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HISTORY MATTERS

The New Instrumental Turn in Nigerian Historical Scholarship

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Abstract

This essay discusses the contours of what I call a new instrumental turn in Nigerian historical scholarship. It argues that the historical discipline in Nigeria is experiencing a new instrumental turn, which finds expression in several new features of academic history writing, teaching, and programming. Some aspects of this trend hearken back to the original instrumental history of the pioneers of Nigerian and African nationalist history; others represent something new, being responses to novel twenty-first-century anxieties and imperatives of nation-building, development, and the place of humanities knowledge in those aspirations. Unlike old conceptions of instrumentality, this new turn signals a more explicit agenda of problem-solving through historical research. It also entails a rather formulaic embrace of proposals for solutions to problems identified in or through historical research.

Keywords: West Africa; Nigeria; historiography; epistemology; governance; research; local history

When the professional discipline of African history emerged in universities in Ibadan, Nigeria; Dakar, Senegal; and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; and Legon, Ghana from the mid-1950s to the 1960s, one of its defining features was instrumentality. This instrumentality was of a symbolic and political kind, what one might call utilitarian nationalist and pan-African history.[1] African and Africanist pioneers of African academic historical inquiry were unabashedly nationalist. Many of them were emotionally and politically invested in the unfolding anticolonial nationalist struggle and viewed history as a space of activism and political engagement. Some were part of ideological networks that nourished the struggle for independence. Africa's first generation of Western-trained academic historians saw their craft as coextensive with the task of decolonization.

[1]Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Nigerian History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Toyin Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2001), ch. 6; Gregory H. Maddox, "The Dar es Salaam School of African History," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Historiography: Methods and Sources,* ed. Tom Spear (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.314. For a critical commentary on the Africanization of African history see Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia, "The History of Africanization and the Africanization of History," *History in Africa* 33 (2006): 85–100. For an early critique of nationalist and nation-bolstering historiography, see Donald Denoon and Adam Kuper, "Nationalist Historians in Search of a Nation: The 'New Historiography' in Dar es Salaam," *African Affairs* 69, no. 277 (1970): 329–49. Terence Ranger's response to the critique was published in 1971 as "The 'New Historiography' in Dar es Salaam: An Answer," *African Affairs* 70, no. 278 (1971): 50–61.

When independence was won, they recalibrated the task of the Africanist historian into the realm of nation-building.[2] The Ibadan School of History was particularly committed to using history to anchor the essence of an emerging African postcolonial nation. History, they self-consciously argued, was not and could not be a neutral inquiry into the past; instead, it was a tool for nation-building and nation-affirmation. The purpose of history was to point to a positive postcolonial future by exploring a glorious African past concealed or distorted by colonial epistemological and cultural violence. This project is what is now theorized retrospectively as nationalist history. At its core was an instrumental understanding of history and its role in society.

Over the ensuing decades, African and Africanist academic historical knowledge production lost some of the brazen transparency of this original instrumental framing. One reason for this was that the African postcolonial nation-state that nationalist history envisioned rarely materialized, and postcolonial political and economic dysfunction called for a rethinking of the nationalist and pan-African foundations of pioneering works of African history.[3] Postcolonial crisis called for a history less burdened by nationalist instrumental concerns and more sensitive to the complexity of human nature, and of African pasts and presents. Another probable reason for the relative decoupling of history from instrumental nationalist agendas is the proliferation of nonacademic and quasiacademic history—popular histories, community histories, historical memoirs, bureaucratic histories, and official histories, or what Terence Ranger critiques in another context as "patriotic history"—and the entry of nonacademic historians into the terrain of historical reconstruction and contestation.[4] With the saturation of the space of historical knowledge came different concerns and ways of doing history.

Although instrumental history receded, the instrumental understanding of historical knowledge does not seem to have left the practice of history in African universities. In recent decades in Nigeria, there seems to be a resurgence—and an extension—of ideas about what history can do or should do for Nigeria, that is, the idea that academic history should participate in national problem solving. In this essay, I want to advance a simple contention: the historical discipline in Nigeria is experiencing what I call a new instrumental turn. Some aspects of this trend hearken back to the original instrumental history of the pioneers; others represent something new, being responses to novel twenty-first-century anxieties and imperatives of nation-building, development, and the place of humanities knowledge in those aspirations.

Unlike old conceptions of instrumentality, this new turn signals a more explicit agenda of problem-solving through historical research. It also entails a rather formulaic embrace of proposals for solutions to problems identified in or through historical research. At the same time, it is important to state that the new instrumental turn has not completely taken hold over Nigerian history writing, and that pockets of resistance to instrumental historical practice remain in the country's academic historical circles. As the survey data analyzed later in this essay demonstrates, the influence of the new instrumental turn, while discernibly significant, has been uneven across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones.

The analysis below centers on Nigeria. The research and observations that inform it come from Nigeria. Anecdotal accounts suggest that there are iterations and degrees of instrumental historical innovations in other African countries. However, because I have not conducted surveys beyond Nigeria, I am reluctant to extend my observations to the academic historical professions of those

[2]For an illuminating analysis of the continuities and ruptures in Nigerian historiography between the colonial and postcolonial periods, see Sati U. Fwatshak, "Colonial and Postcolonial Historiography of Nigeria," in Falola and Heaton, *Oxford Handbook of Nigerian History,* 82–106.

[3]Arnold Temu and Bonaventure Swai, *Historians and Africanist History: A Critique* (London: Zed Books, 1981).

[4]Terence Ranger, "Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History, and the History of the Nation: The Struggle Over the Past in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004): 215–34. See also Mamadou Diouf, "Des Historiens et des histoires, pour quoi faire? L'Histoire africaine entre l'état et les communautés," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34, no. 2 (2000), 337–74. Diouf analyzes the tension between state-sanctioned national histories and centrifugal historical narratives, which put pressure on academic historians who must navigate and mediate multiple historical productions.

countries. The question of whether the new instrumental turn has continental resonance or whether the pressures that birthed it in Nigeria are present in other continental academic historical circles is thus beyond the scope of this essay.

The Personal-Professional

In the last decade and a half, I, like many Nigerian historians based in Western academic institutions, have been participating in various forms of Nigerian academic life. I have collaborated with Nigeria-based historians in research, archival digitization, workshops, and conferences. Upon request, I have read and reviewed the manuscripts of colleagues based in Nigeria. I mentor graduate students and early-career colleagues in Nigeria through career development seminars, journal publishing guidance, and theory workshops. I have presented conference papers and keynote lectures at Nigerian universities. Finally, and perhaps most instructively, I have served as an external examiner for multiple MA and PhD dissertations in Nigeria.

I know and have interacted with two past presidents of the Historical Society of Nigeria, the preeminent body of professional historians in Nigeria, of which I am a member of the diaspora committee. In the last five years, I have received, on average, three inquiries a month from undergraduate and graduate students in Africa, mostly Nigerian and Ghanaian, who want to enroll in North American doctoral programs. Their correspondence usually comes with a statement of purpose, a research proposal, and a writing sample. These documents are an instructive window into the extent to which the logic of instrumentality, policy relevance, and problem-solving have permeated the historical profession and its pedagogical and training practices in Nigeria.

Taken together, these engagements and interactions have brought me closer to the workings of the academic historical profession in Nigeria in recent decades. They have given me a unique perspective into the evolution and underlying concerns of Nigerian academic history in the twenty-first century. I have come to understand what objectives, anxieties, and imperatives drive the production and disciplining of historical knowledge and historical inquiry in Nigerian academic settings. Although my training as a historian began in Nigeria, my doctoral training was in a North American institution, and I am now affiliated with another North American institution. Observing, from there how academic history is imagined and practiced elsewhere has given me comparative insights into the plurality of academic history. It has also enabled me to bring a critical but sympathetic lens of an "outsider" to the Nigerian historical profession. The overarching takeaway from my multifaceted observations is that Nigerian academic history is suffused with a new instrumental imperative that is partly self-generated and partly the product of external pressure to demonstrate the relevance and utility of history to society. The internal anxieties and external pressures work in symbiosis to catalyze and authorize subtle and not-so-subtle methodological, epistemological, and programmatic shifts toward a renewed and more robust focus on instrumentality.

Instrumentality in Comparative Perspective

The question of instrumentality in history is not an exclusively Nigerian or African preoccupation. While resources for historical research remain disproportionately weighted in favor of Euro-America and against historians working in the Global South, the anxieties of historians in both Africa and Euro-America are more alike than different. In the Western academy, history and the humanities in general have had to justify their relevance to state and nonstate funders. Moreover, the discipline faces growing capitalist and transactional pressures that are depleting enrollment in the history major as students weigh the rising costs and benefits of a history degree.

The historical profession, universities, and history departments in Euro-America have had to rethink and reshape the discipline of history to respond to these concerns. Initiatives such as training for and seminars on alternative historical careers, which the University of Michigan and other

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research universities in the United States have integrated into their curricula, are inspired by the issue of the relevance and rewards of academic history. Clearly, then, the "crisis of relevance," as J. I. Dibua characterizes it, plagues the discipline of history everywhere.[5]

And yet there are subtle differences in how questions regarding the relevance of history are framed, posed, and responded to.

Responses to the crisis in Europe and North America differ somewhat from those in Nigeria, as does their articulation of the anxiety. In the former, the idiom of relevance and personal and familial financial rewards dominate the conversation. In Nigeria, the language is, more broadly, that of national utility and development, although the rhetoric of personal returns on academic historical training has now emerged as another site of contestation. This more capacious framing recalls the instrumental nationalist historical imagination of the late colonial and early postcolonial periods in Africa, but it also departs from it, grounded as it is in the starkly practical ethos of crude instrumentality rather than the highfalutin rhetoric of nationalist ideology. In the United States, the debate on relevance is more specifically focused on the question of how history can inform policy or what kind of history is suited to policymaking. However, the ongoing controversy over how to teach United States history in US schools may suggest the emergence of another arena, the contested connection between history and nationalism.[6]

About a decade ago, two historians, Jo Guldi and David Armitage, wrote *The History Manifesto*, which they pitched as a manual to make history regain its old relevance as an intellectual tool and asset in the hands of policymakers.[7] They recommended that historians move away from short-termism to write on *longue durée* themes that identify and illuminate patterns and trends. This focus, they argue, may help explain complex socioeconomic and political phenomena in the present, enhancing the role of history in public policy regarding major challenges such as inequality and climate change. Guldi and Armitage wanted to promote the production of what they regarded as more usable histories that inform and enrich public debates and contribute to policymaking and ameliorative interventions. They also believed that by embracing this type of history, which they argue used to be the norm, historians would develop the skill and confidence to intervene in public policy conversations, bringing their famed analytical rigor, their ability to manage extensive and disparate datasets, and their capacity for evaluating causality and multifactor phenomena to bear on such debates.

This is a polemical maneuver to move the American historical profession toward something resembling what is going on in the Nigeria historical profession, and to help ease the growing anxieties of relevance in the historical profession and in the humanities more broadly. The reception of the work among historians was both enthusiastic and mixed, with more than a hundred reviews published in multiple languages.[8] While many historians lauded the intervention as necessary and timely, others, such as Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler, faulted the premise of the argument: the claim that, since the late 1960s, academic history dissertations' chronological timelines have shortened. They argued that since the 1960s the average history dissertation in the United States has covered a longer timeline than at any other prior period.[9] The argument for a return to longer-term histories fell flat with several historians because, as some reviewers noted, there had never been a departure from such timelines of historical inquiry, empirically speaking.

[5]J. I. Dibua, "The Idol, Its Worshippers, and the Crisis of Relevance of Historical Scholarship in Nigeria," *History in Africa* 24 (1997): 117.

[6]For an overview of the recent controversy on the teaching of US history in American K-12 classrooms, see Mary-Liz Shaw, "Politics, Pressure, and Poor Sources: History Teachers Have it Tough These Days," *EdSurge*, 7 May 2025, accessed 10 July 2025, https://www.edsurge.com/news/2025-05-07-politics-pressure-and-poor-sources-history-teachers-have-it-tough-these-days.

[7]Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[8]See list of reviews on David Armitage's profile page, accessed 10 July 2025, https://armitage.scholars.harvard.edu/publications/history-manifesto.

[9]Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler, "The History Manifesto: A Critique," *American Historical Review* 120, no. 2 (2015): 530–42.

For our purpose here, the most significant controversy is the authors' central assertion that only *longue durée* histories have the capacity to influence policy, and to demonstrate the policymaking impact and relevance of history, what Mark Koyama describes as the authors' "call for political engagement by historians."[10] Since their call for historians to return to *longue durée* history, with its big dataset and long time span, was made with the explicit goal of reestablishing the relevance of historians and history to policymaking, Cohen and Mandler, and Koyama took the authors to task on that point. The reviewers faulted the authors for pitting historians' quest for policy and public relevance against the alleged policy dominance of economists and other social scientists, whose relevance to policymaking the authors dismiss or subordinate to that of historians. Cohen and Mandler go further. They question the correlation between "the length of time a study covers" and its relevance in the public domain.[11] They critique *The History Manifesto* for ignoring the many ways in which history and historians already perform public functions, and for focusing narrowly and crudely on the nexus of history and public policymaking, on explicit instrumentality.[12]

Guldi's and Armitage's argument did not inaugurate the field of policy history in the Global North. Their intervention merely sought to revive a policy dimension of history they claimed was lost with the alleged departure from long-term histories. *The Journal of Policy History*, a periodical dedicated solely to promoting the intersection of historical research and policy, has been in existence since 1989, and sponsors a biannual conference in conjunction with the Institute for Policy History.[13] Other historical journals such as *Radical History Review, Peace and Change*, and the *Journal of Contemporary History*, to name a few, have instrumental underpinnings and promote historical scholarship of different instrumental and activist hues. What *The History Manifesto* did was to rekindle and mainstream a conversation about the public relevance of history, a conversation that history departments and university administrators were framing narrowly in terms of how to improve dwindling enrollment in the history major and how to place their PhDs beyond the academy.

The reaction to the arguments in *The History Manifesto* was understandably varied. Some historians in the West are suspicious of coupling history to policy insofar as policy is understood as translating to measurable, quantifiable outcomes. They see the discourse of policy significance and impact as a dumbing down of their craft. Others resent having to pander to the utilitarian commodification of historical knowledge that the argument for relevance and utility implies. While *The History Manifesto*'s advocacy for a more publicly engaged academic history enjoyed a largely positive reception, some of the pushbacks against its tethering of history to contemporary policymaking and political problem-solving mitigated its capacity to transform the direction of history writing in Euro-America. The Euro-American historical profession, therefore, never experienced any discernibly new movement toward instrumentalist frames in the wake of the book's publication.

All of this is to state that while in the West there is pressure to make historical knowledge production more publicly relevant, and while there is clearly a receptive audience for historiographical works that embody that pressure, the point is rarely articulated in the explicitly instrumental sense that it is in Nigeria, nor has it garnered the consensus that similar sentiments seem to have attracted in Nigeria.

History faces an identity crisis everywhere, with a subset of that crisis being the anxiety about relevance, but the burdening of history with developmental and explicitly instrumental expectations casts the crisis of the Nigerian historical profession in a different, sharper relief. In Nigeria, academic historical debate, historical inquiry, and the template for undergraduate and graduate history training are now structured by this intensely instrumental logic, with attendant implications for the

[10]Mark Koyama, "A Review of The History Manifesto," SSRN Papers, 24 Feb. 2015, accessed 10 July 2025, https://ssrn.com/abstract=2569191.

[11]Cohen and Mandler, "The History Manifesto: A Critique," 530.

[12]Ibid., 537.

[13]Website, accessed 10 July 2025, https://cai.asu.edu/policyhistory.

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ability of Nigeria-produced historical perspectives to enter into dialogue with non-Nigerian historical discourses in non-instrumental terms.

The Instrumental Factor in Pedagogy, Research, and Programming

When I was researching my book *Colonialism by Proxy* around 2009, I consulted many undergraduate and graduate dissertations and theses in Nigerian university repositories and libraries. At Nasarawa State University, Keffi, the department chair at the time, Professor Aruwa Filaba, made a room full of dissertations available to me. A few years later, I served as an in-person external examiner for several master's and doctoral defenses at Benue State University, Makurdi. Between 2014 and 2016, alongside two North America-based colleagues, I conducted summer theory seminars for advanced graduate students and early-career lecturers at Kwara State University. These endeavors and others gave me a vantage point to closely observe the nature of academic historical training in Nigerian universities, especially its evolution from the time when I was an undergraduate history major at Bayero University, Kano. I was struck by the decidedly sharp turn in the direction of instrumental concerns as underlying motivations and end points of historical inquiry, a fact that is illustrated with data from a survey analyzed later in this essay. In subsequent years, I read many graduate student papers, books, manuscripts, and conference presentations from Nigeria that confirmed my impressions. The trend of instrumental history has persisted, and, compared to the 1950s and 1960s, it has intensified.

When I pick up the work of our colleagues in Nigeria, whether they are students, established professors, or people in between, one thing often stands out. Perhaps because of regulatory and societal pressures that privilege instrumental conceptualizations and the notion of usable knowledge, much of the historical knowledge I encounter in my professional interactions with colleagues and mentees in Nigeria tends to be framed in utilitarian terms.[14] Additionally, I have observed that in undergraduate and graduate dissertations a formulaic expectation of instrumental impact shapes the work, recommended and enforced by supervisors and institutional leaders. Some of the dissertations I consulted or examined during my research trips had a chapter or section variously labeled "policy implications," "policy recommendations," or "recommendations." Others had sections that gestured in the same direction even without the label. When I queried both undergraduate and graduate students about this in various settings ranging from conferences to seminars and thesis defenses, they unanimously stated that they had been told that this format was a policy in their department and that it was strictly enforced. This requirement clearly skews the work, *ab initio*, in the direction of instrumentality. For me, this was instructive since it pointed to the intentionality, if not enforced formality, of the new instrumental turn. It seemed to be both a methodological and philosophical maneuver by Nigerian historians, a gesture that dovetails with what Toyin Falola and Abikal Borah argue is a Nigerian traditional philosophy of history as a utilitarian social practice.[15]

When I began to encounter similar sections, chapters, headings, and subheadings in the works of colleagues teaching in Nigerian universities, it confirmed that this trend had permeated the Nigerian academic historical profession, with exceptions that only demonstrate the point. It was a jarring experience to see, in some cases, an itemized listing of "recommendations" and "solutions" to issues and

[14]This may be a methodological innovation, but as a philosophy of African history it is not new in Nigeria. Several historians who wrote out of Nigeria were already signaling the social uses of history in the 1980s as frustration with nationalist history grew. See, for instance, Bonaventure Swai, *The Use of History: Towards the Sociology of Africanist Historiography* (Zaria, Nigeria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1980).

[15]Toyin Falola, "Trends in Nigerian Historiography," *Transafrican Journal of History* 10 (1981): 97–110; Toyin Falola and Abikal Borah, "African Philosophies of History and Historiography," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, 20 Nov. 2018, accessed 26 Aug. 2024, https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-355. Falola and Borah delineate the ways in which the infusion of African philosophies has shaped Africanist historiography since the advent of African history as an academic discipline. Although they do not make this point explicitly, their reflection raises the possibility that African philosophies of history are more sociologically sensitive, that is, more attuned to the nexus of history and societal regeneration.

questions that, in my mind, ought to have been framed in purely historical terms rather than as problems to be solved. It was unsettling to see questions that my doctoral training told me should have been posed in terms that would generate historiographical insights being presented in the language of utilitarian policy knowledge. In some cases, works were structured in transparently teleological terms designed to produce not fresh insight and new arguments backed by compelling analysis, but "solutions" to be implemented. This struck me as a rather different way of doing history—different both from what I learned in Nigeria as an undergraduate, and what I was later trained as a graduate student to practice.

I was subconsciously reading these texts through the lens of what Falola and Borah critique as an overbearing external philosophy of history, which suffocates African historical imaginations in which history is regarded as central to societal renewal.[16] I critiqued the solutions dimension of the new instrumental turn first in polite and indirect tones at conferences, and then online on my social media platforms. This critique was noted by my colleague and collaborator, Professor Okpeh Okpeh, of the Federal University, Lafia, who was at the time the president of the Historical Society of Nigeria. Agreeing with my critique, Professor Okpeh told me that he too did not see the point of requiring academic historical papers and dissertations to make policy recommendations or offer practical solutions to problems.[17] However, he also stated that this was a result of a dissertation template that Nigeria's National University Commission (NUC), which regulates universities and their curriculums, had recommended to academic departments.

My conversation with Professor Okpeh revealed the external facet of the problem, the regulatory pressure on academic historians to remake their discipline as a solution-generating field of knowledge. In reflecting on the issue, and considering my observations and several conversations I have had with Nigeria-based colleagues, it is clear to me that the commercialization and marketization of higher education under the rubric of neoliberal reforms have had a clear impact on how history and other humanities disciplines are being reimagined, a point that I return to later in this essay. However, some of the pressure is also self-generated and internal to the Nigerian historical profession.

It is clear to me that historians in the country are struggling to redefine the relevance of their field and to curtail the waning interest in the discipline among young university applicants. They seem to have not just succumbed to regulatory pressures toward instrumentalized epistemologies and pedagogies but have also invented a set of new logics and rationales to underpin the production of historical knowledge. The new framings range from the old idea of usable, nationalist pasts to the idea of distilling policy implications from historical analysis to the crudest form of the phenomenon whereby historians proffer solutions and sometimes outline implementation strategies for those solutions. It is not just a different way of doing history, it is also a different relationship with history, one that is rooted in ideas about what history can and should do for the nation and for society, and how the historian should mediate this utilitarian relationship.

A Different Historical Imagination?

Historians in Nigeria are asking different questions in their historical research and using sources somewhat differently than their foreign-based colleagues who are researching Nigerian pasts. This means that the research agendas of Nigeria-based colleagues are shaped by different institutional and epistemological concerns, expectations, and protocols than those informing the work of their counterparts in Europe and North America. Because those of us domiciled in Western institutions face less pressure to skew our research in a utilitarian direction, we tend to produce a more traditional

[16] Falola and Borah, "African Philosophies of History."

[17] Personal communication with Professor Okpeh Ochayi Okpeh, former president, Historical Society of Nigeria, 6, Apr. 2019.

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genre of history that privileges source criticism; the construction of original arguments supported by sound, rigorous analysis; and historiographical framings that situate our work more broadly, extend debates, and invite colleagues to engage our claims. As discussed earlier, there are exceptions that accommodate and celebrate instrumental historical explorations, but unlike in Nigeria, there is no institutional pressure to produce that kind of history. It remains a matter of choice and specialization and is thus not the dominant form of history writing in Euro-America. In the logic of the new instrumental historical paradigm in Nigeria, non-instrumental history lacks a purpose and an object. It is history for history's sake, an idle, purposeless historical inquiry.[18] For many colleagues in Nigeria, it is a luxury of epistemological privilege that only resourced historians in cushy institutional jobs in the West can afford. This is an oversimplified view of the dichotomy, of course, but the dichotomy is real. The more I reflect on the dissonance between the questions I pose in my own research and those that my historian colleagues in Nigeria feel compelled to pose in theirs, the more I see their point and appreciate the validity of their historical philosophy and its manifestation in historical research and writing.

The issue of resource inequality does not need to be belabored. It is real, and it affects the scope and depth of work that historians of Nigeria in and outside Nigeria produce. However, sometimes it is overemphasized and oversimplified, and its nuances are cast aside to create convenient alibis for discrepancies that have roots in other factors. Clearly, as a developing country, Nigeria's educational priority is in the natural sciences and the quantitative social sciences, and not in the humanities. This being the case, and in the context of limited resources, humanities disciplines have had to make themselves "relevant" or perform their relevance to national developmental aspirations in order to be taken seriously and be considered worthy of attention and funding.

There is a similar resource gap between the STEM fields and the humanities in the West, but it is narrower. With comparatively better resources to support research, some of them independent of institutional budgets, historians at Western institutions are able to operate above any pressure to demonstrate relevance and usability. They are able to continue doing history in the traditional format of illuminating the past to explain and clarify the present. This is indeed an epistemological luxury, and is one that, without being dramatized, should be recognized as being compatible with a particular way of practicing history. This model of history-writing has been rendered paradigmatic not by any compelling intrinsic logic, but by the epistemological hegemony of the West. In Nigeria, practitioners must choose between a paradigm that would secure for them critical state resources and local relevance and another that could deny them both but might give their work epistemological cachet beyond the local milieu, and that is itself another claim to relevance. It is a consequential, high-stakes dilemma.

Theory and the Crisis of Relevance

There is another dimension to the dilemma plaguing the Nigerian academic historical profession. Alongside the embrace of ameliorative logic as a foundation for historical inquiry, there is a growing embrace of what Nigerian humanities and humanistic social science scholars call a "theoretical framework." This often manifests itself as a mechanical, predetermined enunciation of their work in theoretical terms. Nigerian historians' embrace of this theoretical trend, regardless of its external catalysts, represents yet another effort to align their practice with popular and mandated markers of relevant scholarship.

Utilizing a relevant theoretical postulation to frame a work of scholarship is not new in Nigerian scholarship, but it has recently become something of an academic fetish, required, enforced, and imposed on most dissertations by university regulators and disciplinary gatekeepers. Any academic

[18]In an early, perspicacious observation, historian Toyin Falola states that in Nigerian vernacular philosophies, "history was conceived and studied not for its own sake but in terms of function and the utilitarian value it offers." Falola, "Trends," 102.

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work that is not spruced up in the formulaic template of a theoretical framework is not taken seriously and is often not approved. This has created a practice in which irrelevant and often outmoded theories are uncritically and haphazardly chosen and imposed on empirical works in a mechanical effort to fulfill the theoretical framework requirement. This has become a stiflingly arbitrary convention that undermines originality and novelty.

Many historical works are theory laden or have theoretical implications, whether declared or undeclared. Most historians recognize the value of engaging critically with relevant theoretical formulations or framing their works to engage with relevant theories. Most historians do not however allow theories to overdetermine their work, or to replace or overshadow sound argumentation, analytical rigor, historiographical contributions, and evidentiary integrity. In the Nigerian iteration of the nexus of theory and history, there seems to be a forced adoption of theories in historical studies that can stand on their own merits without the contrived embellishment of a theoretical framework or the veneration of theories with little or no epistemic or empirical intelligibility in Nigerian or African historical realities. More problematically, most of the theoretical framework sections I have encountered in postgraduate dissertations, article manuscripts, and conference papers written by Nigeria-based colleagues and interlocutors contain neither original theoretical reflection nor critical engagement with existing theories.

In the overwhelming majority of cases, the theoretical framework section adds nothing to the work and is in fact an awkward distraction from it, interrupting its flow and crowding out any original insights. Five years ago, I called attention to how this trend was having a negative effect on humanistic academic inquiry in Nigeria by writing a series of social media posts. Among other things, I argued that it was wrong to make a theoretical framework section mandatory for scholarly work in the humanities and the qualitative social sciences since not all topics of inquiry and modes of analysis lend themselves to theorization and theoretical engagement. Some works, I argued, can stand on their own empirical, analytical, and argumentative merits without wearing the garb of forced theory. I therefore contended that advisers and peer reviewers should not require theorization and theoretical engagement but encourage it on a case-by-case basis as necessary.

My intervention generated debate, critique, pushback, and approving commentary in Nigerian academic circles, including among historians. Many Nigeria-based academics agreed with my position while others disagreed. For the most part, the debate and controversy unfolded unsurprisingly along disciplinary lines. Notably, for many Nigerian historians, my intervention was a relief, a permission to state their own objection to a practice whose entry into and function in their field they could not adequately explain. My posts provided an occasion for many Nigeria-based historians to express their own long-simmering objections to what they saw as the tyranny of arbitrary theoretical requirements. It became clear that the obsession with theory as a framework rather than as a product of sophisticated and elevated thought grounded in sound analysis and research came into Nigerian academic history and adjacent fields from some quantitative and qualitative social science disciplines in which the modeling of human conditions, behaviors, and societal realities as a basis for ameliorative recommendations is the norm.

The debate and my subsequent engagements with many Nigerian historians over my posts revealed a salient point. In accepting a seemingly ubiquitous "theoretical framework" trend, Nigeria-based historians were, perhaps subconsciously, trying to combat perceptions of irrelevance and make themselves and their field look as serious as theory-laden fields. One demonstration of relevance was the performance of theoretical sophistication. Nigeria-based historians embraced a theoretical makeover in order to present their field as a serious discipline concerned with tackling significant existential questions with digestible nuggets of theoretical formulations. In the struggle for the optical and perceptual trappings of relevance, Nigerian historians adopted a theoretical straitjacket that is at variance with how inquiry and reflection in their field work—through contingency rather than behavioral modeling and teleology.

The "Why" and "How" of the New Instrumental Turn

How and why did Nigerian historical scholarship take a new instrumental turn, and what exact shape has this new instrumental history taken? Answering these questions requires a discussion on the history of Nigerian academic history and its evolution into its present state of instrumental primacy. Since its inception as an institutionalized field of academic study in the 1950s, Nigerian history has struggled to define its relevance in relation to the colonial and postcolonial nation.[19] What is the role of history in nation-building? What usable materials can history supply to societies reeling from colonization and embarking on a journey of decolonization and development? These questions assumed different rhetorical forms at different times, but the central motif of relevance remained, provoking many approaches that invoke or gesture in the direction of instrumental logics—the basic idea of what history is good for and what it can do for individuals, communities, and nations.

When the *Ife Journal of History* was founded and domiciled in the history department at the then University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, OAU) in 1993, its editorial note spoke volumes about the intensifying crisis of relevance plaguing the academic historical profession in Nigeria:

> More than at any other time, the discipline of history today in Nigeria is under severe stress. Perplexed by economic crises of immense proportions and dominated by the craze for money and by the politics of the moment, we have become distorted in our orientation and deluded of any deep consciousness of history. We live as if all that matters is today.… Our citizens are routinely treated to dreary lectures on the irrelevance and insignificance of a systematic knowledge of our past.… We seemed determined to go on record as the first nation to make meaningful progress without reference to the accumulated values, experiences, and culture of yesteryears…. The discipline of history is routinely dismissed as dispensable. History which used to be an attractive subject has dropped to the bottom of the ladder of priorities for intending undergraduates. Historians receive little or no regard in a society that is [in] a haste to modernize and that places emphasis solely on science and the acquisition of material wealth.[20]

Articulated in the quoted excerpt is the three-pronged anxiety of academic historical practice in Nigeria. The field, as the editorial note states, has struggled to demonstrate its worth to the twin struggles of nation-building and national economic development. This anxiety congeals to the question of how knowledge of the past, and insights and values distilled from such knowledge, can contribute to these national imperatives. The second anxiety concerns the societal perception of history in a postcolonial environment in which existential and economic priorities privilege instrumental knowledge and marginalize less instrumental ones. Finally, there is an individual dimension to the crisis, namely the ways in which Nigerian undergraduates are relating to history as both a knowledge field and a credentialed discipline of study that is expected to provide a return on the investment of money, time, and effort.

The fact that the *Ife Journal of History* was painting such a gloomy picture for Nigerian academic history in 1993 implies that historical scholarship had been burdened by a set of sociopolitical expectations, and second, that those expectations had not materialized. This lamentation points to the longevity of the crisis of relevance that it articulates.[21] Beginning with the nationalist historiographical

[19]For a survey of the multiple phases and shifts in Nigerian historiography in relation to the evolution of the Nigerian nation, see Abdullahi Mu'azu Saulawa, "A History of Historical Writings in Nigeria since c. 1960 AD," *Savanna: A Journal of the Environmental and Social Sciences* 10, no. 2 (1989): 76–85.

[20]"Editorial Note," *Ife Journal of History* 1 (1993), *i*.

[21]In his survey A. O. Adeoye sums up the "crisis" in Nigerian historiography as a crisis of usability, revolving around the question of what the purpose of academic history is. Adeoye dates this crisis to the earliest phase of Nigerian history. Adeoye, "Understanding the Crisis in Modern Nigerian Historiography," *History in Africa* 19 (1992): 1–11.

moment of the 1950s to the 1960s, this crisis evolved over time as new challenges in postcolonial nation-building emerged, but the anxieties remained, as did the instrumental imaginations it catalyzed.

Nigeria nationalist historiography was produced and nurtured at the University College Ibadan (later University of Ibadan), which was established in 1955 as a campus of the University of London. The history curriculum at the new university was inflected by European and Eurocentric themes, having been designed in conjunction with members of the board of studies in London.[22] As Olutayo Adesina explains, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, newly trained African, African diasporic, and iconoclastic European historians at the university gradually moved away from the Eurocentric curriculum.[23] The historians diversified the methodological corpus of their craft away from the veneration of written sources and toward a range of nonwritten sources and methodologies from some of the social sciences. This eclectic body of sources and methods included archeology, oral traditions, oral performative materials, linguistics, material culture, and others. More crucially, the pioneers moved away from a history focused on the activities of Europeans in Africa. They centered Africans in their new African history. Furthermore, they self-consciously allowed their analysis to be guided by an African nationalist impulse that aimed to critique Eurocentric and colonial frames while highlighting the historical deeds, thoughts, and accomplishments of Africans and Nigerians.[24]

Under this radical revisionist template, colonization was reduced to what J. F. Ade Ajayi calls an "episode," a way of decentering the colonial encounter as the most important organizing event of Nigerian and African history.[25] This deprivileging of colonialism in the thematic and periodic delineation of African history stands in contrast to the current decolonial theoretical re-elevation of the colonial encounter as the most significant and enduring event in African history.[26] However, the move away from colonial determinism toward a history of African experiences, initiatives, and political achievements also came with risks. It amplified political, symbolic, and abstract social themes to the detriment of materialist considerations that might have connected more poignantly to the socioeconomic aspirations and challenges of the postcolony. We will return to this point shortly.

The legacy of the Ibadan nationalist school of history was expansive. The Ibadan school spawned the influential Ibadan History Series, which published several groundbreaking works on Nigerian history. It also overlapped with and contributed to the rapid growth of the Historical Society of Nigeria, which was founded as Nigeria's first academic professional society in 1955, along with its journal, *Tarikh*. The *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* (JHSN) was established in 1956. This transformative impact of the Ibadan School spread to newly established universities in other regional Nigerian and continental academic hubs, where African nationalist themes were given further attention.[27] The subsequent emergence of the Port Harcourt School, the Benin School, and the Nsukka School, among others, across Nigeria was an effort to replicate the Ibadan nationalist historical template of moving

[22]Olutayo C. Adesina, "Teaching History in Twentieth Century Nigeria: The Challenges of Change," *History in Africa* 33 (2006): 20.

[23]Ibid.

[24]This invocation of precolonial African civilization achievements and initiatives was a resurrection of a late nineteenth-century African American and African project that historian Joseph Miller describes as a "highly selective emphasis on monumental achievements comparable in antiquity, size, and military power to what Europeans then celebrated about their own past." Joseph Miller, "Africa and Africa/Africa and History," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 1 (1999): 2–3.

[25]J. F. Ade-Ajayi, "Colonialism: An Episode in African History," in *Colonialism in Africa 1870–1960, Volume 1: The History and Politics of Colonialism 1870–1914,* eds. L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 497–509.

[26]Although not explicitly stated, the Africanist iteration of decolonial studies disavows the nationalist historiographical insistence on regarding colonization as just another episode of African history, no bigger in explanatory power than the events that preceded or came after it.

[27]Toyin Falola and Saheed Aderinto, *Nigeria, Nationalism, and Writing History* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2010); J. D. Omer-Cooper, "The Contribution of the University of Ibadan to the Spread of the Study and Teaching of African History within Africa," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 10, no. 3 (1980): 23–31.

away from Eurocentric perspectives on African history in order to write Nigerians back into Nigerian history as makers and authors of their own subnational histories in the various zones of the country.

Historiographical Blind Spots and the Transformation of Instrumentality

One blind spot of the nationalist historiographical intervention was its failure to critique postcolonial conditions, and its related inability to transcend symbolic themes to address the increasingly important question of economic dysfunction, economic disappointment, inequality, and underdevelopment. The emergence of the Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) school of history in the late 1970s and 1980s, with its Marxian and materialist frames of historical analysis, was an attempt to correct the problem. Historians of the ABU school such as Yusuf Bala Usman stressed a bottom-up approach to history and a class-centered analysis. They looked to history to answer consequential national economic and political questions in the present. Their writings gave prominence to the notion of history being a key to understanding contemporary local and international political economy, economic inequality, underdevelopment, and worsening existential struggles. Even more radically, they articulated the idea that immersion in the class dynamics of history was a potential solution to these problems and questions. For them history was a tool of nation-building and the reclamation of national economic sovereignty.

Revisionist interventions such as the ABU Marxian approach were not a palliative to the crisis of relevance plaguing academic history in Nigeria. They changed the terms for discussing the crisis but did little to assuage the growing feeling that academic historical scholarship could not supply an ameliorative content or blueprint for national or individual postcolonial economic improvement.

SAP and the Renewed Crisis of Relevance

By the late 1980s when the implementation of the structural adjustment program (SAP) had decimated social services, reduced funding to universities, and reorganized academic fields into the crude categories of useful and nonuseful knowledge, the failure of both the nationalist and Marxian schools to rescue academic Nigerian history from the perception of irrelevance was obvious. By hollowing out resources from history and other humanities and humanistic social science disciplines, by triggering the outflow of historians from Nigerian universities, and by instigating a governmental policy shift toward vocational and numerical knowledge deemed usable for employment and national development, the SAP accelerated the decline of academic history as a discipline and compounded the crisis of relevance.[28] The most consequential legacy of the SAP in relation to Nigerian academic history is that it accentuated and dramatized the crisis of relevance, which, in the wake of the reforms, became understood in mercantile and capitalist terms of returns on investment and practical, applied, and problem-solving impact. The SAP-induced focus on economic recovery and sacrificial austerity deprioritized history through the rhetoric of irrelevance. In post-SAP Nigeria, the crisis of relevance and instrumentality manifested in several forms, and seemed so daunting that Dibua observed that "the crisis of relevance that Nigerian historical scholarship is currently facing is so acute that it may not be an exaggeration to say that the discipline of history is being threatened with extinction."[29] Policy- and impact-neutral history attracted little interest among young Nigerians as unemployment increased in the 1990s and 2000s. Concerns about post-university employability drove undergraduates from history as a course of study, and enrollment declined.[30] Academic history was placed in the difficult position of justifying its continuous existence as a curricular staple in Nigerian universities.

[28] Adesina, "Teaching History," 27–31.

[29] Dibua, "The Idol," 117.

[30] For comparative numbers from Nigeria's premier university, the University of Ibadan, see Adesina, "Teaching History," 33.

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As practitioners scrambled to address the crisis, rebranding and recalibration suggested themselves as solutions. The solutions implemented in the 2000s included the nomenclatural reconstitution of history departments and degrees, with several universities doing one of two things. Some changed their name to "Department of History and Strategic Studies." Others renamed themselves as "History and International Studies," and a few preferred "History and Diplomatic Studies." These changes were not just gimmicky cosmetic makeovers to solve the enrollment problem. Significantly, for our argument in this paper, they catalyzed and were accompanied by a corresponding curricular and methodological change from the abstractly narrative to the calculatedly instrumental. Other universities paired history with other fields such as economics, sociology, and international relations in a combined degree as a way of attracting students back to the discipline by assuaging their employability anxieties.[31] As Sola Akinrinade states, only a few history departments, notably those at Obafemi Awolowo University, the University of Ibadan, and Ahmadu Bello University, resisted the new gesture of self-remaking under duress. These schools were outliers, holdouts in a rapidly transforming academic historical landscape. Moreover, as Akinrinade opines further, although these departments resisted nomenclatural change, they joined others in combining their degree offering with other disciplines as a way of appealing to the new instrumental focus and in recognition of the fading draw of history qua history.[32]

The "New" Instrumental Turn

Another response to the crisis of relevance is the ongoing tendency of Nigeria-based historians to gravitate toward presentist historical themes connected to current issues, debates, and problems in the hope that their expertise would be consulted and valued in policy and problem-solving state and private initiatives. This explicit disciplinary maneuver for instrumental relevance and problem-solving valuation represents the latest and arguably the most elaborate phase of the transformation of Nigerian historical scholarship.[33] This is not just an evolution, nor is it just a response to the anxieties of relevance and instrumentality in the context of zero-sum patronage and recognition from the state and regulators. It is part of a radical reimagining of academic history. The transition to instrumental presentism fundamentally interrogates the purpose and logic of historical inquiry and history writing, perhaps as a way of returning to Falola and Borah's idea of the societal regenerative logic in African philosophies of history.[34] This reimagination of the field is ongoing, so my discussion of its facets below is necessarily provisional.

The curricular, methodological, and nomenclatural innovations discussed earlier have been more a product of reflex than of a thoughtful, systemic rethinking. The arena in which the response has been more profound, enduring, and revolutionary has been in the topical range of historical inquiry. Here the focus is on topicality and instrumentality. These two logics do not just shape the content and programmatic practices of the field; they have come to dominate how undergraduate history majors, graduate students, and practitioners understand history and its purpose. The evidence for this is ubiquitous in the Nigerian academic historical space and in its iconographies, optics, and visual artifacts.

[31]This response is similar to what occurred in South Africa in the 2000s. There, history departments were reconstituted and merged with heritage studies as enrollment and interest in history qua history declined, a process that as Jane Carruthers argues was advanced as a project to save historical studies from irrelevance by connecting it to a growing post-apartheid public interest and investment in heritage. Ironically, as she contends, the integration of heritage into academic history further marginalized and threatened academic historical studies and practice. See Jane Carruthers, "Heritage and History," H-AFRICA Forum #2 on H-NET, 20 Oct. 1998.

[32]Sola Akinrinade, "Thoughts on Contemporary Humanities Scholarship in Nigeria," *Africa* 94, no. 5 (2024): 709–15.

[33]It is a new iteration of what Christopher Saunders, in his commentary on nationalist Africanist history, calls the centering of "present concerns." Saunders, "The History of African History," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 5, no. 1 and 2 (1986): 185–89.

[34]Falola and Borah, "African Philosophies of History."

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To cite one example of this phenomenon, the history department of the University of Ibadan has as its motto "Awareness, Reconstruction for Development."[35] This is a clear gesture in the direction of instrumentality, a rejection of the notion that history's sole purpose is awareness and edification. It is a self-conscious insistence on combining the illuminating ("awareness") dimension of history with a reconstructive and developmental purpose—its instrumental dimension. This is not a reinvention of the old, outmoded historical belief in history as a guide to princes and men—yes, men—of power, which dominated many historical imaginations before the emergence of academic history in the nineteenth century.[36] Rather, it is a new way of carving out a space of instrumental relevance for history in a nation suffused with the paradigmatic logic of utility and practicality. Presentism is understood to signal relevance and impact, but it is also a way to demonstrate a relationship between history and development, however defined.

A survey of recent themes of the annual congresses of the Historical Society of Nigeria (Table 1, below) reveals overwhelming evidence that academic historians are consciously working to correct that perception of irrelevance through the embrace of topicality and currency of inquiry. This trend apparently began in the 1990s. As of 1997, Dibua was lamenting the failed efforts to raise money to revive the annual conference of the Historical Society of Nigeria, as well as the failed "attempts to revive the interest of historians by choosing themes that are relevant to the contemporary Nigerian situation."[37] In this essay I focus on the themes of the past nine congresses, which indicate a continuation of this effort to underscore history's contemporary instrumental relevance.

These themes represent an effort by Nigerian historians to answer the lingering question of relevance by fusing historical themes to resonant, presentist, and instrumentalist ones in order to connect the past to present problems and issues. Deliberateness and forethought shaped the wording of these themes, and the resulting thematic constructs betray the struggle of Nigerian historians to demonstrate the relevance of their discipline to contemporary Nigerian issues. There is a conscious project at play here, one that seeks to speak to two audiences simultaneously: an internal audience of historians and would-be historians that needs to be reassured that there remains a place for history and historians in the national conversation on development and nation-building; and an external one of government bureaucrats and politicians who have a prejudiced perception of history as a vanity discipline that has no capacity to serve national utilitarian ends.

As a historian who trained and practices in North America, such jarringly presentist framings are unfamiliar. However, as a Nigerian who is keenly aware of the anxieties and pressures driving these eclectic thematic experimentations, I am compelled to understand rather than dismiss them. As an editor of the flagship journal of the field of African history, I am an enforcer of a Euro-American conception and understanding of history and of the prescriptive processes and protocols that flow from that conceptualization. This is sometimes a frustrating task since it can be misunderstood as a form of gatekeeping underwritten by an obdurate adherence to standards and methods curated in Euro-America without reference to alternative and equally legitimate notions of history writing.

Dissertation Survey Data

Although observational, anecdotal, and institutional evidence supports the contention that academic Nigerian history is undergoing a new phase of instrumentalism, there is need for hard data to both substantiate and nuance it. To this end, I and a team of research assistants designed and conducted a survey of history BA and master's dissertations in public universities across Nigeria's six geopolitical

[35]The motto is displayed on the sign at the front entrance of the Department of History at the University of Ibadan.

[36]A representative example of this is Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Another is Petrarch's *De Viris Illustribus (On Famous Men)*. In Africa the *Epic of Sunjata* represents an African iteration of this kind of history in which history serves as a documentation of the deeds of, and a guide for, great men, history being instrumental only in the political projects of great men.

[37]Dibua, "The Idol," 117.

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Table 1. Annual Congresses of the Historical Society of Nigeria, 2015–24

2015	60th Congress	*The National Experience*
2016	61st Congress	*Nigeria Counts: Issues of National Rebirth*
2017	62nd Congress	*Institutions and Nation-building in Nigeria Since Independence*
2018	63rd Congress	*The Military Factor in Nigerian History Since 1960*
2019	64th Congress	*Building the Nigerian Nation Since 1914: Motions, Movements, and Actors*
2020/21	65th and 66th Congress	*Nigeria @ 60: Trials, Triumphs and Trajectories*
2022	67th Congress	*Historicizing Our Connections as a Nation Since the Precolonial Period*
2023	68th Congress	*Evaluating the Role of History in Addressing Environmental Challenges in Nigeria*
2024	69th Congress	*Historical Perspectives on Water Bodies and the Maritime Domain from Precolonial Times to Present*

zones of Northwest, Northeast, North-Central, Southeast, South-South, and Southwest. Dissertations being one critical area where shifts in historical scholarship are expressed and are discernible, we focused our survey on a mix of undergraduate and MA theses from 2000 to the present.

For the survey, we selected a random sample of one federal or state university from each of the six zones (see Table 2, below). We surveyed 20 dissertations at each university, 10 BAs and 10 MAs, for a total of 120 dissertations. We then posed four questions to guide our survey, namely whether the dissertations have a theoretical framework section, whether they outline challenges and solutions, whether they focus on contemporary and presentist topics and concerns and, finally, whether they state the "policy implications" of their research and/or make policy proposals as part of their conclusions.

We found that 18 dissertations, representing 15 percent of the dataset, had a theoretical framework section. Forty-four dissertations, or 36.6 percent, posed a set of challenges and proposed ameliorative solutions. Eighty-four dissertations, or 70 percent, were written on contemporary topics and focused on presentist themes. Finally, 61 dissertations, representing 50.8 percent of the dissertations surveyed, distilled policy implications and/or policy recommendations from their research in the conclusion (see Table 3, below).

The guiding questions, as framed, collectively interrogate the terrains on which instrumental anxieties, innovations, and discussions are expressed in Nigerian university historical circles.

Two of the data categories, contemporary/presentist focus, and policy implications and recommendations, strongly support the new instrumentalism thesis of this article. A third, the challenges and solutions metric, moderately supports the thesis, with about 37 percent of dissertations framed in this mode.

The weakest of our findings concerns required deployment of a theoretical framework. The statistical correlation between theoretical mandates and history dissertation writing is weak. The impact of the theoretical framework trend in Nigerian humanities scholarship on historical scholarship is smaller than we had expected to find, and there are two possible explanations. One is that the embrace of theory by Nigerian academic historians and history departments was always uneven and informal and remains so, and that the departmental dissertation format requirement regarding it was idiosyncratic, determined largely by adviser preference and dominant departmental scholarly orientation. Another possible explanation is that the practice waned after the Historical Society of Nigeria, under the presidency of Professor Okpeh Ochayi Okpeh, instructed history departments not to make theoretical framework and policy recommendations a requirement.

It should be noted that our findings indicate an uneven adoption of the instrumental innovations and trends highlighted. Indicators of instrumentality were strongest in the North-Central zone, with

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Table 2. Surveyed Universities by Geo-Political Zone

Zone	University Name	Number of Dissertations	BA Theses	MA Theses
Northwest	Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria	20	10	10
Northeast	Gombe State University, Gombe	20	10	10
North-Central	Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyingba	20	10	10
Southeast	Imo State University, Owerri	20	10	10
South-South	University of Benin, Benin City	20	10	10
Southwest	Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko	20	10	10
Total	—	**120**	**60**	**60**

Table 3. Instrumental Presence Across the Dataset

Feature	Number of Dissertations	Percentage (%)
Theoretical Framework Section	18	15.0%
Challenges and Solutions	44	36.7%
Contemporary/Presentist Topics	84	70.0%
Policy Implications/Recommendations	61	50.8%

more than 90 percent of surveyed dissertations containing those indicators in our metric. This is followed by the South-South at 56.4 percent and the Southeast at 51.2 percent. Instrumentality metrics, as defined in this study, are weakest in the Southwest.

We have not established the reason for this regional variation in the prevalence of instrumental history dissertation writing, and this would require further research that is outside the scope of this essay. However, the variance suggests that the Nigerian academic historical profession is diverse, with different regional clusters oriented towards different modes of historical scholarship. It also suggests that the instrumental mode has not permeated the discipline uniformly but has done so to different degrees in different parts of the country. Moreover, the data demonstrates that there remains some resistance to the adoption of the new instrumental model in some parts of the country, notably the Southwest and the Northwest.

This finding negates any understanding of the Nigerian historical profession as a monolith that is uniformly influenced by the same disciplinary concerns and the notion that there is a singular response. That is not the contention of this essay. The point, rather, is to identify, through various data and sources, a growing general trend towards what I call a new instrumental history in Nigerian academic history.

Concluding Remarks

Instrumentality is not new in Nigerian history. Nigerian nationalist history of the 1950s to the 1960s was infused with and informed by instrumental intent and fervor, but this instrumentality was purely political and symbolic since the early African and Africanist historians sought to place history at the service of postcolonial nation builders. The instrumental turn analyzed in this paper in respect to Nigerian history therefore represents a new iteration of an old theme, a new answer to an old question.

Contemporary Nigerian historians are giving several new meanings to the imperative of instrumentality. In doing so, they are transforming the practice of history in the country. However, the current moment, as this essay has analyzed, is a product of a long evolution of Nigerian academic historical practice. This process was mediated by the changing crises and anxieties of nation-building and economic development, and by a realignment of the national economic space toward crudely

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mercantile and capitalist logics. This compelled Nigerian historians to scramble to define a new identity for their craft, one that attempts to answer the new, overarching question of disciplinary relevance. What is the purpose of history writing? What social function should it serve without devolving into a starkly functionalist practice? Should we and can we write histories that inform policymaking and problem-solving? While Guldi and Armitage pose these questions in *The History Manifesto* more directly than Nigerian historians, the latter are similarly challenging the taken-for-granted tenets of the field by questioning established assumptions about what academic history should and should not do.

We have established the infrastructure for producing and disseminating historical knowledge. This includes journals, many book series, and conferences as well as unwritten rules for crafting narratives from sources, developing and holding a historiographical argument, engaging with extant perspectives, and making a clear contribution to a debate or historiographical corpus. History journals such as *The Journal of African History*, of which I am the West Africa editor, are structured to ensure compliance with these rules, and editors are saddled with the responsibility of ensuring this compliance. I have performed this task for more than four years. The more I see a bifurcation between papers submitted by scholars based in Nigeria, which tend to be oriented towards instrumentality, presentism, policy, and problem-solving, and those by scholars based in Euro-America, which tend to more closely observe the journal's prescribed mode of history writing, the less convinced I am that the latter approach is right and the former wrong.

My fellow regional editors have encountered similar submissions from Africa-based colleagues or grappled with similar situations in which they had to reject, without review, papers that were framed too starkly in a politically interventionist, solutions-oriented, and presentist template. We have compared notes as editors and have had soul-searching conversations about our dilemma in enforcing protocols of academic history writing that are shaped by the intellectual luxury of doing history as an illuminating window onto the past rather than as a way of solving problems or improving lived conditions in society. This essay originated in part from those difficult editorial conversations in which we found no easy, straightforward answers but posed questions that the larger Africanist historical profession should confront.

While remaining committed to the methodological givens of academic history writing based on source criticism, argument construction, and the illumination of the past, I am no longer sure that an exclusive investment in history as merely a tool for edification, awareness, and reflection is the only way to practice academic history. I am also not sure whether, in countries such as Nigeria with severely limited resources, competing and urgent priorities, fractious and fragmented national communities, and developmental exigencies, academic history can afford to remain decoupled from and untethered to the imperatives of nation-building, economic development, and problem-solving.

When historians in the Global North say with professional certitude that the point of history is to explain the past in a manner that enables consumers of historical knowledge and society in general to learn the "lesson history," how is this different from the instrumentalist conception of history in Nigeria? If there is a difference, it is not as radical as one might think. The former formulation merely renders instrumentality in abstract and passive terms, while the latter articulates instrumentality in practical terms using more direct idioms and the transitive verbs of actions and policies. This is not so much a difference of how the past is understood as it is one of how understandings of the past are articulated and for what purpose. This divergence does not require that historians in the Global North relinquish the artifices of academic history writing: sources, source criticism, analytical rigor, argumentation, and historiographical contribution. Rather, it encourages them to look beyond these mechanics of academic history in order to reflect more on the greater purpose and logic of history writing, and to embrace the diversity and multiplicity of traditions within academic history. If historians in Africa could benefit from more grounding in the rigors and methodologies of academic history as practiced in the Global North, Africanist historians outside of Africa could be more sensitive to and reflect more on new African conceptions of the purpose and uses of history.

The new instrumental turn in Nigerian history challenges us to sympathetically understand and assess alternative philosophies and practices of history so that we can balance the benefits of history as an abstract epistemology of edification with benefits that can be distilled into nuggets of usable, implementable policy ingredients. In assessing the conception of history coming out of Nigeria, we may subconsciously come to the conclusion that our Nigerian professional interlocutors are sacrificing rigor for instrumental flourish. However, it is worth considering whether that is more a result of our peculiar methodological socialization than of a commitment to rigor in any positivist sense of the term.

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