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## Animal Representations in Nigerian Art: A Review of Roles, Significance, and Aesthetics

### Nijerya Sanatında Hayvan Temsilleri: Roller, Önem ve Estetik Üzerine Bir İnceleme

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#### Abstract

The paper explores literature, as well as Nigeria's national museum's content on the use of animal forms as elements and subjects in traditional Nigerian art from prehistoric to the contemporary time. It identifies the roles, and significance of animals to mankind, as well as appraises their aesthetic value in Visual Art. The paper dwells on Nigerian Indigenous tales associated with animals associated with certain Nigerian cultures such as snakes, lizards and crocodiles among others. Other data was sourced from books, journal articles, pictorial images online, as well as museum's documentations online. Data was qualitatively analysed using art historian methods to descriptively present the data. The study identifies animals as important companions of man; most animals serve as food sources, while some typifies human characters. The study concluded that, animal representations in art were born out of love and regard for them. Nevertheless, they have significantly contributed to the visual aesthetics of the past and present cultures, and therefore need to be preserved for future generations to learn from and also to adopt them for art pieces.

**Keywords:** Animal, representation, visual art, aesthetic, Nigerian art.

**Academical Disciplines/fields:** Fine art, museology.

#### Özet

Makale, Nijerya ulusal müzesi'nin, tarih öncesinden çağdaş zamana kadar geleneksel Nijerya sanatında hayvan formlarının unsur ve konu olarak kullanımına ilişkin içeriğinin yanı sıra edebiyatı da araştırdı. Hayvanların insanlık için rollerini ve önemini belirledi ve Görsel Sanattaki estetik değerlerini değerlendirdi. Makale, toplumdaki diğerlerinin yanı sıra yılanlar, kertenkeleler ve timsahlar gibi belirli Nijerya kültürleriyle ilişkili çoğu hayvanla ilişkili Nijeryalı Yerli masallara odaklandı. Diğer veri bilgileri çevrimiçi kitaplardan, dergi makalelerinden, resimsel görüntülerden ve müzenin belgelerinin çevrimiçi olarak yeniden kullanılmasından elde edildi. Veriler, verileri tanımlayıcı bir şekilde sunmak için sanat tarihçisi yöntemi kullanılarak niteliksel olarak analiz edildi. Çalışma, hayvanları insanın önemli arkadaşı olarak tanımladı; Çoğu hayvan besin kaynağı olarak hizmet ederken, bazıları insan karakterlerini simgeliyor. Çalışma, sanattaki hayvan temsillerinin onlara olan sevgi ve saygıdan doğduğu sonucuna varmıştır. Bununla birlikte, geçmiş ve şimdiki kültürlerin görsel estetiğine olumlu bir şekilde önemli ölçüde katkıda bulunmuşlardır ve bu nedenle gelecek neslin onlardan öğrenmesi ve bunları sanat eserleri için benimsemesi için korunması gerekmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hayvan, temsil, görsel sanat, estetik, Nijerya sanatı.

**Akademik Disiplin(ler)/alan(lar):** Güzel sanatlar, müzecilik.

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## 1. Introduction

Animals play significant roles in the environment complimenting the existence of human beings on earth. Some animals are wild in the forests while some are mild and co-habit the built environment with human beings. Animals serve as food for man and also used for other purposes such as transportation and security among others. According to Oyinloye (2015, p. 20), artists in different civilizations have taken interest in representing these animals as vehicles of expression to communicate their importance to man and society at large.

The use of animals in painting started as far as the paleolithic period, 25000BCE when animals were painted on caves (Honour & Fleming, 2005). According to Loftus (1979), Sahara was a huge fertile parkland and well-watered. It was teeming with games such as elephants, buffalos, hippopotamus, deers and people also lived there, the Sahara desert eventually started to dry up and inhabitants were forced to move north and south of the desert. Therefore, the extant lives of people were recorded as rock paintings and engravings.

There records of animal paintings in West Africa on rocks which are by extension from North African and the Sahara. According to Adepegba (1995), Susan (1960) and Fagg (1957) cattles were the dominant representations in Northern Nigeria at Birnin Kudu, this included both short and long-horned cattles while representation of antelopes were dominant at Geji. The representation of animals by indogenous Nigerian people was a mark of honour and respect for the animals they interacted with (Oyinloye, 2015).

This paper explores the use of animal representation from the cave wall and rock painting and also use of animal representationns for sculptural art pieces in some selected locations in Nigeria. Image 1 and 2 are examples of Nigerian tribal arts with animal representation. Image 1 depicts a yoruba warrior on a bull. The tribal marks on the warrior links him to the Yoruba tribe and the bull is identified as an animal for warfare. Image 2 depicts a Benin royalty riding a horse. The staff and ornaments used by the rider shows royalty. This suggests that the use of horse in Benin kingdom is linked to royalty.



**Image 1.** Yoruba cavalier art, ca. 1950.



**Image 2.** *Benin equestrian figure, ca. 19th Century*

## 2. Methodology

Review research methods were adopted for this research using secondary data collection approach. Existing literatures relevant to the topic were carefully reviewed and discussed. Data was also collected from the National museum, onikan, and also some online museum resources. The literatures reviewed were carefully selected based on the originality of their contents and relevance to the study. This research is historical and the data collected was analyzed using descriptive method of analysis. The research focused on the use of animals representations in Nigerian art. The study described the role and significance of art in some communities notable for animal representation in art such as the Benin kingdom in Southernn Nigeria and Birnin Kudu in Northern Nigeria.

## 3. Literary Evidence of Animal Representations in Art

The stone-age period had its debut artistic appearance in 25,000 BCE. The remaining art works from this period are small carvings on bone or stone and paintings on caves where animals were painted on the cave walls, the pictures are abstract as well as naturalistic (Mbahi, 2019, p. 19). According to Loftus (1979) the Sahara was teeming with games such as elephant, hippopotamus, buffalo, and deer and different animals in the past. It was when Sahara began to dry up, that people moved north or south of the Sahara desert. The animals' environment and social life of the people were recorded on the rock as painting and engravings which made anthropologists and historians got to be aware of human existence in that area. Image 3 shows an example of Sahara rock art.

Accordingn to Rhotert (1970, p. 125) the emphases of art historical work have been upon documentation, visual recording and upon periodization, and characterization of art historical periods. Four major periods have been identified with dominant animal types.



**Image 3.** *Example of saharan rock art, ca. 5000 BC*

### **3.1. Bubalus Period (Period of the Hunters) 8/9000-3000 B.C. (Pre-and Early Neolithic)**

Art of this period is found throughout the central Saharan Sites, and dates from a time when Saharan was not a desert. It is characterized by representation of babulus (a kind of enormous buffalo, now extinct), elephants, lions, giraffes, rhinoceros, crocodiles and ostrich among others. This period also depicted humans, together with weapons including clubs, and bows and arrows. These pictures are almost exclusively engravings, outline drawings struck on ground into the easily-worked sandstone (Gillon, 1984). The animals were presented naturalistically and usually in profile. Figure, animal, and human are usually large, and frequently stand alone. The treatment is essentially plain, and the effect, austere (Rhotert, 1970). According to Rhotert (1970, p.126), the pictures from this period are almost always on rocks freely exposed to sunlight, and usually in outstanding and beautiful locations for instance on isolated smooth faced boulders. In such places, pictures are often engraved on top of one another, producing, sometimes, a multitude of lines. In Rhotert's opinion "this would seem to suggest that the *sacred* spot enjoyed some special significance, and that act of making the drawings was more important than the result"

### **3.2. Cattle/Ox Period (Period of the Cattle-Rearers) 3500–.1500 B.C. (Middle Neolithic)**

Rhotert (1970, p.127) noted that there are a vast number of pictures from this period. Representations are not only herds of cattle, dogs, sheep, and goats, but also rearers with their weapons and modes of adornment. The classical period of cattle pictures has been the best ever recorded from Tassili. In this period captured entire herd with their owners or herdsman armed with bows or sticks. Figures were usually depicted in lively movement or active state. The bodies of the cattle are usually piebald, and the udder is often very clearly marked which suggests that these animals are milked.

### **3.3. Horse Period (Period of Herdsmen with Horses and Carts/Chariots) 1200-700B.C. (Late Neolithic and Proto-Historic)**

According to Rhotert (1970, p.130), this period has been sub-divided into three:

#### **i. Chariot sub-period**

Images from this sub-period are typically small, around 25-50cm in height. Represented, outstandingly from Tassili, are two-wheeled carts, rather like Roman battle chariots, drawn by two or more horses at full gallop. This sub-period also showcased pictorial representations of spears, shields, and latter daggers carried on the upper arms and also wild animals' features.

#### **ii. Horsemen sub-period**

The paintings of single horses with riders characterized this period.

#### **iii. Horse and camel sub-period**

This period is transitional to the Camel period, and probably coincided with the introduction of the camel into the Sahara.



### 3.4. Camel/Dromedary Period (Historic)

The desiccation of the Sahara, clearly evidenced since around 3,000 BC, was now advanced and overgrazing had accelerated the destruction of plant cover. Camels were imported from south-west Asia towards the end of the millennium. It was used for transportation between different settlements. The great caravan routes came into being and with them a camel-based nomadic life, supported principally by the exchange of a great variety of merchandise in the oases as seen in Image 4.



**Image 4.** Saharan rock art during horse and camel period, ca. 1650 BC

## 4. Representation of Animals in Nigeria Art

According to Fagg (1957), Sussan (1960), and Adepegba (1995), animals' representation is the dominant subject of paintings in Birnin Kudu. Birnin Kudu is a town located in Jigawa state, Northern Nigeria. Birnin Kudu is an old historic city renowned for heavy presence of rocks and rock paintings with animal representations that dates back to centuries before the conolization of Northerrn Nigeria. However, it is difficult to tell of the particular species of animals that are being represented. This is as a result of mutilated figures beyond recognition, which some are not identifiable. The rock art at Birnin Kudu, Jigawa shows images of animals such as sheep, goat and cattle, and also geometric signs as seen in figure 5. These representations are also assumed to be directly related with some shamanic practices. Some of these rock sites served the ritual and ancestral purposes and till today, some communities still refer to these sites as sacred. In Dutsen Mesa settlement, the images on the rocks represent stylized domesticated cattle that have now gone into extinction in Nigeria. At Yawozo and Dutsen Atiye cave, circular caves adorn the top of the rock. Paintings on the rocks are representations of cattle and geometric symbols, and also handprints colouring pigments.

Other pictures of the art, show different types of animals which were also depicted on the rock surfaces. Both short and long honour cattle are dominantly represented. At Geji, antelope was represented. It is assumed that the Marghi who ones once lived at the cliff of Mandara hill in the north-eastern part of Nigeria must have done the painting, because they still practice rock paintings up till date. Presently, paintings are still being made as part of a ritual which has been described as an initiation rite, betrothal or a preliminary marriage (Vaughan, 1962). It is the rite of Mba people, an annual religious ceremony for every male at about the age of seventeen. The initiates, who are intending husbands gather on the rock at the outskirts of the village, each initiate is accompanied by a younger who does the painting to serve as records of the individuals' fulfillment of the rite (Mbahi, 2019). The pigment for the paintings is the same as the cosmetics, especially smeared on the painter's body for the occasion, and the paintings which range in sizes from three to over eighteen inches are stick representations of different subjects, including names of individuals written by literate participants (Mbahi, 2019). This is shown in Image 5. History has it that, animals have been a source of inspiration to the Nigerian traditional artists' right from the period of cave dwellers who produced most wall paintings and engravings (Mbahi, 2019).



**Image 5.** Example of Nigerian art at Birnin Kudu rock art centre, ca. 1950-1955

#### **4.1. Reason for the Use of Animals as Visual Representation**

Animals have been observed to be companion of man in the rural life setting and growth, to the belief system in myths, legends, even to the contemporary time. The earliest composition of art forms includes human and animals as subject-matter (Anthony, 2015). In the pre-historic art period, animals served as food and were also treated as sacred beings. Animals have always being a major element of art in almost all cultures. During the renaissance period, the use of animal representation in painting was played down on and human subject was focused on, animal representations however reemerged in the eighteenth century by artists like Stubbs, that focused on animal *portraits* which became part of the Romantic artistic vocabulary with artists like Delacroix and Gericault (Anthony, 2015). Animal representation in painting also played a major role in the development of modernism.

Animals are symbolic to different people and communities. They are frequently used by artists to represent gods, power and the super-natural. Animals in the Nigerian art represent spirits that bring power to the important people. Right from the early rock art period to the contemporary media of visual art, animals have been used as symbol of leadership role by people, to tell the history and moral value of ancestors in various communities in Nigeria. The Nigerian traditional people from the past culture relied on the environment, vegetation and animals for their survival. They had great insight into different animals' species, their characters, and skills, as well as had respect, and reverence for some of them whom they are conversant with (Tambiah, 1969). Therefore, animals became major subject-matter for Nigerian artists in their visual representations. Renditions of animals in paintings, sculptures and textiles became a way that expressed their relationship with human beings, or sometimes symbolized certain belief of a people, tribe or culture of a place (Tambiah, 1969). For instance, wild lions are known for their courage and royalty; while an elephant is associated with strength and power. Therefore, artists in the ancient time tend to associate such animals with brave kings or warriors, as a true nature of their characters (Eyo, 1980).

The use of animals in the creative works in Nigeria is in a way to reinforce the strong cultural roots, and importance of art to the society. The idea behind it is to further offer the viewer a leverage to take a deeper look at the creative indices in order to understand the message of the artists. For example, the Nupe traditional wood carvers depict animals like snake, sheep, giraffe, lizard, crocodile, and spider among others to visually communicate the relationship between people and animal peculiar to their environment. This is the essence of reptile animals dominating their creative works. According to Oyinloye (2015) the significance of reptile's motif in the Nupe panels is attached to the belief that Nupe's soul ancestors originated from these creatures. In most cases the carvers depicts: snakes; lizards; tortoise, crocodile and other animals as a sign of respect and commitment to their traditional belief system.

Animal figures made in terracotta representation of perhaps hippopotamus, elephants and rams were excavated at Ile-Ife by an archaeologist, Ekpo Eyo. Apparently they appeared to have being used as sacrifice or equated with power of the King (Eyo, 1980). The traditional artists, who made them, do not just create

images in their arts without having a message at heart to pass across to the public. According to Oyinloye (2015), animals also feature extensively in the proverbs and Nigerian folklore. The following are wooden artworks represented in animal forms displayed in at the courtyard of National Museum Onikan.

1. Headmask with coiled snake of Yoruba origin
2. Two wooden fish of Yoruba origin
3. Benin wooden box with Crocodile and fish motif
4. Wooden Leopard of Yoruba origin (dotted with black colour and dotted circles)
5. Wooden monkey holding maize close to its chest of Yoruba origin
6. Carving representing a cow from Oyo (with cowries surrounded the base)
7. Duck-shaped wooden bowl, Yoruba origin
8. Wooden Head Mask in form of a Bush cow (with raffia base) from Wamba people of Plateau State
9. Wooden Cock of Yoruba origin
10. Tortoise-shaped wooden bowl (*Agere-Ifa*) Yoruba

#### 4.2. Roles of Animals from Historical Perspectives

According to Fagg (1957), Sussan (1960), and Adepegba (1995), The representation of animals in the traditional art was based on man's understanding of the environment in which he finds himself. It is also a way of describing or defining the animals he interacted with, from time to time. The interface between kings and animals like the elephant, lion and leopard is well-known in history. This is synonymous with power and superiority of monarch. The crocodile for instance, represent the activities of policeman of the river in Bini mythology, as well as in Yoruba land. This is also synonymous with marine kingdom where the *Olokun* (the goddess of the sea and wealth) rules. Animals also feature extensively in the proverbs and Nigerian folklores which is common among most communities. For example lions are known for their courage and regality. Likewise, an elephant is associated with strength and power. Crocodiles are associated with evil spirits, therefore, masks carved with their features or skins were used in the cleansing rituals, to chase out evil from the community. Animals play a huge role in the cultural attainments of the people that is why they are symbolized through countless art forms and traditional oral tales. Most tribes believe wearing animal carving on the masks will improve communication with animal spirits that live in the desert.

#### 4.3. Role of Animals in the Benin Kingdom

Benin is one of the principal historic kingdoms of the western African forest region between the 13th and 19th century. The Benin Kingdom also known as the Benin Empire was a kingdom within what is now southern Nigeria. The Benin kingdom is well known for thousands of metal plaques and sculptures that decorated the royal palace of the Benin Kingdom, now Edo state. Art in Benin Kingdom features people, animals and gods (Oyinloye, 2015). The Ancient Benin kingdom among other things was well known for richness of art with evidence even in the British Museum till date. The Benin people were vast in all kinds of art ranging from simple pots, weapons, tools, carved masks and moulded sculptures. Craftsmen in the ancient Benin kingdom were organized into groups known as guilds. The guilds were for wood carvers, leather workers, ivory carvers, blacksmiths and weavers. The brass casters' guild were only allowed to work for the king. These art works and processes are well documented.

In the ancient Benin Kingdom, animals were used as metaphors to represent the essentials of humanity through the establishment of outer limits in creation; that is, the non-human supernatural (Beidelman, 1963). For example, in an artistic perspective, some animals symbolize order and harmony in the created world, and power also power (political and supernatural) that stabilizes the universe when order is disrupted. Animal representations in painting were found on most Benin sculptures used on the royal ancestral altars, village altars and smaller shrines. The frequency of the use of animal representations in painting and use in various contexts are indications of their relevance to the Benin art (Beidelman, 1965). In Benin kingdom, the differences between humans and animals are expressed figuratively through myth, art, and rituals to distinguish between their respective domains of activity. The Bini people believe that human beings, wild animals and domestic animals were created by the most High God, *Osanobua* (Sydow, 1938). Hence, all these creatures share some similarities.



Similarly, certain animals such as reptiles and birds are considered to be dangerous and sacred by the Bini people. They symbolize validity of power and are used largely in political contexts. Other animals in this category are elephants, leopards, vulturine fish eagles and crocodile. The representations of these animals are inscribed on a various objects using variety of techniques such as bronze casting, sewing on leather, carving on wood and other functional items that serve royal purpose, aesthetic enhancement and celebration of royal achievements (Sydow, 1938). However, the most regal of these animals is the leopard. The Leopard signifies kingly power and authority in the Benin kingdom. It is labelled as the king of the bush, it therefore stands in artistic and mythical perspectives as the equivalent of the king *Oba* of Benin. (Beidelman, 1965). Oral tradition reveals that the *Oba* of Benin kingdom is usually referred to as the "leopard of the house" while his animal counterpart is the *leopard of the bush*. Pitt (1900) relayed a myth that the leopard was chosen to be king over other animal by God not because it has fierce power only but also because of its colourful skin, good nature and most importantly, its ability to orderly convene peaceful meeting with other animals. This suggests that the powerful nature of the leopard is balanced by qualities of self-control and fairness in leadership.

In the case of crocodiles, it is believed to be associated with evil spirits, thus, mask using their features or skin were used in cleansing rituals, to chase away evil spirits from the village. As for elephant, due to its enormous size and strength, the elephant represents a lord *Ogie* among other animals, but not equivalent to a king *Oba* in the Bini Kingdom. Some folktales describe the leopard and the elephant as rivals over superiority. The Bini historical traditions associate powerful rebellious chiefs with the elephant characters. That is the reason, when a prominent person dies in Bini kingdom, they usually describe the death as the fall of an elephant (Pitt, 1900). Therefore, representation of an elephant appears on accessories used by chiefs such as hip masks and leather fans.

The crocodile and pythons are associated with realm of the Lord of the waters called *Olokun*. The python is referred to as the messenger and playmate of *Olokun*, usually sent to warn erring followers to change from their evil ways. The python is referred to as the king of all snakes because of its beauty, great stature, and strength. Before the destruction of Benin kingdom during the British army voyage in 1897, a large bronze casted python was used as a decorative piece at the frontal tower of the king's palace, highlighting the connection between King of the palace (*Oba*) and king of the sea (*Olokun*). The crocodile's power is believed to be equivalent to that of the python but not in beauty. The fierceness of the crocodile makes it to be referred to as the policeman of the waters, sent by *Olokun* to deal with evildoers by capsizing their canoes. The representation of crocodiles on Bini brass plaques, shows that ancient warriors wore amulets with images of crocodile heads for protection (Sydow, 1938).

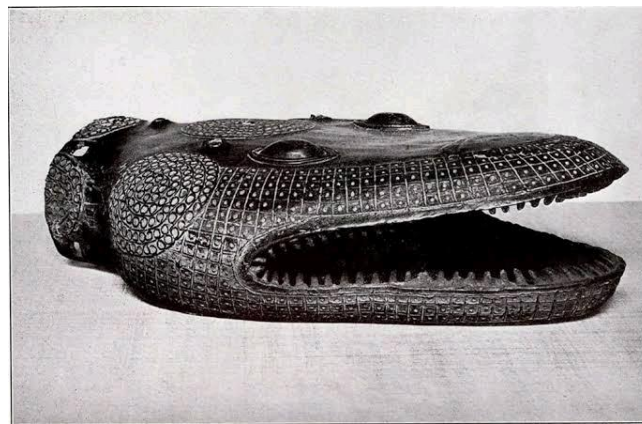
The vulturine fish eagle is believed to be the king of the birds because just like the crocodile and leopard, it is brutal and voracious in nature. Its beautiful white feather is usually worn by Bini chiefs as a symbol of respect, old age and chieftaincy. The artistic representation of fish eagle are usually on wooden object commutative heads placed on the Bini ancestral shines (Tambiah, 1969). The elephant, leopard, crocodile, python and vulturine fish eagle function as metaphors of leadership because of their unique characteristics, they are all rulers and lords in their respective domains. They are therefore used artistically to represent royalty and strength (Tambiah, 1969). Pogeson (2015) noted that the idea underlying Benin Artistic production is basically anthropomorphic revolving around the Benin King and hence a court art, whereas there is paucity of human representations in Northern Edo land which intriguingly also does not have the political structure to support it. Image 6 and 7 are samples of art works with animal representations in the Benin kingdom. According to Oyinloye (2015) The leopard in image 6 were made with elephant's tusks in the 1800s. The spots are copper discs and the eyes were made of mirrors. This pair are imitations of an earlier pair that stood at either sides of the king's throne. According to Leonard (1906, p.279), image 7 depicts a tribal god that was symbolized by a python in Benin city.

#### 4.4. Aesthetic Contents of Animal Representation

There are several distinct styles of rock art of animals' representation. Some are engraved in stone, while others are drawing and paintings. Most inscribing was done by chiseling away stone. Sometimes, the images were made by chipping away the coatings that cover the rock, this makes the images very visible on the rock. Some of the chiseled trenches are usually deeper than two inches which enables them to endure forest winds and sandstorms. Paints for animal paintings were usually locally sourced from minerals like ocher, charcoal and white clay and charcoal. Animal fat, blood and urine were used as binders. The colours used for most of these paintings remain vibrant after years of exposure to heat and rain. The paints were sometimes applied using brushes made from either animal furs or feathers. The most common animals used for artistic paintings are elephants, gazelles, hippopotamus, rhinoceros and wild oxen.



**Image 6.** *Benin leopard figures, ca. 1800s*



**Image 7:** *Benin python head, H. U. Hall, 1922*

Animal illustrations in Nigerian art are depictions of the natural world. They are used to symbolize status, for instance, the horse being an expensive animal is believed to elevate his rider above others. A painting showing a figure on top of horse is a common depiction of a powerful warrior (Chaudhuri, 2012). The traditional art depiction of animals reminds us of the importance and quality traits accorded to them by mankind. Animals in the traditional art have been represented in various ways bothering on the thoughts and beliefs the artists (Chaudhuri, 2012).

The Nok cultural art is based on exaggeration and large sizes. Nok art was a discovery of huge human, animals and other figural items made from terracotta by the Nok culture. Animal illustration used in the Nok art majorly elephants and snakes. There are sometimes human and animal combinations including the combination of human and bird or human and feline mixes. There is also a repeated type of two-headed Janus theme. There might be a possible precursor to the animal art which are figurines. Also among the Nupe people of Benue State are many door panels and house posts carved in low relief with a blend of decorative designs of various animals. The decorative pattern of the Nupe door panels depict reptiles which are found in the middle-belt region of the country. Nupe door panel is significant for protection against trespassers and hoodlums in a traditional African setting. The functional value of this door is so important to the Tiv people. The door was used in the ancient Nupe community by the noble men, traditional rulers, and those individuals who could afford its cost in the past (Oyinloye, 2015). Nupe people of Benue State produced series of wooden doors carved in low relief with a blend of decorative designs. Nupe door panels depicted animal themes which were carved skillfully and creatively. The animal theme on the door panel depicts reptiles which were found in the costal part of the Country. The role of reptiles on the Nupe panels is attached to the belief that Nupes' souls of ancestors originated from reptile animals (Oyinloye, 2015).

According to Oyinloye (2015), the Yoruba people also produced wooden door panels which are primarily meant to prevent intruder to the compound. Door panels in the traditional Yoruba land are for security and to control unwanted visitors. The decorative patterns on the Yoruba door panels represent the life that

surrounds the carver. The carving of Yoruba door panels reflects mainly the thematic and naturalistic narration of animals' folklore and storyline. A personal observation in the Lagos National Museum, Onikan revealed that Yoruba traditional doors and house posts are not only functional in nature but are also decorative and present aesthetic appeasement to the viewers. The door panels usually depict traditional symbols, social events and household animals which basically serve as food source and perform others function for protection.

## 5. Summary and Conclusion

Animal representation in art is an age long practice that dates back to the Paleolithic period when animals were engraved and painted on caves and rocks. These paintings had different connotations depending on the artists and location. These artworks with animal representations describe the interaction between humans and animals and in some cases the animal representations serve as a mark of honour and respect for the animals they interacted with.

Animal representations in Western African art are usually in form of cave painting, rock drawing and engraving and sculptural pieces. In the Northern region of Nigeria, Birnin Kudu was recognized for notable animal representation in rock painting, although some of the animal figures are mutilated and unidentifiable, it is believed that the animal images are directly linked to shamanic practices.

In Southern Nigeria, the Benin kingdom once referred to as the Benin Empire was known for its rich artistic cultural heritage. The Benin people were highly skilled in different forms of art ranging from pottery to sculpture. Their art works had high animal representations. Some of these animals were considered to be dangerous and sacred while some were associated with royalty. These artwork in addition to their cultural connotations, they also serve aesthetic purposes.

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