

Stop Eating Our Beloved Friends—You Cannibals! By Saheed Aderinto (Posted on Facebook on June 3, 2023)

Hilda Baci, the Nigerian celebrity chef who broke the Guinness World Record for the longest individual cooking last month, came under serious criticism yesterday for cooking dog meat and displaying it on the internet. Many people thought that a global icon, an African woman for that matter, shouldn't be so unkind as to cook and promote the eating of humans' most intimate animal companion. The stereotype of Baci's ethnicity as backward people who eat dogs went hand in glove with contradictory comments about how a global celebrity should behave in the interest of the entire Black race she represents. When racial and gender matters collide, we get advanced complications.

To understand the context of the outcry that heralded Baci's criticism, we need to come to terms with the long history of human's relationship with animals as part of the broader history of emotion. Over centuries, humans have established and changed their emotional connection to things, ideas, places, and people in accordance with major political, economic, etc., transformations. Because each generation writes its own history and tends to frame the "(ab)normal" in isolation of past antecedents, the palaver over dog eating deprives us of a much broader conversation about the roles that dogs played in history. The point is, while the debate over whether dog meat should ever be on a dinner table is important, placing dogs as the center of human history is importanter.

It is within this context that I would like to remember Lekewogbe, a war dog in 19th-century modern southwestern Nigeria. The place of this dog in history was solidified when a praise poem was composed to celebrate his exploit at the Battle of Osogbo in 1840. This battle, won decisively by the Ibadan, is why the whole of Yorubaland didn't come under Jihadist influence. I'm Yoruba today because of the victory of the Battle of Osogbo. Ethnicity, like religion, is an accident of history. In honor of his exploit, I dedicated my latest book on animals to Lekewogbe, among other four animals who shaped Nigerian history.

During one of the events of the Dan David Prize ceremony, I performed Lekewogbe's praise poem. What's most fascinating for me is not the text of the performance, but the process of creating it. The original poem was collected from a local woman in Osogbo in the 1950s by Ulli Beier, a respected European advocate of African culture, and translated and printed in English. I searched fervently for the original Yoruba version of the poem, without success. When linguists and language scholars warn us that a language, text, or literature could go into extinction, we must take them seriously.

Ulli Beier's English translation is accurate but lacks some vital nuances. So, to "reinstall" the printed English version into its presumed original Yoruba version that I couldn't find, I translated it, first into Yoruba, and then transliterated it back to English. So, the English and Yoruba versions printed in my book are my own recreation. Before including the two versions in the book, I gave them to friends (Rasaq Malik Gbolahan, Segun Soetan, Kola Tunbosun, and Seun Williams) to help me read for errors. They made useful contributions.

The point here is that history is not just what we write, learn, and teach—it's also what we do. I didn't recreate and perform Lekewogbe's oriki, just to prove that I can negotiate complex Yoruba literary contours, but to come to terms with a particular way of knowing. Why did the

poem exist in the first place? Hence, my performance is first and foremost an epistemic matter—beyond the literary and the stylistic. Historians are more than consumers of already-composed historical texts. They can also recreate one, from the original version.

Yours Sincerely in History,

Ìşòlá Ojúrábẹ̀màsàá