Introduction

This is a street market in Lagos, the largest city in Nigeria.

Long ago, people from many parts of the African continent met to trade in the land now known as Nigeria. Nomads from the desert came to trade with the forest people, exchanging salt, cloth, and weapons for slaves, ivory, and kola nuts.

Over time, many different ethnic groups settled in this area. An ethnic group is a group of people who share a common culture. Each of these various ethnic groups retained its own identity and way of life.

Today, the country of Nigeria has more than 250 ethnic groups, each with its own name, distinct language, and culture. Together, these groups have created a great ethnic diversity within Nigeria. No other country in Africa is home to such a wide variety of people and cultures.

With this ethnic diversity, Nigeria can be a confusing place to study. To help examine such a diverse area, geographers often divide it into regions. In Lesson 2, you learned that a region is an area defined by one or more characteristics that set it apart from other areas. One way to understand Nigeria is to divide it into cultural regions, each set apart by the way of life of the people who live there.

In this lesson, you will explore the three main cultural regions of the country of Nigeria. You will learn about the physical features of each region, meet the largest ethnic group living there, and examine the region’s culture and economy.

How can dividing a diverse country into regions make it easier to understand?

This map shows the African country of Nigeria. Notice that it is divided into three regions: northern, western, and eastern. Each of these regions is home to one of Nigeria’s three largest ethnic groups. Keep the map in mind as you try to answer the Essential Question.
Abuja: A New Capital City
The city of Lagos in western Nigeria was the country’s first capital. In 1991, the capital moved to Abuja, which is in the center of the country. Many people hoped the move would help to unite this diverse country.

1. The Geographic Setting
To locate Nigeria on a map of Africa, follow the Atlantic coastline of the continent until you reach the Gulf of Guinea. The country of Nigeria lies on the northern side of this large inlet of the sea. Two rivers form a Y inside Nigeria, naturally dividing the country into three regions. The Benue River forms the right arm of the Y, flowing from east to west across the country. The Niger River forms the left arm and the stem of the Y, flowing from west to east to meet the Benue River. After the two rivers meet, the Niger turns south and flows toward to the sea.

From Many Ethnic Groups to One Country For most of its history, the area around the Niger River has been home to many peoples. Its hundreds of ethnic groups are further divided into linguistic groups, or groups of people who share a distinct language.

During the mid-1800s, Great Britain took over areas of West Africa. In this system of government, called colonialism, one country rules other places as colonies, with the ruling country controlling trade with its colonies for its own benefit.

In 1914, Great Britain joined parts of these areas to form the colony of Nigeria. As the ruling country, Britain gained control of Nigeria’s natural resources, with the most valuable resources being oil, tin, and gold. At the same time, Nigeria became a new market for many goods that were produced by British factories.

Under British rule, some groups of people were more willing to cooperate with their colonial rulers. As a result, they were treated better than other groups, receiving more education and the best jobs. Other groups resented their British rulers—and they resented these favored groups as well.

Resentment finally brought about demands for self-rule, with protestors marching in the streets and refusing to work. As the protests grew, Britain found it harder to control Nigeria. On October 1, 1960, Nigeria became an independent country.
Ethnic Groups of Nigeria

- Hausa-Fulani: 29%
- Yoruba: 21%
- Igbo: 18%
- Other: 32%

Source: Central Intelligence Agency.

Nigeria's Diversity
Nigeria has more than 250 ethnic groups, some large and some small. There are also more than 500 linguistic groups in this country. As a result, more than one language may be spoken within an ethnic group.

Ethnic and Religious Tensions Divide Nigeria
After independence, Nigerians adopted a federal system of government, but conflict between ethnic groups made governing the country very difficult. A more stable government was finally elected in 1999. Today, Nigeria is divided into 36 states and a federal territory, each with its own local laws. An elected president heads Nigeria’s national government.

Cultural differences still divide Nigeria’s various ethnic groups. Language is just one way in which these groups differ. The national government has made English the country’s official language, and English is taught in schools throughout Nigeria. However, each group still speaks its own language at home.

The people are also divided by their religious beliefs. Half of Nigerians follow the religion of Islam, and around two-fifths are Christians. Many Nigerians also follow traditional beliefs. One of these beliefs is that all natural objects, such as trees and clouds, have spirits. Another belief is that the deceased live on as spirits to guide and help the living in their journey through life.

Geoterms
- colonialism: a system in which one country rules another area as a colony. The ruling country controls trade with its colony for its own benefit.
- cultural region: an area that is set apart from other places by the way of life of the people who live there
- ethnic diversity: a variety of people from different ethnic groups
- linguistic group: a group of people who share a common language
Nigeria’s Cultural Regions
This map shows the primary cultural regions of Nigeria’s three largest ethnic groups. Members of each group also live in other parts of the country. About 32 percent of Nigerians belong to one of the hundreds of smaller ethnic groups.

2. Life in Northern Nigeria
One of the first things a geographer notices about northern Nigeria is how dry the region is. During the six-month dry season, very little rain falls, some rivers dry up completely, and lakes shrink dramatically. Moreover, drought has occurred in recent years. As water has become scarcer, competition for it has increased and led to conflict over resources, including farmable land. Many have migrated to escape the violence.

Physical Environment: A Land of Little Water Much of northern Nigeria consists of high, flat plains. Grasses and thorn trees covered these plains before people cleared the land in order to start farming. Rising up out of the plains is the Jos Plateau. Many people live and farm on this high ground because the weather on the plateau is cooler and wetter than on the plains below.
Lake Chad is an important source of water for many people in the region, but over the last 50 years the lake has been shrinking. In the 1960s, Lake Chad covered as much as 9,500 square miles, but by 2017, as a result of drought, greater use of its water for irrigation, and population increases, the lake was less than one-tenth that size. Some geographers fear that Lake Chad could eventually dry up completely.

A powerful wind known as the harmattan also affects life throughout northern Nigeria. Blowing south from the Sahara between November and March, the harmattan brings large clouds of dust that coat everything with fine, gritty sand.

Ethnic Groups: The Hausa and Fulani The two largest ethnic groups in northern Nigeria are the Hausa and the Fulani. The Hausa came to this region about 1,000 years ago, establishing villages that later grew into important trading centers and, eventually, kingdoms. During the 1200s, the Fulani also began to settle in northern Nigeria.

Over time, people from both ethnic groups married and created a connected culture. As a result, some people refer to the two groups as the Hausa-Fulani. However, there are distinct differences between these two ethnic groups, including language. More than one-third of Nigerians speak Hausa as their first language, whereas traditional Fulani speak Fulfulde, a less common language.

The two ethnic groups also differ somewhat in how they live. The Hausa people tend to settle in one place. Some live in urban areas, but the majority live in rural areas on farms. Similarly, most of the Fulani people live in rural areas, but they travel with their cattle herds during the dry season to search for grazing land. During the rainy season, the Fulani live in villages and plant crops.
Religious Police
Some states in Muslim-majority northern Nigeria base their legal system on shari'a, or Islamic law. In the northern Kano State, the Hisbah Corps is a religious police force that enforces shari’a law. For example, the Hisbah Corps can arrest men and women for dressing indecently.

The Hausa and the Fulani are united by their faith because both groups are Muslim. However, many other ethnic groups in Nigeria are Christian, and tension between Muslims and Christians has increased in recent years. One reason for this is that some states have chosen to make shari’a, or traditional Islamic law, the basis of their legal system. Shari’a covers many aspects of daily life, like marriage and divorce. Non-Muslims often resent having to live under laws that contrast with their religious beliefs.

Traditional Hausa Dress
The Hausa people have long been known for their richly embroidered robes. Until recently, the embroidery was done by men. Today, women also do this work. Some Hausa women sell their robes to buyers in the United States.

Culture: Thatched Roofs and Kalangu Drums Northern Nigeria’s hot climate affects the kinds of homes that people build. In the city, most houses have flat roofs, and people sometimes sleep outside on their roofs on hot nights. In the country, people build round homes out of mud and cover them with roofs woven from reeds or palm leaves, materials that provide good shelter from the sun.

Northern Nigerians favor loose clothes that protect them from the sun. Traditional men’s clothes include baggy cotton pants, a floor-length robe that features embroidery, and an Arab-style hat called a fez. Women’s traditional clothing includes a robe that
covers the entire body and a cloth headdress. Muslim women wear either a *hijab*, which is a headscarf that covers the hair and neck, or a veil that hides most of the face.

A popular traditional musical instrument is the tension drum, which is made from wood and an animal skin stretched tightly over the drum’s top. The Hausa tension drum, called a *kalangu*, makes sounds like those heard in Hausa speech.

**Economy: Farming, Herding, and Trading** Many people in northern Nigeria make their living as farmers and herders. Hausa farmers grow crops such as corn and millet, which is a kind of grain. These farmers eat some of the crops that they produce and sell the rest in local village markets. Fulani herders make their living by selling milk or products that are made from milk, like butter, to villagers. The herders rarely kill cows to sell as meat.

The Hausa have traditionally made beautiful cloth and leather goods. People once traveled from all over Africa to buy Hausa crafts. Some Hausa also work as traders and merchants, selling traditional crafts and factory-made goods to local people and tourists.

### 3. Life in Western Nigeria

It is rush hour in Lagos, the largest city in Africa, and the bustling streets are packed with cars, buses, trucks, and bicycles. The city has become famous for its “go-slows,” or traffic jams. Young boys crowd around stopped vehicles to sell a great variety of goods, including everything from smoked fish to brushes. Girls sell things while balancing bags of water on their heads. They offer drinks, nuts, candy, and even watches and makeup to the frustrated drivers whose commutes can take several hours.

**A “Go-Slow” in Lagos**

Many cities in Nigeria are famous for their traffic jams. Cars, buses, trucks, and bicycles crowd the streets during rush hour. These “go-slows” create a marketplace for thousands of street vendors. They weave through stopped cars and trucks selling drinks, nuts, sweets, and other goods.

**The Physical Environment: Rainforest to Savanna** Western Nigeria sits on the Gulf of Guinea beside a wide bay called the Bight of Benin. The Niger River forms the northern and eastern borders of this part of Nigeria.

Before people settled in western Nigeria, a *tropical rainforest* developed along the coastline. Over time, most of this rainforest was cleared for farming or was cut down to sell as timber. Much of western Nigeria is a *savanna*, a broad, flat land covered with tall grasses and scattered trees.

In the 1980s, almost everyone in western Nigeria lived in villages, but since then many people have moved to cities to seek work. By 2017, about half of all Nigerians lived in cities, and the urban population grows at a rate of more than 4 percent each year. About one-fifth of these city dwellers live in western Nigeria’s two largest cities, Lagos and Ibadan.
**Ethnic Groups: The Yoruba** The Yoruba make up the largest ethnic group in western Nigeria. Many Yoruba are Christian, although some follow Islam or traditional beliefs.

**Yoruba Beadwork**
This Yoruba crown is covered with beadwork. In earlier times, colorful glass beads were very valuable.

The Yoruba people first came to Nigeria around 100 B.C.E. They lived in villages that later grew into kingdoms. Each one of the Yoruba kingdoms had its own king and its own dialect, or a version of a language that is spoken in a specific area. A person from one Yoruba kingdom might not easily understand the dialect spoken in another kingdom. However, in recent years, the various Yoruba dialects have become more similar. Today, about one-tenth of the people in Nigeria speak forms of Yoruba as their first language.

**Culture: Tin Roofs, Beadwork, and Royal Statues** Many of the Yoruba people have relocated from the countryside to one of western Nigeria’s cities. Those who are well-off live in one-story houses or in apartments. The poor, on the other hand, live in shacks that are often put together with materials such as scrap wood, metal, and cardboard. The shacks are clustered on the outskirts of the cities and form shantytowns that lack electricity, running water, and garbage service.

In the countryside, the Yoruba live in houses that are made of mud bricks and usually topped with a steeply sloped roof of tin or iron. During hot weather, the overhanging roof provides shelter from the sun. During the wet season, people put buckets under the edge of their roofs to collect rainwater.

The Yoruba are famous for their colorful cloth and beadwork. The cloth is woven by Yoruba women and sold at markets in the cities. Yoruba beadwork was traditionally made for the upper classes. In fact, kings still wear clothing covered in beads from head to toe, including their robes, shoes, and crown. Yoruba crowns have beaded birds perched on them that look as if they may suddenly fly away. Crowns also have a beaded fringe or veil to conceal the king’s identity and to emphasize his office as king.
Selling Bread
This Yoruba woman is selling bread on a local street in Lagos, Nigeria. Success at trading and selling goods in markets or on the streets enables Yoruba women to achieve higher statuses in society.

Much of Yoruba art has been made to honor the long line of Yoruba kings. Yoruba artists create fancy wood masks for their kings, and they make bronze or clay statues to represent kings who have died.

Like the Hausa, the Yoruba are also known for their drums. One type of tension drum, called a *dundun*, is shaped like an hourglass, wide at the top and bottom and narrow in the middle. This tension drum imitates some of the sounds of the Yoruba’s spoken language, which is why it is sometimes called a *talking drum*.

Economy: Farms, Factories, and Markets Those Yoruba who live in cities hold a variety of jobs. Some work in factories, some work in offices, and others are teachers, engineers, or doctors.

Traditionally, the Yoruba worked as farmers. Some of these farmers grew wealthy enough to hire paid laborers to help them in their fields. Some also work as palm tree tappers, producing a palm wine called emu. Emu is a very popular drink of the Yoruba, who often purchase the drink to use for gatherings or ceremonies.

Yoruba women do some farming, but they also work as traders in a complex market system. They sell produce, such as yams and corn, from their farms, and they sell homemade cloth, baskets, and other traditional goods that tourists might want to purchase.

4. Life in Eastern Nigeria
For centuries, the Niger River served as an important source of fish for the people of eastern Nigeria. Then oil was found in the Niger River’s delta. Today, pollution from oil spills has killed most of the fish in the delta. For all of the wealth that oil brings to the country, oil pollution has made life difficult for eastern Nigerians who once depended upon the river for water and food.

Physical Environment: Rivers and Rich Resources Eastern Nigeria sits along the Gulf of Guinea beside a second bay known as the Bight of Biafra. The Benue River forms the northern edge of the region, and the Niger River forms the western edge.
This region receives more rainfall than other parts of Nigeria. Long ago, there were rainforests here, but people have cut down most of the trees to sell as timber. Today, swamps line the coast.

The Niger River has built up a large delta where it enters the Gulf of Guinea. The Niger Delta is one of the world’s largest wetlands and also contains Nigeria’s large oil deposits.

### Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria

These people are celebrating the end of Nigeria’s civil war. The war began when the Igbo tried to leave Nigeria in 1967 to form their own country. Their rebellion ended 31 months later. More than 1 million Nigerians died as a result of fighting, hunger, and disease brought about by this conflict.

### Ethnic Groups: The Igbo

The Igbo (pronounced ee-bo) are the largest ethnic group in eastern Nigeria. This group of people first settled here thousands of years ago. Unlike the Yoruba, the Igbo did not develop kingdoms, but instead lived in villages, each ruled by a council of elders.

The Igbo developed as an ethnic identity during British colonial rule. Before colonization, each village spoke its own dialect of the Igbo language, but today there are around 30 Igbo dialects. During the colonial period, differences between small Igbo groups decreased, and differences between the Igbo and other ethnicities increased.

Under colonial rule, most Igbo became Christian, and many were educated at church schools. Additionally, many Igbo held positions in business or government throughout the colony. This increased tensions with other ethnic groups in Nigeria.

After Nigeria became independent, things did not go well for the Igbo people. Other ethnic groups in Nigeria resented the power that the Igbo had. Igbo who had migrated to other regions of the country were killed by the thousands. At least one million more Igbo fled in terror back to their home region, where they remained deeply suspicious of their neighbors to the north and west.

In 1967, the Igbo tried to break away from Nigeria and form a country of their own called Biafra. The Nigerian government sent troops to the region to stop the breakaway, and hundreds of thousands of people died as a result of the war that followed. In 1970, Nigeria was once more united as a country, but the memories of the war remain in the minds of many Igbo.

### Culture: Houses on Stilts, Colorful Wraps, and Masked Dancers

In the cities, the Igbo build houses using mud bricks or cement blocks, with metal roofs protecting the houses from heavy rains. In swampy areas, people build their houses on stilts. During the rainy season, they paddle canoes to their homes and climb ladders to get inside.
Igbo traditionally wrapped themselves in colorful cloths. Igbo women wore one cloth wrapped around the lower body and another around the head. The men wrapped a cloth around the lower body and wore a cap on their head. Clothing styles changed with colonialism, but variations of this clothing are still worn on cultural occasions.

Oil Rig in the Niger Delta
Since oil was first discovered in the Niger Delta in 1956, Nigeria has become one of the top-15 oil producing nations in the world. However, oil production has also caused related pollution, including oil spills, and the Nigerian government does little to protect its citizens and the environment.

Across Africa, people create masks for rituals, ceremonies, and festivals. Masked dancing is a popular tradition among the Igbo, who make masks of wood or leather and decorate them with teeth, hair, fur, and other materials. The Igbo design their masks in secret and keep them hidden until they wear them, thereby allowing the masks to remain mysterious and important.

Economy: Oil and Education Farming used to be Nigeria’s main economic activity. Today, it is oil, and most of Nigeria’s wealth comes from selling oil to other countries.

In the past, foreign oil companies controlled Nigeria’s oil industry. Today, these companies partner with the Nigerian government. However, the government relies on these foreign companies to explore for oil, extract it, and to build the infrastructure to support the oil industry.

In the past, foreign companies mainly brought in foreign workers instead of hiring local people. Today, many Igbo work in the oil industry, but the Nigerian population does not benefit as much as it could from the oil wealth. More than 60 percent of the population still lives in poverty.

The Igbo have also used education to improve their lives. During colonial times, many Igbo attended college. Today, their children and grandchildren serve Nigeria as doctors, lawyers, and teachers.

Summary
In this lesson, you learned about Nigeria and its ethnic diversity. You explored the country’s three main cultural regions: northern, western, and eastern Nigeria. In addition, you read about some of the problems that face a country with so many different ethnic and linguistic groups.

Ethnic conflict is a problem in many parts of the world. In Africa, ethnic tensions were made worse by colonialism. The colonial powers established most of Africa’s present-day
national boundaries, but they gave little thought to how well the groups within a country might get along. Think about this as you examine the map of African ethnic groups in the next section.

**Global Connections**

The small map shows how Africa was divided into colonies in 1914. The large map shows Africa today. The red lines indicate where people of various ethnic groups live, and the black lines represent country borders.

**The Colonization of Africa**

Around 1500, European countries began setting up trading posts in Africa. By the 1800s, Europeans were competing fiercely for control of Africa and its resources. They divided most of Africa into the colonies shown on this map. Resistance to colonial rule grew over time. Between 1950 and 1980, 47 African colonies gained their independence.
Why do most African countries have so many cultural regions? In Africa, it is rare for ethnic boundaries and political boundaries to match. Most African countries were created during colonial times. European countries divided Africa into colonies to suit their own needs, without giving much consideration to tensions that might arise between ethnic groups living in the same colony.

What problems do countries with many cultural regions face? Countries have faced a range of problems, from disputes over national language to clashes between groups over government power. Issues of language have been easier to resolve, with many former colonies choosing the language of their former colonial ruler, such as English or French. Ethnic conflict over issues such as land, resources, and power has been a more serious problem. Some ethnic groups have a long history of disagreements, and often old hatreds have erupted into war.

What are some ways governments might reduce cultural conflicts? One way of reducing cultural conflict is to promote a common identity for everyone. In Nigeria, this means persuading people to think of themselves as Nigerians first and as part of an ethnic group second. Another way is to give local or regional governments more power so that each group can shape the laws in its own area to suit its way of life.