Animal symbolism in the poetry of Joe Ushie

Mathias Iroro Orhero* and Friday Akpan Okon

Abstract: Although Joe Ushie’s poetry has received critical attention, studies focus mainly on the socio-political and ecological issues prevalent in the poems. Our paper is interested in the way Ushie uses the idea of human-animal metamorphosis and animal symbolism in expressing his ecological and socio-political concerns, personal vision, and other forms of activism. Animals have particular importance in the African socio-cultural context, and there are many instances of human-animal transformation or animal symbolism in oral traditions. We argue that Ushie draws from this paradigm in the adoption of animals in his poetry and poetic works. Our close reading of Ushie’s Popular Stand and Other Poems and Lambs at the Shrine reveals the use of animals as symbols in the advocacy for ecological preservation and balance and the characterisation of humans as animals or vice versa as a form of satire against political leaders and oppressors. The archetypal significance of the animals represented in the selected poems reflects Ushie’s vision, and through their symbolism, issues bordering on socio-political malaise and environmentalism are foregrounded.

Subjects: African Literature; Post-Colonial Studies; Poetry

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Animals occupy an essential place in the African socio-cultural space. Many myths, legends, and other oral literary forms reveal the fascination with animals or even their reverence or danger to

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper studies the use of animal symbolism in two poetry collections by Joe Ushie. We begin by exploring the place of animal symbols in African culture and proceed to establish how they are used to convey ideas about human nature, the environment, life, and other philosophical thoughts. We then undertake a review of relevant literature on the poetry of Ushie to establish that animal symbolism has not been studied before. Having established that, we discuss some of the animal symbols Ushie uses in Popular Stand and Other Poems and Lambs at the Shrine. Our close reading of the collections demonstrates how Ushie uses animals to present his ideas about environmental preservation, his socio-ecological vision, and as a way of representing bad leadership and other social malaise. From our reading, we conclude that animal symbolism is significant in Joe Ushie’s writing, and it could be a way to understand his advocacy.
humans. Olusola (2005) examines the place of animals in Yoruba ontology from the perspectives of ethics. His analysis foregrounds the centrality of animals in Yoruba oral forms like the oriki, and he comments that: “the Yorùbá closely interact with animals, and this has also made their scientific understanding of animals around them. This deep understanding of theirs about animals has given them the power to know the attributes, characters and innate powers and virtues that the supreme God has given to various animals in the universe” (p. 170). His argument here is that animals exist in Yoruba indigenous thought, and their attributes are used to understand the world and convey a certain depth of meaning. Okpewho (2003) confirms this point in his ascription of “educational or moralistic quality” to tales that centre on “animals and humans and the lessons to be drawn from their interaction” (p. 217). The point is that animal stories are used allegorically to teach some lesson or inscribe a sense of morality in precolonial societies. This premise informs our study of Joe Ushie’s Popular Stand and Other Poems and Lambs at the Shrine. We contend that Ushie uses animals symbolically in his poetry to represent his socio-ecological vision and as a form of cultural inscription.

Joe Ushie was born in Akorshi, Bendì, Obanliku Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. He is an alumnus of Government Secondary School, Obudu, University of Calabar and University of Ibadan, and he currently teaches English at the University of Uyo. His poetry has attracted wide scholarship. Aboh (2017) describes Ushie as “one of Nigeria’s finest writers.” He further comments that “He belongs to the group of Nigerian poets generally referred to as ‘third-generation’ poets. His agrarian background later, in myriad ways, shaped his lexical configuration as evident in his preponderant use of nature-based imagery … Ushie is remarkable for his critical undertones on the sociopolitical condition in Nigeria and Africa.” Aboh’s categorisation of Ushie as a “third generation poet” is significant because it situates Ushie in a tradition of protest writers who spoke against military dictatorship in Nigeria, political corruption, and other social failings, as well as, in the context of the Niger Delta, environmental and minority rights issues.

To Bassey (2008), Ushie’s poetry falls within the tradition of “protest literature” (p. 20). He adds that “from Popular Stand through Lambs at the Shrine, Eclipse in Rwanda, to Hill Songs, Joe Ushie’s works are concerned with the plight of the common man in contemporary Nigeria.” Bassey’s reading of Ushie’s poetry is positioned in the framework of Ushie as a people’s poet whose works portray the plight of the oppressed Nigerian. Similar to Bassey, Egbug (2012) submits that Ushie’s poetry deals with the realities of man. To him, “Ushie’s poems are more concerned with issues of culture, life, death and the unborn because he has come face to face with the realities of his country that is in a war with itself” (p. 142). Egbug further identifies some of the satirical tropes in the poetry of Ushie and how the poet uses them to confront the leadership problems in Nigeria and the issues beleaguer ing society.

Aboh (2017) also confirms Bassey’s assertion that Ushie’s poetry deals with the common man. In his words, Ushie “has continued to show unrelenting interest in the things that concern the ‘ordinary’ people. His acute examination of fear, extreme anxiety, restiveness and relative powerlessness of the people goes a long way toward humanising the daily struggles of many Nigerians/Africans who scavenge to survive in the midst of abundance.” Aboh demonstrates his position with a linguistic analysis of selected poems by Joe Ushie. In another linguistic study, Aboh (2013a) investigates pronominal strategies in the poetry of Ushie and concludes that “His use of language is active, resistant and revolutionary, which corresponds with the active, conscious resistance and leached terrorism by the military and its collaborators … His pronominal strategies therefore provide us with deep understanding of how those in positions of authority impose a capitalist social order on the masses” (pp. 183–184). Aboh probes into the construction of identity in Ushie’s poetry through Bette-Bendi proverbs in yet another linguistic study. He declares that the “Bette-Bendi proverbs and euphemisms Ushie appropriates serve as the linguistic armoury, which he depends on to question and rebuff socio-political and socioeconomic issues that encumber the collective existence of the Nigerian populace” (Aboh, 2013b, p. 107). What Aboh confirms here is that Ushie draws from the cultural ethos of his Bette-Bendi people, and this view is helpful in our
proposition that Ushie relies on Bette-Bendi constructions of animals and their interactions with humans in his use of animal symbolism in his poetry.

Tsaaior (2012) discusses Ushie's Eclipse in Rwanda and comments that the collection beams with effervescent hope for a new beginning since the eclipse, from all indications, is not total and the sun will radiate its healing, iridescent rays on a world in stygian darkness. The volume peaks significantly at two points: it combines thematic appropriateness and a searing vision in the navigation of the murky waters that Africa, in her post-colonial condition, is fatally plunged into. (p. 39)

Here, Tsaaior subscribes to a vision of hope and social change in Ushie's poetry. His view is that there is hope for the continent despite the bleak realities of the African postcolonial condition that we find in Ushie's poetry. Thus, Tsaaior's reading hinges on Ushie's representation of a pan-African condition, especially with reference to the Rwandan genocide and other conflicts in Africa.

In terms of Ushie's poeticis, Aliyu's (2013) investigation of the aesthetics of place in Ushie's Hillsongs is insightful. Hinging her study on ecocritical perspectives, Aliyu reads Ushie's employment of place as a discursive strategy to catalogue the functionality, spirituality and mysticism of nature while engaging in a political venture of mediating for those whose very existence is tied to the preservation and the humane exploration of its components. Hence, Ushie's deployment of the aesthetic of 'place' is dual in function: as a framework for an exploration into how contemporary poets perceive and utilize nature in their creative ventures; and as a political tool to champion the quest for proper handling of the environment and the people affected by it in the face of capitalist and industrial demands for resources. (p. 145)

Aliyu's view is anchored on the idea that Ushie emphasises “place” as an ecocritical strategy to represent his natural world. To her, Ushie's poetry intervenes in the lives of the common people, the deprived, and their struggle for survival in a national landscape. Like Aliyu, Ushie and Bello (2014) reveal how the natural environment provides metaphors for the poems' language and style. To them, Ushie's poetry is a “political representation of the agents of poverty as predator birds that not only destroy the ecosystem, but also leave the pastoral people who depend on the ecosystem in ‘tattered penury’. These agents are semiotized as politically powerful people from the north who swoop on the ecosystem” (p. 1328). Here, they are concerned with how Ushie writes oppression and marginality using signs and symbols, and their observation comes from a linguistic stylistic reading of Ushie's poetry.

The preceding reveals some of the scholarship on the poetry of Joe Ushie. What is apparent is that apart from isolated mentions, the place of animal symbolism in Ushie's poetry has not attracted critical attention. Critics have read Ushie's poetry and poetics based on the politics of his generation, as well as from the perspective of environmentalism. However, one aspect of his poetry and poetics that has not received attention is animal symbolism. It is this lacuna in scholarship that justifies the need for our research.

The representation of animals in literary texts is not a new phenomenon. Bolongaro (2009) dates animal representation in literature to the early fables that employed animal characters. He submits that “Western poetry is almost unimaginable without animal metaphors and animal imagery. Even realistic fiction relies on animals to achieve a wide range of rhetorical effects, ranging from pathos, to bathos, and including the commonplace” (p. 105). This position confirms the centrality of animals in European literary traditions.

Writers use animals for varied purposes in their works. However, in almost all cases, the animal characters are representational. Animals in literature are sometimes employed in the archetypal sense, representing certain universal traits, character types, emotions, or moods. Ameer (2011)
confirms this point in his study of animal symbolism in Ted Hughes’ poetry. Ameer believes that Ted Hughes employs certain animals to represent violence, beauty, passion, and natural instincts. He proceeds to identify animals like “jaguar,” “snake,” “otters” etc. and foregrounds what they represent in Hughes’ poetry in line with their archetypal significance. Other similar studies have also been done on Ted Hughes' poetry, confirming the usefulness of such an archetypal reading of animals.

Nwafor (2019) adopts an archetypal approach in her reading of animal symbolism in Igbo oral and visual cultures and submits that animal symbols are an indication of the relevance and place of animals in the lives of the Igbo. Humans have their place within the social structure - the noble, poor, men, women and children. The same is as well tenable in the domain of animals - strong, aggressive, cunning and intelligent animals as opposed to the submissive, meek, docile or passive ones. The figurative attributes of animals thus is compared, allegorically and philosophically, to specific personal temperaments attributed to humans as well as, to the ranking of individuals within various social indigenous organizations in Africa. (pp. 130–131)

Her comment is informed by the primordial image of the animal and its ability to “mediate between the physical, social and spiritual realm as conduits for emphasizing the essentiality of aestheticized animal characters to human existence” (p. 131). As archetypes, animals can be used symbolically to represent attributes constructed in either specific social spaces or as universal traits. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the cultural context of any animal symbol and what it may signify beyond the cultural space of production to capture its symbolic value.

In this paper, we define animal symbolism as the representation and signification of animals in literature. Animals that are alluded to or referenced through any literary strategy are identified, and their significance in the text is discussed with particular attention to the context and form of the poems. Ushie’s *Popular Stand and Other Poems* was published in 1992 and has 34 poems. Many of the poems in this collection reflect ecological themes. For example, in “Elephant,” Ushie (1992) expresses the need for ecological preservation using the elephant. In this poem, the elephant operates synecdochically, representing all animals. The poem begins with the speaker’s description of elephant meat consumption:

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Eat,
it’s the Elephant,
Eat!
it’s trunk
its tail
its limbs
all flesh, fleshy,
unfinishing
(p. 16)
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This excerpt mentions the various parts of the elephants that can be thought of as delicacies. The persona, however, ends the poem with a charge: “I can hear this faint warning echo/ Elephants feed also” (p. 16). The closing lines place the poem in its appropriate context as a warning against the indiscriminate consumption of animals as food. Here, there is what Mwangi (2019) calls “vegan unconscious” at work (p. 7). Mwangi explores the intersections between animal studies and postcolonial studies and comments that “Although they do not openly advocate vegan ethics, African authors grapple with the possibilities of alternatives to meat eating and encourage us to minimize animal suffering as much as possible. That is, postcolonial animal-consuming cultures are presented in African texts as shifting toward an embrace of cultural and political practices that avoid the use of animals” (p. 8). His position is that African writers convey an unconscious sense of vegan advocacy through the sentience given to represented animals. In Ushie’s poem, elephants
are presented as sentient beings who need to feed like humans, foregrounding their agency. The sanctity of animal life is emphasised in the speaker’s tone, and the word “elephant” is spelt as a proper noun (with initial letter capitalisation).

From another perspective, the elephant can also be interpreted as a symbol of the Niger Delta and its vast wealth. The entire nation feeds on the “meat” of the Niger Delta region and enjoys the wealth gotten from the region, but they forget that “elephants feed also.” Here, the focus is on the marginality of the Niger Delta region and its people whose environment and means of livelihood are destroyed by the oil industry. The ill-treatment of the minority peoples of the region is configured into the symbol of the elephant which is devoured without any consideration or sympathy.

The advocacy for ecological preservation is only present in Ushie’s “Song of the bedbug.” Here, the poet draws from the bedbug myth that is predominant in Eastern Nigeria. The bedbug represents the entire fauna and how the activities of man affect all, big and small. The poem begins with the word “violated,” representing how the “sun-soaked” bedbug feels. The mother bedbug tells her son:

Don't give up, son
The death facing us
Is from harsh hot sun
Soon, its strength spent
Sun will roost and
We will rise
(p. 22)

In these lines, the mother bedbug emphasises that the sun is killing them, but even in the face of imminent death, she expresses hope that the sun will be no more one day. From an ecological perspective, the bedbug represents the fauna, while the sun’s harshness is a direct consequence of man’s ozone-depleting activities. Although the bedbug is small, they are significantly affected by man’s activities. This is a cautionary poem that presents the ecological imbalance caused by man’s destruction of the natural environment.

From the socio-political perspective, the bedbug can be interpreted as a symbol of the masses. The sun represents the political oppressors who torture the masses and unleash suffering and agony on them. However, as in the mythical origin of the bedbug tale, the mother bedbug tells her son that the “Sun will roost and/We will rise.” This foregrounds the transience of the human condition. Though the sun may be harsh now, night will come, and the bedbugs will rise. The interpretation here is that the political elites cannot torture the innocent masses for long because no condition is permanent. This reading of the bedbug as an oppressed creature also echoes a form of minority politics in which the bedbugs symbolise the oppressed and minoritized people of the Niger Delta who suffer the burden of exploitation and marginalization. In this sense, Ushie encodes hope and a utopic vision for the people.

Natural balance is celebrated using animal symbolism in “A trip home.” This poem is about the speaker’s trip to Bendi, where his “umbilical cord rests” (p. 31). The speaker foregrounds the environmental harmony of his rural community where there are “healing hills” and “tropical rain forests.” He returns home “as a chicken/To her mother.” Chicken is used here as an archetype of innocence and safety since the mother-hen always protects it. To the speaker, nature is his mother-hen. He relishes the memory of his pristine environment, and the “peaceful home of the tilapia/The electric and mud fishes,” the “crabs rising like peace,” and squirrels “running the Empire Race,” among other animal symbols, represent the pristine state of the environment as he knew it.
On returning home after what appears to be a sojourn away from the pristine environment he remembers, the speaker discovers “restless soldier ants, armed with/A match and the new chainsaw./Have murdered our love.” Here, animals transform into humans through the figuration of soldier ants. Soldier ants, as used in this poem, represent the busybodies who destroy the environment with ferocity. They have “violated the tilapia,” and they “try an axe, a hammer, a match or saw on own armour” (pp. 33–34). The speaker portrays man, transformed to soldier ants, as dangerous and destructive to their natural habitats or “own armour.” The poem ends on a cautionary note: “When the armour is gone, we'll learn/The young fly's lesson . . . /Our lesson as warring gadflies” (p. 34). Two animal symbols are introduced in the preceding lines. The young “fly” that learns his lesson alludes to the cautionary tale of the stubborn fly that follows a corpse to the grave. Gadflies are a type of flies that bite livestock. The poet transforms man into gadflies to represent the leeching on nature and eventual destruction of the natural world.

In “The tiger,” Ushie celebrates nature’s law of the survival of the fittest using contrasting predator-prey animal symbolism. The tiger is the predator, and it represents agility, strength, and stealth. In this poem, the tiger stalks, leaps, and devours “Orangotang, kangaroo, gorilla” (p. 40). These animals are prey to the tiger, and they serve to represent nature’s natural order of things where the strong prey on the weak in order for natural selection to occur. The poet celebrates the tiger after his hunting success thus: “Then is he seen/Then is he felt/Then is he heard” (p. 40). The eponymous tiger in the poem pounces on its prey, rather than declaring itself a tiger, and in a sense, this representation alludes to Soyinka’s oft-quoted quip that “A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude—he pounces.” It is after devouring the prey that he is “seen,” “felt,” and “heard.” The poem is short, but it is a succinct celebration of natural order and normal predator-prey relations. Ushie uses animal symbolism to express ecological balance in this poem.

The archetype of the scapegoat forms the basis for “The scapegoat.” In this short but poignant poem, the speaker narrates an incident thus:

Papa raised a cane
Mama echoes with an axe:
“He must be killed.”
The offence:
I spilled water on the floor
I fought not for fairplay
For, it’s better for Pa and Ma
To co-kill me than to
Continue their yester-quarrel
(p. 41)
Here, Ushie draws from the archetypal significance of the scapegoat and his persona is transformed into one. A scapegoat is an animal or person blamed for wrongdoings or mistakes of others, especially for reasons of expediency. Its archetypal significance is rooted in both African culture and Judeo-Christian mythology. In this poem, the persona’s parents are armed with a cane and an axe, and they attack the persona for the offence of spilling water on the floor. The parents exaggerate the offence and declare that the persona must be killed. However, like the typical scapegoat, he accepts his fate as long as both parents come together to kill him instead of continuing their long-standing quarrel. The scapegoat in this poem symbolises one who must sacrifice himself for the greater good. It is this idea of selflessness and a sense of collective responsibility that Ushie advocates in this poem.

“Son of the soil” is a poem composed to celebrate freedom and self-determination. The poet employs the animal symbolism of a “young he-goat” as an archetype for youth, strength, virility,
and curiosity. The he-goat “wallows” in freedom, tears through the yard he is kept in and attempts an escape. After some trials, he contemplates:

Why should I tread softly
Why should I tread gently
Why should I tread mindfully
On this ground of my birth?
Mother it is that was bought,
Not I
Here was I born-
Free,
A son of the soil!
Market days come and go
And kids live and grow
Unseeing that tether ahead
Unseeing that market yonder
(p. 42)
The he-goat’s contemplation reveals his love for freedom, and he represents all who are enslaved, minoritized or oppressed in one way or another. The he-goat’s quest for freedom and his justification that his mother was bought, not himself, represents the poet’s vision of a free society where the sins, actions, and inactions of parents do not constrain or limit children. It is also noteworthy that the he-goat’s constant crash after each attempt to jump represents fortitude and perseverance. Like the Cockroach in Tewfik Al-Hakim’s *Fate of a Cockroach*, the he-goat takes his fate into his hands and attempts to make meaning out of his existence. Thus, Ushie uses the symbolism of the he-goat to celebrate freedom and espouse the existentialist struggle for meaning and purpose in the universe.

Furthermore, the he-goat can also be interpreted as the youth filled with pride and recklessness without knowing that life is filled with bobby traps that can mar a careless or reckless person. In the poem’s last lines, the speaker says that the he-goat is unaware of the “tether ahead” and the “market yonder.” The tether is the collar used on a goat or any other animal to restrict its movement when tied to a rope. In the poem, the he-goat, representing youths, is unaware of the tether and market where goats are sold. This means that the youth is ignorant of the hurdles that one must face in life. Here wisdom and caution are celebrated.

The harmony between man and nature is foregrounded in “When I think.” The poem opens with the poet’s acknowledgement of ecological order: “Of nature renewing herself in circles/Of birth and death/growth and decay” (p. 49). Then animal symbolism is used to represent this order:

Of the alligator’s birth years
numbered by his swallowed pebbles,
of the cock and his
faultless timing of man
[...]
Of the elephant and his fabled memory
Of the bat and her multi-purpose mouth
(p. 49)
The animal symbols employed in this poem represent the pristine state of nature. The alligator has a natural age counter, the cock has a default clock that man follows, the elephant never forgets, and the bat uses its mouth for feeding, echolocation, and excreting remains of undigested food, among others. These animals are symbolic representations of natural order and a theistic
disposition that “There is Something like Him there” (p. 49). Ushie inscribes his personal belief in a greater being in this poem, and to him, the natural environment exists in its untamed state and functions effectively because of “He” who is “above.”

_Lambs at the Shrine_ was published in 1995, and it is a collection of 32 poems. The poems in this collection are mainly socio-political. In “The news,” Ushie (1995) employs animal symbols to reflect on life and to express his pessimism on the state of affairs. In the traditional sense, the news is a report of abnormal or unusual happenings, and this is what the speaker captures in the poem in the first few lines of the poem: “The news! Omens and omens and omens. // At bedtime yesterday, some hen/in the yard crowed cock-like” (p. 9). The poet paints the atmosphere of confusion and absurdity using the hen as a symbol. It is common knowledge that hens do not normally crow as cocks do. However, by depicting hens crowing like cocks, the poet relays the idea of abnormality. It is this idea that manifests throughout the poem. Animal symbolism continues in the poem:

Last week, Agba’s car crushed two ducks on the highway. This morning, the chameleon hurried across the road before us. Recently, two green plantain leaves drooped right before our open eyes. The owls and the cats have wailed their throats hoarse these seasons (p. 9)

Here, the speaker shows more abnormality in the depiction of a duck on the highway. It is known that ducks do not patrol the highways but prefer to reside in and around rivers or other large water sources. In this poem, a duck is crushed on the highway, signifying an abnormal event. A chameleon also hurries across a road. This animal is not known for its speed, but the speaker describes a fast-moving chameleon, representing the abnormality of the world. Furthermore, the owls and cats, both nocturnal and normally quiet animals, are seen wailing in the poem. The idea of chaos and abnormality is evident in the poet’s transformation of animal archetypes. In one stanza, Ushie alludes to the conflicts in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Somalia. At the time the poem was written, these countries were engaged in either war or some civil conflict. This is concretized with the reference to “festival of wars,” where there is a “feast for vultures.” Wars are generally disastrous events where deaths are expected. The symbolism of vulture in this instance is drawn from its archetypal representation of death and mortality.

Beyond its symbolisation of death, vultures also represent oppression in “Evening tales.” The poem begins with the speaker’s narration to his children of forefathers “who were warriors” (p. 13) and who procured farmlands from neighbours through hounding and plundering. The emphasis is on the bravery of the forefathers in confronting others. Using contrast and animal symbolism, the speaker quizzes:

But what tale will my children tell about me and these overblown vultures landing on my roof-top in wait for the flesh of my starving child whose lean meal the vultures have seized? (p. 13)

Here, vultures represent oppression and the speaker’s helplessness in the face of oppression is contrasted with his forefather’s bravery. The poet transforms political leaders into vultures, and in
In this context, the vultures are the political leaders who have seized the “lean meal” of the persona’s children and still want to eat their flesh. This depiction foregrounds the wickedness of Nigerian political leaders who steal money and opportunities from the common man. Further revealing this human-animal transformation, the speaker says:

Each generation has its woes and wars
ours must be with these vultures
on my rooftop spreading their wings
in leisure like the politician’s agbada while
we wait in misery with feminine minds
and sorrow-soaked hearts
(p. 14).
In this excerpt, the use of simile makes the encoding of humans as animals clearer in comparing the vulture’s spreading of wings to the politicians’ signature agbada clothes.

In “Fate of the sheep,” Ushie employs the contrasting animal symbols of sheep and lion to represent the masses and the leaders in Nigeria. Through the agency of human-animal transformation, the masses are embodied in the sheep, an archetype of meekness and gentility, and the corrupt political leaders are embodied in the hungry lion, an archetype of aggression and predation in certain cultural imaginations. In the poem, the hungry lion is “bereft of reason to devour the/ sheep.” (p. 24) but ends up accusing the hungry sheep who stands downstream of “stirring up/dirts for him to drink of, up the/course of the stream where he stands/steel-like, bellicose and accoutred.” The depiction of the lion is in line with its archetypal form. The lion represents the political elites who stay upstream and still oppress the hungry sheep who reside downstream.

The poem further reveals how the lion devours and dismembers the sheep for meat without any sign of guilt, remorse, or worry. This depiction is the bitter reality of the Nigerian society where the political elites plunder and loot from the public purse even as the ordinary man suffers and lives in abject poverty. The swallow, a type of bird, utters, “Such is the law of the jungle” before flying away “in disgust.” The swallow represents the passive observers who can do nothing as they witness the oppression of the helpless man by those at the helm of affairs. It is also a satire of those who “fly away” when they could have done something to save helpless people from predation.

In “Oracle of the night,” the owl is employed to symbolise death and evil. The poem opens with the ideophone “Huhu, hu-huhu huhu/Huhu, hu-huhu huhu” (p. 44) to capture the sound the owl makes. In a language laden with apostrophe and rhetorical questions, the speaker contemplates: “O bird of the night buried in tuft/of leaves in dark sacred groves/whose death are you announcing?/Whose dirge are you singing?” (p. 44). The phrase “O bird of the night” within the poem’s context refers to the owl. The feeling that the owl conjures in this poem is that of dread and fear. Foregrounding the sense of impending calamity that the owl symbolises, the speaker quizzes: “tell me, tell me what you’re seeing/this night, how this day will end/and if the hooting is for me” (p. 45). The preceding lines are steeped deeply in the superstitions associated with the owl, especially in the Nigerian socio-cultural context where it is believed that the owl is a harbinger of death. The poet uses the owl symbol to express his pessimism and the idea of man’s ephemeralism.

The titular poem of the collection “Lambs at the shrine” employs the archetype of the sacrificial lamb. Here, “Ingrid, Dele, Wali/and all those who felled … ” (p. 54) are transformed into sacrificial lambs. The sacrificial lamb symbolises the person or animal that must be killed/sacrificed for the common good. Its archetypal import derives from both African indigenous thought and Judeo-Christian mythology. In the poem, the sacrificial lambs represent those who died while fighting for the people’s freedom. This symbolism is further inscribed through the allusion to Ingrid Jonker, a South African anti-apartheid poet whose poem was read by Nelson Mandela when he became
South Africa’s first black president; Dele Giwa, who was murdered by a letter bomb as a result of his attack of Nigerian military despots; and Obi Wali, who was brutally murdered in his home because of his ferocious criticism of the military junta.

The poet describes how the “golden lamps” of the sacrificial lambs are “quenched in the mid/dle of a night walk” (p. 54). He also uses vultures to symbolise death and gloom in the lines: “those golden lamps/blown off by the vultures’/wings in flight at night.” The vultures here are metamorphosed humans, specifically those who unleash tyranny and death. The sacrificial lambs pledged their lives to “ideals which tantalise like Eldorado,” but they are “unaware of our new creed/founded, as always by man, on greed” (p. 55). They are blindfolded and taken to the “blades of the guillotine.” The poem then parodies a statement associated with military rule: “to keep the ship going/we must all be dumb.” This line echoes the civil war propaganda of Gen. Yakubu Gowon’s military junta: “to keep Nigerian one is a task that must be done,” a statement which essentially negated Biafran secession from Nigeria. The sacrificial lambs are finally “emptied of blood at the/shrine of our new god” (p. 55). The “shrine” references the poem’s title and refers to the new order of things.

Adopting the archetype of the lamb, Ushie’s “song of the season” is written as an elegy for Kenule Saro-Wiwa, the famous Ogoni martyr who was killed in 1995 by the military junta of Gen. Sani Abacha. In the poem, Saro-Wiwa is transformed into a lamb “that stared the invading/leopard in the face” (p. 56). As a lamb, his meekness and gentility contrast with the leopard, a predatory animal that represents aggression and fierceness. The military junta that sentenced Saro-Wiwa to death is embodied in the leopard. This contrast is presented in another stanza of the poem thus: “In the leopard’s clenched teeth/is the prime lamb of our yard,/but near the leopard’s head/is the hunter’s aim” (p. 57). The hunter’s aim represents the speaker’s conception of divine justice for the marauding leopard in these lines. The speaker consolidates this point by asserting that the dead martyr will “sing/the requiem for the leopard.” There is a paradox in the preceding lines because the dead will not be around to sing a requiem. However, the poet emphasises the immutability of the cause and struggle that the “lamb” stood for before his slaughter.

Using more animal symbols, the speaker reveals what followed Saro-Wiwa’s death:

Shocked, the ever-journeying wind,
reared not her head this day; the
birds hid in their nests, the rivers
slowed down their pace, the ants
wept aloud, the owls hooted
themselves hoarse and the
dogs barked their throats dry
(p. 56).
The above lines reveal some of the reactions to Saro-Wiwa’s death using animal symbols. The birds that generally soar the skies hide in their nests, and the ants that are not known for crying weep aloud. Even the owls and dogs are anguish. The abnormality of the situation represents the confusion that Saro-Wiwa’s death caused. The animals also represent the various character types in society and their responses to the martyr’s death.

Ushie is a very creative and dynamic poet. His use of human-animal metamorphosis and animal symbolism to reveal ecological and socio-political concerns is noteworthy. What is evident from the close reading is that in Ushie’s Popular Stand and Other Poems, animal symbols are employed to celebrate ecological harmony and caution man about the dangers of destabilizing the natural environment. He also uses animal symbolism to celebrate freedom. In Lambs at the Shrine, Ushie uses animal symbolism to represent bad leadership, social malaise, socio-political activism, and
personal vision. In both collections, the symbolism of the animals sometimes originates from their archetypal place in the African cultural milieu, especially of his Bette-Bendi ethnic group, or from the context of the poem. There is still much to be done in unlocking the functions of animal symbolism in the poetry of Joe Ushie and other Nigerian poets. However, our paper has pioneered a reading of Ushie’s poetry in particular and Nigerian poetry in general from this perspective.

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