World Directory of Minorities

Africa MRG Directory → Nigeria → Tiv

Tiv

Profile

The estimated 3.5 million Tiv of Nigeria live in the central-eastern state of Taraba in the valley of the Benue River, and neighbouring states. Tiv are prosperous subsistence farmers and traders growing yams, millet and sorghum and raising small livestock and cattle. Their villages comprise compounds of sleeping huts, reception huts and granaries with a central marketplace. They speak Nyanza or Benue-Congo, part of the Niger-Congot language family. Traditionally Tiv formed a classic segmentary society in which strongly organized patrilineages linked large portions of the ethnic group into named non-local segments. Local organization, land tenure, inheritance, religious beliefs, law and allegiances were all related to this segmentary lineage. Tiv political organization and the possibility of conflict or alliance among territorial groups are traditionally based on the relative closeness of patrilineal descent members to a male ancestor. Nonetheless all Tiv have united against neighbouring enemies because of their common ancestors. Many Tiv continue to practice their traditional religion, while others have converted to Christianity and Islam.

Historical context

Tiv were never conquered by the Muslim jihad. Traditional lineage elders settled political disputes. Tiv had no paramount chiefs although the British established one in 1948. Under indirect rule, the British granted authority to members of the Jokun minority in order to control the Tiv majority, and tensions have continued ever since.

Wider administrative units were introduced under British rule, and mission-led education and conversion to Christianity helped create a sense of separateness from the Muslim north, based on educational disparity and religion. Tiv rioted in 1952 against the Hausa - Fulani rulers of northern Nigeria, who took harsh punitive action against them. Violence between Tiv and Jokun broke out on the eve of independence in 1959, as Tiv again expressed anger with the Native Authority System. Tiv were among members of the United Middle Belt Congress that opposed the rule of the Native Authority, which supported the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the ruling party of the north. Many people were killed during uprisings in 1960 and 1964. The Tiv attempt to create a separate region was blocked by northern Muslim-based political parties. Tiv agitation led eventually to the creation of the Benue-Plateau State in 1967, and in 1976, the splitting off of Benue State gave the Tiv a homeland, where they form a convincing majority. Nevertheless, tensions continued. In 1991-1992 there was renewed fighting over control of Wukari, which after the drawing of new state borders lies in the majority-Jokub state of Taraba, and over the boundaries between Benue and Taraba states. The Jokub minority in Benue and the Tiv minority in Taraba both complain of marginalization. The conflict has been heightened by the concept of 'indigeneity' enshrined in Nigeria's constitution, and the majorities claim that the minorities are 'settlers' deserving of fewer rights and privileges. Violence peaked in 2001, when hundreds died. Many of those were killed by the army in reprisal attacks against the Tiv community after Tiv militants killed 19 soldiers who had been deployed in the area to quell the fighting.
Current issues

In November 2007, in a highly unusual move, the Nigerian army issued a formal apology to the Tiv community for killings carried out by the military in 2001. Condemned by some, as inadequate because it was not tied to compensation for the victims' families, it was nevertheless welcomed by others as a sign that the Nigerian army was at last taking human rights issues seriously.