

BOOK REVIEW

Dr Saheed Aderinto. *Animality and Colonial Subjecthood in Africa: The Human and Nonhuman Creatures of Nigeria*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2022. 340 pp. Photographs. Tables. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$36.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780821424766.

Writing about the history of guns in Nigeria, it was inevitable that Saheed Aderinto would need to explore the topic of hunting. This, in turn, brought further issues about human–animal interactions, the environment, conservation, and their complex historical interplay to his attention. Aderinto realized that “animals, like humans, were colonial subjects in Africa” (xiii). This culminated in his in-depth exploration of the historical importance and place of animals in shaping who we—both human and nonhuman animals—are today. The resulting book is a must-read for anyone interested in learning more about human–animal interactions—both past and present—and their future implications.

One word that sums up this book is multiplicity: multiple animals, multiple voices, multiple identities, multiple sources, multiple disciplines. Aderinto presents eight case studies that address a particular aspect of human–animal interactions and how they have shaped—and have been shaped—by Nigeria’s colonial history. In five of the chapters, he gives detailed attention to cattle, horses, donkeys, and dogs. He explicates the interplay between them, the colonialists, and Nigerians, and its impact on the identity and personhood of all concerned. He looks at hunting and conservation issues, animal imagery, and animal cruelty in the other chapters.

In Chapter One, Aderinto explores the colonialist agenda and resulting activities to try and maximize meat production—especially beef—and the resulting impact and consequences in terms of the environment and economy, political, social and religious relations, and health. Some of the major consequences included changing meat-eating habits, altering attitudes toward livestock, their rightful place (especially in urban settings), and ensuing legislation and prohibitions. Health-wise, moving livestock in order to meet increasing demands for meat also resulted in moving pathogens. Aderinto explains the resulting veterinary practices and attitudes both toward and between colonialists and Nigerians, as well as between human and nonhuman subjects.

In Chapters Two and Eight, Aderinto turns to donkeys (who were essential for ensuring the transport of goods) and horses to explore similar themes. His examination of horse racing and durbars brings political, racial, and gender relations to the fore. The horse’s sporting importance also established its nobility, whilst the donkeys’ role as pack animals helped establish colonial rule.

Both were considered “vital living machines of imperialism” (248). Paradoxically, their services and nobility resulted in different practices to maximize their status and their economic and entertainment value. Whether such practices were considered cruel or not depended on one’s perspective and brought European and Nigerian ideas and practices into conflict. “It is interesting,” Aderinto points out, “how religion, time, and political power shaped what constitutes civilization within the context of animal welfare” (240).


Aderinto also dedicates two chapters to dogs, where he contrasts their positive attributes that primarily result from human–canine collaboration with their negative image as vectors of disease, especially rabies. He explores different dogs’ identities, roles, and lifestyles from colonial and Nigerian perspectives. He explicates how these resulted in controversial tax and licensing legislation, vaccination schemes, and the emergence of the modern dog. Aderinto further demonstrates how human–canine interplay reflected attitudes and relations between colonialists and Nigerians.

In Chapter Four, we learn about Akinola Lasekan, a Nigerian cartoonist whose animal iconography expresses “the overlapping themes of modernity, colonial subjecthood, nationalism, ethnic and party politics, and the idea of nationhood” (121). By examining Lasekan’s artwork, Aderinto demonstrates how the intersubjective nature of human–animal interactions allows us to express experiences and opinions in meaningful ways.

In Chapter Six Aderinto delves into the different perceptions of, and engagements with, wildlife, together with hunting ideologies and practices. These, in turn, helped determine and legitimize sometimes controversial and questionable conservation efforts.

In Chapter Seven Aderinto details the controversial establishment of the NRSPCA (Nigerian Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) and the different factors that helped define cruelty to animals, such as perceived animal agency, human vulnerability, religious practices, ideas about moral responsibility, and degrees of domestication. Domesticated animals were considered “colonial subjects and modern creatures that can feel pain and possess the right not to be cruelly treated” (103); the more civilized the animals, the more they benefitted. This also reflected intra-human relations.

By bringing together multiple relations and dimensions, Aderinto succeeds in giving a holistic overview of human–animal interactions and how they have shaped Nigerian history. The insights he reveals are not only important for Nigeria, but are valid for Africa more generally and beyond. Deepening our understanding about the historical place and role of animals in shaping who we are today should further help us better consider our future relations.

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