

## African Onomastics: Animal Psychology and Zoonyms in the Cognomen of the *Alaafin* of Oyo

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### ARTICLE INFO

Received: July 15, 2019

Accepted: August 17, 2019

Published: September 30, 2019

Volume: 1

Issue: 5

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### KEYWORDS

*Alaafin, Oyo, Nigeria,  
Zonymy, Cognomen, and  
History*

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### ABSTRACT

This study extracts some zoonyms from the cognomen of the *Alaafin* (Owner of the palace) of Oyo, Nigeria to demonstrate their cultural cum extralinguistic consequence among the Yoruba. Traditionally, *Alaafin* is the titular name for a paramount ruler among Oyo people. He is an offspring of Oduduwa and has a plethora of cognomens with which he is praised. They are performed by his royal chanters and queens who commemorate his and forebears' accomplishments through songs, recitations, and chants. Our data comprised ten (10) purposively selected zoonyms from a recording of the *Alaafin's* cognomen. Meanwhile, the Hallidayan contextual models functioned as our theoretical construct. The study is predicated on the transliteration of two (2) vocal performances on the monarch notably, by his royal chanter, and a prominent presenter at the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Oyo. It was concluded that zoonyms are cultural/historical/psychological devices for documenting the monarch's peculiarities and leadership dispositions.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the *Alaafin* of Oyo and his (forebears) championed military campaigns to extend the frontiers and influence of Oyo Empire beyond Southwest Nigeria to the Republic of Benin (Dahomey), Nupe, Abome, Weme, and other parts of Togo. The monarch achieved success due to his well-organised administration which comprised of the *Oyo Mesi* (a council of seven elders who were regarded as King-makers), and the *Ogboni* (a Yoruba secret cult). To his merit, the Oyo Empire recorded an unprecedented stability and relevance from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century through her large armies and cavalries (Law, 1975: 1-15). The Empire thrived economically and agriculturally on diplomatic relations with African and European countries, such as Sudan, Spain, and Portugal.

In addition, the standardisation of a common dialect (Yoruba) and religious observations further boosted the prestige of the Empire. The fall of the Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was caused by lack of de-centralisation of power from Oyo-Ile, the capital city of the Empire to other Yoruba states. Furthermore, there were persistent attacks on the Oyo Empire by the Fulanis in Northern Nigeria. Most importantly, revolt against the *Alaafin* by his provincial and military chiefs in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries further wrecked the central government (Law, 1977: 235).

Notwithstanding the fall of the Oyo Empire, the impact of Oyo and the *Alaafin* on Yoruba and African history cannot be disputed. Meanwhile, zoonyms in the monarch's cognomen have been overlooked by critics such as Johnson (1921); Babalolá (1966); Law (1977), Olátúnjí (1984); Folárànmí (2002); Kövecses (2002); Olateju (2005); Olusola (2006); Sabaria (2013); Owoseni and Olatoye (2014), who have conducted several researches on the history of the Yoruba, history of Oyo, oral tradition of Oyo, and animals in the Yoruba culture. Therefore, the present study, is designed to provoke a dialogue among onomasticians, psychologists, zoologists, biologists, and other related professions on the significance of animal names in *Alaafin's* cognomen.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Onomastics is derived from a Greek word: *onomastikós* or shortened as *ónoma*, 'name.' It is the study of proper names of all kinds and the origins of names (Hajdú 2002: 1). Onomastics has different branches, some of which are: zoonym (animal name), toponym (place name), anthroponym (the proper name for a group of person/persons), hodonym (street name), hydronym (water body name), literary onomastics among several others. Zoonym in the cognomen of the *Alaafin* of Oyo is the focus of this study.

### 2.1 Human-Animal Relations

Human-animal relation dates back to primordial era when individuals named their favourite and domestic pets, and these names were often associated with folk and cultic signs. This naming phenomenon originated from pre-historic tribes who worshipped the images of animal totems. Furthermore, zoonyms (animal names) are widely used as popular expressions in English. Few of such expressions are 'black sheep,' 'he-goat/scapegoat,' 'hot dog,' catwalk, lion share, rat race among several others. The Yoruba also have aphorisms that bear on human-animal relations, one of such is: *Ise eniyan nise eranko* (Human traits are similar to animals').

### 2.2 Animals in Multidisciplinary Studies

Animal names and features have intrigued scholars from oral literature, onomastics, anthropology, psychology, and biology. The prominent of such scholars is Charles Darwin who based his 'evolutionist theory' on the hypothesis that human beings (*Homo-sapiens*) metamorphosed from some kinds of 'homos-' before their eventual transformation. This theory is crux for Morris's (1967: 9) declaration that "human beings are naked apes." The Darwinian theory though widely acclaimed in the biological field is disapproved in some quarters. Kövecses (2002: 72) asserts that human behaviour seems to be metaphorically understood in terms of animal behaviour, which leads to the conceptualisation of 'People are Animals' metaphors that underlie various daily expressions. Both Kövecses (2002) and Morris' (1967) studies emphasise on psychology rather than the cultural perspective to animal names which is the approach employed in the present study.

### 2.3 Animals and the Yoruba Creation Myth

The Yoruba creation myth has it that Olodumare (the Supreme Being) referred Obatala (the Arch-divinity god) to the earth with a mystical rooster and sand stored in a snail shell. He was directed to pour the sand on the watery surface of the earth to solidify it, and also use a rooster to spread the soil. Similarly, the Bible describes how God formed man and called forth other living creatures from the earth. The above accounts affirms that human beings have always share relation with animals though, they are esteemed as 'higher animals.'

### 2.4 Animals and African Culture

Olusola (2006: 155-172) categorised animals by their habitat and physiological traits. He opines further that Yoruba animal kingdom consist: *eran omi* (aquatic, sea or water animals), *eran ile* (land animals), *eran afayafa* (reptiles), *eran elese meji* (bipeds), *eran elese merin* (quadrupeds), *eye* (birds), *eku* (rodents), *eran ile* (domesticated animals), *eran igbe* (wild animals) (Olusola 2006: 156). Among animals considered sacred is *adie irana* (the fowl that clears the path), it is prescribed for rituals and buried alongside the corpse of a prominent member of the occult. This sacred fowl expose the strict religious and metaphysical implications of some animals in the Yoruba cosmos.

Also, some other animals are granted 'divine' rights and revered among the Yoruba people. There is a myth on *Oya*, a Yoruba African goddess who had contact with buffalos; therefore; it is exempted as a game among the Yoruba (Olusola 2006: 157-158). This fact validates the Yoruba belief in reincarnation that is, the transmigration of human spirits into the bodies of animals: insects, birds, goats, deer, etc. In this respect, animals, as well as human beings, are significant within the Yoruba culture, particularly animals used as appeasements for the gods. Therefore, animals generally, receive meaningful names/panegyrics like human beings in the Yoruba cultural milieu.

Winneba tribe in the Central Region of Ghana celebrates the *Aboakyere* festival. The name consists of two morphemes: *aboa*, 'animal' and *kyere*, 'to catch.' It is a festival where two different groups hunt for a live deer. The first group to catch it will run home to show the deer to the chief, thus, wins the game for the year, and thereafter, the leader will step on the deer three times (Opoku 1970). Unlike Opoku (1970), Olusola (2006: 155-172) goes a step further on African beliefs on animals by expounding 'ontological perceptions' of Yoruba on animals, which he classifies into religious, traditional, economic (food and hunting), and human-animal relations.

## 2.5 Animals in the African Oral Poetry

Oral poetry is a resourceful pool to investigate Yorùbá animal names (zoonyms) as exemplified in the study. Hunters in Yoruba communities are fond of compiling their observations/experiences on animals while hunting. These hunters are spurred by aesthetic and rhythmic impulses, it is, therefore, common to discover that Yorùbá oral poetic genres have diversities, such as *Ijálá* (the Yorùbá hunters' poem), *oríkì* (the Yorùbá praise poetry) and *ese-ifá* (the Yorùbá Ifá divination poetry), salutations to animals (Olusola 2006: 159).

In such poetic compositions, their admiration and love for the animals are expressed, they also detail animal features that have been observed. The *Ijálá* chant below delineates on elephant (*erin*), which is saluted for its strength, awe-inspiring gait, and costliness of its tusks, skin, and meat:

*Erin lábá-owó, erin abikúnlè pelemomo* (Babalolá 1966: 93, line 1).

'O elephant pouch-filled with money, O' monstrous elephant whose shape descends like a mountain.

Apart from the Yorùbá hunters' poem, the largest concentration of verbal salute to animals is encoded in *oríkì*, which according to Olátúnjí (1984: 67), is the most prominent of Yorùbá oral poetic genres. Cognomen (*oríkì*) is a collection of time-worn and deep-rooted praise poetries as well as animal metaphors. It explicitly features animal traits such as, physiognomies, feeding, sleeping, movement or pace, appearance, and other endearing features which arouse hunters' interest. Some of these features are ascribed to the *Alaafin*, as it would be uncovered in the present study.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The data was analysed from both historical and situational contexts which were used to disambiguate the ten animal names within the socio-cultural milieu of the Oyo people in Nigeria, while the primary research strategy is oral interviews. This is so because animal names are communicative measures among the Yoruba in southwest Nigeria. By installing animal qualities in the monarch's cognomen, they evoke potent images (signs) and associations which exceed the conventional description. Interviews were conducted with Adesina Adejare, a presenter at Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) Oyo, skilled at reciting the cognomen of the *Alaafin* of Oyo and Mayowa Ayolo, the royal chanter/bard (*Akewi*) to the incumbent monarch. The interviews transcribed from Yoruba into English language formed the foundation for our data analysis.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

| S/N | Animals/ Scientific Names              | Yoruba Animal Names  | Qualities             |
|-----|--|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1.  | Elephant/ <i>Loxodonta</i>             | <i>Erin/ Àjànàkú</i> | Size                  |
| 2.  | Lion/ <i>Panthera</i>                  | <i>Kinnùún</i>       | Strength              |
| 3.  | Ostrich/ <i>Struthio camelus</i>       | <i>Ògòngò</i>        | Speed, Pride, Beauty  |
| 4.  | Horse/ <i>Equus caballus</i>           | <i>Esin</i>          | Magnificence, Warfare |
| 5.  | Mamba/ <i>Dendroaspis</i>              | <i>Sebe</i>          | Swift/Noxious         |
| 6.  | Leopard/ <i>Panthera pardus</i>        | <i>Amotekun</i>      | Agility               |
| 7.  | Vulture/ <i>Aegypius monachus</i>      | <i>Igun</i>          | Sacredness            |
| 8.  | Cat/ <i>Felis catus</i>                | <i>Ologinni</i>      | Fearsome              |
| 9.  | Nile rat/ <i>Arvicanthis niloticus</i> | <i>Emo</i>           | Sneaky                |
| 10. | Rooster/ <i>Gallus domesticus</i>      | <i>Akuko</i>         | Timeliness            |

Elephant/*Àjànàkú*

"*Àjànàkú kò ni èkàn,*

*Oba tí yòd mú erin so kò tî je*

The elephant cannot be fettered;

the king that will domesticate the elephant has not been

enthroned

(Ayolo, 2011).

The elephant is an animal metaphor that describes size, economic status, and scope of influence of the monarch. The above excerpt indicates that the king is powerful and cannot be subdued by any authority or force.

Lion/*Kinnùún*

*Kinnìún l'oba eranko*

The lion is king among animals

The lion is another animal metaphor that describes the power, authority, and ferociousness of the monarch. The above excerpt equates the animal qualities with the leadership position of the king, who is revered among the Yoruba.

Ostrich/ *Ògòngò*

*Aloko Lawani, boku lopo ode ogongo*

The owner of Lawani farm, the one who hunts ostriches (Ayolo, 2011)

Ostrich is associated with leadership, pride, and beauty. *Alaafin's* queens often eulogises him as thus, *Ògòngò baba eye* 'Ostrich, the queen among birds.' Ostriches are considered unique among birds because of their towering height, speed, elongated neck, long legs, bright feathers and manner of laying eggs. However, the above excerpt describes the monarch as a brave and courageous hunter/warrior. During pre-historic times, kings were selected based on their bravery and fighting prowess.

Horse/*Esin*

*Bí ó wo dò, ariwo esin esin*

When he enters the river, his horses cause commotion,

*Bí ó gòkè odò, eruku esin*

When he climbs out, the horses raise the dust,

*ó fesè esin somi rùkú rùkú rùkú*

He stirs the river violently with his horses' hoofs (Ayolo, 2011).

The horse is another animal metaphor that denotes magnificence, militancy, and courage of Oyo monarchs/princes. During the pre-historic era, soldiers fought on horses especially, kings and warlords and their cognomens were instrumental to their victory as they are spurred to achieving victory on the battlefield. The horse, as deployed in the above excerpt, reveals the monarch as being famous and an attraction for public glee. Kings and princes ride on horses in the pre-historic era in Yorubaland. Thus, the animal differentiates royals from commoners.

Leopard/*Ekun*

*"...erin k'owo ija lori, ekun baba Timi ..."*

the elephant reverence the leopard, the father of Timi

*Alaafin, ekun bu, a sa*

*Alaafin*, growls like a leopard and people ran.

The leopard is an animal known for its ferocity, agility and hunting prowess. There is a myth on Oranmiyan, *Alaafin* Sango's father who left Torosi, his pregnant wife at home before he left for a battle. And while she was in labour, and the absence of her husband, the woman, died while delivering Sango (the fourth and only defied monarch of Oyo). The baby was consequently, thrown into the bush where he coincidentally, was nursed alongside the cubs of the leopard for three days. Oranmiyan later returned from the war front the third day to retrieve his son, Sango and a cub. Oyo monarchs since then are eulogised as *Omo ekun*, 'offspring of the leopard.' The two excerpts above buttress the personality of the king as someone ruthless and terrifying.

Vulture/*Igun*

*Bi omo abile ebe idile Lagbosa je,*

Inquire from children born in Lagbosa's home,

*Omo kekee won dasa kolo,*

that is, infants who are still developing

*Kolo bi igun lo bale*

if it was truly the vulture that stooped (Ayolo, 2011).

The Yoruba have complicated taboos and myths about some animals, especially vulture. It is an animal used for rituals and sacrifices. The Yoruba have restrictions such as disruption of animals' sexual intercourse, prohibitions against killing or eating sacred animals like vultures, ground hornbills, and parrots (Olusola 2005: 156). One of the Yoruba myths claimed that the vulture carried appeasement to the *Olodumare* ('the supreme being') in the sky on behalf of other animals to avert a draught. However, while it was returning, there was a torrential downpour of rain, and there was no shelter for it to hide. As a result, the vulture's head became bald because it was severely beaten by the storm. Thus, the above excerpt supports the notion of the sacredness of animal.

Cat and Rodent/*Ologinni-Ekute ile*

*Ekute ile o mo iwon ara re,*

The homestead rat does not remember its position,

*O ni lati ojo ti ologinni ti bimo,*

It says since the cat gave birth,

*Ohun o tii lo ki,*

It has not visited (Ayolo, 2011)

Cats and rodents are age-long foes; thus, cat in the above excerpt denotes the *Alaafin* while the rat denotes forces against the monarch. The cat in the poem describes the sovereignty of the ruler who evokes fear and intimidation in his adversaries that is, the rat.

Mamba/*Sebe*

*Oworuwo sebe ni layiwola* 'Layiwola is a fast-moving mamba (Adesiyani, 2011)

The animal metaphor in the above excerpt describes the monarch as being offensive, fast, and tactical. He is courageous and one who dares his adversaries.

Nile rat/*Eemo*

*Ako eemo ti b'oloko paala* The male rat that shares the farm with farmers (Adesiyani, 2011)

The animal metaphor in the above excerpt indicates that the monarch is competitive, smart, and disastrous. Rats upset peasant farmers when they plague and destroy their crops such as maize, beans, millet, etc.

Rooster/*Akuko*

*O se kan rigidi,*

*Ti n ji ko bi akuko idaji,*

He is insolent

like a rooster that crows in the wee morning (Ayolo, 2011).

The animal metaphor in the above excerpt indicates that the monarch is audacious and challenging like a rooster. Traditionally, the crow of a rooster is used to calculate hour(time) among the Yoruba.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Findings indicated that zoonyms in the monarch's cognomen serve descriptive and attributive purposes. In this regard, four out of the ten selected zoonyms described the king as being vehement, three described his splendour, and the other three defined his uniqueness and intelligence. Thus, the ruler possess both mystical and material attributes that unveiled his personality, position, power, leadership, authority, pride, splendour valour, sacredness, and intelligence. The above are few among several traits of the *Alaafin* of Oyo (and his forebears), and they distinguish him from the league of Yoruba monarchs. On this premise, the present study presents an opportunity for further discourses on other aspects of the cognomen of the Oyo monarch.

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