



# Preserving the Past: A Critical Study of Archival Practice and Historical Research in Nigeria

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## Abstract

The preservation of archives in Nigeria remains a complex and often neglected aspect of historical inquiry. Rooted in colonial legacies and shaped by post-independence aspirations, Nigeria's archival infrastructure has played a vital role in the documentation of the nation's past. However, the condition of archival repositories today reflects decades of underfunding, poor maintenance, and administrative lapses. These challenges have hindered access to critical primary sources, especially for historians attempting to reconstruct colonial narratives. This paper examines the emergence and evolution of archival practice in Nigeria, with emphasis National Archives Ibadan (NAI). Methodologically, this study draws on existing literature and qualitative insights from interviews with administrative staff of the National Archives Ibadan, as well as historians and researchers who regularly use the archives. It also explores how Nigerian historians have navigated incomplete archives, linguistic diversity, and oral traditions to build a more inclusive historiography. The relevance of this paper lies in its call for renewed attention to archival preservation as a foundation for historical accuracy, cultural continuity, and national identity.

**Keywords:** Nigerian historiography, colonial records, Archival research, Archival preservation, National Archives Ibadan

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## **Introduction**

An archive is more than a collection of documents. It serves as a country's memory bank. Archival records are the repository of the intellectual and creative independence of a community.<sup>1</sup> They hold information about the identity and history of people. Archives worldwide have been used as a repository of official documents and as a means of ensuring that the memory of states and institutions are passed to future generations. In Africa and Nigeria, specifically, archival records are a significant source of documenting colonial rule, pre-colonial situations, nationalistic actions, and post-independence realities.

The National Archives of Nigeria, with its major branches in Ibadan, Kaduna and Enugu, were set up in the colonial time to receive, preserve and administer government documents.<sup>2</sup> These repositories have proved helpful to anyone studying the history, identities and cultures of Nigeria. However, the evolution of archival practice in Nigeria has been affected by several complex factors. The colonial administration developed fragmented record-keeping systems that reflected imperial priorities rather than indigenous perspectives.<sup>3</sup> The post-independence era also saw new research ambitions as Nigerian scholars attempted to dismantle the Eurocentric approach to history and tried to rewrite the African contribution to history. In the current digital world, archival terrain is complicated further by digital technology presenting threats of exclusion, as well as opportunities for preservation. Despite their importance, Nigerian archives have remained fraught with many setbacks, which include insufficient financing, substandard preservation centres, administrative delays, and restricted accessibility. Such issues hinder the ease with which archival material can be utilised and threaten the preservation of Nigerian history.

This paper therefore looks into the history of the establishment of the National Archives of Nigeria with respect to its colonial beginnings, postcolonial transformations, and modern developments. It also looks at how Nigerian historians have used incomplete sources, linguistic variability, and oral traditions to create a more inclusive historiography.

## **Methodology**

This paper adopts the qualitative research method in exploring the issue of archival practice in Nigeria. Primary data were obtained through interviews with administrative personnel of the National Archives in Ibadan (NAI), historians, and researchers working at the NAI. The secondary data were retrieved via published journal articles, books, and institutional reports. Thematic analysis was used to review and classify the materials to facilitate a descriptive approach to the topic.

## History and Methodological Challenges

Nigeria's historiography has faced tremendous challenges right from its inception. As a result of these challenges, the perceptions and research strategies of writing the history of the country have changed over the years. Among the challenges was dealing with the already existing Eurocentric accounts about the people and culture of Africans. Such Eurocentrism were represented by the illustrations of African cultures as backward, primitive and uncivilised. This in turn caused stereotypes that demeaned the depth and proficiency of the indigenous cultures of the African people.<sup>4</sup> Eurocentric historiography tended to focus more on the stories and experiences of colonial administrators, missionaries, and explorers and played a second fiddle to the voices and narratives of indigenous persons.<sup>5</sup> This then led to a distorted representation of Nigerian history. Interest in written texts, particularly in European languages, marginalized alternatives to written historical narratives and helped to obscure and distort indigenous narratives in historical records.<sup>6</sup>

Another challenge historians had to contend with during the documentation of Nigeria's history was the use of oral sources. This reliance on oral sources, however, also posed a major challenge; authenticating the information. Oral traditions are prone to distortion, variations, and other embellishments as they change with time, unlike written records, which give a physical and usually chronological narrative of historical events.<sup>7</sup> This constant change posed a formidable obstacle for historians who set out to create a consistent, coherent and accurate account of Nigerian past. The dynamic nature of oral traditions, which are informed by memory, narrating, and its intergenerational nature, makes it complicated to distinguish between fact from fiction, and truth from myth. This presents historians with the dilemma of how to determine the reliability and authenticity of oral accounts since they can be easily reinterpreted or manipulated as they are reproduced over generations.<sup>8</sup>

The lack of external corroboration contributes to the difficulty in verifying oral traditions.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to written records, which can be complemented by archaeological data, archival documents, or material objects, oral descriptions are sometimes not backed up by other documents. This dependency on single sources of information enhances the chances of bias or distortion or manipulation that make it hard to history to determine the accuracy of oral accounts.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, oral tradition should be collected and processed with respect to its linguistic and cultural peculiarities.

Another challenge to Nigerian historians is the lack of indigenous sources and archives at certain places in the country that makes tracing the past through historical sources difficult. This dearth of primary materials restricts researchers' access to first-hand accounts, official records, and other contemporaneous sources that are crucial for reconstructing Nigeria's past. To confront the

challenge posed by the storage of colonial documents, Kenneth Dike redirected his focus towards the monumental task of establishing bibliographic control over all amassed colonial records.<sup>11</sup> Numerous challenges plague the National Archives of Nigeria, including the enduring framework established by the Public Archives Law of 1957, inadequate conservation facilities, minimal awareness of the archives' importance, limited training opportunities for staff, and the dormant state of the archives committee. Of significant concern was the absence of a comprehensive records management programme. Despite the Colonial Office's initial focus on records management, Nigerian administrators historically have not prioritised the preservation of historical records. This then results in a trend that impedes archival development in the country.<sup>12</sup>

Prejudices and political factors play a potent role in the history of Nigeria, as they can impose versions of the historical past and shape how people think about the past. Historians are faced with the power of political perspectives, ideological frameworks and ethnocentrism, which in the past consistently entered historical discourse. The impacts of colonial legacies, post-independence struggles, and modern political relationships all play a role in framing (or denying the perspective and empowering other aspects). In addition to that, there is the issue of politicisation of history, as several interested parties are fighting over possession of the history of Nigeria. This aspect makes it even harder to come up with an objective and impartial account of history. The resultant effect is that historians are left with the daunting experience of wading through layers of prejudice and political favouritism to arrive at the fundamental truths behind the intricate and complicated historical route of Nigeria.

The existence of over 500 languages has made this process critical for uncovering the historical themes of various cultures and communities in Nigeria.<sup>13</sup> Such linguistic variety complicated the writing of a general history of Nigeria since historians found it hard to assemble a complete picture of the past. Historians in the former British colonies have found this challenging and so they began to speak English as a language of communication. This was motivated by the desire to present historical coverage that would be easily understood by a broader audience. At the same time, knowledge on the writing of history in the indigenous languages was restricted among only a few ethnic groups in Nigeria. By resolving to write in English, these writers were able to improve their literary statuses and achieve respected recognition within the international community as well as achieve a wider audience level. This choice also enabled them to separate themselves from the social stigma that ethnic and regional narrowness presents.<sup>14</sup>

Translations of historical narratives in Nigeria and other African states have been largely limited, mainly because of the various difficulties. A major challenge is the wide linguistic diversity on the continent, which comprises more than 4,000 languages. Such linguistic diversity presents a significant threat to the understanding, exploration and communication of the history of various

ethnic groups.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the absence of education, particularly during the colonial period, had its imprint on the transcription works in Nigeria. The absence of learning institutions in the formulation of providing translation and research on history into local languages was an hindrance to development of fluently trained translation.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, most of the languages spoken in Africa were oral, meaning the historical records could not be written down since most people did not document them.<sup>17</sup> This dilemma highlights the importance of maintaining oral history programs that have played an important role in trying to fill the gap that exists due to insufficient written literature. Yet, the lack of a strong system of language management in the nation also added to the challenges that hindered translation in the past. Comparing this to European nations, where countries like Germany and Ireland have well-defined structures that govern the existence of the language, the fact that quite the opposite is lacking in Nigeria highlights the importance of systematic language planning and standardisation. The creation of language-based institutions such as the Yoruba Academy, the Urhobo Studies Association, and the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture has been a very positive shift over the last few years. Nevertheless, these initiatives have a restricted reach to some ethnic groups, which indicates how far the linguistic diversity in the country remains a challenge to be reckoned with.<sup>18</sup> Translating oral histories into written form presents its own set of challenges, as proverbs, tone, and context may be lost in the process.

### **The Beginning of Historical Research in Nigeria**

The inception of historical research in Nigeria represents a notable milestone in the academic advancement of Nigeria. Rooted in colonial encounter, early attempts at historical inquiry in Nigeria were framed within Eurocentric perspectives that reflected the prevailing intellectual and political climate of the period. These viewpoints, predominantly driven by European scholars, laid the groundwork for subsequent investigations into Nigeria's historical past.<sup>19</sup>

As Nigeria went from colonialism to independence, the desire for indigenous historical inquiry gained momentum. Nigerian intellectuals were aware that they needed to take agency over their historical narratives. This led to them looking inwards by describing and studying sociocultural events and community history.<sup>20</sup> Thus, this resulted in the emergence of a new field of study: Nigerian historiography. Local historians who had a sense of national identity and cultural pride wanted to dismantle Eurocentric narratives and create accurate narratives of the past. There was a sudden boom in research efforts during this period, and scholars began examining many different facets of the Nigerian past, including pre-colonial societies and the post-independence processes of nation-building. Key to the establishment of historical research development in Nigeria was the formation of academic institutions and research institutes focusing on historical research. These institutions became the centres of intellectual brainstorming and cooperation, offering scholars the necessary resources and platforms to study the issues intensively and disseminate the findings.<sup>21</sup>

Another contributing factor towards the development of historiography in Nigeria was the inclusion of archival records and oral histories in the domain of scholarly discourse, which provided additional thoughts and views on Nigerian history. It was a transformative departure that led to a more inclusive and culturally aware way of historical research. Such a strategy enabled the opinions and experiences of indigenous communities. Colonial rule also led to the creation of a corpus of historical knowledge, which was later deposited in central repositories that were later converted into national archival facilities. These repositories have served as a limitless reservoir of source material, facilitating the generation of numerous documentations, monographs, books, and articles in the post-independence era.<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Dike's pivotal role in the establishment of archival research in Nigeria began with his initiative to collect colonial documentation from British colonial governments operating in Nigeria.

The significance of the National Archives to the growth of the practice of history in Nigeria is of paramount importance and cannot be overstated. The establishment of these archives was conceived with the primary objective of systematically locating, collecting, and preserving the historical records of Nigeria spanning both the colonial and post-colonial times. This archival approach not only ensured the safeguarding of the nation's historical legacy but also served as a means of immortalising and preserving cultural and societal customs. Such meticulous record-keeping practices further facilitated the authentication and validation of historical narratives, thereby enhancing the scholarly pursuit of historical inquiry.<sup>23</sup> Archival sources contained a variety of materials ranging from official correspondence to specialised files that covered sundry subjects. The official correspondences, originating from the lowest colonial jurisdiction to the Colonial Office in London, were systematically preserved in bound volumes within the Nigerian archives and organised chronologically. The Central Secretariat files, categorised under the Chief Secretary Office (CSO) series, utilised distinct codes for provinces, divisions, and districts, exemplified by the classification of files related to the Colony of Lagos as "Comcol" (Commissioner of the Colony) papers. Another significant category comprised the annual reports, gazetteers, and intelligence reports, particularly compiled during the 1930s for administrative reforms. These intelligence reports contained ethnographic data on indigenous communities that anthropologists collected. Another collection in the archive includes statistical data stored in Blue Books, which offered comprehensive insights into economic and social dimensions.<sup>24</sup>

### **The National Archives**

The inauguration and development of the national archives in Nigeria can be traced back to Kenneth Dike's attempt to preserve Nigeria's history in 1949, when he was awarded a Colonial Social Science Research Fellowship. During his research, he found valuable documents rotting away in government offices. Therefore, he requested that the government ensure the preservation of these documents. His request was granted, and in 1951, he was appointed to survey available historical

records and suggest a sustainable method through which they could be preserved. This led to the commissioning of the Archive Service office in Ibadan in 1954. This office later moved to its permanent site, now known as the National Archive in Ibadan. The National Archives in Kaduna and Enugu were inaugurated alongside the National Archive in Ibadan in 1958. Although these archives have been depleted over the years with numerous documents misplaced and ruined due to environmental factors, these archives were initially organised with slight differences in their operational structure.

Generally, Nigeria's archives house similar documents. These documents include consular dispatches, colonial administrative documents, the Civil Secretary's office holdings, provincial and district office records, files of government ministries and parastatals, photographs, newspapers, gazettes, and official publications. These documents are categorised into the Southern, Northern and Western regions.<sup>25</sup> Documents from the south-eastern states, such as Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Anambra, Cross River, Enugu, Imo, and Rivers, are housed in the national archive at Enugu. The National Archive Enugu opens from 8 am to 2:30 pm on weekdays only. Researchers are required to acquire a registration card and passport photograph on their first visit. This is part of the registration process and is acquired for a fee. This registration was initially valid for a year, but now covers a month. A maximum of six files, four volumes and two newspapers can be ordered at a time.<sup>26</sup> The request for documents ends by 1:30 pm, and any document not produced by that time would need a new request application on the researcher's next visit.

The National Archive, Kaduna, has a similar operational structure. Additional documents, such as Arabic manuscripts, can be found in the Kaduna archive. Documents housed in the archives are classified into typed and bound volumes based on the province or institution from which they were obtained. The three national archives use a simple list and a class list. These lists have the full or abridged title of files written beside file numbers. The file numbers indicate the shelf location from which the documents are produced when a request is made. The title beside the file number gives the researcher an idea of what is contained in the file. In addition to a procurement fee, the national archive in Kaduna requires that a researcher present a letter of introduction from a Nigerian institution. If approved, the registration card is processed. Opening hours are 8:30 am to 2:30 pm on Monday through Thursday and 8:30 am to 12:30 pm on Fridays.<sup>27</sup>

The Ibadan archive was considered the richest as it contained federal, regional and state government papers of native and local authorities. Furthermore, it housed papers of semi-public bodies, religious organisations and documents of private individuals and families. It is renowned for being the first national archive in Nigeria. Its permanent site consists of a repository, search room, processing area, repairs and bindery department, staff office area, photographic laboratory and a reference library.<sup>28</sup> The National archive in Ibadan opens from 9 am to 3 pm on weekdays. The

request for documents from the repository ends by 1 pm. Researchers are required to pay a registration fee of three thousand naira (postgraduate students), one thousand naira (undergraduate students) or fifteen thousand naira (foreigners) on their first visit. This registration receipt is valid for one month. A monthly renewal is required to validate registration. Payment is strictly made in cash.

The search room in the national archives is also known as the reference room. This is where the researcher meets with the document.<sup>29</sup> After registration, a researcher is taken to the search room and is given a simple list. Food items and ink are prohibited in the search room. Researchers are required to come in with a pencil. This is used to fill out the request form after the researcher identifies the file they want from the simple list. The request form costs fifty naira. After the request is made, the documents requested are produced from the repository. Viewing of these documents is free; there is a fee for taking pictures or making photocopies. Each photocopy costs a hundred naira, and a snapshot costs fifty naira. Searchers are not allowed to take documents out of the archive. Upon arrival and departure, searchers are required to sign in and sign out in the visitors' book. Aside the search room, the archive also has a repository section, a library section, a binding section and an ICT section at its developmental phase.

Acquiring collections is an essential aspect of archival practice in Nigeria, as it helps to improve the breadth and depth of their holdings. Archives employ several methods to acquire new materials. One such method is the purchase of materials. This approach allows them to actively seek out and obtain materials that are deemed essential for their collections.<sup>30</sup> The National Archives acquires new materials by embarking on what is referred to as acquisition tours. The practice has dramatically declined in recent times, contributing to the limited number of new collections in the national archives. This acquisition tour would have enhanced the quality of the archives in the country today. The practice was being done at the early developmental phase of the Nigerian Archives. These acquisition tours were an instrumental method for archivists to seek out and obtain new materials for the archives.<sup>31</sup>

The three zonal archives have some degree of similarities in mandate and operations, although each has developed a unique role in the reconstruction of Nigeria. Ibadan has been key to the study of colonial administration and nationalist politics in part because it constitutes the oldest and widest-ranging archive. Kaduna, with its Arabic manuscripts and records relating to the northern areas, is a mine of information in respect to Islamic learning and indirect rule. Enugu, by comparison, has been invaluable concerning research on southeastern Nigeria, especially trade, missionary activities, and the Biafran war.<sup>32</sup> Collectively, the three repositories offer complementary glimpses into the various dimensions of the past of Nigeria. Thus, their preservation is essential to offer a balanced national historiography.

The three zonal archives are however subjected to government neglect. Researchers often talk about the falling quality of paper, inadequate cataloguing, and the lack of digitisation. Ibadan has very robust collections. Despite this, the location has poor facilities for preservation. Kaduna possesses rare Arabic manuscript materials, but does not have many skilled persons capable of preserving the inherently delicate sources.<sup>33</sup> Enugu has had to contend with disruptions associated with infrastructural decay and poor staffing. Such difficulties show the unevenness of the archival conditions that resulted from the specifics of the regional management and funding that further increased the risks of irreversible knowledge destruction.<sup>34</sup>

Access to these archives is also representative of the larger Nigerian archival practice. In addition to official requirements of registration and payment, scholars face delays in preparation of files, lost documents etc., or the bottlenecks of bureaucracy.<sup>35</sup> Important documents are sometimes simply not accessible or lost, so that historians have to turn to oral history or to previous written sources.

### **Archives and Nigerian Historiography**

The availability of archives transformed Nigerian historiography. Early historical writing under colonial rule was largely Eurocentric. European scholars depicted African societies as “primitive” or “tribal” with scant regard for indigenous perspectives.<sup>36</sup> After independence, Nigerian historians seized upon newly available archives to challenge these biases. Archival research has enabled scholars to recover suppressed voices and correct misconceptions. For instance, using colonial census reports and local government records, historians have reinterpreted social and political life in many Nigerian communities beyond colonial stereotypes. Nigeria’s National Archives thus provided a limitless reservoir of primary sources. These sources range from letters and maps to missionary records and legal documents, therefore, fuelling a surge in theses, monographs and articles that refashioned Nigerian history.

Simultaneously, Nigerians embraced oral history and indigenous scholarship. Oral narratives and local traditions increasingly challenge established Eurocentric interpretations of African history.<sup>37</sup> Scholars have worked to integrate oral archives (sermons, folktales, clan histories) with written records.<sup>38</sup> This inclusive approach prioritised the perspectives and experiences of indigenous communities. In effect, archives and oral traditions have been used in tandem to construct a more nuanced national narrative. Archival collections have authenticated oral accounts or filled gaps when witnesses were no longer living.<sup>39</sup> This collaboration has enriched the historiography: for example, colonial land surveys in the archives helped verify local accounts of pre-colonial boundary changes. At the same time, court records have corroborated community oral testimonies about inter-communal conflicts.

Despite these advances, historiography in Nigeria remains shaped by archival biases. The colonial archive itself reflects colonial priorities and omissions. Many documents of nationalist activity or internal African political movements were never created or were discarded. Historians must therefore critically interrogate archives that were initially tools of empire. Additionally, due to political instability in the country, particularly during the civil war, some archival materials were destroyed.<sup>40</sup> This led to the creation of a historical gap due to the loss of some crucial documents. The use of archives would help a historian refute the current interpretation and prejudice and rectify any misinterpretations that may have occurred over the years. They offer a shared storage of primary material, and have led to cross-cultural research projects, resulting in a more international insight into Nigerian history. This has assisted in placing Nigerian history in a broader, regional and global context, with scholars being further enticed to seek out associations and links in Nigerian histories and the rest of the world.<sup>41</sup>

The archival context in Nigeria is defined as being very intricate and diverse. The former colonial rule of Nigeria by the British has left a significant number of documents both in local and international locations. Abioye pointed out that the British colonial government had firmly documented its undertakings, which led to the creation of a rich pool of records that provided valuable information on the era.<sup>42</sup> The historiography in Nigeria is a fundamental instrument in shaping and retaining the national narrative. The blend of Nigeria's peculiar historical realities, both pre-colonial and modern, has helped develop a detailed and authentic narrative of its history. The country did not just rediscover its own story that external influences had distorted. It also resulted in the emergence of a unique African voice in the world historical dialogue. Historiography is essential not only because it documents events, but also because it provides the people of Nigeria with a lens through which they can understand, make sense of, and appreciate the strength in their past. Moreover, historiography in Nigeria contributes to the creation of a sense of unity and common descent among the various populations. All the different stories that historians write outline the lives of several ethnic groups, and this can be attributed to the fact that other cultures, languages and traditions exist in Nigeria. Taking control of their narrative, the Nigerian historians have helped to bring out a more detailed and accurate picture of the African past. This active intervention in historiography contributed to breaking stereotypes, ensuring existing preconceptions and prejudices were addressed, and affirming the relevance of indigenous knowledge in the history-making of the continent.<sup>43</sup>

### **Challenges in Archival Preservation and Access**

Nigeria's archival institutions face persistent practical challenges. Chronic underfunding is perhaps the most critical problem. Agidi and Gmamwuan noted that Nigeria's archives and records management have historically received little or no budgetary support.<sup>44</sup> In practice, this means dilapidated buildings, outmoded climate control, and insufficient conservation supplies. Okpanachi

supported this argument by stating that National Archives Ibadan suffers from improper maintenance of holdings and a lack of back-up and digitalisation due to budget and policy neglect.<sup>45</sup> Power outages, which are a common occurrence nationwide, further threaten collections by impeding preservation equipment and making digital access unreliable. In short, the archives are often in a deplorable condition that scholars have warned needs urgent remediation.<sup>46</sup>

Human resources are likewise strained. Both Amodu and Gbamwuan asserted that staff shortages and limited training were severe deficits.<sup>47</sup> Experienced archivists and conservators are few, and staff turnover is high. With minimal professional development, archivists often struggle to implement modern practices. One consequence is a lack of a comprehensive records management programme. Government agencies may accumulate huge backlogs of unsorted records that never reach the archives. Corruption and inertia exacerbate this situation. Some agencies reportedly withhold or quietly destroy records rather than officially transfer them to the National Archives in Ibadan. The attitude of the workers and their low remuneration is another challenge. The workers are poorly paid, making them susceptible to bribery and other illegal activities in a bid to make ends meet. They are also not motivated to work due to the low incentives they receive.<sup>48</sup>

Physical risks also loom large. Nigerian archives have endured severe damage from disasters and vandalism.<sup>49</sup> Ogunsola's survey of National Archives Ibadan staff reports past incidents of insect infestation, flooding, rodent damage and theft/pilfering of documents.<sup>50</sup> There are cases of theft, water leakages, and other artificial disasters at the archives. Many archival buildings lack modern security measures (CCTV cameras, alarms) and disaster mitigation systems, so a single fire or break-in could destroy irreplaceable records. In 1967-1970, during Nigeria's Civil War, many archives and libraries were looted or burned, creating permanent gaps in the historical record.<sup>51</sup> Such losses indicate that preservation failure is indeed a national problem.<sup>52</sup>

Another lingering colonial legacy compounds these issues. Early colonial record-keeping was uneven and selective, so even intact archives today reflect Eurocentric concerns. Moreover, as noted above, much of Nigeria's colonial documentation remained in London for decades.<sup>53</sup> Only recently have joint efforts begun to repatriate or digitise the so-called migrated archives (files removed from Nigeria between 1948 and 1980).<sup>54</sup> This foreign custody of records means Nigerian scholars must contend with incomplete local archives or resort to research visits abroad. Until very recently, many official papers, including some documentation of independence negotiations and early government policies, were effectively off-limits at home.

### **Oral Traditions and Alternative Sources**

A critical complement to institutional archives in Nigeria is the use of oral sources to support historical narratives. Since colonial archives are incomplete, Nigerian historians have long relied

on oral traditions, legends, songs and photographs preserved in family or communal memory. This reliance brings its challenges. Oral histories are fluid and must be critically evaluated. Without cross-checking written evidence, oral sources can suffer distortions or exaggerations over generations.<sup>55</sup>

However, oral sources pose their problems. By nature, stories passed down by word of mouth can change over time. Historians must carefully compare multiple accounts to triangulate facts. There is also the issue of language. Nigeria is extraordinarily diverse, with over 300 ethnic groups and more than 500 languages. This means that many oral testimonies and written traditions exist only in local tongues. To reach a broader scholarly audience, Nigerian historians have often published in English. While writing in a lingua franca improves communication and international recognition, it can also sideline those traditions that have not been translated. Furthermore, literal translations do not do justice to the actual meanings of some Nigerian languages. In practice, only a few major languages (like Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba) have substantial written histories. Many smaller-language sources remain inaccessible to outsiders.

Despite these obstacles, there is growing recognition of opportunities to modernise Nigeria's archives. Digitisation is often cited to both preserve deteriorating records and democratize access. Gbamwuan and Agidi noted that careful digitisation can make archives more visible and accessible while reducing the handling of fragile items.<sup>56</sup> In practice, Nigeria's efforts are still nascent. Some archives have begun pilot scanning projects for priority collections, and partnerships with universities and international agencies are forming. For example, the recent "Stolen Archives" initiative led by Northumbria University and IFRA-Nigeria helped Nigeria-based researchers identify and digitise hundreds of official files that had been held in the UK.<sup>57</sup> These projects underscore that international collaboration and technical aid are crucial until local capacity catches up. There are also independent private organisations that have begun the process of digitising historical documents. Archive.ng, a startup, has gotten involved in digitising newspapers and magazines of different Nigerian publishing firms.<sup>58</sup> This allows historians and researchers to read through national dailies.

Alongside digitisation, advocates call for improved legal and institutional frameworks. Archives must cease to be seen as a dumping ground for dead pasts and instead be valued as active sources of national development.<sup>59</sup> There is a need for the establishment of stronger national records laws, creating emergency conservation funds, and expanding training programs for archivists.

## **Conclusion**

Nigeria's past can only be fully understood if its archives are preserved and used effectively. This study has shown that Nigeria's archival practice has deep historical roots, from colonial record

offices to the post-independence National Archives. This has enabled significant scholarly advances in historiography. However, archives today suffer from multiple crises, such as dilapidated facilities, funding shortfalls and lingering colonial gaps in the record. The consequences are severe. Without urgent intervention, irreversible losses may occur, and entire chapters of Nigeria's story could remain obscured.

Moving forward, there is a need for a concerted effort towards investment in archival infrastructure. Enhanced funding would facilitate the construction and upkeep of modern storage units, the provision of conservation tools, and the development of digitization centres through which sensitive records are preserved. Digitization, especially, will allow a greater level of access without compromising the integrity of materials that are rapidly degrading. International collaborations can also play a significant role in terms of providing technical support, financial aid, and training facilities.

Training of the professionals is also essential. Training of archivists, historians, and records managers will make sure that standards of preservation are adhered to and that the archives are well managed to make them usable by both scholars and the general population. There is also a need to integrate archives into the development plan of Nigeria at large. They must be perceived as assets to both learning and governance as opposed to being seen as passive repositories of the past. One of the ways that archives can be repositioned as a centre of cultural continuity and national identity is by creating awareness through public educational campaigns.

## Endnotes

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