Ughoton, who later returned to set up a trading factory linked with the Portuguese. Other famous Benin rulers include Oba Esigie and Oba Orhogbua, whose son is said to have founded the ruling dynasty in Lagos, which is believed to have been at one time a dependency of Benin.

### *The Itsekiri Kingdom*

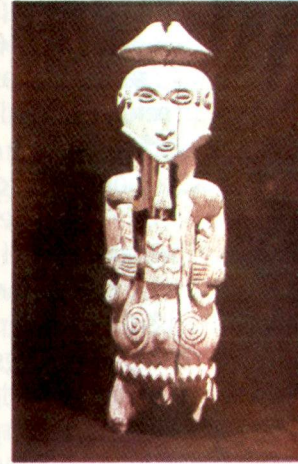
The Itsekiri kingdom, which was established in the western part of the Niger delta towards the late fourteenth century, evolved around the city state of Warri, which became the Itsekiri capital in the mid-sixteenth century. After an initial period of subjugation to Benin influence, which is attested by a tradition that traces the origins of the Itsekiri kings to a Benin Prince named Ginuwa, the Itsekiri kingdom developed into a position of great influence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, owing to its strategic position as a trading emporium. King Antonio Domingo, son of an Itsekiri Prince named Mingi who had been educated in Portugal, was the first Christian monarch to rule in Itsekiriland, although Christian influence was eventually eclipsed among the Itsekiri.

Other city states of the Delta area include Ijo, Nembe, Kalabari, Bonny and Old Calabar on the Cross River which was settled by the Efik speaking people sometime in the early seventeenth century.

### *The Ibo Communities*

To the east of Benin, Edo cultural and political influence is reflected in the role that migrant groups from the Benin kingdom are believed to have played in the establishment and growth of several small states in the region that now extends to the banks of the River Niger in its southward course.

One such group, known to local tradition as *Umuezechime*, is said to have settled for a while in Onitsha on the east bank of the River Niger, and to have returned westward to occupy the region of



*Artefacts (ancestral figures) of the "Ekpu culture" period, going back over 1800 years to the period 900 BC - 200 AD*

Ubulu-Ukwu, Issele-Ukwu and Onitsha-Ugbo, after having adopted the Ibo language as their tongue.

Many Ibo-speaking communities in this area, such as Asaba, Agbor and Ogwashi-Ukwu are believed to have been formed by a mixture between Ibo elements and Benin migrants, as well as an infusion of migrants of Igala origin.

East of the Niger, the institution of sacred kingship was found in the ancient city state of Nri, while recent excavations attest to the development of elaborate kinship institutions in the vicinity of Igbo-Ukwu, near present-day Awka. In general however, the Ibo-speaking tribes evolved in decentralized units which were more or less independent of each other, although they were bound by a number of common cultural factors which seem to indicate a common origin in the past.

Kinship institutions did not exist among the Ibos, except among the more westerly groups such as the Onitsha and the Ika-Ibo of present-day Bendel states, which were greatly exposed to Benin influence. Political organization among the Ibo-speaking peoples therefore tended to be at the village level, where decisions were either taken by the entire male population in concert or by a council of titled elders, the *ozo* title holders.

Although there was no tradition of centralised authority extending over large areas, kinship ties often cut across the smaller village units to create large territorial groupings that operated in loose federal style. Given the circumstances of the settlement patterns of the Ibo-speaking peoples, this type of organisation was adequate to ensure agricultural and trading links over sufficiently wide areas, as was later illustrated by the dominant commercial position achieved by Arochukwu, an Ibo-speaking community situated on the upper banks of the Cross River which was the home of a famous oracle.

The Aro domination of the Ibo hinterland and of the neighbouring Ibibio speaking tribes, who shared similar patterns of settlement with the Ibos, was a characteristic example of the judicious utilization of politico-religious influence, coupled with astute commercial organization.

## The Colonial Experience

The initial contacts between the peoples of Africa and European visitors were of a peaceful and amicable nature, resulting in the gradual development of commercial relations between the two continents. However, with the advent of the transatlantic slave trade, European penetration of Africa began to have a devastating effect on the peoples of Nigeria.

It is estimated that well over eleven million Africans were forcibly transported from the African continent to the New World countries during the four centuries of the transatlantic slave trade from 1500 to the end of the nineteenth century. Nigeria alone may have contributed as much as a fifth of this total figure, which is a minute reflection of the widespread turmoil and devastation that the slave trade brought to Africa in its wake, particularly as a result of the internecine wars it provoked.

In terms of social, economic and political disruption, the transatlantic slave trade was certainly a catastrophe of unparalleled magnitude for the peoples of Nigeria.

By the early nineteenth century however, the development of mercantile capitalism coupled with the beginnings of industrial development in Europe created conditions whereby the emerging European industrial powers stood to gain more from legitimate trade exchanges than from the continuation of the slave trade.

Efforts were therefore made to intensify trade in agricultural products and other raw materials for the growing European industries at the same time as the transatlantic slave trade was outlawed.

The growth of British commercial interests in Nigeria eventually necessitated military intervention, and led to the annexation of Lagos by the British in 1862. From the bridgehead created by the establishment of the colony of Lagos in the following year, British military forces undertook the conquest of the Yoruba hinterland, at the same time as British influence was imposed in the delta and upper River Niger areas by the Royal Niger Company, a trading concern that was empowered to recruit and utilize the services of armed European mercenaries in enforcing unfair trade conditions in its areas of operation.

### *The Berlin Conference*

Finally, all pretence was cast aside following the notorious Berlin conference in 1885, which partitioned the territories of Africa among imperialist European nations, and Britain undertook the systematic military conquest of what is now the federation of Nigeria.

In spite of the heroic resistance of various Nigerian patriots, British military superiority was ensured by superior weaponry in the form of machine guns, rifles and Howitzers which the peoples of Nigeria could only oppose with bows and arrows or outmoded Danish guns.

In spite of the disparity of means however, the colonial conquest of Nigeria was considerably delayed and often placed in jeopardy by the resistance of such Nigerian patriots as King Jaja of Opobo, Oba Ovenramwen of Benin, Kosoko of Lagos, and Zubeir the Emir of Yola.

In one of the most remarkable examples of patriotic resistance to British conquest, the defenders of the little town of Burmi led by Mallam

Musa defeated a British military force under the command of Captain Sword on 13 May 1903 in a heroic attempt to protect the retreat of the Emir of Sokoto, Attahiru I, who had been forced to flee from the invading British forces.



*Statue of King Jaja who founded the Kingdom of Opobo but was later exiled to St Vincent in 1891 by the British*

In a subsequent battle in the same locality one and a half dozen months later, an overwhelmingly superior British military force finally overpowered the defenders of Burmi in a fiercely contested battle in which the Emir of Sokoto, Attahiru I, the *Magajin Keffi*, Dan Yamusa, and many other brave men made the supreme sacrifice of their lives rather than surrender to the British.

Following the imposition of colonial rule, Nigeria was first administered by the British as two separate units: the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, which included the colony of Lagos. The two protectorates were amalgamated in 1914 and thenceforth Nigeria became a single political unit. In 1946 a new constitution was introduced which

provided for a central legislature for the whole of Nigeria and for the three Regional Houses of Assembly, one for each of the three administrative units that made up the Federation of Nigeria.

A subsequent constitution, promulgated in 1952, offered increased regional autonomy and conceded a greater share in government to Nigerians. These and later constitutions, as well as general political developments in Nigeria during this period were dictated by the rise of Nigerian nationalism and fuelled by the growing tide of anti-colonial sentiment in the country.

### *Nationalist Movements*

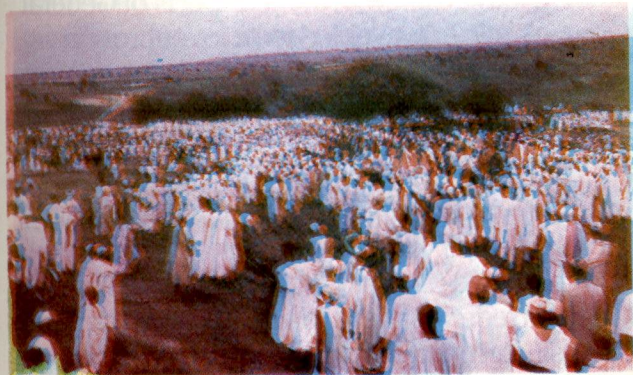
The first political party to appear in Nigeria was the Nigerian Youth Movement, which was formed in 1936. In 1944, the late Herbert MaCauley and Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe founded the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), to be followed soon afterwards by the foundation of the Action Group (AG) by Chief Obafemi Awolowo in 1951 and by the creation of the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) under the leadership of the late Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello, in 1952.

Under the pressure of growing nationalist forces, a new constitution was adopted in 1954 which transformed Nigeria into a federation and gave considerably increased participation in government to the Nigerians themselves. At a further conference in London in 1957, arrangements were completed to enable the Eastern and Western Regions to become self-governing later in the same year, and in 1958, it was agreed that the Northern Region should become self-

governing the following year.

Following the upsurge of nationalist movements all over the world in colonized countries and the forced retreat of imperialist powers over the years following the Second World War, Nigeria achieved independence on 1 October 1960, with Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe as President of the Republic and the late Alhaji Tafawa Balewa as Prime Minister.

Unfortunately, however, the size of the regions, added to the failure of any of the political parties to emerge as truly national in scope, created the basis for political instability in post-independent Nigeria, leading to military intervention by way of a *coup d'état* in January 1966, led by Major Chukwuemeka Kaduna Nzeogwu.



*Celebrations in 1958 that were typical of those that marked the self-governing of the various regions.*

The bitterly disputed *coup d'état* that signalled the demise of the Nigeria First Republic brought to power General Aguiyi-Ironsi as Head of State but General Ironsi's inability to find lasting solutions to the country's political crisis led to a second *coup d'état* in July 1966 which brought General Yakubu Gowon to power.

A subsequent attempt by the Eastern Region to secede from the Federation of Nigeria following a period of communal strife triggered off by the on-going political crisis led to a civil war between the Federal Government and the secessionist forces, led by Odumegwu Ojukwu.

The civil war came to a close officially on 15 January 1970, with the defeat of the "Biafran" secession, and the page was quickly turned on the tragic experience of the war by General Gowon's judicious policy of national reconciliation.

General Yakubu Gowon is also credited with broadening the country's federal structure by the creation of a twelve state structure that ended the regional administrative pattern.

Dissatisfaction with some aspects of General Gowon's rule however led to his overthrow in 1975 in a bloodless *coup* which led to the appointment of the late General Murtala Mohammed as Head of State.

The late General Mohammed is widely credited with attempting to galvanise the country through the introduction of a number of major administrative reforms, including the creation of nineteen federal states. He was however, tragically assassinated in the course of an abortive *coup* by a dissident army group led by Colonel Dimka, who was subsequently tried and executed for his role in the attempted *coup* along with his accomplices.

The late General Mohammed's successor, General Olusegun Obasanjo, paved the way for a return to civilian rule, and countrywide general elections in 1979 resulted in the election of President Shehu Shagari as the first Executive President of the Nigerian Second Republic.

Following a series of general mismanagement of the Nigerian economy, President Shehu Shagari was overthrown in a bloodless coup on 31st December, 1983. This coup installed Major-General Muhammadu Buhari as the head of state and Major-General Tunde Idiagbon as the Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters.

The Buhari/Idiagbon Administration lasted for 20 months, a period of draconian measures and abuse of human rights and was overthrown in another bloodless coup which crowned General Ibrahim Babangida as the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces while Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe became the Chief of General Staff (C.G.S.) in a government which keeps an eye on the protection of human rights while taking far-reaching measures to tackle the economic malaise inherited from previous administrations. Its repeal of the notorious decree four which put journalists in chains restored freedom of expression to a people in whose midst the print medium had thrived for over a century.



*Major General IBRAHIM B. BABANGIDA CFR, fss; mni.  
President and Commander in-Chief of the Armed Forces  
of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.*