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Christmas in Nigeria

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Matthew Ojo

The West African nation of Nigeria, once a colony of Great Britain, is the most ethnically diverse country in Africa. It hosts over 200 different cultural groups that speak about 400 different languages. However, there are only three major ethnic groups in the country, which are Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. About 60 percent of Nigerians are Christians, while the other 40 percent are comprised of Muslims and traditional believers. Muslims dominate northern Nigeria, while Christianity is strongest in the southern part of the country. Nigeria, with detailed coastlines, lush savannah grasslands, and clashing arid cliffs and deep valleys, is the place to vacation during Christmas. Christmas in Nigeria brings out the very best of the country while making it a cherished place to enjoy the thrill of Christmas carnival.

Christmas in Nigeria is a time of great joy when families get together and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. While some denominations still do not believe that Jesus was actually born on the 25th of December, all join in to participate in the Christmas celebration. The Christmas season is arguably the most celebrated season in Nigeria, because everyone (except for Muslims living in the north) gathers to celebrate the Yuletide season. People start shopping for Christmas by early December. During Christmas time, children expect a new cloth, called a “Christmas cloth”, from their parents. The new Christmas cloth is what most children, and some parents who still enjoy the tradition, wear on Christmas day. Children then go from house to house in the neighborhood getting Christmas gifts, usually in the form of small amounts of money. Children use most of the money to buy firecrackers and bangers (a type of firework).

During Christmas, many towns and cities are emptied as most Nigerians who have moved to the cities return to their ancestral villages to be with family and to bless those who are less fortunate. The major gift shared during Christmas in Nigeria is either money or materials; exchanging Christmas cards is not part of Nigerian culture. People usually go to church on Christmas Eve and begin celebrating immediately afterwards. Loud music is played when they return from church and people begin to enjoy the traditional wine of Nigeria, palm wine. Everyone drinks and dances on Christmas Eve and saves the Christmas food for Christmas day. Christmas Eve is the time when people discuss their lives in the city. This lasts until midnight or sometimes until early the next morning. Then, people wake up to greet each other with a “Merry Christmas” in their respective languages. Many different languages are spoken in Nigeria; in Hausa, Merry Christmas is ‘*barka dà Kirsimati*’; in Yoruba it is ‘*E ku odun, e ku iye’dun*’; in Fulani it is ‘*Jabbama be salla Kirismati*’; in Igbo (Ibo), ‘*E keresimesi Oma*’; in Ibibio, ‘*Idara ukapade isua*’, and in Edo, Merry Christmas is ‘*Iselogbe*’.

Cooking usually involves all women who are part of the extended family; cooking starts immediately when women wake up in the morning. In a Nigerian home, Nigerian food is always prepared by the woman of the house, or first daughter as tradition permits. However, there are exceptions to this rule. Just as turkey or ham are traditional foods for celebrating Thanksgiving in America, chicken or hen are traditional foods for celebrating Christmas in Nigeria. However, many Igbos, an eastern tribe in Nigeria, kill goat for Christmas. The goat meat is used to make a special Igbo dish called “nkwobi.” Rather than having desserts and cakes, Nigerians cook a lot of Christmas meals and children usually get extra candies and biscuits. In most villages, neighbors exchange Christmas meals to show love. In the south, a dish called jollof rice is served with stews of various meats along with boiled beans and fried plantains; in the north, rice and stew, as well as tuwon shinkafa, a rice pudding served with various meat stews, is preferred. An alternative in both regions (but more favored in the south) is a pepper soup with fish, goat, or beef, which

may also be served with fufu (pounded cassava). Served with this food are an array of mainly alcoholic drinks, such as the traditional palm wine, or various local and imported beers and wines; children and women may be served locally made soft-drink equivalents instead.

Music begins again around noon when everyone wakes up and gets ready for Christmas. Then, everyone eats Christmas meals and have fellowship together. In some villages, masquerades dance around in traditional regalia and move from house to house to get gifts. In Calabar, a state in southeastern Nigeria where many ethnic Ibibio live, wandering companies in colorful attire perform traditional folk dramas and masquerades. Children also don masks made from colored raffia or hide their faces under heavy makeup as they gather in groups that compete with one another to put on the best masquerade in a combination of song, dance, and drumming. This tradition is slowly dying out as more people criticize these acts and say that Christmas is for the celebration of Christ only. However, this still remains a major way of celebrating Christmas in most remote villages.

The same kind of celebration happens in the city except that on Christmas day, families usually go to fairs, amusement parks, the beach, or street carnivals. Various popular comedians organize shows in major hotels on Christmas nights, and street carnivals are on almost every major street in the cities. Many people (especially females) dress in

colorful traditional apparel and engage in various activities, such as dancing or parades. People in the cities, especially newly married couples, usually go to the beach to ride horses, play fun games, and enjoy time together. Setting up Christmas trees is not a significant part of Nigerian culture; however, this act is becoming more common in malls and big homes in large cities.

While Christmas is a lot of fun, the days before Christmas are usually filled with a lot of stress for anyone travelling to villages. Traffic and transport fares rise because of the many people traveling back to their ancestral villages. Transport fares increase in an upward trend starting from a week before Christmas and usually double or triple from their original prices a day before and on Christmas. Also, the high concentrations of people on the roads and in the marketplaces encourage bandits, pickpockets, and thieves to increase their activities during this season. So far, these difficulties have not stopped Nigerians from celebrating Christmas with gifts and family reunions, but more people now travel a week before Christmas to their villages for the Yuletide celebration.

Christmas in Nigeria is an escape from the cold bleakness of winter snow to the rich heritage of African tradition. Whether to enjoy the cheer of the Africans at the Idumota Market or to know the deep legendary sagas of the Emir's Palace, Christmas in Nigeria is the best time to be in Africa. Nigeria, with its traditions, glamour, and extravaganza, adds to the Yuletide spirit during the end of December.