

The O'Horse of Lagos: Animal Transportation in Time Perspective (Posted on Facebook on 02/04/2020)

It is no more news that okada and marwa have been prevented from plying some roads in Lagos since yesterday. The breaking news is that some smart Lagosians have been using beach/leisure and polo horses to transport people. The gory image of a dying transport horse, knocked down by a car yesterday, goes beyond the obvious misfortune of the "brute" creature. It is also about technological failure caused by the anachronism of horse transportation in 21st century Lagos. To many, the new O'Horse of Lagos is an innovative way of addressing the hardship imposed by the government. But to a historian familiar with equine history, it is the shadow of the past casting upon the present.

No doubt, horses are outdated means of urban transportation in Nigeria of today. However, they were first-rate urban animals, who occupied a respectable place in elites' construction of cities as achievement of human civilization. Decades before cars became popular, horse carriage or taxi was a valued means of getting around. Distance, location, landscape, and landmarks were defined and described by the movement of the horse. Hence, it is not by accident that a car's strength is measured in horse power. How Lagos, a city within the tsetse fly zone, became the home of horses during the colonial era cannot be divorced from the expansion of veterinary medicine and the railway, which allowed horses to be quickly transported across the country in response to the outbreak of animal disease. Horses were living technology of history. They aided the creation of empires and civilizations in northern Nigeria and were an insignia of royal and elite power in the south. Without them, racing, the official sport, through which colonialism solidified its professed legitimacy, would not have been successful. If horses played an indispensable role in the conquest of Nigeria, they would help in the daily administration of the colony where motor transportation was grossly inadequate. Indeed, horsemanship was a virtue of white imperial masculinity—one colonial officer was prevented from a state dinner with Governor-General James Robertson in 1957 because "he could not trust himself to stay in the saddle."

History matters in everything because it is just the only way to understand anything!

