

Introducing Animal Nigerians in Time and Space (Posted on Facebook on 10/28/2020)

Recent events in Nigeria further necessitates seeing humans' experience through animals and thinking about animal Nigerians. Why do humans take refuge in animal identity when they reach the bottom of nothingness? Last night, I gave a talk (via Zoom) based on my latest book "Animality and Colonial Subjecthood in Africa." Organized by Nancy Jacobs (Brown University) for the American Society for Environmental History, my talk was in conversation with the works of Bénédicte Boisseron and Yuka Suzuki.

Here is short excerpt:

My lecture begins with the story of Chuku, a dog who survived the Aro expedition, one of the numerous episodes of the British invasion of Igboland in 1901/1902. In mainstream African studies, humans have occupied the central focus as the primary victims of colonial violence, despite the fact that colonialism involved governance of and by nature, including nonhuman creatures like Chuku.

But Chuku's story did not end with the violent take over of his territory by the British. His entire life trajectory would undergo a transmutation after the invasion. In addition to being an Arochukwu dog, he would become a "native," an Igbo, and a Southern Nigerian canine. Each of these identities had significant implication on his position within the colonial society. His symbolic materiality and ownership would also change--from Chuku, the utility dog of an Arochukwu farmer to Chuku, the pet dog of the Larymores, colonial officers who took part in the invasion and "rescued" and adopted him.

But more importantly, Chuku became a colonial subject and by extension, a Southern Nigerian. His entire existence was reconstituted to align with the imperialists' conception of progressive hierarchy within the colonial society. Because he now belonged to a white colonial officer and could understand basic command in English, Chuku became a "civilized" specimen of a "native" dog. Like humans who worked as domestic staff of colonial officers, Chuku was considered to have evolved in the scale of difference and ordering--two of the numerous planks on which colonial objectification stood.

My lecture today is derived from my latest book, entitled "Animality and Colonial Subjecthood in Africa: The Human and Nonhuman Creatures of Nigeria" scheduled to be released in 2021 by the New African Histories Series of Ohio University Press. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first book to fully conceptualize animals as colonial subjects in Africa.... The idea of "animals and other Nigerians" simply suggests that "Nigerianness" (like ethnic categories) transcends the human factor....