

From Annulment to Recognition: State Power, Historical Revisionism and the Politics of Memory in Nigeria's Democracy Day

Okechuku Onuchuku

Vice Chancellor, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuolumeni, PMB 5047 Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

Chibuzor Chile Nwobueze, Nyenwe Emem

Okey Onuchuku Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, PMB 5047, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

Glory Ogbonda Emeh

Department of Political Science, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, PMB 5047, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

Patrick Favour Wubong

Department of Foreign Languages and International Studies, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, PMB 5047, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

Abstract: Nigeria's democratic journey began in the 1960s after independence from Britain but recorded setbacks arising from military coups that paved the way for transition to civil rule. This paper critically explores how June 12, which was once an annulment of elections day and national trauma in 1993, was declared as Nigeria's Democracy Day in 2018 by way of formal proclamation. It examines how Nigerian governments, one after another, have engaged in historical revisionism to reshape people's memory and political legitimacy through selective narratives of the past. Drawing from secondary sources, media and policy reports, and academic critiques, the study problematizes the convergence of state power, national identity-making and memory politics. It dwells on how symbolic rehabilitation of June 12 and posthumous commemoration of Chief M. K. O. Abiola form a gesture of atonement and instrumental effort by the state to renegotiate its democratic heritage. The paper argues that, although the official holiday on 12th June is a significant step towards democracy in Nigeria, it also reveals underlying tensions between popular historical consciousness and official memory. The study calls for a more inclusive and dialogical memorialization beyond political opportunism and actual national reconciliation.

Keywords: June 12, Historical Revisionism, Politics of Memory, Democracy Day, State Power.

Introduction

The June 12, 1993 presidential election in Nigeria remains a milestone in the democratic evolution of the country. It was the freest and fairest election in Nigeria's history, and was widely believed to have been won by Chief Moshood Kashimawo Olawale (M. K. O.) Abiola, a businessman and philanthropist. However, the election was annulled by the then military government headed by General Ibrahim Babangida, a move that ignited national and

international condemnation. The annulment not only derailed Nigeria's transition to democracy but also set in motion a series of political crises, civil resistance movements and repression that have shaped the trajectory of Nigeria's democratic struggles for decades (Diamond, Kirk-Greene & Oyediran, 1997; Osaghae, 1998).

June 12 became a rallying point of resistance and democratic expectation, especially among civil society groups and the Yoruba ethnic nationality, from which Abiola hailed, for years. It was unofficially celebrated in the South-West and remembered as a national betrayal elsewhere. The memory of June 12 lived on in street protests, songs, editorials and anniversary lectures, but was never commemorated by successive federal governments, both civilian and military. It was not until 2018, twenty-five years after the annulled election that the Nigerian federal government under President Muhammadu Buhari officially made June 12 Nigeria's Democracy Day, replacing the formerly commemorated May 29, which marked the handover of power from the military to the civilians in 1999. The state also awarded Abiola the Grand Commander of the Federal Republic (GCFR) title, Nigeria's highest national honour typically bestowed on presidents. This sudden shift from erasure to recognition constitutes a critical moment in the politics of historical memory and state legitimacy.

The paper interrogates the refashioning of June 12 from a day of electoral nullification and state repression into a national symbol of democracy and legitimacy. It argues that this is emblematic of how state power is exercised to redefine the past by playing politics of memory and acts of historical revisionism. The state here is not just a bystander but a hegemonic institution that constructs and reconstructs national memory in the interest of present politics (Trouillot, 1995; Olick & Robbins, 1998). The decision to elevate June 12 to the national sphere was a strategic retooling of history in an attempt to consolidate political capital and deal with legitimacy deficits at a moment of democratic frailty, apart from being a moral or symbolic rectification.

Memory politics is the idea that history is not merely about the past, but about ongoing struggles over meaning, identity and power. Governments also manipulate collective memory through the choice of what to remember, what to forget and how to interpret things in national narratives (Nora, 1989; Assmann, 2011). In Nigeria, where ethnic, regional and historical fault lines continue to shape political contestation, the control of memory becomes even more contentious. The June 12 example shows how memory can be evoked by both state and non-state actors, and for various purposes, ranging from calls for justice to attempts at forging national unity or distracting from governance failures.

The decision to declare June 12 as a special day came at a complicated political time. President Buhari, who had been a military ruler and part of past authoritarian governments, was facing increasing criticism for leaning towards authoritarianism, showing ethnic bias and moving away from democracy. By linking himself to Abiola's legacy and the pro-democracy movement of the 1990s, Buhari might have tried to reshape his image and win support from a wider democratic audience. This act of revising history and giving a late national tribute served two purposes: it acknowledged long-suppressed truths and also gave his government legitimacy by connecting it to a respected democratic figure. But recognizing June 12 also brought up important questions. Whose memory was being honoured? Which parts of the June 12 struggle were highlighted or left out in the official story? Was this a genuine effort to reconcile with the past, or was it a political move to take over a previously rebellious memory? These questions reveal the deeper power struggles involved in shaping collective memory. As Pierre Nora (1989) points out, official celebrations often turn important memories into sanitized rituals that strip events of their original, radical meaning.

Moreover, the symbolic recognition of June 12 has not necessarily fruited in terms of substantive democratic reforms or increased government accountability. Despite over two decades of civilian rule, Nigeria continues to grapple with electoral violence, judicial manipulation, voter suppression and declining public faith in democratic institutions (Omotola, 2010; Ibeanu, 2019).

This gap between symbolic action and substantive democratic consolidation raises concern about the instrumentalization of history for political ends.

The essay proceeds in four parts. The first section provides a historical overview of the June 12 election, its annulment and its immediate aftermath, including the resistance movements that followed. The second section is an analysis of historical revisionism and the politics of memory, drawing on relevant theories. The third section is a critical analysis of the process and meaning of the Federal Government's recognition of June 12 as Democracy Day. It examines media coverage, official statements and civil society responses to ascertain how this action reconfigured national memory. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications for democratic consolidation, national integration and collective memory politicization in Nigeria.

This study contributes to the growing body of work that views memory not just as a cultural product but also as a political tool. In the Nigerian case, where selective amnesia and historical grievances routinely shape governance and identity, the politics of memory offers valuable insights into the contested nature of nationhood, reconciliation and democratic legitimacy.

Methodology

The qualitative methodology based on the interpretivist paradigm was used in the research to appreciate the ways state power, historical revisionism and the politics of memory have shaped the development of June 12 from a representation of democratic annulment to its creation as Nigeria's Democracy Day. Qualitative analysis offered the most appropriate paradigm for dismantling the symbolic and ideological shifts that form the base of the official redefinition of June 12 in the Nigerian democratic history. The research was based solely on secondary sources, such as government reports, presidential addresses, archival records, newspaper reports, historical narratives, scholarly books, journal articles, and civil society reports and human rights reports. Primary sources such as the formal proclamation by President Muhammadu Buhari in 2018, the National Honours list posthumously honouring M. K. O. Abiola, and past Democracy Day speeches from 1999 were examined for content, wording and symbolic construction.

The thematic content analysis method was adopted. This involved the identification of recurring themes, discursive patterns and narratives that highlight the dynamics of historical revisionism as well as the employment of political memory by the Nigerian state. Special emphasis was placed on the construction of June 12 in political discourse, the subjects included or excluded from official remembrance, and how the development of this day was directed towards serving other agendas of state legitimacy and national integration. The paper also did critical discourse analysis with the aim of challenging the ideological underpinnings of official and media accounts of June 12. Using this approach, the paper examined how the politics of memory as an exercise in power makes national identity, collective consciousness and historical responsibility in post-authoritarian Nigeria. Lastly, this qualitative methodology provided a nuanced, context-rich analysis of the manner in which political forces within Nigeria utilize historical memory to remember, as well as to construct and entrench power.

Objectives

The objectives are to:

- i. Examine the political and historical significance of the June 12, 1993 presidential election and its annulment in Nigeria's democratic trajectory;
- ii. Analyze how successive Nigerian governments have constructed, suppressed or reinterpreted the memory of June 12 in public discourse and national policy;
- iii. Investigate the role of state power in shaping collective memory and historical narratives through the official recognition of June 12 as Democracy Day;
- iv. Evaluate the implications of historical revisionism for democratic legitimacy, national integration and political inclusion in Nigeria; and

- v. Explore how the memory politics surrounding June 12 reflects broader patterns of symbolic governance, identity construction and post-authoritarian nation-building in Nigeria.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on three interlocking ideas: state power, historical revisionism and memory politics. These ideas provide a lens through which the transformation of June 12 from a shelved democratic process to an officially commemorated Democracy Day can be critically examined. Each idea makes it possible to understand how the Nigerian state engages with history, constructs national identity and justifies political power through selective remembrance.

Power of the State

The power of the state, in this study, is not merely the administrative and coercive might of the state but also its discursive and symbolic power, that is its ability to make meaning, construct narratives and dominate public memory. Borrowing from Michel Foucault's understanding of power as productive and relational and not just repressive, this research perceives the Nigerian state as an agent engaged in the constitution of social reality (Foucault, 1980). The state does not simply make laws and rule over spaces; it also generates prevailing accounts of the past by establishing public holidays, bestowing national honours, dictating school curricula and circulating media accounts. Under the auspices of June 12, state power manifests itself through the official endorsement of the date, the conferment of national honours on M. K. O. Abiola, and the presidential reinterpretation of the context of the election in 1993. These actions do not occur without bias; they demonstrate calculated reconstitution of state legitimacy. As Gramsci (1971) postulates in his theory of hegemony, dominant classes exercise power not just through coercion but also through the achievement of the consent of the ruled through cultural and ideological leadership. The change of official discourse about June 12 therefore amounts to a strategy of hegemonic re-articulation.

Historical Revisionism

Historical revisionism is the reinterpretation of the past, usually because of new evidence, shifting political circumstances or ideological impulses. While revisionism is an acceptable scholarly practice, it can also be employed as a political strategy by the state or the elite to serve the ends of redefining historical narratives to suit present exigencies (Trouillot, 1995). In transitional or authoritarian regimes, historical revisionism may be practised through "symbolic politics", a way of recontextualizing previously suppressed or inopportune histories in a bid to fit the agenda of the dominant parties (Olick & Robbins, 1998).

In this paper, the June 12 declaration in 2018 is analyzed as state-sponsored historical revisionism. The act of converting June 12 from an infamous day (defined by annulment, repression and resistance) to a national celebration day signifies a shift in the remembrance, packaging and projection of the past. This is reconciliatory revisionism, not an analytically critical one. It is one that opens up selective orientations, alternative kinds of authenticity and the silencing of alternative voices, particularly those of civil society groups, pro-democracy forces and victims of military atrocities. The study critically examines how such reframing is employed to enhance the legitimacy of the Buhari administration while simultaneously extinguishing the radical demands for which the original June 12 movement was famous.

Politics of Memory

Politics of memory is a contested process whereby societies remember, commemorate and narrate their pasts. It involves the struggles over what events to celebrate, what to forget and how collective identities in terms of shared (or dispersed) memories are formed. Memory, here, is not a passive repository but active and even politicized terrain (Nora, 1989; Assmann, 2011).

In the Nigerian context, memory politics is inextricably linked with the narrative of ethnicity, regionalism and postcolonial state-formation. June 12 is a rich case of memory politics, in that it

conjures up pride, betrayal, resistance and reconciliation, depending on the position of one within the national space. The article examines how and why official explanations of June 12 have evolved over time and have been challenged or embraced by various actors, including the political elite, civil society groups, ethnic minorities and the media. The institution of June 12 as Democracy Day is a case in point of how memory becomes institutionalized through state rituals and symbolic acts, and how those acts can be resisted by counter-memories rooted in local, ethnic or ideological experience. Politics of memory thus becomes a contested arena for legitimacy, where the past is not just remembered but also actually re-created in order to define present and future political alignments.

Theoretical Framework

Two interrelated theoretical perspectives underpin this study: Collective Memory Theory and Gramscian Theory of Hegemony. These theoretical perspectives provide intellectual explanation for how state actors reconstruct national narratives, power is exercised over history, and memory is used as a tool of legitimacy in post-authoritarian settings like Nigeria.

Collective Memory Theory

The Collective Memory Theory, in the formulation of scholars like Maurice Halbwachs (1992), Paul Connerton (1989) and Jan Assmann (2011), contends that memory is not an isolated psychological event, but a socially constructed one via institutions, political actors and cultural norms. Collective memory becomes embodied in rituals, commemorations, monuments, official speeches, education systems and national holidays. It reflects how societies choose to remember and forget.

June 12 constitutes, in this respect, a space of contested memory in the political history of Nigeria. Informally, it had been recalled for decades by activists and suppressed in official discourse. The state's late recognition of June 12 as Democracy Day in 2018 ushered in a shift in the landscape of collective memory, reconstituting a day of civil resistance as a nationally-sanctioned icon of democratic identity. Nevertheless, the Collective Memory Theory identifies that these transformations are not at all neutral; they involve political struggles over legitimacy, ownership, and meaning.

This theory allows the paper to ask:

- How state-enforced memory is produced and disseminated;
- Whose stories are privileged or excluded from national memory; and
- How reorientation of June 12 reflects tensions between official memory and mass memory deeper.

Gramscian Theory of Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony provides a powerful lens to analyze how the political elite sustain power not merely through coercion but also through consent and ideological leadership. Hegemony operates by manufacturing cultural and historical consensus, often by co-opting previously oppositional symbols and rebranding them to fit dominant political narratives. In the Nigerian situation, the state's declaration of June 12 and the posthumous recognition of M. K. O. Abiola can be seen as a hegemonic revisionist act. A symbol of civil resistance and disobedience against military dictatorship is today used to reinforce the legitimacy of the modern democratic state—specifically under the leadership of a former military dictator, President Muhammadu Buhari.

The theory of Gramsci explains:

- How the state makes strategic use of history to reinforce national unity and conceal complicity in past authoritarianism;

- The co-optation of symbols of opposition (June 12 and Abiola) into the mainstream as a neutralizing strategy against opposition; and
- Symbolic politics as a soft power strategy for generating public consent.

Placing the recognition of June 12 within hegemonic processes, the study deconstructs the ways in which memory is being used not only towards reconciliation but also towards political containment and legitimacy engineering.

Synthesized Application of the Theories

Synthesized application of Collective Memory Theory and Gramscian Hegemony enables a multi-faceted examination of the transition of June 12 from a cancelled election to a de jure national holiday. While the Collective Memory Theory points out the symbolic and cultural composition of public memory, Gramscian Theory reveals power relations behind these compositions. Combined, they help the study respond to its main inquiry: How and why did the Nigerian state redefine June 12, and what does it reveal concerning the interrelation of memory, power and democracy? This is a theoretical framework that emphasizes the political nature of remembrance in postcolonial Nigeria. Striving to bring together memory studies and critical political theory, the paper demonstrates how the state's intervention in the production of history narratives, such as the history of June 12, is not only commemorative but also highly strategic, ideological and determinative of democratic advancement.

Literature Review

The cancellation of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, widely regarded as Nigeria's freest and fairest, by the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida has been the subject of continued academic scrutiny. The election, which Chief Moshood Kashimawo Olawale (M. K. O.) Abiola won, became a turning point in Nigeria's pursuit of democracy and remains firmly rooted in the nation's psyche. This review critically engages the literature on four thematic areas of scholarship: (1) June 12 as a democratic break, (2) state authority and democratic legitimation, (3) historical revisionism of postcolonial African states, and (4) symbolic representation and memory politics.

There exists vast literature interpreting June 12 as a break in Nigeria's democratic journey. Scholars, including Diamond (1995) and Ihonvbere (1996), contend that the annulment constituted a deliberate subversion of popular will by the entrenched military elite. The democratic hopes embodied in the outcome of the election and the popular uprising that ensued, are interpreted as manifestations of long-standing discontent with authoritarianism and ethno-regional marginalization. Abiola's movement and the June 12 mandate are also taken to have wrought a special moment of national consensus, transcending ethnic and religious divisions (Osaghae, 1999; Suberu, 2001).

However, the broader literature suggests the paradox of that consensus: while June 12 for a time united Nigerians, it only reaffirmed the deeper regional and class contradictions that have structured the postcolonial state. Ayoade (2000) argues that the annulment helped deepen political cynicism, distrust of institutions and regional disaffection, particularly in the Southwest. The protracted agitations of civil society actors and pro-democracy coalitions kept June 12 as a touchstone of morality alive as much as successive post-1999 democratic governments initially resisted officially marking it.

State Power and Democratic Legitimation

Numerous scholars have discussed how African postcolonial states wield power not only by coercion but also by symbolic acts that create legitimacy and build collective memory (Bayart, 1993; Chabal & Daloz, 1999). In Nigeria, the control of national celebrations, state funerals, history curriculum and commemorations are part of a broader discursive repertoire of nation-building through memory politics. The move by President Muhammadu Buhari in 2018 to declare June 12 as Nigeria's Democracy Day and to posthumously honour M. K. O. Abiola is

interpreted by analysts as a tactful exercise of state power. It was aimed at pacifying long-standing Southwest grievances, rebranding the administration's democratic credentials, and reconciling historical memory with new political priorities (Adebanwi, 2019). Olaniyan (2021) observes that the law, though symbolic, was not followed by substantive institutional reforms, such that one is inclined to think that it was more a performative act of legitimacy than an actual expression of commitment to June 12 ideals.

Historical revisionism in the form of reinterpretation of the past to serve the purposes of today is a common feature of post-authoritarian and postcolonial governments. Nigerian writers, such as Falola (2009) and Mamdani (1996), have noted how history comes to be rewritten from the podium of political expediency instead of scholarly objectivity. This is achieved through state-directed education, selective forgetting and erasure of troublesome narratives. The restoration of June 12 is thus interpreted in literature as a work of official historical revisionism. While it serves to correct past erasures, it also raises questions of the selectivity and instrumentality of state-making memories. Oloruntoba (2020) opines that such revisionism becomes questionable when isolated from broader machinery of justice or when it serves to silence the radicalism of past struggles by scrubbing them into state-conformable narratives.

Politics of memory refers to the remembering, forgetting and narration of the past in society in the manner that reflects existing power structures. Nora (1989) and Assmann (2011) point out that memory is not static but consists of "sites of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*) including monuments, anniversaries and rituals. Memory politics in Nigeria has been shaped by governments, interregional tensions and civil society resistance.

Olick and Robbins (1998) theorize that memory is not only about the past but also about present agendas and future hopes. To this end, the institutionalization of June 12 as Democracy Day is rewriting of the Nigerian memoryscape. The literature cautions that these acts are typically top-down impositions of official memory that may come into conflict with more heterogeneous or organic forms of remembering. For instance, while Abiola was acknowledged by the Federal Government, other key actors of pro-democracy movement, such as Gani Fawehinmi, Kudirat Abiola and or NADECO (National Democratic Coalition) activists have been relatively less acknowledged.

As broad as research on June 12 has been, little attention has been given to a rigorous, theory-based analysis of how the Nigerian state has used memory politics as a tool for historical revisionism and political legitimation. Much of the written literature is concerned with the historical details regarding the annulment or Abiola's symbolic meaning. There is a lack of understanding of how the transition from annulment to recognition signifies a broader movement in state-sponsored historical engineering and how it ties up with Nigeria's contemporary democratic problems. The scholarship sets June 12 as an unmistakable symbol of Nigeria's democratization struggle and argues that its official remembrance is politically significant and theoretically revealing. There is a need, however, for critical examination of the dynamic relationship between memory, power and legitimacy. This study contributes to filling this gap by combining political theories, memory studies, and postcolonial historiography to investigate how the Nigerian state deals with its controversial past in advancing interests today.

Political and Historical Significance of the June 12, 1993 Presidential Election and Its Annulment in Nigeria's Democratic Experience

The June 12, 1993 election is widely regarded as a turning point in Nigerian politics, a moment that symbolized Nigeria's democratic consolidation and integration promise. Its significance lies not only in the election but also in the cancellation of the election by the military regime that provided impetus to Nigeria's post-democratic development.

1. An Episode of National Unity and Democratic Legitimacy

The June 12 election took place amidst the transitional programme of General Ibrahim Babangida's military regime. Despite the constraint of having an election process funded and

managed by the state and imposing only two political parties, Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC), on the people, the election itself was generally considered free, fair and credible to both domestic and international observers (Diamond, 1995; Kurfi, 2005). It united a wide array of Nigerians, cutting across ethnic, religious and regional fault lines; the presumed winner, Chief M. K. O. Abiola, won a national mandate that cut across the customary cleavages that tend to polarize Nigerian politics.

This historical demonstration of national cohesion demonstrated that it was possible to overcome disintegration along ethnic lines and that it was possible for Nigerians to forgo primordial loyalties in favour of issue-based politics and uninhibited electoral processes. The outcome was that June 12 became a symbol of a national yearning for democratic governance and participatory leadership.

2. The Annulment and Betrayal of the Popular Will

On 23rd June 1993, about a week following the election, the military regime annulled the election results based on uncertain and unconvincing reasons, such as electoral irregularities and security threats to the nation. This was done as negation of the Nigerian people's will and the glaring manipulation of democratic achievements by the military class whose interests had been jeopardized by Abiola's victory (Ihonvbere, 1996).

The annulment not only plunged the country into a prolonged period of political repression and instability but also highlighted the fragility of Nigeria's democratic institutions. It evoked mass protests, civil disobedience campaigns and formation of pro-democracy groups, such as Campaign for Democracy (CD) and National Democratic Coalition (NADECO). These organizations were instrumental in mobilizing opposition to the military dictatorship and, in the process, June 12 became ingrained in the democratic memory of Nigeria as a symbol of resistance and sacrifice.

3. A Catalyst for Democratic Consciousness and Civil Society Engagement

Although the annulment was a loss, it also served as a catalyst for democratic consciousness and civil society action in Nigeria. The following events radicalized public sentiment, especially in the Southwest, and continued to put pressure on the government of Babangida, Ernest Shonekan and Sani Abacha. The continuous demand for the actualization of Abiola's mandate and return to civilian rule further deepened the pro-democracy cause and paved the way for Nigeria's eventual transition to the Fourth Republic in 1999.

The June 12 struggle also redefined the roles of diaspora, civil society groups, media and labour unions in holding the government to account and upholding democratic values. They emerged as the essential actors of the reconfiguration of Nigeria's politics and demanding electoral reform, good governance and human rights.

4. Symbolism and Politics of Memory

The eventual recognition of June 12 in 2018 by President Muhammadu Buhari, 25 years after the election, marked a dramatic shift in state acknowledgment of historical injustice. By declaring it Nigeria's official Democracy Day and posthumously honouring M. K. O. Abiola with the title of Grand Commander of the Federal Republic (GCFR), the Nigerian state formally revised its historical narrative, shifting symbolic legitimacy from May 29 (previously recognized as Democracy Day) to a date that represented grassroots democratic struggle.

This recognition, as much as it is being celebrated by the majority, has also been condemned as an exercise in political appeasement through historical revisionism, this time of the Southwest quadrant, and not so much of making peace with the past. It does, however, shows the lasting political importance of June 12 and its positioning at the core of the birth of Nigeria's democratic identity.

5. Impact on Democratic Trajectory and Contemporary Politics

June 12 is a turning point in Nigeria's broader democratic history. It is both the height of popular democratic engagement and a cautionary lesson against the dangers of authoritarianism. It has conditioned debate about electoral credibility, institutional change, alternation of power, national unity and exclusionary politics.

Besides, June 12 lessons continue to define democratic struggles across Nigeria, from demands for electoral justice to demands for decentralization and restructuring. It is a touchstone from the past for challenging current democratic practice and avoiding the repetition of errors made previously. It is remarkable that the June 12, 1993 election and its annulment are at the core of Nigeria's democratization. They symbolize the struggle between popular sovereignty and authoritarianism and a people's determination to reassert their entitlement to self-government. From the ashes of that invalidation arose a new affirmation of democratic ideals, flawed as they were, that continue to shape the nation's politics. At once a memory and a mirror, June 12 makes Nigeria confront honestly the past and demand a fairer, more democratic future.

How Subsequent Nigerian Governments Have Constructed, Repressed or Redefined the Memory of June 12 in Public Debate and National Policy

The memory of the June 12, 1993 election has been subjected to various degrees of suppression, contestation and reinterpretation by successive administrations in Nigeria. This shift is a reaction to the struggle over national identity, historical narrative and political use of memory. The military denial of democratic appropriation, the state's management of June 12, serves as a blueprint for the way governments use history to build legitimacy, establish power and manage dissent.

1. Suppression and Erasure by the Military (1993-1998)

The post-annulment era, after General Ibrahim Babangida and subsequently General Sani Abacha, was characterized by deliberate repression of the June 12 narrative. The cancellation of M. K. O. Abiola's presumed victory was predicated on national security grounds, and the military administration sought to destroy the symbolic and electoral legitimacy of the event. Popular debate was suppressed by censorship, intimidation of activists and silencing of media reports.

Abiola's 1994 detention, following his unilateral declaration of presidential mandate, symbolized the state's oppressive response to the June 12 heritage. The regime severed him from his mandate and ultimately was accountable for the ambiguous circumstances of his death in detention in 1998. The attempts by civil society organisations to commemorate June 12 during this period were met with repression, raids and branding of pro-democracy activists as foes of the state.

2. Civilian Rule and Strategic Silence (1999-2007)

The return to democratic rule in 1999 that ushered in President Olusegun Obasanjo, a fellow Yoruba statesman, was a hope that June 12 would be given formal recognition. But rather, the Obasanjo administration went on to institutionalize May 29 as Nigeria's official Democracy Day—the day that Obasanjo was inaugurated as civilian president.

This move was viewed by the majority to be political in intent to de-emphasize the significance of June 12, maybe due to Obasanjo's contentious association with Abiola and the struggle that gave rise to the Fourth Republic. Although the administration invoked the entire pro-democracy struggle, it fell short of elevating June 12 or Abiola to official status, thereby muzzling its unquestioned centrality in Nigeria's democratic process. The government fostered a "national reconciliation" rhetoric that discredited the radical democratic aspirations of the June 12 movement and skirted the atrocities of the annulment or nurturing victimized by state repression.

3. Regional Recognition and Grassroots Memorialization (2007-2015)

Under President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua and President Goodluck Jonathan, there was no significant change in federal policy towards June 12. State-level officials, however, mainly in the Southwest (Lagos and Ogun States), declared June 12 a public holiday, upholding the memory from below.

This phase saw June 12 becoming more and more a site of sub-national memory and opposition because civil society groups, activists and state governments used commemoration to highlight chronic democratic deficits and honour the heroism of M. K. O. Abiola. National debate remained muted, as the Federal Government continued to hold on to May 29 as Democracy Day, thereby sending a signal of reluctance to confront the contested past.

4. Official Recognition and Historical Reframing (2015-2023)

A major shift happened under President Muhammadu Buhari, who in June 2018 proclaimed June 12 as Nigeria's new official Democracy Day. The move involved posthumous national awards to M. K. O. Abiola, his vice presidential candidate, Babagana Kingibe, and leading pro-democracy activist lawyer Gani Fawehinmi. The government of Buhari positioned the action as one of restorative justice and national healing.

The recognition was deliberate re-writing of Nigerian democratic history. By situating June 12 at the centre of collective memory, the state legitimized the people's choice of 1993 and authenticates the pro-democracy movement that followed. Some people thought it was a political manoeuvre, one geared towards consolidating support from the Southwest and deflecting attention from recent issues of governance, such as democratic backsliding and dissent quelling.

Buhari's June 12 celebration had the tendency to depoliticize the broader civic resistance and popular mobilization and framed the transition as a state-directed evolution instead. This selective memory wiped away the agonies and sacrifices of the civil society, thus embedding June 12 into official nationalist discourse.

5. Contemporary Ambiguity and Memory Contestation (2023-Present)

With President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a veteran of the June 12 struggle and NADECO strongman, expectations were high that there would be deeper institutionalization of June 12 values. But like the situation with his predecessors, tension remains between symbolic recognition and real democratic transformation. As the public speeches and media framing of June 12 celebrate the triumph of democracy, enduring concerns such as voter suppression, electoral manipulation and restricted civic space cast doubts on the sincerity of the state's commitment to the ideology of June 12.

Consequently, although the memory of June 12 has been socially reinterpreted as a symbol of national democracy, there are other discourses which still exist, especially among historians and activists, emphasizing the unfinished injustices, selective memory and paradoxes of Nigeria's democratic experience.

The construction of June 12 in Nigerian political imagination demonstrates that memory is not fixed or neutral. It is invented, repressed and reinterpreted according to powerful political interests and administrations. From outright erasure under the military regime to symbolic takeover by the civilian administrations, the state has sought to orchestrate the meaning of June 12 in order to legitimize itself and construct national identity. Lastly, the June 12 politics reveals underlying questions about who controls memory, who is included or excluded from national history, and how the past struggles are being utilised in the present time. To sustain the spirit of June 12, Nigeria must move beyond symbolic recognition to the values that it represents –justice, accountability, inclusivity and popular sovereignty.

Agency of State Power in Collective Memory and Historical Narrative-making through the Official Commemoration of June 12 as Democracy Day

The official pronouncement of June 12 as Nigeria's Democracy Day by the Buhari administration in 2018 was a landmark moment in the country's reconciliation with its democratic process. This act not only honoured the memory of the annulled 1993 presidential election and Chief M. K. O. Abiola but also demonstrated how state power actively constructs and manages collective memory. By celebrating June 12, the Nigerian state reasserted its agency in the construction of the nation's historical narrative, often enough through selective remembering, symbolic atonement and politically-motivated re-interpretation of the past.

1. State Power and the Construction of National Memory

State power is also central to the shaping of collective memory, the public recollection of past events that make up national identity. Governments decide what will be remembered, how it will be remembered and whose voices are heard or suppressed. Through commemoration policies, state holidays, monuments and public speeches, the state stamps certain stories on public consciousness and omits others (Olick & Robbins, 1998).

In the Nigerian context, the recognition of June 12 is a reconfiguration of state-sponsored memory, moving the emphasis from May 29 (the anniversary of the end of military rule in 1999) to a site of democratic yearning that had been marginal for so long in national discourse. The move was not just a rectification of historical injustice; it was a reconfiguration of the symbolic foundation of Nigeria's democracy.

2. June 12 as a Means of Legitimation

By declaring June 12 as Democracy Day, President Muhammadu Buhari leveraged state power to create legitimacy, both retrospective and contemporary. Retrospectively, the move attempted to acknowledge the significance of Abiola's presumed victory and the sacrifices made by pro-democracy activists. In the contemporary political landscape, it served to position Buhari's government as a corrective force, capable of addressing long-standing grievances and repositioning the historical narrative in favour of justice and inclusion.

Nonetheless, this action was not ideologically neutral. It was consistent with political calculations, namely the necessity to solidify alliances in the Southwest, Abiola's native region and a zone of passionate historic commitment to June 12. This instrumentalization of memory demonstrates how governments often use symbolic recognition to support political capital and pre-empt criticism of present democratic shortcomings.

3. Selective Inclusion and Historical Revisionism

The state's recognition of June 12 also illustrates selective revisionism of history. In commemorating Abiola and conferring national honours on key players, such as Gani Fawehinmi and Babagana Kingibe, it excluded other key players in the June 12 struggle, particularly grassroots activists, journalists, the labour movement and civil society organizations that fought the military dictatorship and paid high prices.

Furthermore, the official rhetoric has the tendency to decontextualize or sanitize the nature of the 1993 annulment and the repression that followed, including the premature and mysterious deaths of Abiola and his wife Kudirat. In focusing on the symbolic plane (naming public institutions and public holiday), the state sidesteps the deeper structural and institutional reforms necessary for meaningfully honouring the democratic hopes of June 12.

This sort of state-controlled recollection is exemplary of what scholars have called "memory politics", the employment of selective accounts of the past by those in power for the purpose of shaping collective identity, legitimizing authority and suppressing dissidence (Trouillot, 1995; Assmann, 2011).

4. Memory as a Form of Symbolic Governance

The rebranding of Democracy Day on May 29 as June 12 also falls into a broader pattern of symbolic governance, whereby the state uses ceremonies, commemorations and awards to cast a narrative of progress and reconciliation. While such symbolism can bring citizens together and advance national healing, it can also mask the absence of concrete democratic reforms, such as electoral credibility, institutional accountability and human rights enforcement.

Critics argue that, for all the recognition of June 12, many of the same authoritarian tendencies that ruled prior to 1999 remain firmly entrenched, including repression of protesters, manipulation of the electoral process and executive excesses. The question is whether the state's June 12 is one of true restitution or a purely political spectacle that co-opts the rhetoric of democracy without its substance.

5. State Narratives vs. Popular Memory

There is an inherent conflict between official memory (that which the state promotes) and popular memory (that which people remember and celebrate spontaneously). June 12 was preserved in the collective memory of the civil society, and particularly the Southwest, for decades against federal suppression. Television commercials, newspaper editorials, protest marches and regional holidays ensured that the significance of the 1993 election was not lost to history.

The state's late recognition of June 12 can be seen as an appropriation of this bottom-up memory, an attempt to domesticate what had for so long been a source of critique of the Nigerian state. In so doing, the state reasserts its control over the interpretation of the past and entrenches a version of history that is within the bounds of official legitimacy.

6. Implications for Democratic Consolidation

The official declaration of June 12 by the state is symbolic of how state management of memory can both enable and constrict democracy. On the one hand, it is a step towards acknowledgment of past injustices and promotion of inclusive memories. On the other, it testifies to the risk of the use of symbolic gestures to obscure ongoing failures, such as compromised electoral institutions, insecurity, and social injustice.

To render democratic consolidation meaningful, structural change must follow memory politics. The recognition of June 12 should not only memorialize a point in the past but also inspire deliberation on current democratic deficits and drive institutional reforms that will actualize democracy for every Nigerian. The designation of June 12 as Democracy Day reveals the authoritative power of the state to shape historical narratives and collective memory. Through strategic actions of recall, Nigerian administrations have used June 12 to construct legitimacy, channel dissent and redefine the symbolic foundations of the nation's democracy. Yet the selectivity of such recognition, and its frequent detachment from substantive reform, underscores the political complexities of memory. In order for June 12 not to lose its promise, its commemoration must transcend state-sponsored rituals to embrace a broader, more inclusive reckoning with Nigeria's democratic past and future.

Consequences of Historical Revisionism on Democratic Legitimacy, National Consolidation, and Political Inclusion in Nigeria

Historical revisionism, the reinterpretation of the past to suit contemporary narratives, political agendas or ideological purposes, is a two-edged sword for post-authoritarian and transition societies like Nigeria. As it can be utilized in a manner that produces reparation through re-engaging the repressed realities and embracing past injustice, it can also engender manipulating national memory, institutionalizing exclusion and undermining democratic development. In Nigeria, the state's approach in remaking history around events such as the annulled June 12, 1993 election is a classic case in point. Below is a critical analysis of the effects of historical revisionism on democratic legitimacy, national unity and political inclusion in Nigeria.

1. Effects on Democratic Legitimacy

a. Rehabilitation of democratic narratives

Through the declaration of June 12 as the official Democracy Day, the Nigerian state appeared to reverse decades of historical repression and marginalization. The declaration takes the country's democratic persona closer to popular sovereignty and civic resistance, in view of military retreat (as exemplified by the former May 29 Democracy Day). Such a revision can reaffirm democratic legitimacy, especially where it is grounded in people's volition and boosts electoral justice (Osaghae, 2011).

b. Threat of symbolic appropriation

But historical revisionism can also be employed by the governing elite to manufacture semblance of democratic legitimacy. Unless reinforced by structural reforms, such as genuine elections, the protection of civic rights or accountability such initiatives may be received as political propaganda, and therefore undermine the legitimacy that they seek to recover (Adebanwi, 2014).

c. Legitimization of previous democratic attempts

Selective representation of historical heroes (e.g. M. K. O. Abiola and Babagana Kingibe) but not the broader mass alliances (e.g. NADECO, civil society groups and labour unions) that led the June 12 struggle distorts the democratic narrative. The selective memory disempowers the full depth of democratic struggle and demobilizes non-elite political action in Nigeria's development.

2. Implications for National Integration

a. Inclusive recognition has the capability to foster unity.

Historical revisionism can, when properly managed, be an instrument of national integration through recognition and validation of the history of previously suppressed or marginalized groups and political forces. June 12 as a national holiday can then be interpreted as an act of healing ethno-regional wounds, especially for the Yoruba in the Southwest who were betrayed by the cancellation of the 1993 elections and the attendant experiences.

b. Regional resentment and exclusionary narratives

When historical revisionism appears to be regionally or politically interested, it may even increase ethno-regional tensions. Thus, the state's highlighting of June 12 and Yoruba struggle may be interpreted by other groups (e.g. Niger Delta or Southeast) as an act of selective justice reflecting negatively on their own historical complaints, such as the Biafran War or environmental injustices.

c. Fragmented collective memory

The failure to create a common and inclusive national memory, a memory that acknowledges several struggles and histories, results in broken national awareness. Competing regional memories resist the creation of a single national identity and complicate efforts at substantial integration (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

3. Implications for Political Inclusion

a. Recognition as a pathway to inclusion

Historical revisionism, if it is open and democratic, can widen political participation by validating repressed voices. Official acknowledgment of repressed democratic events means the state will embrace pluralism and address the past wrongs, which could be reflected in greater civic engagement and trust.

b. Co-optation and elite capture of memory

Historical revisionism aimed at advancing elite rulers over the socio-political movements they were leading could reduce political inclusion to mere representation. This elite-oriented approach

excludes mass movements, youth and minority groups from the current political process, which hardens disparities in political representation and power (Ihonvbere, 1996).

c. Degeneration of accountability from history

Sanitizing or erasing state violence, corruption or authoritarianism from historical revisionism not only whitewashes the past but also gives a dangerous message. It can erode historical accountability, excuse perpetrators of injustice and solidify impunity, thereby deterring honest engagement from communities victimized by state repression.

The Nigerian democratic experience has a complicated phenomenon known as historical revisionism that holds transformative and corrosive potential. If inscribed in truth-telling, justice and inclusivity, it may transform and unite the country further, and incorporate more citizens in politics. Used selectively or manipulatively, it may distort history, deepen regional and class fault lines, and subvert the democracy it is celebrated to be serving. For Nigeria to enjoy a sustainable democracy, revisionism must evolve from elite symbolism to historical justice founded on openness, public discourse, inclusive narratives and institutional transformation. Then, and then only, can the memory politics of Nigeria serve as a bridge towards authentic national reconciliation and democratic consolidation.

Memory Politics and June 12: Symbolic Governance, Identity and Nation-building in Nigeria

The politics surrounding June 12, which refers to the memory of the annulled 1993 presidential election, offers a valuable way to understand larger issues of symbolic governance, identity and nation-building in Nigeria after authoritarian rule. As Nigeria continues its journey with civilian government, the debate over what June 12 means shows how memory serves both as a space for reflecting on history and as a battleground where the country's legitimacy, identity and democratic values are constantly shaped and challenged.

1. Memory Politics as a Tool of Symbolic Governance

Symbolic rule accounts for the use of rituals, symbols, remembrance and other representations by the state to legitimise leadership and make public awareness (Edelman, 1964; Alexander, 2006). For June 12, the Buhari administration's 2018 designation of the day as Democracy Day represented a calculated move at establishing the state as both moral authority and disbursing justice.

This re-framing of memory was a multi-symbolic action:

- Adjusting a historical wrong (the cancellation of the 1993 election)
- Appropriating a people's struggle for democratic rights
- Re-writing the founding myth of Nigeria's democracy –military withdrawal (May 29) to popular sovereignty (June 12).

But this symbolic gesture was not accompanied by structural reforms, such as stronger electoral institutions or protection of civil liberties, which made many people view it as a politically expedient act of memory annexation, designed to shore up administration legitimacy at the cost of not confronting authoritarian vestiges that remained in Nigerian politics.

2. June 12 and Democratic Identity Building

June 12 has changed from being seen as a tragic election day to an important part of Nigeria's democratic history. For many years, civil society groups, especially in the Southwest, marked June 12 as an unofficial "people's democracy day" to remember M. K. O. Abiola and the pro-democracy movement. The official recognition of this date shifted the national story away from elite-driven democracy towards one that honours popular electoral power and sacrifice. However, focusing only on certain figures in this story leaves out the many groups –students, workers, the media, and activists –that also faced harsh state repression. Reducing democracy to

just a few individuals or events limits the chance to build a more inclusive and diverse national identity.

In addition, by placing June 12 within the framework of ethnic or regional politics (i.e. as a “Yoruba grievance” now “resolved”), the state risks discrediting national unity and fuelling inter-group suspicion, especially among groups whose unresolved historical wounds are not recognized (e.g. Biafra, the Niger Delta and the Middle Belt).

3. Post-authoritarian Nation-building and Management of Collective Memory

In post-authoritarian regimes, nations struggle with how to manage painful pasts as they build democratic futures. Politics of memory is crucial in this endeavour, particularly through official commemoration, national symbols and state-sponsored narratives (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Assmann, 2011).

The rebranding June 12 to Democracy Day is an attempt at nation-building through memory management the invention of a democratic origin from resistance, sacrifice and final redemption. This follows the trend among other post-authoritarian nations, where states seek to legitimize new administrations by deciding to recall some occurrences rather than others.

In Nigeria, however, the process remains contentious and incomplete owing to the following:

- There is no collective national understanding of what June 12 means and is worth.
- The legitimacy of the state’s moral foundations is eroded when democratic practice conflicts with June 12 values (i.e. election rigging, crushing demonstrations and not delivering justice to historical abuses).
- Other communities and regions find that their historical injustices are excluded from national debates, thus perpetuating alienation and disintegration.

Therefore, while the memory of June 12 is institutionally legitimized today, it is still a slender pillar of post-authoritarian nation-building, more symbolic than substantive, and more a result of political expediency than reconciliation.

4. Memory, Power, and Selective Remembrance

June 12 demonstrates how state power acts upon memory. The long silence of successive governments on June 12, from Abacha to Obasanjo and to Jonathan, demonstrates how the political elite naturally suppress painful memories that challenge their legitimacy or violate dominant national narratives. The ultimate mobilization of this memory by the Buhari administration demonstrates the plasticity of national history and how memory is used instrumentally for political purposes.

But this strategic deployment is seldom accompanied by accountability. Principal agents and institutions that participated in the annulment and repression have yet to face justice or public scrutiny. This absence of transitional justice processes taints the legitimacy of memory politics and limits the capacity of the nation to reconcile with its authoritarian history.

5. Towards an Inclusive Memory Culture

The June 12 politics of memory holds within it the contradictions and challenges of post-authoritarian politics in Nigeria. It illustrates how symbolic actions, such as renaming a national holiday, can simultaneously celebrate democratic values and cover up system failures. June 12 offers the potential for a shared democratic self, but the state’s selective deployment of history unearths other fault lines in Nigeria’s nation-building project.

To realize the potential of June 12 as a platform for democratic progress, Nigeria must move away from symbolic leadership to embracing:

- National memory that includes all regions, struggles and identities;

- Historical responsibility that addresses past state abuses and acknowledges grassroots actions; and
- Democratic consolidation in authentic institutions that reflect the values of June 12 transparency, participation, justice and electoral integrity.

Then, and then only, can the memory of June 12 become a shared national legacy.

Concluding Remarks

The change of June 12 from a day marked by democratic betrayal to the official Democracy Day shows the complicated mix of state power, revisionism and memory politics in Nigeria. As this paper has shown, the 2018 recognition of June 12 was not just about national healing or justice; it was a way to reshape political memory to support the state and rewrite Nigeria's past. Using ideas about collective memory and Gramsci's concept of hegemony, this work shows how political leaders use the past to serve current goals. By taking on the symbols of June 12 and the legacy of M. K. O. Abiola, the Nigerian government turned a history of protest into a story of national unity. This story hides ongoing problems, sidelines other voices in the democratic struggle, and turns a painful event into a celebration of democratic progress. This kind of rewriting history, while giving some recognition to previously ignored stories, has problems like selective remembering, political manipulation and questions about true national healing. It shows that, when the state controls memory, it can be both a way to bring people together and a tool for power and control.

The path from annulment to recognition reveals Nigeria's mixed feelings about democracy, a government still grappling with its authoritarian past, disputed memories, and the politics of forgetting. Real democratic progress requires more than symbolic acts; it needs an open, inclusive look at the past that empowers people, gives all voices a chance, and supports justice and accountability. Finally, this essay calls for a more active and critical way of remembering June 12, one that goes beyond official stories to include the full range of Nigeria's democratic experience. Only then can Democracy Day truly reflect the hopes, struggles and sacrifices that keep shaping the nation's fight for a fair and equal future.

References

1. Adebani, W. (2019). *The End of June 12 as Radical Memory?* In *Democracy in Nigeria: Reflections and Critique*.
2. Assmann, A. (2011). *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*. Cambridge University Press.
3. Ayoade, J. A. A. (2000). The Federal Character Principle and the Search for National Integration. In Amuwo et al. (eds.), *Federalism and Political Restructuring in Nigeria*.
4. Bayart, J.-F. (1993). *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. Longman.
5. Chabal, P. & Daloz, J.-P. (1999). *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. James Currey.
6. Connerton, P. (1989). *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge University Press.
7. Diamond, L. (1995). *Nigeria: The Uncivic Society and Descent into Praetorianism*.
8. Diamond, L., Kirk-Greene, A., & Oyediran, O. (1997). *Transition without End: Nigerian Politics and Civil Society under Babangida*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
9. Falola, T. (2009). *Colonialism and Violence in Nigeria*. Indiana University Press.
10. Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Pantheon Books.
11. Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. International Publishers.
12. Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On Collective Memory*. University of Chicago Press.

13. Ibeanu, O. (2019). Electoral Integrity and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria. *Journal of African Elections*, 18(1), 25-47.
14. Ihonvbere, J. O. (1996). *The Transition to Democratic Governance in Africa: The Role of the Military*.
15. Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*.
16. Nora, P. (1989). Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire. *Representations*, 26, 7-24.
17. Olaniyan, R. (2021). *June 12 and the Re-imagination of Nigerian Democracy*.
18. Olick, J. K., & Robbins, J. (1998). Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 105-140.
19. Oloruntoba, S. (2020). *Reclaiming the Future: Memory, Nationalism and the Politics of History in Africa*.
20. Omotola, J. S. (2010). Elections and Democratic Transition in Nigeria under the Fourth Republic. *African Affairs*, 109(437), 535-553.
21. Osaghae, E. E. (1998). *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence*. Hurst & Company.
22. Trouillot, M.-R. (1995). *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press.