

A Bird Nation: How the Eagle Became a National Symbol in Nigeria (Posted on Facebook on 03/16/2019)

The Super Eagles, Nigeria's national football team, is participating in the 2019 AFCON, Africa's biggest soccer event taking place in Egypt between June 21 and July 19, after failing to qualify for the last two editions of the championship. During the tournament, Nigerians are expected to temporarily shelve their ethnic and religious, among other socially and historically-constructed identities, as they cheer the national team to victory. They would liken the players' performance to the flying habit of the eagle, the mascot of the team, adopted from the country's coat of arms. We expect angry fans to sarcastically rename the team "Super Chicken"—a low class bird that cannot fly—to register their displeasure of poor performance. In short, the eagle would be used as a mnemonic and as a proxy for agonizing the failure of the national football team and of the nation in general.

But how did the eagle become the most famous animal in Nigerian sport and popular imagination of national progress? In the first place, no generation has a monopoly of interpretation of symbols, especially of animals, because the meaning assigned to living and non-living creatures is traditionally a reflection of human experience at a given period. Today, Nigerians have a simplistic interpretation of the eagle as a flying bird. But on the eve of the nation's independence in 1960, nationalists and local intellectuals saw it as an embodiment of a great country.

The eagle became a national symbol when pioneering cartoonist Akinola Lasekan deployed its main characters (fearlessness, vision, vitality, leadership, and tenacity) to project what Nigeria would become after independence from Britain. Nigeria was expected to be as assertive as the eagle who broke loose from colonial entrapment. The eagle, Lasekan insisted, was more than a flying bird. At independence in 1960, the animal occupied a strategic position in the country's coat of arms. Yet, the eagle holds a transnational place in the conception of national glory across the world. This is why many countries inscribed it on their coat of arms.





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