

CHAPTER 3

Before the Unavoidable Transformation from AI: Finding Nigeria's Historiography and Digital History in the Cyber Age

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Abstract

This analysis sets the stage for the imminent torrent of scholarship on the ramifications of artificial intelligence (AI) for the entirety of Nigeria History; ramifications whose exhaustive assessment is for now considered premature. The present study consequently examines how technologies, media devices and associated-features of the digital age have transformed, are shaping and are perhaps undermining the nature and study of Nigeria's past. It explores how the philosophy and writing of Nigerian history have responded to the influences of the forces, technologies, media and other underlying drivers of the digital age, particularly before the recent and rapidly evolving ascendancy of the ongoing previously unseen disruptive of chatbots that are the major attributes of AI.

Introduction

This study examines how technologies, media devices and associated-features of the digital age have transformed, are shaping and undermining the study of Nigeria's past. Such processes are what contemporary historians would rather

describe as digital history including Nigeria's digital history (Zaagsma 7). Thus, this study explores how the philosophy and writing of Nigerian history have responded to the influences of the forces, technologies, media and other underlying drivers of the digital age, comprising the evolving ascendancy of Artificial Intelligence (AI), together with its disruptive chatbots (Obiegbu 1).

Some of these drivers indeed continue to impact every facet of the world including Nigerian historiography in previously unseen dimensions. This, so far, is unarguably, the story surrounding such digital pillars like cloud data storage, Internet, the World Wide Web, the cyberspace, the email, scanners, the smartphones, virtual communication, dedicated software systems and the ubiquitous "apps" that have not ceased in spawning the presently unfolding fourth industrial age (Cohen et al. 454).

Digital History-Historiography Nexus

To meaningfully address the objective that this study sets for itself, five crucial factors compel a keener consideration of what is here meant by digital history and historiography. The first is the emerging tendency in literature to interchange the combination of history, historiography and the digital age for an unavoidable fusion of history and digital media; a fusion considered to be the archetypical personification of digital history (Cohen et al. 454). The second among these crucial factors is the perceived inseparableness of the manifold drivers of the digital age and history.

Third is the increasing creation of schools of digital history in foremost academic institutions the world over. The principal ones comprising Centre for Digital Humanities, University of Lagos, Centre for Computer Assisted

Research in the Humanities at Stanford University; and the Department of Digital Humanities at King's College London (Gold 67-71; Cohen and Rosenzweig 1-5).

The fourth factor is the swelling rank of professional digital historians in the countries presently hosting these schools. The fifth is the axiom that Africanist historiography has always developed in dialogue with developments in world history (Whitfield & Ibhawoh 586).

With regards to historiography, while an awareness of the basic constitution – theories and methods of history, history of historical writing, and philosophy of history - of the subject is ideal, it is somewhat insufficient as a working description of historiography here. It is to this effect that the overlapping positions of Adiele Afigbo, Arthur Marwick and Aviezer Tucker, on the subject, are deserving of recollection. These positions which constitute this study's conceptual point of departure on the subject coalesce around the following argument: that historiography involves ways by which the historian does his work; discovery and critical analysis of historical sources; history of historical research; reflections on the trends and patterns of historical writing; construction on the basis of ascertained information, some general theories which give meaning and inner logic to the known past (or most of it); and the description, analysis, interpretation, construction and reconstruction of the past, which, in the first place, are animated by information quarried from these sources (Fwatshak, 82-108; Afigbo 40; Adeoye 1; Macdonald and Macdonald 131-141; Marwick 290).

It becomes appropriate to emphasise that very a few issues elicit a consensus from the generality of digital historians. One of these issues is that digital history is firstly a branch of digital humanities, the second has to be that the marriage between historiography, history and the (drivers of the) digital age represents the sum-total of digital history. Yet, noteworthy is that digital history transcends the meshing of the electronic media and t material information of the past, be it of Nigeria's or any other society (Ayers 6).

Similarly, it is notable that digital history is not only about the effect of the former on the latter; neither is digital history only about the use of sources in digital form nor is digital history only about the dematerialisation of the analogue records of the past to digital (electronic) formats (Brugger 104; Fitzpatrick 13-67). Rather, the practice and nature of digital history is also anything that uses digital technologies in creating, storing, enhancing or distributing research and scholarship of the past (Cohen, et.al. 453) .

As a skill or method, digital history is, therefore, not only illustrative of the process by which historians are able to deploy computers to produce history; particularly in ways impossible without the computer ((Cohen, et.al. 453), rather, it also embraces situating scanned journal articles online, using the computer to find library resources, and using digital hardware and software/applications for the preservation, presentation, analysis, probe and uncovering of the past (Galgano et al. 7-63; Burton; Ayers; Brugger 104).

Consequently, investigating the past, using electronically-reproduced primary sources becomes another undeniable facet of the inseparableness of history and the digital age (Lee 504).

Nigeria in the Evolution of Digital History

Despite prior opacity, it is now important to begin to determine Nigeria's location in the universal evolution of digital history. Existing literature traces the use of computers for general scholarship to the early 1960s, before the advent of personal computers (Zaagsma 4)

Similarly, the earliest manifestation of the inseparableness between history and the digital age is argued to have begun with the emergence of personal computer including hypermedia, precisely in USA in the 1980s. This incipient interaction between this digital combine informed the emergence of amplified books and HyperCard stacks, resulting in a textbook (*Who built America?*) on a CD-ROM that integrated such novel non-linear and multimedia features as documents (blocks of text), film, audio clips, images and searching capabilities (Ayers, 6).

Conversely, up till the 1980s, and even to the mid-1990s when the internet had begun to be incorporated into the foregoing in a number of Western countries, the use of the aggregation of the personal computer and the CD-ROM for historical research in Nigeria was virtually non-existent (Obajemu 17-24). Obajemu et al corroborate this simultaneously advancing reasons for its persistence. These included unfavourable government policies, lukewarm attitude to alleviate the sufferings of academic institutions by government, insufficient fund allocation to education/ research, prohibitive cost of

importation of the hardware/software accessories for information technology, and deeply-rooted conservative intellectual culture (Obajemu).

Remarkably, whereas the mid-1990s witnessed the introduction of the digital-trinity of the internet, e-mail, and the World Wide Web to the public globally, their acceptance, adoption and impact on Nigerian history, historiography and historians had negligible significance. In fact, of every one hundred Nigerians including historians interviewed between 1996 and 2000, the percentage of internet users was below one percent (Vanguard).

This pattern would experience a phenomenal change between year 2000 and 2014 when it is recorded that the number of internet and personal computer users in Nigeria reached almost eighty million, hundreds of Nigerian historians inclusive. Evidence of the use of the personal computer and other digital technologies for the practice of history by students of history in Nigerian universities as far back as year 2002 is provided by Saheed Aderinto. Saheed, who is now Professor of History at the Florida International University, was in that year a 300-level student of the Department of History, University of Ibadan, and he nostalgically recalls how his acquisition of a computer through research assistantship to Laurent Fourchard, turned his room on campus into a Mecca for colleagues who determined to digitise their historical works (Aderinto).

Yet, what is alternatively noteworthy is this change's other radical corollaries - among them the macro transformation to Nigeria's historiography. Moreover, the field of Nigerian history experienced far-reaching characterisation by the application of binary technology and coding which produced certain enduring developments. Salient therein was the proliferation of websites that were

centred on Nigeria's past including nairaland.com, vanguardngr.com, naij.com, informationng.com, saharareporters.com, nigerianbulletin.com, allafrica.com, usafricaonline.com; geniusofnigeria.com; naijawoman.8m.net; bestofnigeria.co.uk; and punch.com.

Second was the emergence of digital archives, repositories and libraries including multifaceted primary resources on Nigeria, variously accessible on internet platforms like hathitrust.org, biafranigeriaworld.com; africa.upenn.edu; thisdayonline.com; budgetoffice.gov.ng; nara.gov; nationalarchives.gov.uk; afrobarometer.org; ajol.com; and worldbank.org

The third was the intensified and later unavoidable use of the internet to teach and prepare Nigerian history, and publication/dissemination of scholarship/studies on the past of Nigeria – i.e. dissertation, monographs, theses, journals – in digitised formats. A relevant example here being experiences of undergraduates - including this writer - of the Department of History and Diplomacy, Olabisi Onabanjo University, many of who, at the prompting of lecturers, spent hours in surrounding cybercafés to obtain digital historical materials to augment instruction previously acquired in class.

There was also the proliferation of digital offline/online libraries and databases accommodating relevant secondary and pivotal primary resources and podcasts on Nigeria's past (Personal Observation October 2023).

As such, different from the time before 1999, the post-2000 period represented a watershed in the history of historical writing on Nigeria by heralding the online/electronic versions of the seminal histories of Nigerian historians, many

of which were until then only in print format. Thus appeared the electronic/online versions of *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* (1956), *The Small Brave City State* (1964), *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (1964), *Christian Missions in Nigeria* (1965), *The Police in Modern Nigeria* (1970), *Holy Johnson* (1970), *The Evolution of the Nigerian State* (1970), *The Warrant Chiefs* (1972), *The Fall of Nigeria*, *The Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* (1956) and *the Tarikhs* (1971 -1987).

Remarkably, behind the digitisation and internet accessibility of these books and related ones are institutions like the University of Michigan, Stanford University and The Library of Congress (Personal Observation July 2024). Similarly, from 2020, the National Library of Nigeria began to make digitised text available both offline and online (nln).

Transformation and Positives to Nigeria's Historiography: Intersecting Digital History After 2000

This transformation to Nigerian historiography from the year 2000 is further underlined by the evolution of the sales and purchase of both electronic copies of secondary works on Nigeria's past on renowned internet-based bookshops like Amazon, AbeBooks, Booktopia, Ebay. Needless to say that this considerably constitutes the genesis of the prevailing inclination among historians of Nigeria of the inexcusability of obtaining any relevant secondary material fast enough for a historical research. The other side of this inclination is the transformational multiplication of the previously-mentioned Nigerian-oriented electronic archives, repositories and libraries. Predictably, the embrace and ever-expanding utilisation of the totality of the foregoing electronic (re)sources and infrastructure by Nigerian historians in the course of the

profession continue to be reinforced by their inherent benefits, a number of which merit imminent emphasis.

To begin with, their (websites, digital archives, electronic journals) creation and restructuring with relatively little expense and effort perhaps represents an apt point of departure. For example, an undergraduate/postgraduate student or instructor of history only needs to get on the wordpress.com website, five minutes after which, at virtually no expense, he would have started a Nigerian history-oriented website or modest digital archives (taiwohds).

Remarkably, this same possibility is available to that student/instructor on facilities provided by weebly.com, svbtle.com, penzu.com, tumblr.com, webs.com and wix.com. Yet, absolutely no knowledge of Computer Engineering/Science or algorithms is required by the student to get the website running.

Second, the almost boundless nature of the internet gave an unprecedented reach and audience to the seminal Nigerian historical studies published before and after 1999 because they were through the internet, progressively now accessible in places formerly difficult to reach prior to the year 2000. Third, duplication and circulation of digitised historical materials on Nigeria at near-zero cost by any number of people is also nothing short of a revolution because this was an impossibility in the era of historiography that preceded the period before 1999.

The fourth is the transmissibility of electronic records of the past at the near speed of light, such that any number of over fourteen thousand digital materials/sources on Nigeria, at the National Archives, United Kingdom is

obtainable within minutes, if not downloadable in a previously unimaginable short period of time (national archives). This same feature is remarkably obtainable also with reference to over twelve thousand digitised discussions on Nigeria by the British Parliament between 1803 and 2005 (Millibanks). Both feats are impossible in the interaction of a Nigerian or historian with any physical archive. Further still, the significance of the nano-scale nature of the prevailing digital resources on Nigeria's past comes to the fore in this regard. The point being that the storage of digital historical (re)sources on Nigeria-and other countries- in nano-scale volumes has equally been of novel historiographical import, especially in the light of the rather vast volume of space required for a robust physical archive or library, within which virtually all primary resources on Nigeria resided in the year prior to 2000. Much in the same significant is the way that these digital (re)sources began to allow users to browse and follow historical argument in a multi-linear fashion, instead of the linear character of text that was more the norm with respect to Nigerian history until the late 90s. The preceding has, since the early 2000s, continued to be bolstered by the convenience in the direct retrieval of many of these primary and secondary sources, considering that these resources inherently bypass vexatious archival hands.

Further, the point needs to be emphasized regarding the now prevailing ability of the authors of digitised (and secondary) Nigerian historical resources to make very detailed and specific claims about evidence which the reader is able to cull-up on the spot. To this is the advantage in the previously unattainable quality of accessibility intrinsic to these digitised (re)sources on the past. One which continues to progressively nullify the challenges of fragility and

brittleness of analogue Nigerian documents, making it more and more unnecessary for the twenty-first century professional Nigerian historian to make the hitherto mandatory in-person contact with the documents, archive and library.

‘Searchability’ is another salient and perhaps invaluable property embodied by virtually all the mentioned digital (re)sources, exactly in the sense of the rapidity with which specific words, items or information in these digital sources are retrieved which in many cases is within a fraction of the time required in the case of documents in print format (at the archives or library). This search feature, it must be stressed, is applicable to the millions of electronic dairies, books, articles, interviews, manuscripts, symposia papers, newspapers on the past of Nigeria obtainable in several active online repositories/databases (Cohen et al. 455; Cohen and Rosenzweig 7-13). The principal benefit of this is, of course, in making possible a number of studies that would have been unachievable given the intimidating number of relevant evidence versus the available time for research.

Yet, many of these electronic primary and secondary sources have additional advantages for users in terms of their flexibility, ‘manipulatability,’ reiteration, reflexivity, higher tendency of exclusiveness and their appeal to a far larger audience, in contrast to resources in print (Burton 12-13; Ayers). By no means is the impact of the digital age on the study of Nigeria’s past, even then, limited to the foregoing. A more meticulous examination of the extant body of digital literature - particularly at the level of secondary materials – is bound to reveal the philosophical consequence of that impact. In this connection, the hyper-

textual and hyper-media approach/framing arguably qualifies as the most fundamental (Cohen, et.al.454).

Elaborately used is the nearly extinct CD-ROM, the internet and the World Wide Web, hypertext represents a collection of electronic documents comprising cross-references known as hyperlinks with which a user can, in an instant, move from one document, screen, file or page (graphics, audio, video, and email) to another. Using the words of Fitch, the hypertext essentially consists of text “comprising blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains or trails in an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms, *path*, *node*, and *links* (Fitch 427)

On the screen of the personal computer, the hyperlinks are usually the highlighted, emboldened or uniquely coloured items within the surrounding text. Of particular significance is the intrinsic multimedia – integration of icons, animations, photograph, pictures (graphics), sound, video and text character of the hypertext, a format around which virtually all of the digitised secondary materials on Nigeria’s past is developed (Fitch 428). The level of invaluableness which these digital tools have presented to historians including those of Nigeria is hereunder driven home by one observer:

All websites begin with a “home page” that has links to other pages. Each of the pages has its own links. When one clicks on ... a link, the links calls up a new page or a section of a page ... No two students will necessarily read the hypermedia book (or website) in the same way ... Most

hypermedia theorists have concluded that no single page in hypermedia project should be over about 800-1000 words ... the historian is to write simple, clear explanations of a topic and then include the links that ... elaborate upon what is read ... Links in other words are powerful tools for historians (Fitch 429-450).

In terms of the influences of the digital age on the methodology of Nigerian history, nothing summarises this better than the forgone acceptance through established manner of citing or referencing of offline and online electronic (re)sources in the bibliographic section of any qualitative historical scholarship (Brigger 104). The digital enablers of these are mainly the hypertext and hypermedia codes. Through them, a number of electronic works on Nigerian history, in their bibliographic sections, are now able to offer links to related evidences which, apart from availing the writer sufficient scope to focus on the main account, also impresses the whole work with previously unachievable levels of conciseness, authenticity and effectiveness. It has, therefore, increasingly become possible since 2000 for authoritative works of Nigerian historians to, unlike before, embody tools that can lead the reader to the comprehensive sighting of the primary evidence used. Revolutionary depth of this convention is unassailably explained by the elaborate list of useable online/digital/electronic primary resources in this direction in the latest edition of Kate Turabian's manual for producing dissertation and theses (Turabian).

In all this, it is the internet's facilitation of the ease of publishing electronic works on Nigeria's past by historians that perhaps ranks as the most striking of

these benefits. This is what is now known as online publishing. This came about as the use of the internet experienced massive expansion after the year 2000. With this expansion is the development of the culture of online book publishing and the associated online publishing businesses, many of who offered increasingly relaxed editing and publishing benchmarks to both professional and amateur writers of Nigerian history. One of the more profound effects of this being the rush by these authors for the services of these business concerns, instead of the rigorous terms and oftentimes slow publishing procedures of the few publishing houses commonly associated with the production of works on Nigerian history before 1999.

Proliferation of e-books and online-facilitated publications on Nigerian history are yet to cease since then, spawning a litany of Nigerian histories such as *Capitalism in the Colonies African Merchants in Lagos, 1851-1931* by A.G Hopkins (2024); *Emirs in London* by Moses Ochonu (2022); *Politics and Society in South Eastern Nigeria 1841-1906* by Kannan Nair in 2025; *Nigeria. The Land* by Rosenberg Anne; and *History of Sultan Bello Mosque in Northern Nigeria* by Fatimah Bello in 2012.

Digital History-Aminated Drawbacks in Nigeria's Past

Having established the above, it is important to add that digital history is symptomatic of a number of significant drawbacks. These drawbacks which, upon a closer examination, are also present in the past, present – and foreseeable – interactions and effects of the fusion between Nigeria's historiography and the digital age.

First, there is the ever clear and present inability of the internet to distinguish between the true and the false, the important and the trivial, as well as the enduring and the ephemeral that ultimately exposes the historian of Nigeria's past to the risk of utilising inaccurate sources which, in turn, raises the perennial debate of the objectivity of (his) history. The second is the problem of evidence-overload *vis-a-vis* the time at the disposal of the historian. Nothing demonstrates this better than the use of the search tool to find information on any electronic offline/online database. If the information sought is on colonial Nigeria, for example, the notorious Google presents to the searcher over 3,200 websites, each with the tendency of an assortment of digital books, articles, podcast, interviews, manuscripts, drawings, paintings, memoranda, maps, deeds, gazettes, ordinances, dissertations, symposia papers and newspapers. But that is just the beginning. For the same search on colonial Nigeria on the electronic Journal *Storage* (JSTOR), the researcher is confronted with over 37, 251 digitised journal articles on the same subject.

The third drawback is that bordering on lack of provenance of a number of the documents, including those on Nigeria, in digital archives, even as the information they capture remains accurate. Yet another shortcoming in this regard is the emergence of unregulated archives available to the historians of Nigeria and those of other countries since the 2000s. This is so because these archives can now evolve anywhere, many times unaccompanied by the usual management and moderation by professional archivists or government. The associated consequence being the question marks on the objectivity and independence of the historical works inspired by such archives.

Related drawbacks in this context include the considerable decline in historical pedagogy on Nigeria, underlined by the reckless reliance of Nigerian history undergraduates on resources like Wikipedia or commercial historical essay websites; quicker facilitation of these to those undergraduates by artificial intelligence platforms; increasing retreat of the historians' sole authority over the practice and content of historical products owing to numerous websites that claim to offer similar histories; stiff competition that continues to confront the works of professional historians at bookstores from these websites; resultant plunge in the fortunes of publishers once noted for publication of rigorous works on Nigerian history; and the popular suspicion towards authoritative works of Nigerian historians engendered usually by unimaginable interpretations from amateur historians with strong online presence.

Lastly in this regard, there are fluidity and impermanence of the (digital) medium that borders on the originators' never ending editing, addition, annotating and refinement of the content; numerous unsolicited and many times provocative advertisement on them; irritating slowness inherent in downloading image files on a browser since they are usually very large; several limitations associated with popular memory; as well as the evolution of predatory online publishers of Nigerian history like *Aphascript Publishing*; *VDM Verlag Dr. Muller*; *Blessed Hope Publishing*; *Flu Press*, *Volv Press*, *Brev Publishing*, *Anim Publishing*, *Dicho*, *Turbs Publishing*, *Fast Book Publishing*, *Dic Press*, to mention just a couple (Cohen and Rosenzweig; Galgano et al. 13-65).

In view of all that has been articulated so far, and given that there is no running away from the more extensive digitisation of Nigeria's historiography, serious Nigerian historians, particularly producers of Nigerian history must

increasingly reflect on and devise means of avoiding these drawbacks. Remarkably, the knowledge and mastery of the evolving skill of digital source criticism provides an excellent point to attain this. Good enough, digital source criticism is now being thoroughly examined by scholars (Pascal).

Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper has been to reveal the extent to which principal forces of the electronic age have influenced how the past of Nigeria is studied. In the process, we have identified that digital history is a function of the interaction between agents of electronic age and the practice of history, evolution of Nigeria's digital history, forms of Nigerian digital history, impact of the electronic age on the methodology of Nigerian history, intrinsic merits of history in digital form, and the drawbacks of digital history. Two things are clear from all what has been discussed. The first is that electronic primary and secondary sources have come to stay in the study of the past – including that of Nigeria. (Brugger 115).

Second, it is that the profession of history can no more be successfully pursued outside the adoption of these and other principal drivers and media of the digital age. This was emphasised by Falola in his recent reflection on the inroads of social media in history and historiography (Falola). The invention, development and spread of new media (digital devices and technologies) are arguably the most profound historical change of the last five decades and those changes show every sign of accelerating. Nigerian historians, indeed historians generally, for both defensive and hopeful reasons, need to understand this new media and its implications as fully as possible. They need to resist the dilution and distortion of historical knowledge and the erosion of their authority on the

discipline that are latent within these widely dispersed media. Certainly, the best way to wage that resistance is for historians to seize the opportunities the media offer (Ayers 6-7).

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