

A History of Nigeria

Compiled by Fr. James Ngahy W.F.

SUMMARY

Independence: 1st. October, 1960.

The first Prime Minister: Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa from Bauchi (A.K.A. Golden Voice of Africa).

The first Governor General: Sir Nnandi Azikiwe from Anambra State.

The Government and Military Coups: 15th. January, 1966, first military coup took place. Major General Johnson Aguiyi Ironsi from the Ibo tribe of Eastern Nigeria became the first Military Head of State.

29th. July, 1966, the second military coup. Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon from Plateau State became the second Head of State.

29th. July, 1975, third military coup. General Murtala Muhammed became the third military Head of State from Kano State. He was assassinated on the 13th. February, 1975.

13th. February, 1975, General Matthew Olusegun Okiki Ola Aremu Obasanjo from Ogun State was forced to become the Head of State.

1st. October, 1979, civilian regime. Alhaji Shehu Aliyu Usman Shagari from Sokoto State became the Head of State.

31st. December, 1983, the fourth military coup. General Muhammed Buhari from Katsina State became the fourth military Head of State.

27th. August, 1985, the fifth military coup. General Babangida Ibrahim from Niger State.

1993 an Interim National Government headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan from Ogun State.

1993 General Sani Abacha from Kano State became the sixth military Head of State. He died in June, 1998.

June, 1998, General Abdulsalaam Abubakar from Niger State became the seventh military Head of State.

May, 1999, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo from Ogun State became the second civilian President of Nigeria.

THE NIGERIAN LEGACY

Nigerian history may be divided into four periods, namely:

- (1) Colonial subjugation and indirect rule (1900-1946);
- (2) De-colonisation and struggle for power (1946-1960);
- (3) Early independence (1960-1966); and
- (4) Crisis, civil war and reconstruction (1966 until today).

I. COLONIAL SUBJUGATION AND INDIRECT RULE (1900-1946)

Between 1880 and 1905, most of Nigeria was conquered by the British. First in the South, along the coastal areas, and finally in the North (there had been several centuries of contact along the coastal areas). In 1900, **Sir Frederic Lugard** declared all of Northern Nigeria to be under British rule and he set up headquarters at Lokoja in Kogi State. In March, 1903, he

Editor's Notes: Fr. James Ngahy is a White Father from Mbinga Diocese in Tanzania. He was born on the 2nd. May, 1966, and after studies, including time at St. Edward's, Totteridge, he was ordained at St. Killian Cathedral (Mbinga) on the 16th. June, 1998. Fr. James is working in Ibadan, Nigeria. The article was written on the 1st. April, 2000.

[1] Frederic Lugard (later Lord) served as an army officer in India, Egypt, Nyasaland (Malawi) and Uganda. He joined the Royal Niger Company (chartered in 1886) and founded the Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF) in 1897. The RWAFF was made up of local **Levies** who served under British officers and later it incorporated troops from the Gold Coast (Ghana), Sierra Leone, and the Gambia. With this force Lugard was able to subdue the local leaders and through them he established British indirect rule. He proposed to move the capital from Lagos to Kaduna. Lugard had a bias towards the 'Muslim North' and made a pact with its leaders to protect their Islamic culture from the Western influences which were coming from the south. This north-south divide was emphasized and became more obvious during the struggle for independence. It nurtured the seeds for many



invaded Sokoto in Northern Nigeria where he installed a new Sultan on his own behalf. [1]

The British regarded the three segments in northern Nigeria to be:

1. the Sokoto Empire or Fulani Empire as they came to call it;
2. the Borno Empire or Kanuri Empire; and
3. the minorities in the middle belt which included the Gwari, the Bachama, Angas,

of the problems which Nigeria has to this day. Lugard was the High Commissioner of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria and Governor General from 1900-1906 and 1912-18 - between 1906 and 1912 he was the Governor of Hong Kong.

Tiv, Jukun, Igala, Idoma, Birom, and many others. [2]

In 1912, for reasons of administrative convenience, Lugard was appointed Governor of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria as well as Governor of the colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. This was done in order to bring both territories under a single administration, this is called the **Amalgamation** and it



took place in 1914. A Lieutenant Governor was appointed in Kaduna, which was the new Northern capital, to run the North, and a Lieutenant Governor in the East to run the South while Lugard himself remained in Lagos.

2. DE-COLONIZATION AND STRUGGLE FOR POWER (1946-60)

The period from 1946 until independence, on the 1st. October, 1960, was characterised by a series of constitutional discussions and debates which focused both on the timing of independence and the structure of government. On another level there was the beginning of a struggle for power in Nigeria and electoral politics was the only means to that power.

In 1945, there was the **Richard constitution** in which the North, East and Western Provinces were given a House of Assembly with members selected by the Native Authorities. The legislative council in Lagos, however, still had real power.

In 1951, the **John Macpherson constitution** came in. Under this constitution elections were held between November, 1951, and January, 1952. Political parties were formed in the North to contest these elections. Notably the **Northern**

People's Congress (N.P.C.), which was a counter balance to the **Action Group (A.G.)** led by chief Obafemi Awolowo of the Western Region and the **N.C.N.C.** led by Azikiwe of the Eastern Nigeria. [3]

In 1953, Sir Anthony Enahoro of the Action Group introduced a motion in the House of Representatives demanding self government by 1956. Northern ministers opposed this on the grounds that they were not ready for self-government. It should be noted that as of 1957 there were only five University graduates in the entire north.

3. EARLY INDEPENDENCE (1960-1966)

Nigeria became an independent nation on the 1st. October, 1960. The system of government at the time of independence was the cabinet/parliamentary system of government after that of Great Britain.

The first prime minister was Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa from Bauchi State, Northern Nigeria. While Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, from Anambra State, was the first Nigerian Governor General and commander in-chief of the Armed Forces. Thus the first republic was established, but it only lasted for six years, from 1960-1966.

Editor's Notes: [2] The Borno Empire (Kanuri Empire) was independent from the other States by the end of the 14th century. It developed out of Kanem's expansion and internal conflict, as the Kanuri ethnic group, on to the western shore of Lake Chad. It grew from the trans-Saharan and desert trade in slaves, salt and livestock to become a rival to the Songhai Empire. After the latter's fall Borno ruled the region for about 200 years. Borno's power began to decline in the mid-1700s due to drought and famine in the Sahel region, and to the encroachment of the Tuareg. The Sokoto Caliphate (Fulani Empire) has its roots in the jihad led by Usman dan Fodio (1804-08). In this Muslim scholars and teachers within the Hausa States and the Borno Empire rose up and overthrew the authorities. It gained its name from the new capital at Sokoto which was founded in 1809. By this time all the major leaders were Fulani. Usman dan Fodio died in 1817. Soon the Caliphate extended over 900 (1,500kms.) from Dori (Burkina Faso) to Adamawa (Cameroon) - the largest African empire since the fall of Songhai (1591).

[3] After the Second World War ethnic and regional differences were emphasised in politics. The National Youth Movement (NYM) split into three parties: the **Northern People's Congress (N.P.C.)** (Hausa and Fulani from the north, founded in the late 1940s), the **Action Group (A.G.)** (Yoruba, founded 21st. March, 1951, led by Obafemi Awolowo), and the **National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (N.C.N.C.)** (popular across the nation, mainly of Ibo origins, and founded on 26th. August, 1944, led by Nnamdi Azikiwe, later it became the **National Council of Nigerian Citizens**).

[4] Major General Johnson Aguyi Ironsi was born in March, 1924. After the abortive coup of January, 1966, Ironsi, who was the Commander in Chief of the army, took over and formed a Federal Military Government. Ironsi was killed in the coup when Gowon took control (29th. July, 1966).

[5] Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon (born 19th. October, 1934), a Christian from the minority Anga ethnic group, was 31 years old at this time. His intention was to eventually return the country to elected civilian rule. He later stated this (October, 1970) setting the date of 1976 when the political program was due to have been completed. Gowon did not fulfil the plans as he was deposed in a bloodless coup d'état on the 29th. July, 1975.



On the 15th. January, 1966, the first military coup in Nigeria took place. It was led by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu. During this coup, the Prime Minister, Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Mr Akintola, Okotie Eboh and the Sadanna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello, were assassinated by the coup leaders.

Major General Johnson Aguyi Ironsi, from the Ibo tribe of Eastern Nigeria, became the first Nigerian military Head of State. He introduced the unitary system of government in Nigeria. [4]

In July, 1966, another coup took place. It was led by Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon, from Plateau State in the middle belt area of Nigeria. [5]

Meanwhile, feelings rose in the north over the assassination of key Ibos and massive emigration began. Meanwhile the governor of the Eastern region Lt. Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu in return expelled all non easterners and indications suggests that he was setting up an independent state.

On the 27th. May, 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Gowon divided Nigeria into twelve states: six in the south, six in the North.

4. CRISIS, CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION TO DATE (1966 UNTIL TODAY)

After the creation of the 12 states in Nigeria, Ojukwu, the governor of Eastern region, rejected the twelve states system and seceded. Thus, on the 1st. July, 1967, Ojukwu declared the Eastern region as an independent state called the **Republic of Biafra**. The resulting civil war lasted until January, 1970, when Federal troops reunited the country. [6]

In July, 1975, Gowon was overthrown in a bloodless coup and General Murtala Mohammed, from Kano State, became the head of State. He divided the country into 19 states: ten in the north and nine in the south. He also set in motion the removal of the capital from Lagos to the middle of the country in a new site called **Abuja**. He was assassinated on the 13th. February, 1976, in a bloody coup. [7]

Picture above: Getting water, a daily chore



General Olusegun Obasanjo, who was the Chief of Staff at supreme headquarters, was called to assume the mantle of leadership. Thus, General Obasanjo ruled Nigeria as a military head of state from 1976 to 1979.

On the 1st. October, 1979, General Obasanjo handed over power voluntarily to civilian rule with Alhaji Shehu Shagari as the president. Shagari was from Sokoto State in Northern Nigeria. Thus, the second republic was from 1979 to 1983.

On the 31st. December, 1983, General Mohammed Buhari, from Katsina State, seized power and the military came back again.

In August, 1985, General Ibrahim Babangida, from Niger State, seized power from Buhari. In 1993, Ibrahim Babangida annulled an election won by chief M.K.O. Abiola. This election was the fairest and freest in the political history of Nigeria.

Editor's Note: [6] The 'Biafran War' (1967-70) - In the early part of Gowon's rule ethnic tension grew within the country, especially between soldiers who were divided along the lines of their Northern or Southern origins. In September, 1966, there were attacks, fermented by 'Muslim traditionalists', on the Ibo people in the north. It was reported that Northern troops were involved in the deaths of an estimated 10,000 to 30,000 people. This resulted in retaliation against Northerners in many cities and a mass exodus of the population, which included over one million Ibo returning to the Eastern region.

The country was under great pressure and there was the possibility of secession by the several Regions. Attempts were made to reconcile the various points of view and in May, 1967, Gowon implemented the Aburi Agreement, which had been drawn up in Aburi, Ghana, at a meeting held in January. At this time Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu (born 4th. November, 1933) was the Eastern Region's military governor. He and the Eastern Region Consultative Assembly rejected the plan and voted to secede from Nigeria on the 26th. May. On the 30th. they proclaimed independence and the Republic of Biafra (named after the Bight of Biafra) was born. It was recognised by four African countries: Tanzania (13th. April, 1968); Gabon (8th. May, 1968); Ivory Coast (14th. May, 1968); and Zambia (20th. May, 1968).

The Federal Army moved into Biafran territory in July but they were repulsed. The Biafrans then attacked the Mid-western Region, where they seized strategic points. At this time the Federal Government's Army numbered 10,000 so they began to enlist new recruits, by early 1969 there were 250,000 men. At the end of the year the Federal Army had retaken the Midwestern Region and held the delta region (Rivers State and Southeastern State), thus stopping Biafra's access to the coast. Despite being outnumbered and outarmed the Biafrans held firm against Federal attacks. They even counterattacked in places with commando raids across the Niger River.

In September, 1968, Gowon's 'final offensive' began but the Federal Army failed to break the Biafrans but they did hem them in, eventually reducing the republic's area to a tenth of its former size. It was at this time that the effectiveness of Biafran 'propaganda', especially accusations that genocide was being carried out on the Ibo people, came into play. The international reaction was incredible and humanitarian aid - food and medical supplies - streamed into Biafra. Sometimes arms and munitions were mixed in with these, coming from private and religious groups in America and Western Europe. The majority of the military equipment for Biafra were bought on the international arms market, much with the unofficial assistance of France, and brought in through her former colonies. The Soviet Union was a source of military equipment for the Federal Government e.g. they supplied aircraft, flown by Egyptian and British pilots, which inflicted heavy casualties on Biafra's urban centres. The USA kept to a policy of 'non-involvement' and prohibited the sale of military goods to either side, though did recognise the Federal Government.



Babangida handed over, shamefully, to an unconstitutional Interim National Government headed by chief Ernest Shonekan from Ogun State. After eighty-three days in office as the Head of the Interim National Government, General Sani Abacha from Kano State took over in a palace coup.

General Sani Abacha ruled Nigeria from 1993 to June, 1998, when he died. General Abdulsalam Abubakar, from Niger State, succeeded him and he handed over to a civilian regime headed by President Olusegun Obasanjo from Ogun State.

The present democratic regime has a great task of rectifying corruption which is rife in Nigeria. Religious conflicts, especially with the introduction of Shari'a Law in some of the states, makes things more difficult for the civilian rule. In fact, it shatters the dream of peoples' democracy and the freedom to live

out their beliefs fully, especially those which do not agree with those proclaimed in Shari'a Law. Ethnic clashes and tribalism are threatening the unity of the Federation. [8]

We hope and pray that the effort of President Olusegun Obasanjo to improve the country both socially and economically will not be in vain!

In October, 1969, Ojukwu asked the United Nations (UN) to mediation a cease-fire but the Federal Government insisted on Biafra's surrender. In December 120,000 Federal troops began an offensive that divided Biafra and resistance collapsed. Ojukwu fled to the Ivory Coast and Philip Effiong - Chief of Staff - took charge. He called a cease-fire on the 12th. January, 1970, and surrendered to the Federal Government on the 15th. January. An international team of observers were present at the surrender and also investigated the accusations of genocide. They found no evidence of genocide but that there had been considerable famine and deaths caused by the conflict.

Ukapi 'Tony' Asika, an Ibo, became the administrator of the new East Central State and a cabinet was made up of Ibo, including members of the Biafran regime. They were also reenlisted in the Federal armed forces. Gowon made great efforts of reconciliation and to build a united Nigeria. The aftermath of the war was devastating to the former Biafra: deaths in the conflict, or due to disease, and starvation were estimated at between one million and three million; more than three million Ibo refugees; severe shortages of food, medicine, clothing, and housing; schools, hospitals, utilities, and transport facilities had been destroyed or were inoperative. The physical assets which were damaged and destroyed exceed the value of N600 million (about US\$900 million). Gradually the State was rebuilt and much of what was destroyed in the civil war was replaced with assistance from the Nigerian Government and many international organisations.

[7] The Abuja Federal Capital Territory was created in 1976. It was formed out of parts of the former Benue-Plateau State, North-Western State, and of Western State. The main ethnic groups in the Territory are the Afo, Bassa, Fulani, Ganagana, Gwandara, Gwari, Hausa, and the Koro. The new Abuja area was chosen because it was not identified with any specific ethnic group and covers an area of 2,824 square miles (7,315 sq.km.).

Picture above: Part of the market at Otan



Are The Proponents of Shari'a Law Fed Up With Democracy in the Name of the Good God?

By Fr. James Ngahy W.F.

For more than twenty years Nigeria was in the turmoil of the military junta cacooning all democratic enjoyments and possibilities. Now that a democratic regime is on stage some people, who seem to be addicted to dictatorship and self-centredness, have decided to impose **Shari'a Law**. Imposing **Shari'a Law** in a multi-religious federation, like, Nigeria is indeed opposing democracy. The supporters of **Shari'a Law** seem only to understand dictatorial language which does not allow citizens to express their views or demand their human rights. The principle of popular control over collective decision-making, and equality of rights or duties in the exercise of that control is denied. That is why these people never made noise during the time of military rule.

If it is not a matter of narrow-mindedness of understanding and comprehending democracy then why should religion be confused with politics? Why should religion be the underlying force behind conflicts, like those of Kaduna State, leading to social stagnation, retrogression, oppression and discrimination? Why should religion not aid social progress, educational development, interpersonal co-operation as well as mutual understanding?

The recent human slaughter in Kaduna State is a clear indication that the proponents of **Shari'a Law** are totally opposed to democracy which Nigerians are just beginning to enjoy. Moreover, these killings are done in the name of God. The fanatics have done incalculable damage slaughtering their fellow men and women in

Editor's Notes: [8] A map of the States in the Nigerian Federation may be found opposite on page 11. Islamic Shari'a Law - According to its Constitution Nigeria is a secular state but Islam dominates many of the country's activities, especially in the North. The Judicial System is based on English common and customary law which has been modified through the years by various rulings, legislative and constitutional enactments, and military decrees. The Constitution allows States to pass laws which can be applied within that State. It is with this background that the question of Shari'a Law should be seen.

The roots of Shari'a Law go back many centuries, and is based on the Sunni school of Malik ibn Anas (Medina). Due to the domination of the Hausa-Fulani during the time of indirect rule it was often imposed on other ethnic groups. Shari'a Law was encouraged in Colonial times, and the Constitution provides for it's use in matters of family law in Muslim communities. Some States (Borno, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara), with a majority Muslim population, have begun to extend Shari'a Law in trying criminal cases. In theory non-Muslims are not supposed to be subject to Shari'a Law, but many Christians fear that it will be imposed upon them. At the time of writing (March, 2001) the Nigerian courts are trying to decide whether this expansion of Shari'a Law is constitutional.

Concerns about Shari'a Law have led to tension and clashes between Muslims and Christians in Kaduna (see the next article) and Sokoto (north), and Abia, Imo and Akwa Ibom States (south-east). Various organisations have been established to quell the violence and to see how Shari'a Law can fit in with Nigeria's present legal system, they include: an inter-religious council in the North; a panel of Christian and Muslim leaders in the nineteen northern States; and other organisations in individual States.

Author's Bibliography: John D. Anderson, 'West Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', Ibadan, Heinemann Educational Books, 1972; Michael Crowder, 'The Story of Nigeria', London, Faber and Faber, 1978; Ogbu Kahn, 'The Nigerian Story', Ibadan, Daystar Press, 1978.

Nigeria - The States



their hundreds in the name of the Good God! Many fanatics have been driven into a pathological illusion and have rendered themselves cruel, heartless, wicked, inhuman and Godless, all in the name of God! What kind of God is this? The God of hatred? The God who rejoices in the termination of life which he has created for no reason? What kind of theology do the proponents of **Shari'a Law** follow that does not even allow wife and husband to travel in the same car or to sit together watching a football game in the stadium?

The killings in Kaduna vividly express the imposition of **Shari'a Law**. It is a provocation

against peace and unity, hence, threatening the democracy of the country.

If the Federal government does not take serious measures now, then this democracy will indeed be lost because of a few religious fanatics who deceive and manipulate young people to fight in the name of religion for their own selfish reasons. This is a powerful and very delicate phenomenon which needs to be handled with utmost caution. The effects it has already produced cannot be ignored. For one thing is certain that if the mad race for **Shari'a Law** continues, it is bound to result in more slaughter than has ever occurred in the history

of this country. If there will be a victor left, the only victory will be a living death!

As Christians we need to be very watchful and careful in our response or reaction to the violent proponents of **Shari'a Law**. What happened in Aba (eastern part of Nigeria), roasting hundreds of Hausas like sausages in revenge for the easterners who were slaughtered in Kaduna, is absolutely un-Christian. It is very barbaric. We realise that religion is indeed a two-edged sword which cuts both ways with serious consequences. Our basic teaching of unconditional love, embracing friend and so-

called enemy, has to become our practical necessity, an imperative especially when indiscriminate destruction threatens our Christian community.

‘God will settle disputes among great nations. They will hammer their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning knives. Nations will never again go to war, never prepare for a battle again.’ (Is. 2:4)

Do not let religion be a source of democratic catastrophe that will take Nigeria back into a cacooned military junta!

Some Background Information on Nigeria

Compiled by Fr. Bill Turnbull W.F

BASIC INDICATORS

Total Population ⁽¹⁾	108,945,000
Population under-5	17,880,000
Population under-18	54,771,000
Annual no. of births	4,176,000
GNP per Capita	US\$310

LANGUAGES, ETHNIC GROUPS AND RELIGIONS

Ethnic Groups: Africa's most populous country with over 250 ethnic groups and 4,000 dialects. The main ethnic groups are Hausa and Fulani 29%, Yoruba 21%, Ibo (Igbo) 18%, Ijaw 10%, Kanuri 4%, Ibibio 3.5%, and Tiv 2.5%.

Languages: English (official), Hausa, Yoruba, Ibo, Fulani.

Religions: Islam 50%, Christianity 40%, traditional religions 10%.

HEALTH

MORTALITY RATES

Infant mortality rate ⁽²⁾	112
Under-5 mortality rate ⁽²⁾	187
Under-5 mortality rank	15
Annual no. of under-5 deaths	781,000
Maternal Mortality Ratio ⁽³⁾	700

Life Expectancy	51.56 years
male:	51.58 years
female:	51.55 years

IMMUNIZATION

% of 1-year-old children	
BCG	27
DPT3	21
Polio3	22
Measles	26
TT2	29
% of routine EPI vaccines	
financed by government	100
% Oral Rehydration (ORT) use	32

NUTRITION

Infants with low birth weight (%)	16
Exclusively breastfed (0-3 months)	22
Breastfed with complementary food (6-9 months)	44
Still breastfeeding (20-23 months)	36
Underweight	
moderate and severe	31
severe	12
Stunting	
moderate and severe	34

Wasting	
moderate and severe	16
% of children receiving	
Vit A supplementation	23
% of households consuming	
iodized salt	98

SAFE WATER AND SANITATION

% of population with access to		
sanitation		water
Urban	85	81
Rural	45	39
Total	63	57

THE LAND AND ITS USE

Total Area:	356,667 sq.ml.
	(923,768 sq.km.)
land:	351,647 sq.ml.
	(910,768 sq.km.)
water:	5,020 sq.ml.
	(13,000 sq.km.)
Land Borders: total	2,515 ml.
	(4,047 km.), Benin 480 ml.
	(773 km.), Cameroon 1,050 ml.
	(1,690 km.), Chad 54 ml. (87 km.),
	Niger 930 ml. (1,497 km.), coast-
	line 530 ml. (853 km.)
Land use - arable land:	33%
permanent crops:	3%
permanent pastures:	44%
forests and woodland:	12%
other:	8%

Irrigated land: 3,695 sq.ml. (9,570 sq.km.)

THE ECONOMY

Exports: US\$13.1 bn. to US 35%, Spain 11%, India 9%, France 6%, Italy.

Imports: US\$10 bn. from UK 13%, US 12%, Germany 10%, France 9%, Netherlands.

Nigeria has 47% of West Africa's population and 41% of its GDP.

GDP: real growth rate 2.7%.

GDP: purchasing power parity US\$110.5 bn.

GDP: purchasing power parity per capita US\$970 ⁽⁴⁾

EDUCATION

	Male	Female
Adult Literacy Rate (15 years and older) ⁽⁶⁾	66	47
Primary School Enrolment Ratio (Gross)	75	65
Primary School Enrolment Ratio (Net)	38	33
Secondary School Enrolment Ratio (Gross)	33	28

GDP: composition by sector ⁽⁵⁾	agriculture	33%
	industry	42%
	services	25%

Footnotes: (4) 1999; (5) 1997 estimate; (6) total adult literacy rate = 57%

Footnotes: (1) a July, 2000, estimate of the total population is 123,337,822; (2) = per 1,000 live births; (3) = per 100,000 live births; DPT3 = diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough) & tetanus; TT2 = tetanus twice to pregnant women and mothers.

Picture above: A bride and bridesmaid



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN NIGERIA

EARLY EVANGELISATION

The first Catholic contact with Nigeria was from chaplains who travelled with Portuguese explorers. The country's evangelisation began in 1470 and was carried out from São Tomé. Three priests visited Benin City in 1515 where they stayed there for two years. Previously the Oba of Benin had sent an ambassador to the royal court in Lisbon. São Tomé became a diocese in 1534 and its first Bishop was Augustinian Gaspar Cao in 1556. He sent the first two Augustinian missionaries to Warri in 1577. They stayed in the town for a year and baptised the heir to the throne and established a Catholic dynasty which lasted for over two hundred years when they reverted to the traditional religion. Capuchins took over from the Augustinians in the 17th. century.

THE SOCIETY FOR AFRICAN MISSIONS

In 1862 Fr. F. Borghero, an Italian SMA (Society of African Missions) arrived in the Benin Republic and from there he visited Catholics in Lagos. Gradually the SMA and the Our Lady of the Apostles Sisters (OLA) established missions in Lagos, Abeokuta, Ibadan and Oyo. They evangelised in the area west of the Niger River to the Volta River in Ghana. It was known as the SMA mission to Dahomey and became the Apostolic Vicariate of the Bight of Benin in 1870. The Dahomey Vicariate, later to be named Ouidah and then Cotonou, was established in 1901. In 1943 the Vicariates of Asaba-Benin, Lagos, and Ondo-Ilorin, and the dioceses of Ondo-Ilorin and Benin City were created. Prefectures were also established in Oyo (1949) and Ibadan (1952). The first mission north of the Rivers Niger and Benue was established at Shendam (Plateau State) in 1907. The Prefecture of Northern Nigeria was divided into the Prefectures of Kaduna

and of Jos in 1934 and they became dioceses in 1954. The dioceses of Uotukpo (Makurdi) and Yola were established in 1959 and 1962 respectively and the hierarchy was established when Kaduna became an Archdiocese (1959).

THE HOLY GHOST FATHERS

In 1885, the first French Holy Ghost Fathers (CSSp), lead by Fr. Joseph Lutz, arrived in Onitsha after travelling from Libreville. They evangelised the area between the Niger and Congo Rivers. Great results were eventually reached amongst the Ibo people when Fr. Joseph Shanahan became the Prefect Apostolic, in 1905, mainly through the mission schools which he established. In 1889 Onitsha became the Prefecture of Lower Niger, and then the the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Nigeria in 1920. In 1934 the area was divided between the new Prefecture of Calabar and the Onitsha-Owerri Vicariate and the Kiltigans (St Patrick's Society of Irish Kiltegan Fathers) took charge. Further divisions took place in 1947-1948 with Calabar, Onitsha and Owerri becoming separate Vicariates, and eventually dioceses in 1950. The same year Onitsha became the metropolitan archdiocese and the hierarchy of Southern Nigeria was established.

THE WHITE FATHERS

The first White Fathers arrived in Nigeria on the 11th. October, 1943, following a request from the Vatican. They worked with the SMA at Ibadan and they were initiated to the country during a six year apprenticeship. The White Fathers then moved to the present day Oyo Diocese and today they work at Agbowo, Awkwa and Ibadan. ⁽⁵⁾

THE CHURCH TODAY

The 'Delegation to West Central Africa' was based in Lagos and on 23rd. September, 1960,

Archbishop Sergio Pignedoli was appointed as the Apostolic Delegate. It covers Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Gabon, Nigeria, and Ubangi-Shari (later central Africa). During the civil war the Church became associated with the Biafran cause, mainly due to the fact that the majority of the population there were Christian. After the civil war ended many Catholic missionaries were expelled from Nigeria.

Pope John Paul II has made two visit to Nigeria, the first was in February, 1982, and the second,

his 13th. to Africa, was in March, 1998. On the 22nd. March, 1988, he presided at a Mass for the beatification of Fr. Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi at Onitsha. Fr. Tansi, an Ibo, was a parish priest and he did much work in trying to reconcile the ethnic and religious divisions in Nigeria. He retired to a Trappist Monastery in England where he died in 1964. Nigeria has the largest number of Catholics, and the most priests and religious vocations, of any African country. Its missionaries, including White Fathers, work all over the world.

Sources of the Editor's FootNotes and Background Information:

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