



An Articulated Silencing: Curriculum Politics, Historical Erasure, and the Systematic Distortion of Igbo Heritage in Nigeria

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Abstract

Original Research Article

History education in postcolonial Nigeria is devoted to power, identity, and curriculum politics. This paper appraises the controversy surrounding the claimed Federal Ministry of Education’s non-approval of the textbook *Living History*, debating that it echoes a wider design of epistemic relegation and historical muzzling of Igbo heritage. Rather than a purely procedural decision, the episode discloses how curriculum gatekeeping and appeals to “national values” function to privilege dominant chronicles while rendering Igbo history partial, distorted, or peripheral. Drawing on discourse analysis and postcolonial theory, the article validates how colonial and postcolonial frameworks have misrepresented Igbo political and cultural systems, reinforcing hierarchical constructions of national history. The paper further places language as a critical site of historical struggle, showing how the dominance of English in history education contributes to epistemic loss. Building on the author’s doctoral research, it argues that integrating English and Igbo offers a pathway toward historical recovery, cultural justice, and genuinely plural national memory.

Keywords: Curriculum politics, Igbo heritage, postcolonial historiography, epistemic marginalization, history education in Nigeria.

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Introduction: History, Power, and the Politics of Approval

History is never neutral (Carr 1987). In postcolonial states such as Nigeria, history is a contested terrain where power, identity, and memory collide. Decisions about *what* is taught, *whose* past is validated, and *which* narratives are authorized are fundamentally political acts. The recent clarification by the Federal Ministry of Education that the history textbook *Living History* was neither approved nor recommended

for use in Nigerian schools has reopened deeper anxieties within the Nigerian polity— anxieties that go beyond procedural approval to the systematic marginalisation and distortion of Igbo history within national educational discourse.

While the Nigerian Ministry of Education’s statement frames the issue as a technical matter of curriculum alignment and due process, it cannot be divorced from Nigeria’s longer history of epistemic exclusion, particularly as it concerns the Igbo people. This essay argues that



the controversy surrounding *Living History* is symptomatic of a broader, calculated attempt—whether by omission, bureaucratic inertia, or ideological selectivity—to deface Igbo historical consciousness and dilute the integrity of Igbo traditional heritage within the Nigerian imagination.

Crucially, this essay situates the eventual concern aspects within the framework of my PhD research on the integration of English and Igbo, demonstrating how language, discourse, and curriculum operate as instruments either of domination or of cultural recovery; instilling that bilingualism is profitable

History Education as Ideological Control

Education systems are among the most powerful tools through which states manage collective memory. Textbook approval processes, curriculum councils, and “national values” are often presented as neutral safeguards of quality. Yet globally, such mechanisms have historically been used to normalize dominant narratives while rendering minority histories peripheral, fragmented, or suspicious. In saner societies, history has never been defaced, thwarted or distorted of factuality, rather, it is presented as indication for constructive axiom for national change. For instance, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 significantly impacted history by forcing Japan's immediate surrender, effectively ending World War II, preventing a projected, bloodier land invasion of Japan, and fostering a long-term, intense global commitment to peace, nuclear non-proliferation, and scientific understanding of radiation, hence, the impact has created innovative studies around the establishment of Hiroshima University in 1949 as part of a national reorganization of Japanese education after World War II. Therefore, allowing scientists to study their suffering, atomic bomb survivors have transformed our understanding of radiation's health effects (Dennis 2020). Biafra War remains an integral facet of Igbo history which should have received similar attention rather than seeming attempts to erase it through subtle attempts in varying disguises with seeming false intentions

In Nigeria, history education has undergone repeated disruptions: its removal from school curricula for decades, its reintroduction under tightly regulated frameworks, and its continued subjection to centralized approval structures. These shifts have not affected all ethnic histories equally. Hausa-Fulani emirate systems and Yoruba monarchical traditions often appear in national narratives as stabilizing civilizational anchors, while Igbo history is frequently reduced to precolonial acephaly, missionary contact, and the Biafran War—stripped of its philosophical depth, governance sophistication, and cultural continuity. Thus, when a history text emerges that potentially re-centres indigenous agency, local memory, or alternative epistemologies, it is met not merely with scrutiny, but with institutional resistance.

Igbo History and the Burden of Misrepresentation

Igbo society has long been mis-characterised and misrepresented through colonial and postcolonial lenses as “stateless,” “fragmented,” or lacking political complexity with the archival cliché “*Igbo eweghi eze*”. Such depictions ignore the intensely rooted antimonarchism or republicanism, age-grade systems, title institutions (such as *Nze na Ozo*), and sophisticated indigenous jurisprudence that governed Igbo communities for centuries. Their true identity is rooted in the worship of “Chi (God)” “Okike (Creator)” etc, This distortion did not begin with modern-day prospectus politics. Colonial ethnographers; relying on foreign political models and resistance to recognise decentralised governance as legitimate political organisation. Postcolonial Nigeria largely inherited these frameworks, reproducing them through textbooks, syllabi, and examination bodies.

The danger, therefore, is not merely that an unapproved book circulates, but that approved materials themselves often perpetuate partial truths, reinforcing a hierarchy of cultures within the federation. When Igbo students encounter their history primarily as absence of conflict, or deviation from a “norm,” the result is cultural alienation and historical amnesia.

Curriculum Gatekeeping and the Question of Whose Knowledge Counts

The National Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), as the gatekeeper of instructional legitimacy, wields immense epistemic power. Its approval or disapproval determines which narratives enter classrooms and which are relegated to the margins. While standardisation is necessary, centralisation becomes dangerous when it lacks cultural pluralism.

The outright dismissal of *Living History*—without published transparent public engagement with its content—raises uncomfortable questions. Was the concern purely procedural, or does it reflect deeper discomfort with historical narratives that challenge established national myths? In a multi-ethnic state, the insistence on a single, sanitised version of history often results in the silencing of subaltern voices. For the Igbo, whose historical experiences include colonial disruption, civil war, and post-war marginalisation, such silencing is not accidental—it is cumulative.

Language as a Site of Historical Struggle

This is where the question of language becomes inseparable from history. History does not exist outside discourse; it is mediated through language. The dominance of English as the primary language of instruction in Nigeria has profound implications for how indigenous histories are conceptualised, narrated, and understood. Worst still, a scenario where excelling in English language becomes an indispensable criteria for university entry in Nigeria has placed many Nigerian languages at a precarious position. Nonetheless, English takes the primal credit for being a language of national integration in Nigerian not just because of its colonial significance but the failure of Nigeria to develop *wazobia* or any other ingenious language after over six decades.

English, as a colonial inheritance, carries with it epistemological assumptions that often fail to capture indigenous worldviews. Igbo concepts such as *omenala* (custom), *mmuo* (spirit), *ala* (land/deity/morality), and *umunna* (kinship

collectivity) lose semantic depth when filtered exclusively through English descriptors. My PhD research on the integration of English and Igbo emerges precisely from this tension although centred on writing competence. It argues that meaningful historical representation requires linguistic hybridity, not linguistic hierarchy.

Integrating English and Igbo as Epistemic Resistance

The integration of English and Igbo is not a sentimental call for bilingualism; it is an intellectual intervention. By allowing Igbo to co-function with English in academic, pedagogical, and historiographic contexts, we recover suppressed epistemologies and restore cultural nuance.

In pragma-discourse terms, language choice determines who speaks, who is heard, and how meaning is inferred. When Igbo history is narrated solely in English, it is forced into alien pragmatic frames. Integrative discourse allows Igbo concepts to retain their illocutionary force while engaging global academic audiences through English. This approach directly challenges the kind of curricular monoculture that renders Igbo heritage vulnerable to distortion or erasure. It also aligns with global movements advocating mother-tongue-based multilingual education as a means of cognitive justice and cultural sustainability.

The Politics of “National Values” and Cultural Hierarchy

The ministry’s reassurance that approved textbooks reflect Nigeria’s “shared history and core national values” sounds inclusive on the surface. Yet such phrases often mask unresolved tensions: whose values are considered core, and whose histories are considered foundational? A truly shared history cannot be built on selective remembrance. The Igbo experience—precolonial ingenuity, colonial resistance, postcolonial trauma, and contemporary resilience—is not a regional footnote; it is central to Nigeria’s story. Any curriculum that sidelines

this reality undermines national cohesion rather than protecting it.

Public Discourse, Misinformation, and Intellectual Vigilance

Calls for the public to “disregard misinformation” are valid in principle. However, intellectual vigilance also demands that citizens question why certain narratives are swiftly delegitimized while others enjoy institutional protection. Responsible discourse must include the right to interrogate curriculum politics without being dismissed as disruptive. The narrative would have been different if the omission or misinformation was about another major tribe of Nigeria. For Igbo scholars, educators, and parents, silence is no longer neutral. To remain silent in the face of historical distortion is to consent to it.

Conclusion: Reclaiming History, Reclaiming Voice

The controversy surrounding *Living History* should not be reduced to an administrative footnote that entailed expressed non-approval by the Nigerian government of day; It must be understood as part of Nigeria’s ongoing struggle over memory, identity, and power. For the Igbo, this struggle is existential: history denied today becomes identity erased tomorrow. My further PhD work on interaction of English and Igbo would represent one pathway of resistance—one foregrounding that language justice is historical justice, and that no people can be fully present in a nation whose educational structures systematically misrepresent their past.

Nigeria’s future depends not on uniform narratives, but on honest plurality. Until Igbo

history is taught with depth, dignity, and linguistic authenticity, the promise of a truly united Nigeria will remain unfulfilled.

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