

The Lions of Igbosere: Royalty, Political Power, and Self-fashioning in Nigeria (Posted on Facebook on 05/14/2019)

I arrived in Nigeria yesterday and went to the Lagos High Court at Igbosere today to lobby for the removal of an embargo placed on colonial court records, dating back to the 1860s. It is neither an architectural mishap nor an aesthetic ignorance that the sculpture of two lions is the first thing you encounter at the entrance of the Lagos High Court, constructed during the colonial era. Artistic and architectural ingenuity are always intentional.

The makers of our collective civilization thought they were superior to wild animals because of their ability to reason. However, they regularly returned to the wild to appropriate some of its elements to mend their own weakness or amplify their ability, or both. In stationing animal symbols and trophies at courts and palaces, both the colonial and indigenous authorities sought extra help in instilling fear, securing loyalty from their subjects, and broadening the terrain of power. In the allegory of violence, the king, like the colonial officer, was a carnivore, capable of mauling an unroyal subject. Symbolically, the dominion of the king extends to the wild. He presides over all creatures, the human and nonhuman (*Oba ba lori oun gbogbo*).

The exclusive appropriation of wild animal trophies by the elites dates back to centuries of African precolonial past. This act also allowed them to conserve nature. What is the point in killing an elephant if you cannot publicly display its ivories? Nigeria lost much of its wildlife between 1890s and 1960s because of population expansion (in addition to liberalization of trophy collecting and guns), and superfluous urbanization and built environment, which set culture against nature. If you have a firearm in colonial Nigeria, you can simply hunt an elephant and sell the ivories to European trading companies for cold cash. It was that easy. For Europeans, wanton killing of wildlife was one of the gains of colonialism, which turned Africans into "poachers" and foreigners into "naturalists" and "conservators."

Non-elites can also acquire the power of the wild to feel cool about themselves. They can compose a praise poem or name with animal epithets (such as *Erinfolami*, *Erinjogunola*, *Erinfolayagi*). When I opened my Facebook account 11 year ago, I adopted the praise name "Ajanlekoko." We all know what would happen to



OLUBADAN OKUNOLA ABASI ALESINLOYE
1930-1946



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dog



messing with



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