

Squiz the World goes to... Nigeria

Each fortnight, we give the world globe a spin, and see where we land. Then we take the kids of Australia and the world on an audio excursion to visit that country and its people.

I'm Christie Kijurina, and today on Squiz the World we're visiting a country where powerful queens helped shape history, movie-makers bring stories to life in one of the world's biggest film industries, and preparing a meal can give your muscles a workout!

Can you guess? ... Strap yourselves into the Squiz Kids Super Fast Supersonic Jetliner as we take off and take a squiz at Nigeria.

JUST THE FACTS

"Nigeria sits in West Africa, tucked into the bend where the continent's coastline turns south. Benin (beh-NEEN) is on one side, Cameroon on the other, with Niger (nee-ZHAIR) and Chad to the north and the Atlantic Ocean along its southern coast.

The whole country is just a little bigger than New South Wales. But while New South Wales has more than eight million people, Nigeria has more than 240 million. It's the most populous country in Africa and the sixth-most-populous country in the world. And about four in every ten Nigerians are under 15.

That is a LOT of school lunches."

"The capital is Abuja, which sits near the centre of the country, while Lagos, on the coast, is its biggest city and a major centre for business, music and movies. It's one of Africa's largest cities, with busy markets, apartment buildings, offices and roads packed with traffic.

But beyond the cities, Nigeria's landscape changes enormously. The south is warm and tropical, with rainforests and mangrove swamps, where trees grow in muddy water along the coast. Head north and the forests give way to savanna... wide grasslands dotted with trees... and eventually to much drier landscapes at the top of the country."

Those different habitats support thousands of plant species and hundreds of kinds of birds and mammals. There are elephants, chimpanzees, colourful birds and, in forests near the border with Cameroon, extremely rare Cross River gorillas.

"The mighty Niger River also winds through the country, spreading into a network of waterways called a delta before reaching the ocean. And just to untangle the names: Niger, Nigeria's northern neighbour, is a separate country. Both countries take their names from the river.

Nigeria's official language is English, but more than 500 languages are spoken here. Many people also use Nigerian Pidgin, a language that draws much of its vocabulary

from English. With more than 250 ethnic groups, Nigeria has an enormous variety of traditions, foods and ways of life."

"Nigeria's government is a federal republic, divided into 36 states, plus the territory containing Abuja. That means national and state governments share responsibilities, and an elected president leads the country. But alongside that system are traditional kingdoms, chiefdoms and emirates, with royal families and palaces still in use. Their rulers have cultural and community roles, with influence that varies from place to place.

So how did one republic come to have so many royal families? To understand that, we need to go back to before Nigeria was one country, when separate kingdoms and communities shaped this part of Africa. It's time to do a little..."

TIME TRAVEL

"Long before Nigeria appeared on a map, this part of Africa was home to separate kingdoms, empires and communities, each with its own leaders and traditions. There were busy trading cities, skilled craftspeople and powerful armies. And some of the people making the biggest decisions were women.

One of the most famous was Amina, remembered as the warrior queen of Zazzau (zaz-ZOW), in what is now northern Nigeria. Stories passed down through generations describe her riding into battle, commanding soldiers and expanding her kingdom's territory. She is also credited with building defensive walls around towns.

Much of Amina's story comes from oral tradition, history shared through storytelling, and historians disagree about some details, including exactly when she lived. But her reputation as a formidable leader has lasted for centuries."

"Further south, in the Kingdom of Benin, another woman was helping shape history around 500 years ago. And a quick geography reminder: this kingdom was in what is now Nigeria, rather than the neighbouring country called Benin.

Her name was Idia (ee-DEE-ah), and her son, Esigie (eh-SEE-gyeh), was the oba (AW-bah), or king. Idia was an important adviser who helped him secure his throne and supported his military campaigns. He honoured her with the title of iyoba (ee-YAW-bah), or queen mother. Beautifully carved ivory masks believed to represent her are among the kingdom's most famous artworks.

So, even a king could benefit from listening to his mum."

"But this region's history also includes a deeply painful chapter: the Atlantic slave trade.

Over several centuries, people from communities across what is now Nigeria were captured, taken from their families and sold. European traders carried them across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas, where they were forced to work, often on huge farms called plantations. They were treated as property and denied their freedom.

Some local rulers and merchants also took part, capturing or buying people and selling them to overseas traders. Those involved grew wealthy while others suffered terribly. Enslaved people resisted in many ways, and carried knowledge, beliefs and traditions with them that helped shape cultures across the Americas."

"During the 1800s and early 1900s, Britain gradually took control of the territory that became Nigeria. In 1914, British authorities joined their northern and southern territories under one administration, bringing many different peoples into the same colony.

After years of campaigning by Nigerians for self-government, the country became independent on October 1, 1960.

But becoming one country didn't make all those older kingdoms and royal families disappear."

"Today, Nigeria has many traditional rulers, with titles including oba, emir and chief. Their roles vary, but they can help preserve traditions, settle disputes and speak up for their communities. Some still carry out their duties in royal palaces, alongside Nigeria's elected system of government.

And belonging to a royal family doesn't necessarily mean spending your whole life sitting on a throne.

Take Princess Adetutu Adesida (ah-deh-TOO-too ah-deh-SHEE-dah). She was working as a pharmacist in Texas in the United States, when her father, the traditional ruler of Akure (ah-KOO-reh), died. She returned to Nigeria and became regent (a temporary ruler while a successor was chosen). That's quite a career change.

Of course, becoming a pharmacist takes plenty of studying. And for the millions of Nigerian children beginning their own learning journeys, it's..."

TIME FOR SCHOOL

"Imagine getting to the school gate and being asked to show your passport.

Your passport? You've brought your homework, your lunch and, against all odds, both of your sports shoes. Nobody mentioned international travel.

Luckily, you don't need a passport to go to school in Australia. And Nigerian children don't need one to get through the gate either. But a special kind of passport is helping more kids to get an education."

"It's called the Nigeria Learning Passport, and instead of opening the door to another country, it opens up a whole collection of lessons, videos and quizzes.

The passport is an online learning platform developed by Nigeria's education authorities with the United Nations agency UNICEF and partners. It's a free digital platform that

children can use on a phone, tablet or computer. The materials match Nigeria's school curriculum, with resources in English, and the other main languages of Hausa (HOW-suh), Igbo (EE-gboh) and Yoruba (YOR-uh-buh). Teachers can use it in class, children can practise at home, and it can help learners whose schooling has been interrupted. And if the internet is dodgy, it can be used offline too. The platform now has more than two million registered users in Nigeria."

"For some families, the cost of uniforms, books and supplies makes attending school difficult, even though public primary education is meant to be free. Conflict and flooding have also interrupted schooling in parts of the country.

The Learning Passport is one way to help bridge those gaps. A child can revisit a tricky explanation, try an activity again or catch up on something they've missed. No need to put a hand up and ask the video to repeat itself. Just press replay."

"And there's plenty to learn. Nigerian children usually begin primary school at around six, spending six years there before moving into secondary school. Their timetables include English, maths, science, art and other subjects, including Nigerian languages.

So, if fractions are giving you trouble in Australia, there's a fair chance someone your age in Nigeria is puzzling over them too. Being on the other side of the world doesn't get you out of maths."

Of course, plenty of learning happens away from a screen too. Stories, music and traditions are passed between generations and in Nigeria, there are hundreds of communities with their own ways of doing that. So....

LET'S GET CULTURAL

"If a drum started talking to you, you might reasonably wonder whether you'd spent too long in the sun. But among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, a skilled drummer really can make an instrument imitate speech.

Yoruba is a tonal language, which means the pitch of your voice (how high or low it goes) helps give words their meaning. A talking drum can copy those patterns. The drummer holds the hourglass-shaped instrument under one arm and squeezes the cords running down its sides while striking it with a curved stick. Squeezing changes the tension of the drumheads, making the sound rise and fall, just like speech."

"The Yoruba are one of Nigeria's three largest ethnic groups, alongside the Hausa and Igbo. An ethnic group is a community connected by things such as language, ancestry and cultural traditions. Yoruba communities have strong roots in the south-west, Hausa communities in the north and Igbo communities in the south-east, although people from all three live across Nigeria and around the world.

And remember, those are just three of more than 250 groups. We'd need a considerably longer podcast to visit everyone."

"In northern cities such as Kano (KAH-noh), an important centre of Hausa culture, Durbar (DUR-bah) celebrations bring spectacular horse processions into the streets around major Muslim festivals. Riders wear flowing robes and elaborate headwear, while their horses are dressed in richly decorated cloth, and even the horses have special-occasion outfits.

In many Igbo communities, another important celebration marks the arrival of the new yam harvest. Yams are large, starchy tubers that grow underground (a bit like potatoes), and the New Yam festival gives people a chance to give thanks for the crop and gather for feasting, music and dancing. "

"Traditions also find their way onto the screen in Nigeria. You've heard of Hollywood, right? And perhaps India's Bollywood? Well, Nigeria has Nollywood! That's the nickname for its enormous film industry.

Nigerian film-makers produce comedies, dramas, romances and stories about family life, history and much more, in English and Nigerian languages. Films reach audiences through cinemas, television and online platforms, carrying Nigerian stories far beyond the country's borders.

One estimate put Nollywood's film output at around 2,500 films a year. That's roughly 50 movies every WEEK. You could watch a different one every day and still never get close to watching them all."

All that drumming, dancing and acting has worked up an appetite. And after hearing about a festival devoted to yams, I think we should find out what's on the plate. It's...

DINNER TIME

"Before we sit down to eat, we might need to roll up our sleeves. Because preparing one of Nigeria's favourite foods can involve a very large wooden mortar (like a big heavy bowl), a long, heavy pestle (a kind of heavy grinding/ mashing tool) and quite a bit of muscle.

We're making fufu... a soft, stretchy dough often eaten with soups and stews. Nigerian cassava fufu is usually made from cassava (another type of tuber) that has been peeled, soaked and fermented, then processed and cooked. In a traditional pounding method, the mixture goes into a heavy wooden mortar on the ground and is worked with a long pestle until smooth.

Like... Thump. Thump. Thump."

"There's some important food science involved too. Raw cassava contains substances that can release a poison called cyanide. Proper processing makes it safe to eat, so those preparation steps really matter.

To eat fufu, you pinch off a small piece and use it to scoop up soup, maybe egusi (eh-GOO-see) soup, made with ground melon seeds, vegetables and other ingredients."

Then there's jollof (JOLL-off) rice, cooked in a richly seasoned mixture of tomatoes, peppers and onions. It's loved across West Africa, and Nigerians and Ghanaians have a famously lively rivalry over whose version tastes best. I think I'm going to need several helpings before offering an opinion on that... just to be sure.

THE S'QUIZ

This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening.

"What is Nigeria's capital city?

Is it:

a) Lagos

b) Niger

c) Abuja

[c) Abuja]"

True or false: Nigeria has more people than any other country in Africa. [True]

What food did we learn about that can be made by pounding prepared cassava in a large wooden mortar? [Fufu]

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for staying curious about the world, and joining me on this incredible trip to Nigeria.

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day. Over and out.