

Hakurin Kaya Sai Jaki: The Donkey in Nigerian History (Posted on Facebook on 12/22/2018)

Growing up in 1980s Ibadan, I first encountered the donkey (figuratively and literally) in oral, visual, and written texts. In 2003, I saw a live donkey for the first time when I visited northern Nigeria. Regardless of content and context, the animal's core identity as a beast of burden was constant. But Fela Anikulapo Kuti, in his eccentric character, had a pet donkey. Gowon, Fela's pet donkey, reminds one of the uneasy relationship the musical icon had with Nigerian military dictators.

The donkey was the official working animal of colonial capitalism in Nigeria. Its fame traveled far and wide—from the Colonial Office in London to the remotest village in northeastern Nigeria. We often marvel at the massive groundnut pyramids of northern Nigeria and how cash crops fueled the economy of the First Republic (1960-1966), but we rarely consider how they were transported from the farm. The slow pace of motorized transportation in northern Nigeria increased reliance on donkeys, who can transport up to 200 pounds of merchandise over 25 miles a day, on a moderate diet. They were also easy to breed in large quantity. Even the international consumer culture recognized the local utility of the donkey. An advertisement of a bicycle brand in a Nigerian newspaper in the 1950s tried to tarnish the donkey's long-standing reputation, depicting it crumbling under heavy weight. Technology met its match in nature!

Donkeys have not disappeared completely from the economic landscape of northern Nigeria. Just like their ancestors, the 21st century donkeys can be found (even in big cities like Kano) helping humans to carry heavy loads. While the debate about overloading of donkeys shaped the tenor of politics in colonial Nigeria, everyone seems not to worry about the daily experience of this beast today. They remain visible, yet unseen. A collection of 500 Hausa proverbs published in 1966 has an entry that pays tribute to the donkey: Hakurin Kaya Sai Jaki (Only a donkey shows patience under a load).



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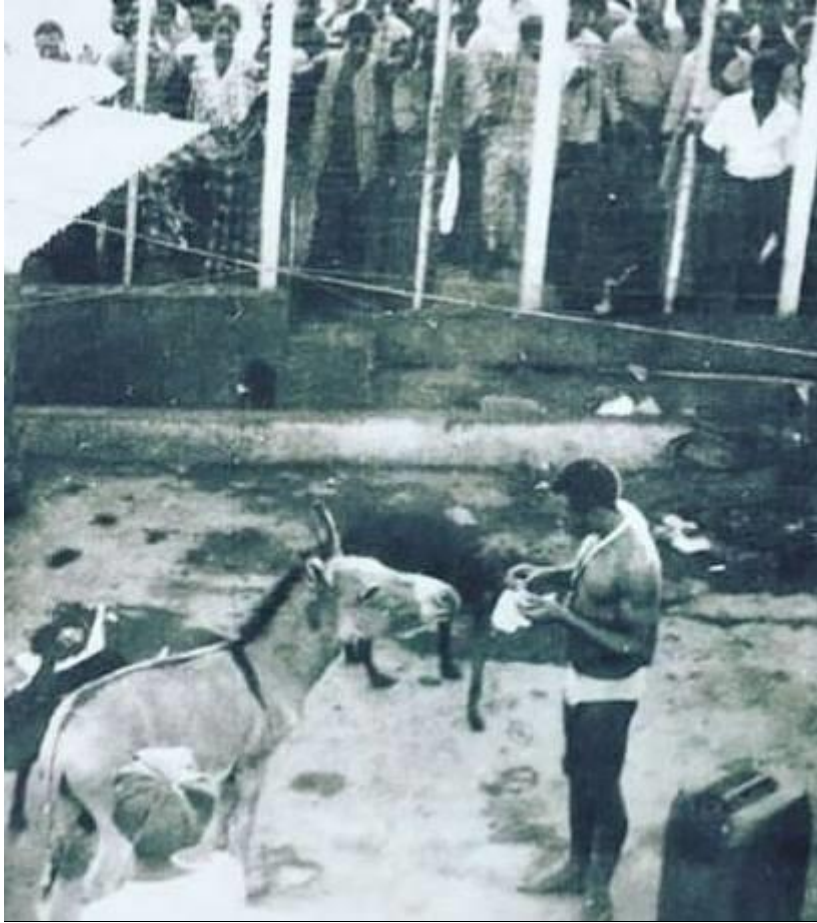


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