

BETWEEN FACT AND FORM: RETHINKING LANGUAGE AND STYLE IN NIGERIAN HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

OLUWASEUN IGBAGBOYEMI SOILE
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye

ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the relationship between factual content and stylistic form in Nigerian historical scholarship, challenging the longstanding assumption that historical writing must adopt a neutral, objective tone to be considered rigorous. It argues that language and style are not mere vessels for transmitting historical truth but are central to the construction, interpretation, and reception of historical knowledge. The study employs the qualitative research methodology, drawing on examples from both academic and vernacular traditions, including the works of Nigerian historians, oral narratives, and culturally embedded storytelling practices. The paper aims to explore how stylistic experimentation can deepen historical insight, broaden audience engagement, and reflect indigenous epistemologies. It also examines the institutional and epistemic constraints that discourage stylistic innovation, such as colonial legacies, academic gatekeeping, and the privileging of Eurocentric modes of narration. In proposing a more pluralistic approach to historical form, the paper advocates for an expanded methodological imagination that embraces linguistic diversity, indigenous expressive forms, and reflexive narrative strategies. Ultimately, it calls for a rethinking of scholarly conventions to make Nigerian historiography more inclusive, dynamic, and responsive to its own cultural and intellectual contexts.

KEYWORDS: Decolonisation, Epistemology, Language and Style, Nigerian Historiography, and Pluralist Historiography.

INTRODUCTION

History is not simply a repository of static facts, nor is historical writing an unbiased recording of the past. Every historical account is an epistemological claim and a stylistic construction. The language through which history is reconstructed—its structure, tone, rhythm, and metaphor—profoundly shapes how history is comprehended, to whom it speaks, and what silences it upholds. In the Nigerian context, this tension between "fact" and "form" assumes urgency. Postcolonial

historians have been grappling with colonial archives and epistemologies, as well as with academic conventions that place compelling limits on a narrow conception of objectivity, generally considered to be modelled on Euro-American traditions of historical inquiry (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Aderinto, 2016).

This paper develops from the critical understanding that the form of historical writing—language and style—is not to be considered secondary to the content. In fact, it is through the historical discourse that form becomes constitutive of meaning. The politics of form affect not only what is recounted but also whose voice is legitimised as history. For some time, Nigerian historians have been foregrounding in their works, particularly those grounded in African epistemological traditions, the inadequacies of Western historiographical theories; but the stylistic dimension of this critique has gone largely unnoticed. While much has been debated regarding sources, periodisation, perspectives, and so forth, stylistic concerns have remained largely untouched.

Those historians focused on "scientific" or positivist histories, with their emphasis on archival sources, chronological precision, and the erasure of authorial presence, have naturally come to marginalise alternative modes of narration emanating from African oral traditions, vernacular expressions, and communal modes of memory (Ngũgĩ, 1986; Achebe, 1975). Consequently, many Nigerian historians have found themselves navigating a double bind: to seek international scholarly legitimacy while at the same time staying true to local cultural forms. Some, like Toyin Falola (2013), have felt emboldened enough to lay an authorial voice over other voices, mixing overtly autobiographical and reflexive forms of writing, thus disturbing the neat separation of history and literature, fact and affect. On the other hand, popular artistes and oral historians have generated richly textured accounts of the past through songs, proverbs, parables, and performance forms rarely recognised in the formal academy.

This paper argues that a meaningful rethinking of historical scholarship in Nigeria must interrogate the politics of not only what is written but also how. It sets out to investigate the politics and aesthetics of some epistemological stakes of historical language and style in Nigerian historiography. The core questions guiding this study are: How does style or form constrain or enhance the authority of historical knowledge and/or its accessibility? And what are the consequences of privileging Eurocentric over indigenous narrative forms? What are some practical models for the integration of divergent linguistic and expressive forms into rigorous historical scholarship?

To answer these questions, this paper is structured into six sections. After this introduction, the second section interrogates the politics of historical language,

tracing colonial and postcolonial trajectories that have played an influential role in shaping academic norms of Nigerian historical writing. The third section discusses the contested relationship between form and method, demonstrating how differing narrative modes (e.g., thematic, biographical, poetic) affect the conduct of historical writing both as interventions and containers of content. The fourth section explores case studies of stylistic experimentation and innovation among Nigerian scholars and public historians. The fifth section presents institutional and epistemic constraints that inhibit such experimentation. The sixth lays out a framework for a pluralistic historiography, while the seventh concludes the study by reviewing possibilities for future historical research that is intellectually robust and culturally relevant.

Ultimately, this paper calls for a methodological turn within Nigerian historiography, one that treats form not as an aesthetic embroidery but rather as an essential part of historiographical method. Viewed as a site of epistemic negotiation, this paper contributes to wider discourses on the decolonisation of knowledge, the role of language in historical representation, and the future of Nigerian, nay African, scholarship.

THE POLITICS OF HISTORICAL LANGUAGE

Historiography, like other types of discourses, is rooted within the structures of power. Language itself is active, ideological, and constitutive; it is no passive conveyor of historical truths. The Nigerian historiographical landscape is marked by politics of language brought about by a variety of forces: colonial epistemologies, nationalist re-appropriations, postcolonial academic constraints, and indigenous cultural forms. To comprehend the stylistic and linguistic choices of Nigerian historians, one must first understand the history of the language of history itself: how it has evolved, what it tends to exclude, and whose authority it has privileged.

Colonial Legacies and Epistemic Authority

Colonial historiography served as a tool of imperial legitimation. European colonial administrators and missionaries constructed narratives that cast Africa as ahistorical, static, primitive—a continent without written records or historical consciousness (Vansina, 1985; Mudimbe, 1988). In dismissing oral traditions as merely unreliable, African history got dismissed, and the Western and Eurocentric paradigm of historical writing that privileges linear chronology, documentary evidence, and dispassionate tone was institutionalised. Moreover, English—with its attendant colonial representation—became the default medium of academic

production, further estranging history from indigenous epistemologies and audiences.

This framework endured into the early period of the postcolonial academy, as many Nigerian historians and scholars tried to legitimise themselves within Western-dominated academic structures. The idea of a “scientific history”—inspired by the Rankean tradition of objectivity and “what really happened”—was widely adopted in Nigerian university history departments (Ajayi, 1969). While this approach marked a significant departure from colonial denials of African historicity, it also perpetuated a narrow understanding of what qualified as genuine historical knowledge and how such knowledge should be expressed.

Nationalist Historiography and the Turn to Sources

The post-independence generation of Nigerian historians, notably J. F. Ade Ajayi, Kenneth Dike, and Tekena Tamuno, sought to reclaim the African past through intense archival and oral historical sources. These would serve as the foundations for establishing African agency, complexity, and continuity as genuine themes of history. However, the stylistic dimensions of their histories remained, to a great extent, conservative. Influenced by British academic conventions and writing for audiences both within and outside Nigeria, these scholars prioritised factual precision and structural coherence over narrative experimentation (Dike, 1956; Ajayi, 1969).

This budding urge to reconstitute African “authentic” history through “authentic” sources, while revolutionary at the time, still operated within a formalistic stylistic milieu that marginalised local idioms, oral aesthetic forms, and emotive expression. According to Obichina (1990), the language of nationalist historiography often echoed the tone and syntax of the colonial academy even as it challenged its content. This paradox demonstrates the entanglement of language with power in historical writing: one can decolonise the archive without touching the form of expression.

Language, Class, and Audience

The preponderance of academic English in Nigerian historiography began to raise critical questions about audience and accessibility. Historical scholarship remains largely meaningless to many Nigerians who are not fluent in academic English or literate in the first place. The irony is that histories meant to recover subaltern voices are often written in a form that excludes those very subjects. This creates a dichotomy not only between academic and popular history but also between knowledge producers and the community they serve.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) has eminently argued that the language of African literature—and by extension, scholarship—must reflect the empirical realities of African peoples. In the Nigerian case, this means acknowledging the expressive capacity of indigenous languages such as Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo, among others. Yet, this acknowledgement is something mainstream historiography has found hard to give, thereby impeding linguistic plurality in Nigerian historical scholarship. Although oral historians and artistes frequently deploy indigenous languages in their work, these modes are often relegated to the margins of “serious” academic history. The dominance of English thus sustains an epistemological hierarchy in which certain forms of expression—and by extension, certain kinds of knowledge—are rendered less legitimate.

Academic Gatekeeping and Epistemic Inertia

The stylistic conservatism of Nigerian historical writing is reinforced by institutional structures as academic journals, funding bodies, and peer review mechanisms, all espouse Eurocentric writing styles and citation forms. Historians who toy with form—by integrating autobiography, fiction, metaphor, or indigenous idioms—often find themselves excluded from mainstream venues or labelled as “unprofessional” or “unacademic.” As Oyewunmi (1997) has argued in the configuration of African feminist epistemology, the privileging of certain forms of knowledge is deeply gendered and racialised, mirroring broader global asymmetries in knowledge production.

Also, there is a pedagogical dimension to this apathy. In the context of the Nigerian university system, students are taught to conform to stylistically sanctioned, rigid, and formalistic prose styles; these styles discourage any deviation from convention. This inculcates a feedback loop: traditional styles earn rewards, while experimental styles are penalised; hence, stylistic novelty remains rare. Even when oral traditions and local idioms gain any sort of recognition as a subject of study, rarely are they employed as rigorous tools in historical narration. This separation of content and style preserves a history that rhetorically distances itself from the cultural life-worlds that it is trying to represent.

Contested Spaces: Journalism, Popular Culture, and the Vernacular

However, beyond the academy, the alternative forms of historiography flourish. Nigerian journalists, musicians, and dramatists have, for a long time, kept the flame of popular history alive in accessible language and idiomatic forms. For instance, *Fuji* and *Apala* musicians like Ayinla Omowura and Sikiru Ayinde Barrister have embedded historical commentary in poetic Yoruba, offering insights

into labour struggles, colonial experiences, and postcolonial disenchantment (Adeyemi, 2023). On the other hand, narrative flair and moral urgency have been utilised by journalists and essayists—such as the late Dele Giwa—to historicise contemporary issues in a manner that resonates with a broad audience.

These vernacular histories that most academic historians reject challenge the very notion of history as a solemn discourse rendered in sober, linear prose. They highlight the capacity of affect, rhythm, and metaphor to capture the pains, pleasures, and complexities of history and to mobilise a community's collective memory. Through their silencing, academic historiography does not infer curtailment of its own range of expression but rather concedes the stage to less rigorous, yet far more eloquent, narrators of the past.

Towards a Critical Politics of Style

If the language of history is never neutral, then the stylistic choices historians make must be understood as political. The privileging of formal, Eurocentric academic prose mirrors and reproduces power relations—between the West and the Global South, between elites and subalterns, between scholars and societies. Rethinking the politics of historical language thus requires more than including new sources; it demands a fundamental reimagining of how history is told and to whom it speaks. To be clear, this is not an argument against academic rigour or archival precision. Rather, it is a call to expand the historiographical imagination—to recognise that style is not antithetical to substance but integral to it. A more inclusive and reflexive historical scholarship would acknowledge multiple ways of knowing and telling the past, including those rooted in oral tradition, performative narration, and affective engagement.

FORM AND FUNCTION: STYLE AS METHOD IN NIGERIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Style, in most conventional historiography in Nigeria, is usually treated as an afterthought pertaining merely to clarity in prose, coherence, and grammatical correctness. Very rarely is style considered central to the historical method or even as a constitutive element of interpretation. Yet, form is never neutral. It reflects not only the worldview of the historian but also the type of meanings that emerge from historical data. This insight, in the Nigerian context, is particularly salient, due to the multiplicity of narrative traditions, the importance accorded to oral forms, and the contentious nature of historical authority. The central argument, here, is that style—

the very form in which history is written—is more than just literary flair; it is, in fact, a methodological choice that is loaded with epistemological implications.

Style as Method, Not Ornament

The historiographical problem that has long received attention is how to represent complex pasts so that they will be understood and accepted by people. European historians have often been engaged in discussing the role of narrative, metaphor, and temporality in historical writing—from the Annales School to postmodern theorists (White, 1973; Ricoeur, 1984). However, in Nigerian academia, much of such debate has never taken place. This is partly because of institutional constraints, but also due to the enduring belief that style risks diluting the “factual” core of history.

Yet, scholars like Toyin Falola have demonstrated that stylistic experimentation can strengthen rather than weaken historical argumentation. In works such as *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt* (2004), Falola intersperses autobiography, folklore, and reflexive narrative to present a history that is both personal and collective, emotionally charged, and analytically precise. The stylistic form, filled with parables, digressions, and idiomatic expressions in the Yoruba language, is itself a method of historical interpretation—allowing readers to experience the text as an unfolding act of cultural remembrance. Here, form and function converge. Instead of compromising and diminishing the historical value of the text, the use of personal narrative enacts the very epistemology, rooted in memory, affect, and cultural transmission, which the author intends to foreground. Metaphor and rhythm thus transform into analytical tools, not just ornamental and decorative. Hence, style manufactures its own argument: it is a way of knowing as much as a way of telling.

Narrative Structure and Historiographical Imagination

History is conceptualised by means of narrative in a way that is conditioned by form: linear, thematic, episodic, or cyclical. The generally accepted chronological narrative so common to Western historiography quite often, though not always, implies causality, teleology, and progress. Yet it may not be the best to describe with accuracy an African form of oral tradition with its overlapping construction of past, present, and future (Mbembe, 2001).

Nigerian historians, who are writing precolonial histories, for example, often face the challenge of narrating non-linear histories embedded in meshworks of myths, performance, and ritualism. Scholars like Bolanle Awe (1991) and Akinwumi Ogundiran (2005), in their two-pronged call, underline the need for forms that speak of the African concept of time in all its ontological complexity and, in some

instances, embrace cyclical or multi-vocal narratives that reject closure and remain comfortable with indeterminacy.

Awe's (1992) work on women's role in Yoruba history, for example, adopts thematic rather than strict chronological approaches to allow different aspects of social life, namely economic, political, and religious, to surface in relational terms rather than sequential terms. This, then, serves to highlight the agency of women even as it undermines the masculine, event-focused form of historical narration.

Orality, Performance, and Affective Style

In Nigeria, oral tradition is not anaemic in its ability to confer content; instead, its form has its own aesthetics and epistemological rules. The various *griots*—praise singers and storytellers—use repetition, rhythm, proverbs, and exaggeration not as embellishment, but as a structure to sustain memory, community, and cultural continuity (Barber, 2000). These elements of orality can be—and occasionally have been—incorporated usefully into written historical discourse.

Akinwunmi Ishola's historical dramas and Wale Ogunyemi's theatrical works, for example, dramatise Yoruba histories in performative styles deeply rooted in *oriki* (praise poetry) and ritual language. Despite often being treated as literature rather than “history,” these works convey sophisticated historical consciousness, communal memory, and both direct and indirect criticisms of colonial and postcolonial transformations. Their stylistic techniques—repetition, call-and-response, emotive intonations—are methodological, not merely expressive (Brantley, 1996).

These stylistic methods are few in academic writing. In stark contrast to many subject matters with deeply affective nature—slavery, war, displacement—emotional registers are curiously toned down in academic history. One of the reasons for rejecting such emotive language in academic history is to maintain objectivity and accuracy, but it does so at the expense of flattening the texture of historical experience. In her work on slavery, Hartman (2008) demonstrated that stylistic choices like fragmentation, speculation, and lyrical prose can serve as an ethical and epistemic manner to represent past traumas that evade conventional narration.

Language, Translation, and Multivocality

Language choice and translation pose another dimension in style appropriation. Nigerian historians writing in English must constantly be watching out for problems of equivalence and fidelity, as well as nuances of culture. Some terms like *ogún*, *àsò-ẹbí*, and *èèwò*, carry cultural meanings that cannot be reduced to

simple equivalents or straightforward translation. The decision to leave such terms untranslated, or to gloss them in footnotes, is not merely a stylistic issue—it reflects deeper methodological stances on cultural representation and reader positionality.

Some historians have attempted a style of writing in different languages that allows for code-switching and embedded proverbs along with parallel translations. This approach foregrounds the tension between global academic norms and local cultural specificity. It also enacts multivocality—allowing different registers and worldviews to coexist within the same text. While this style may challenge conventional readability, it reflects a more honest representation of the linguistic hybridity of Nigerian life. Toyin Falola (2013) and others have argued that African historiography must take seriously the polyglot realities of African existence and concede that "standard academic English" is neither neutral nor universal. By incorporating multiple linguistic registers in the text, historians would fight against epistemic homogenisation and pave the way for divergent perspectives on seeing and articulating the past.

Finally, style is not just methodological—it is ethical. The way historians write about their subjects reflects assumptions about whose voices matter, whose pain is visible, and whose memories are worth preserving. A dry, detached tone may suggest impartiality but can also erase the emotional and moral weight of certain histories. Conversely, a reflexive and affective style may be more faithful to the lived experience of those whose histories are being told. In postcolonial Nigeria, where history is often contested terrain, style becomes a mode of ethical engagement. Writing with sensitivity, cultural insight, and rhetorical care is not a betrayal of academic norms but a fulfilment of historical responsibility. As such, historians must develop a critical awareness of their own stylistic choices and the forms of power they inscribe.

EXPERIMENTS IN STYLES: CASE STUDIES FROM NIGERIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY AND BEYOND

While Nigerian historical scholarship has largely been shaped by empiricism and documentary fidelity, several notable works have departed from these programmed methodologies, thus opening possibilities for stylistic experimentation to enrich historical comprehension. This section considers some Nigerian and Africanist texts that disrupt conventional narrative forms, employing such innovative styles to investigate historiographical and ethical frontiers. These Nigerian-focused case studies reveal that experimental language and form become critical interventions into the practice of history rather than mere artistic devices.

Falola's Memoir as Historiographical Performance

Toyin Falola's *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt* (2004) projects the idea of an in-between text, caught somewhere between autobiography, cultural history, and fiction, simultaneously. Set as a childhood memoir in Ibadan, it is neither a conventional African historical study nor merely a pure narrative of personal growth. The text is set up to mingle idioms, proverbs, folklore, and reflection, thereby privileging the oral form of storytelling within an academic written form. The language of the memoir cuts a path between straightforward English and Yoruba-inflected speech, offering an experience of cultural memory rich with texture.

An intentional narrative digression style punctuated by scenes of repetition and emotion puts into question linear, so-called "objective" historiography. On the other hand, in this manner, Falola uses style to narrate a life and at the same time model another epistemology: one based on orality, emotion, and indigenous ways of remembering. The memoir, instead of creating a widely accepted distinction between the scholar and the subject, collapses this divide and positions the historian at the centre of the story, thus making style a live site of historiographical investigation (Falola, 2004).

Nwando Achebe's 'Narrative Voice' and Gendered History

Similarly, Nwando Achebe's *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe* (2011) uses narrative techniques that divert from traditional historical writing. Blending oral testimonies, archival material, and imaginative reconstruction, Achebe offers a feminist history that recovers an obscured figure while simultaneously engaging with a politics that reflects that of her subject. The author's presence is regularly emphasised throughout the text as it acknowledges the difficulties of writing about a woman who left behind scant written documents but an overwhelming presence in oral traditions.

Achebe's prose style acknowledges that it is self-consciously situated. This is done by refusing to pretend to be dispassionate; by contrast, she acknowledges her emotional, intellectual, and political commitments to her subject. By so doing, she questions the possibility of a neutral historical voice and offers an alternative that foregrounds empathy, positionality, and narrative complexity (Achebe, 2011). This formal experiment enables Achebe to deal with gaps in the archival records with cautious speculation and literary skill, reflecting Saidiya Hartman's (2008) notion of "critical fabulation." In both cases, a stylistic choice functions both as a medium of grappling with historical absence, silence, and/or erasure, particularly with reference to gendered and subaltern subjects.

Tejumola Olaniyan's Cultural Criticism as History

Straddling disciplinary borders between history, literary criticism, and cultural theory, Tejumola Olaniyan's *Arrest the Music! Fela and His Rebel Art and Politics* (2004) gives an account of the life and work of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti using a prose style that duplicates the energy and complexity of his subject. Frequently, the text shifts from analytical prose to lyrical description and historical narration, producing a polyphonic and improvisatory ambiance not dissimilar to that of Afrobeat itself.

In opposition to a historiographical method based on chronology, the structure of the text, rather, follows a thematic logic which, in multi-layered ways, explores Fela's aesthetics, politics, sexuality, and religion. This thematic organisation enables Olaniyan to present relations that link the private life with larger transformations on the political level in postcolonial Nigeria. Rhythmic, polemical at times, and always firmly engaged with the stylistic registers of popular culture, Olaniyan considers musical aesthetics and political protest as co-constitutive, thus modelling a form of historiography that recognises cultural performance as an archive (Olaniyan, 2004).

Histories in Translation: Multilingual and Polyvocal Styles

Another important site for experimentation in Nigerian historiography is the embrace of multilingualism and polyvocal narration. The English language remains a dominant language for scholarly communication. However, an increasing number of Nigerian historians and literary scholars contend that indigenous languages, idioms, implicatures, and stylistic devices should be incorporated. This includes the usage of terms that are never translated in academic writings, as well as the cannibalisation of traditional narrative form—types such as *itan*, *oriki*, and *esin* into forms of historiography.

Dramatic language and oral performance modes are applied by Olu Obafemi in his historical plays, for instance, *Naira Has No Gender* (2007). Even if, strictly speaking, Obafemi's works are not historical monographs, they serve as historiographical critique—using performance to dramatise political history and social contradiction. In doing so, these dramatic texts respond to Walter Benjamin's (1968) plea for historians to blast open the continuum of history with disruptions of linearity through mishmash and juxtaposition.

These efforts point toward a new potential for African historiography that draws from indigenous genres not only as content but also as methodological inspiration. The hybridity of styles reflects the realities of postcolonial subjectivity, which is fragmented, polyglot, and historically entangled.

Comparative Glimpse: Hartman, Trouillot, and Narrative Ethics

Whereas this paper mainly focuses on Nigerian historiography, a brief mention of other African diasporic thinkers can help shed light on the ethical and political stakes of stylistic innovation. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* (1995) shows how measures of historical narrative construction consist not only of the very facts supplied or withheld, but also of the internal mechanisms of storytelling itself. His explanation of how the archival and narrative procedures bring about silences parallels the battles of Nigerian historians with fragmented colonial record systems and the erasures of indigenous voices.

On the contrary, Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) pushes the very limits of academic prose as they blend archival fragments, poetic speculation, and lyrical reconstruction in tribute to Black women whose lives have been marginalised by systematic historiography. Her approach suggests that formal experimentation is not only daring aesthetically but becomes an ethical imperative when dealing with subjects that are rendered invisible by conventional historiography.

These comparative instances underscore a central argument of this paper: that style is not a diversion from historical rigour but rather a site where rigour, ethics, and imagination converge.

CHALLENGES AND CRITIQUES

While stylistic experimentation in Nigerian historiography holds exciting promise and great potential, it equally sets in motion rather pressing challenges, which are sometimes epistemological, institutional, and political. This section outlines the major critiques and limitations that meet the attempted re-thinking of language and style in historical writing in contexts marked by academic conservatism, infrastructural set-ups, and the lingering shadows of colonial knowledge systems.

Epistemological Concerns: Fact, Fiction, and the Archive

Empirically-minded historians have long been concerned that stylisation may dilute the gravity of evidence upon which the discipline rests. In the words of the opponents: memoirisation, speculative construction, or poetic powers threaten to obfuscate the divide between history and fiction (Cohen & Hanrahan, 2020). To others, highlighting the voice of subjectivities and narrative glories has detracted the historian from the essential task of weighing claims, cautiously interpreting sources, and assembling historically grounded accounts.

This concern becomes particularly potent within the Nigerian academic environment, where historical scholarship has functioned as a means of asserting the autonomy and complexity of African pasts against the earlier colonial distortions. Experimental styles, in such a context, threaten to imperil the hard-won legitimacy of historical discourse. As Adebayo (2018:2) notes, "to write with flair is often seen as to write with frivolity," and historians who embrace literary devices may be dismissed as lacking analytical depth.

Disciplinary Orthodoxy and Institutional Gatekeeping

Another huge challenge comes from the disciplinary norms governing academic publishing and university pedagogy in Nigeria. History departments, journals, and exam boards put a premium on clarity, neutrality, and formality. Those values were historically imported from Western models of academic writing. Conventions that stigmatise first-person writing or do not accommodate speculative methods reward mainly linear structure, passive voice, and impersonal narration.

Such gatekeeping mechanisms stand in the way of the younger generation of scholars experimenting with voice and form. Even when fellow historians theoretically support alternative styles, institutional pressure—as in promotion criteria, peer review expectations, and thesis guidelines—inhibits their ability to fully express themselves in ways that diverge from conventional thought. In the words of Osaghae (2022:46), "style is not only a matter of individual choice but also structural power," which is determined by what is regarded within the academy as acceptable knowledge production.

This structural conservatism also extends to journal editors, conference assessors, and funding bodies, many of whom still prefer established methods. Consequently, experimental styles may likely face a longer time for publication, rejection, or a lack of institutional acknowledgement, further marginalising stylistically adventurous scholarship.

Language Politics and the Question of Accessibility

One of the complexities of stylistic innovations is the tension between complexity and accessibility. Experimental forms might mirror history's fragmented and polyphonic nature; however, accessing these forms requires a familiarity with postmodern or literary idioms, which might alienate some readers. In Nigeria, where higher education continues to be stratified and underfunded, those who adopt excessive opacity or stylisation may find themselves entangled with neither the academic world nor the public.

The tension is heightened by the linguistic politics of Nigerian scholarship. English remains the dominant medium of academic expression, even though many scholars think and write across multiple languages. Yet incorporating indigenous linguistic forms—such as proverbs, praise poetry, or code-switching—may render texts less accessible to a global readership or peer reviewers trained in Anglo-American academic traditions.

The rise of formalised alternative styles can be exclusionary by design. An attempt at decolonising language, therefore, has the potential to degenerate into a new language of elitism—already intelligible only by those who are at ease with the aesthetics of either hybrid or postcolonial prose. This issue of exclusivity is aligned with how scholars such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak have been criticised for their convoluted theoretical language that, while politically engaged, has also prevented numerous attempts at comprehension and activism (Ahmad, 1992).

Ethical Risks: Romanticisation, Overreach, and Misrepresentation

Stylistic innovation, particularly with imaginative reconstruction, comes with ethical risks. Historians, who have gone beyond the available evidence toward speculation, tend to inadvertently misrepresent their subjects, mainly when dealing with voices already marginalised. Although techniques, including Saidiya Hartman's "critical fabulation," aim to highlight the silences and violence of the archive, they simultaneously work to blur the lines between strict historical truth and creative interpretation (Hartman, 2008).

In Nigerian historiography, the use of oral traditions in filling gaps in colonial records calls attention to an intermediate space in which historians must weigh the value of oral knowledge against romanticisation. Overly poetic versions of oral narratives may constrict complex historical agents as symbolic or allegorical figures. Likewise, excess intrusion by the historian into the narratives may easily suppress the voices of historical agents themselves.

Also, the pressure to innovate stylistically sometimes is the result of global academic trends, and not a spontaneous need of local knowledge communities. Critically, the urge to "write differently" often becomes a mere performance in the name of Western audiences instead of really fighting epistemic hierarchies on their own terms. As Mbembe (2001) admonishes, decolonisation must go further than aesthetics; it must demand a radical transformation in knowledge production, not merely changes in narrative texture.

Resource Constraints and Editorial Infrastructure

Lastly, many of the stylistic innovations discussed in this paper call for editorial flexibility and interdisciplinary collaboration and publishing outlets that

support creative formatting and hybrid genres. Regrettably, Nigeria's academic publishing sector remains underdeveloped, with little or no funding, outdated formatting systems, coupled with a dearth of responsive editorial houses. This infrastructural deficiency places an impediment to any attempt at experimenting with layout, typography, or multimedia codifications that might otherwise add value to the non-traditional style of writing.

Moreover, creative historical projects often benefit from working with artists, translators, ethnographers, and digital humanities experts—resources that may not be readily available in Nigerian universities. Without institutional support, even the most promising stylistic ventures may remain isolated or under-recognised.

TOWARDS A PLURALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY: EMBRACING MULTIPLICITY IN FORM AND VOICE

In addressing the challenges and criticisms outlined above, this concluding section advocates for a pluralist approach to Nigerian historiography—one that legitimises stylistic multiplicity while upholding scholarly rigour and ethical responsibility. Rather than seeking a single and definitive model of “alternative’ historical writing, it encourages a flexible framework that accommodates both mainstream approaches and experimental ones. Such pluralism recognises that there is no single narrative technique that can capture the complexity of Nigeria's diverse historical experiences.

Legitimising Stylistic Experimentation within the Discipline

To meaningfully incorporate alternative styles into historical scholarship in Nigeria, the discipline must expand its criteria of legitimacy. This means an understanding that historical truth may be conveyed not only through the sober cadence of academic prose, but also through affective, fragmented, or metaphorical registers. As Trouillot (1995) contends, history is always a narrative construction, filtered and shaped by choices about voice, inclusion, and emphasis. If historians accept this premise, then they are at liberty to treat style not as a peripheral embellishment, but as a methodologically relevant issue.

Institutional actors—journal editors, thesis supervisors, and academic communities—must therefore act as facilitators in this process. Editorial boards should consider embracing guidelines that explicitly welcome such innovative submissions, while academic departments could incentivise experimental chapters and hybrid dissertations. Training workshops in creative nonfiction, digital storytelling, or multilingual writing could also equip scholars to explore new stylistic terrains without compromising analytical depth.

Dialogue between History and the Humanities

Another method to facilitate stylistic innovation is to strengthen dialogue between history and the general humanities, particularly literature, anthropology, and philosophy, because these disciplines provide methodological tools and rhetorical conventions that enrich historical writing. For instance, literary techniques such as stream of consciousness, nonlinear plotting, or polyphonic narration might be harnessed toward historical ends with appropriate contextualisation.

Interdisciplinarity is not against the retention of disciplinary focus. In fact, creatively borrowing from these disciplines should remain entirely grounded in evidentiary logic as well as contextual awareness. For example, Nigerian historian Moses Ochonu (2014) strikes an exquisite balance between ethnography, biography, and political analysis to explore how cross-genre techniques can study complex historical actors while preserving analytical rigour. In their own writing, Gloria Chuku (2009) and Saheed Aderinto (2017) have similarly shown how thematic cohesion sustains even in diffuse, culturally grounded prose.

Collaborations between historians and artists, linguists, or digital curators could support new forms of storytelling—multimedia archives, animated historical essays, and performative re-enactments. Many of these forms may not conform to mainstream scholarly formats, but they engage an audience in ways that a printed monograph often cannot.

Decolonising Language through Indigenous Epistemologies

A pluralist historiography must further confront the language politics undergirding Nigerian historiography. Though English has remained the dominant medium of academic discourse, it is not neutral. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argued that colonial languages dominate African scholarship, thereby alienating the writer from local epistemologies and idioms. Reintegrating indigenous languages and ideas, either through code-switching, use of proverbs, or citing oral sources, can serve as both decolonial gestures and stylistic enrichment.

Decolonising language does not mean giving up English entirely. Alternatively, the goal is to subvert English and turn it into a malleable, local, and context-aware vehicle that can carry local meanings without smothering them. Hybridisation has been explored for a long time by Nigerian writers, from poetic neologisms by Wole Soyinka to mythic English by Amos Tutuola. Historians could use such literary precedents as inspiration for creating forms of narration that are historically grounded and make cultural sense.

In addition, by employing an indigenous narrative framework, like the Yoruba *itan* ('story-history') or Igbo *ilu* ('proverbial logic'), historical conceptions of

time, causality, and agency might be opened anew. These forms offer alternatives to Western perspectives of chronology and objectivity that place relationality, spirituality, and collective memory as valid historical registers (Oyewunmi, 1997).

Pedagogical and Public Engagements

Such a pluralist approach to historical writing in Nigeria also implies pedagogical and public engagement concerns. Within the classroom, students must be exposed to a gamut of genres of history: memoirs, historical fiction, critical fabulations, and audio-visual histories, besides the conventional textbooks. Exposure to these genres serves the two-fold purpose of sharpening analytical skills while opening students' imaginative capacities and appreciation for the craft of writing.

Historians must consider ways of engaging their work with audiences outside academia. In a country where history has mostly been neglected in the national curriculum for a long time, there arises a pressing need to bring back popular historical consciousness through catchy storytelling. Radio documentaries, community archives, street theatre, and social media engagement serve as a pluralist historiography platform, especially when these media draw from local languages in tandem with participatory formats.

This approach arguably ensures that the prospects of Nigerian history lie as much outside as within the academy. Since historical pasts are relatively better disseminated than academic texts by popular musicians, filmmakers, and spoken-word artistes, it would be good to open discourses with these cultural producers for enhancing the scope and relevance of academic practice by taking seriously the historicity involved in their art.

Rethinking Authorship and Authority

Essentially, the stylistic pluralism agenda in Nigerian historical scholarship is a call to rethink authorship. It raises the fundamental questions such as who has the right to speak for the past, in what voice, and to what audience? Rather than aspiring to a single authoritative tone, it proposes a multiplicity of registers—objective and subjective, analytical and emotive, poetic and pedestrian. Such an approach honours the richness of Nigerian histories, which have always been told through multiple media and perspectives.

This does not mean abandoning disciplinary standards. On the contrary, it demands that these standards be more reflexive and expansive definition of those standards—one that values clarity without uniformity, rigour without rigidity, and form together with content. By embracing plurality, Nigerian historiography will truly represent the diverse textures of the lives it earnestly seeks to understand, represent, and remember.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that language and style are not merely the peripheral issues of Nigerian historical scholarship but are rather the very basis upon which historical knowledge is generated and thus conceived and conveyed. Defying such a simplistic and most common notion, language and form are very instrumental in mediating the entire relationship among evidence, interpretation, and audience. In a postcolonial society such as Nigeria, rife with epistemic pluralism, linguistic diversities, highly contested historical narratives, and all other factors, stylistic choices become, therefore, matters of life and death.

The hegemony of Euro-American academic prose, inherited from colonial legacies and global scholarly hierarchies, often marginalises alternative modes of writing and drawing from indigenous epistemologies, oral traditions, or affective registers. But, as has been shown, a long history of stylistic experimentation has existed within and outside academia—from lyrical musings of nationalist intellectuals such as Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo, to socially engaged verses of *Apala* musicians such as Ayinla Omowura. Such forms challenge the idea that historical truth must be told in the impartial, linear, or single-voiced register of academic prose.

The very contemporary spirit of historiographical practice admits of, and at the same time constrains innovations. Some historians indeed have made innovations by using creative nonfiction, multilingual narration, and inter-textual storytelling; yet most institutional structures still uphold the formalist orthodoxy. Hence arises a more profound dilemma: how can historians innovate without rushing to lose credibility within the disciplinary and professional framework?

Such a dilemma might have been buttressed by establishing and maintaining a plural historiography that allows divergent narrative forms but remains committed to evidence-based inquiry. Pluralism, in this regard, should not mean relativism or abandoning scholarly standards; instead, it would entail asking historians to be reflexive about the choices they make in relating their narrative forms as an extension of method and critically engaging the audience they serve. This expresses the belief that serious scholarship can be expressed through multiple voices: analytical or poetic, fragmented or seamless, vernacular or elite.

Most importantly, such pluralism must be supported by pedagogical and institutional change. Historians will have to be trained not just in archival research and argumentation; they should also be instructed in writing across genres and registers. Editorial boards and peer reviewers will have to be armed to consider innovations without prejudice toward convention. Much must be said, as well, in

recognising the public as a legitimate recipient of historical knowledge—an audience that frequently demands newer narrative forms that are more resonant and accessible than the overtly formalistic prose of the academia.

Ultimately, rethinking language and style in Nigerian historical writing is not merely a matter of aesthetics or accessibility. It is a political and epistemological project—one that seeks to democratise historical knowledge, affirm cultural specificity, and resist the silences imposed by colonial, academic, and linguist gatekeeping. As scholars continue to debate what history is, they must also reflect on what it sounds like—and for whom it speaks. The very future of Nigerian historiography may well hang on the willing embrace of a more equal negotiating ground—where diverse historical voices can come to be heard, and narrative forms can meet the richness, violence, contradiction, and beauty of the pasts they seek to tell.

REFERENCES

- Achebe, C. (1975). *Morning yet on creation day: Essays*. Anchor Press.
- Achebe, N. (2011). *The female king of colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe*. Indiana University Press.
- Adebayo, A. (2018). *Writing history, writing style: Rhetorical practices in African historiography*. *African Studies Review*, 61(2), 1–18.
- Aderinto, S. (2016). *Children and childhood in colonial Nigerian histories*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Aderinto, S. (2017). *Guns and society in colonial Nigeria: Firearms, culture, and public order*. Indiana University Press.
- Adeyemi, O. (2023). *Ayinla Omowura: The musician as social chronicler*. Lagos: Bookcraft.
- Ahmad, A. (1992). *In theory: Classes, nations, literatures*. Verso.
- Ajayi, J. F. A. (1969). *History and the nation*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press.
- Awe, B. (1991). The rise of feminist historiography in Nigeria. *African Studies Review*, 34(2), 1–10.
- Awe, B. (1992). Reflections on the construction of gender in Nigerian history. *African Historical Review*, 24(1), 15–25.
- Barber, K. (2000). *The generation of plays: Yoruba popular life in theatre*. Indiana University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1968). Theses on the philosophy of history. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (H. Zohn, Trans.). Schocken Books.

- Brantley, B. (1996). Menacing Shadows Greet Dawn in Nigeria. *The New York Times*. 11 October.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/10/11/theater/menacing-shadows-greet-dawn-in-nigeria.html> Retrieved 20 May, 2025.
- Chuku, G. (2009). *The Igbo intelligentsia and African nationalism: The case of the Igbo women, 1900–1960*. Routledge.
- Cohen, D., & Hanrahan, M. (2020). *Historiography: An introduction*. Routledge.
- Dike, K. O. (1956). *Trade and politics in the Niger Delta 1830–1885: An introduction to the economic and political history of Nigeria*. Oxford University Press.
- Falola, T. (2004). *A mouth sweeter than salt: An African memoir*. University of Michigan Press.
- Falola, T. (2013). *The joy of learning: Memoirs of an African child*. Carolina Academic Press.
- Falola, T., & Heaton, M. M. (2008). *A History of Nigeria*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hartman, S. (2008). *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hartman, S. (2008). *Venus in two acts*. *Small Axe*, 12(2), 1–14.
- Hartman, S. (2019). *Wayward lives, beautiful experiments: Intimate histories of social upheaval*. W. W. Norton.
- Isola, A. (1998). *Efunsetan Aniwura: Iyalode Ibadan*. Ibadan: Kraft Books.
- Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the postcolony*. University of California Press.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. (1988). *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge*. Indiana University Press.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. Heinemann.
- Obafemi, O. (2007). *Naira has no gender*. Ibadan: Kraft Books.
- Obichina, E. (1990). The burden of language in African historical writing. *Journal of African Studies*, 17(2), 23–36.
- Ochonu, M. (2014). *Colonialism by proxy: Hausa imperial agents and middle belt consciousness in Nigeria*. Indiana University Press.
- Olaniyan, T. (2004). *Arrest the music!: Fela and his rebel art and politics*. Indiana University Press.
- Osaghae, E. (2022). *Institutional norms and the politics of academic writing in Africa*. *Journal of African Knowledge Systems*, 5(1), 44–62.
- Oyewumi, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. University of Minnesota Press.

- Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and narrative: Volume 1* (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.
- Trouillot, M.-R. (1995). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Beacon Press.
- Vansina, J. (1985). *Oral tradition as history*. University of Wisconsin Press.
- White, H. (1973). *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

