

Eco-spirituality and indigenous communication in Igbo cosmology: An ethnographic study of conservation and ritual utilisation in Southeastern Nigeria

Charles Okwuowulu

Department of Mass Communication & Department of Theatre Arts, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

Email: okwuowulu.charles@funai.edu.ng; Tel: +234 803 644 6689; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2853-4480>.

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates a fundamental duality embedded within Igbo indigenous knowledge systems in southeastern Nigeria: the dialectical tension between the sacred protection and ritual exploitation of animal fauna through the cosmological practices of *Afa* divination. Grounded in relational ontology, the research conceptualises animals not merely as biological specimens or economic resources, but as metaphysical entities and active spiritual 'workers' operating dynamically across the physical and intangible realms. Within this cosmological framework, traditional ethical mechanisms such as *Nso-A/la* (sacred taboos) establish culturally enforced sanctuaries for totemic and spiritually significant species. Paradoxically, the very metaphysical potency attributed to these animals generates an intense demand for their physical consumption and sacrifice in ritual pharmacopoeia, spiritual charms, therapeutic remedies, and apotropaic rites. This paradox poses a profound challenge to conventional conservation frameworks, which routinely overlook indigenous cultural and communicative structures. Utilising a qualitative ethnographic design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews and observations conducted across selected communities in southeastern Nigeria. Key participants, including traditional diviners, spiritualists, scholars, and spiritual-fauna vendors, provided the primary accounts, which were analysed thematically to document the narratives and ecological functions surrounding sacred fauna. Central to this inquiry is the role of indigenous communication systems as repositories of environmental knowledge. Sound-producing media technologies (such as *Ukoro/Ikolo/Ikoro*, *Ogene*, and *Ekwe*), alongside oral traditions, masquerades, songs, and ritual performances, serve as vital institutional instruments for transmitting ecological memory, regulating community conduct, and enforcing sacred boundaries across generations. The study suggests that fauna conservation initiatives in Igbo communities may benefit from conservation approaches that recognise indigenous cosmological values and communication structures alongside contemporary ecological governance.

Keywords: *Afa* divination, African conservation, animal survival paradox, eco-spirituality, Igbo cosmology, indigenous communication systems, relational ontology.

INTRODUCTION

In selected Igbo communities in southeastern Nigeria, particularly those represented in the study sites in Ebonyi and Enugu States, biodiversity-related beliefs and practices are embedded in ritual performances, cosmological ethics, and indigenous communication channels. Through these systemic frameworks, environmental values and ecological regulations are

continually transmitted, interpreted, re-evaluated, and renewed across successive generations. While foundational literature in African indigenous communication has historically prioritised media channels primarily as tools for political organisation, social cohesion, and news dissemination, focusing on elements such as town criers, talking drums, gongs, proverbs, masquerade

displays, and community festivals (Ugboajah, 1979; Wilson, 1990), substantially less critical attention has been directed toward their structural role as living repositories and vital transmitters of ecological knowledge within the Igbo cosmological worldview. Although previous studies have examined Igbo beliefs and practices in relation to environmental preservation, limited attention has been given to the specific relationship between animal-fauna utilisation, ritual demand, and indigenous communication systems. This study therefore examines how these elements interact within selected Igbo communities and how such interactions may influence the conservation or depletion of culturally significant fauna, arguing that indigenous communication extends far beyond the linear exchange of utilitarian messages to represent the ongoing socio-cultural reproduction of collective memory, moral authority, environmental stewardship, and cosmological consciousness.

In conceptualising this phenomenon, indigenous communication functions precisely as what Assmann (2011) defines as 'cultural memory', a structural mechanism that preserves, stabilises, and transmits institutional knowledge across temporal horizons that far exceed individual human lifetimes. Among the Igbo, this cultural memory is intrinsically embedded within rich oral traditions, sacred ritual performances, nocturnal storytelling, age-grade initiation rites, *Afa* divination sessions, title-taking societies, and specialised acoustic media technologies. Prominent among these sound-producing instruments are the *Ogene* (iron gong), the *Ekwe* (wooden slit gong), and the massive *Ikoro* (sacred slit drum). These media technologies do not merely sound routine social announcements; they actively broadcast binding ecological decrees concerning inviolable sacred groves, protected animal totems, taboos governing aquatic bodies, medicinal plant harvesting protocols, and seasonal ritual bans on hunting and deforestation. Through repeated, highly stylised public performances, these communicative practices translate abstract ecological imperatives into deep communal consciousness.

This conceptual framework expands upon Ugboajah's (1985) seminal formulation of 'oramedia,' which conceptualised indigenous communication as an intrinsically culture-bound media system operating semi-autonomously from modern mass media infrastructures. Beyond broadcasting socio-political directives, oramedia simultaneously safeguard and perpetuate indigenous environmental philosophies. Within this ecosystem, every proclamation delivered by a town crier, every rhythm emitted by an *Ikoro* drum, every masquerade performance, and every communal gathering functions as an active site of environmental pedagogy. In these institutional spaces, younger generations do not merely absorb community histories; they internalise precise ecological boundaries, learning which animal species are divinely protected, which forest canopies remain inviolable, which streams demand periodic ritual

purification, and which specific environmental behaviours constitute *Nso-A/a* (prohibitions against the Earth Goddess). Consequently, the transmission of biodiversity knowledge within Igbo society operates through continuous socio-cultural performance rather than formal, codified institutional schooling.

Ecological regulations within traditional Igbo societies are rarely recorded in written constitutions or legislative enactments; rather, they are embodied and sustained through folk praises, ritual chants, oral poetry, symbolic theatricality, and civic ceremonies. As Vansina (1985) observed, oral traditions constitute exceptionally resilient and sophisticated historical archives capable of retaining complex social data over vast historical spans. Within the Igbo context, this oral archive functions simultaneously as an environmental database, ensuring that conservation principles remain deeply integrated into everyday socio-cultural life. Biodiversity preservation thus becomes fundamentally inseparable from the communicative acts that articulate it. Acoustic technologies such as the *Ikoro*, *Ekwe*, *Ogene*, and ceremonial horn-bugles function as structural mechanisms for orchestrating collective participation in ecological governance, judicial proceedings, and sacred observances. The reverberation of these instruments summons community members to mandatory civic labour, such as the seasonal clearing of village pathways, the ritual cleansing of communal streams, the inauguration of agricultural festivals, or the enforcement of sacred animal sanctuaries. These sound instruments act directly as instruments of environmental governance rather than simple signalling tools. Without the continuous maintenance of indigenous communication practices, the socio-ecological bonds linking human communities to their natural environments inevitably atrophy, threatening both cultural memory and regional biodiversity.

In contemporary southeastern Nigeria, the rapid acceleration of urbanisation, Western educational paradigms, demographic mobility, socio-economic restructuring, and the pervasive spread of Christian evangelicalism have fundamentally transformed traditional mechanisms of knowledge transmission. While these globalised developments have undeniably broadened access to formal education and digital communication platforms, they have simultaneously catalysed a profound decline in community participation within traditional communicative institutions that historically reinforced ecological ethics. As Nkama, Okoro, and Nwannennaya (2022) observe, the structural weakening of traditional belief systems centred on *Nso-A/a* has directly accelerated the erosion of indigenous biodiversity conservation mechanisms. Furthermore, the structural decay of indigenous communication institutions severely diminishes the public arenas in which ecological obligations were historically rehearsed, reinforced, and socially sanctioned.

Against this backdrop, this research critically investigates

the complex intersection of Igbo eco-spiritual cosmology, Afa divination practices, animal utility, and indigenous communication. Specifically, the paper addresses three core research objectives: (1) to interrogate Igbo eco-spiritual beliefs and indigenous knowledge systems regarding the cosmological significance of diverse animal fauna; (2) to examine how the metaphysical utility attributed to these animals generates an existential paradox between their sacred protection and ritual exploitation; and (3) to evaluate how traditional communication systems can be dynamically revitalised to sustain the intergenerational transmission of eco-spiritual and ecological knowledge in contemporary Igbo society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY AND INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGY

To rigorously analyse the complex empirical data surrounding animal utilisation and conservation within Igbo communities, this study adopts the theoretical framework of Relational Ontology. Relational ontology fundamentally rejects the foundational Cartesian dualism characteristic of Western modernist thought, which sharply dichotomises 'nature' from 'culture,' the 'human' from the 'non-human,' and the 'material' from the 'spiritual.' Instead, relational ontology conceptualises reality as an interconnected web of dynamic relationships wherein entities derive their existence, identity, and agency strictly through their ongoing interactions with other entities within the cosmic structure. Relational ontology guided the interpretation of participants' accounts by directing attention to three core relationships: (i) human–animal relationships, (ii) human–spiritual-world relationships, and (iii) communication–environment relationships. Interview narratives were therefore examined according to how participants described animals as relational rather than merely biological entities.

This theoretical orientation aligns directly with Juma's (2025) philosophical examination of indigenous eco-spiritualities, which emphasises the deep linguistic, ontological, and theological entanglement between humanity and the earth. When contextualised within African cosmological frameworks, this entanglement ceases to be an abstract or philosophical metaphor, but operates as a lived, existential reality. Human existence is understood as sacredly grounded within and dependent upon the vitality of the physical land (Ala/Adamah). This framework had earlier been demonstrated by Appiah-Kubi and Aabaa (2019), noting that African traditional worldviews perceive the natural universe as a vital, organic living entity. Within this ontological paradigm, an animal is never reduced to a mere biological resource, a commodity, or a passive object awaiting economic management; rather, the animal is recognised as a metaphysical relative, a spiritual neighbour, a messenger, or a sacred vessel harbouring divine energy. This radical interconnectedness

generates a binding 'ritual force' that flows continuously through all material and spiritual inhabitants of the cosmic architecture.

Consequently, when a traditional practitioner or diviner interacts with a natural forest ecosystem within Igbo land, they are not entering a vacant 'wilderness' or an unpeopled natural space; they are stepping into an intensely social space populated by ancestral spirits, deities, and intelligent non-human entities. This ontological reality was directly affirmed during field interviews with key practitioner Onyemechi Ariwa, who reported that, within his spiritual experience, specific trees, medicinal herbs, and animals communicate with him through their spiritual identities and reveal what he interprets as their therapeutic and metaphysical capacities (personal communication, June 15, 2025). As Appiah-Kubi and Aabaa (2019) stress, this relational shift radically redefines environmental ethics: the primary objective shifts from an anthropocentric model of 'resource management' or 'species preservation' to the continuous, active maintenance of harmonious relationships with non-human kin. The epistemology of Afa divination provides the operational mechanism through which relational ontology is interpreted and practised.

Drawing upon Zeitlyn's (2020) conceptualisation of divination as a sophisticated cognitive and semiotic framework for framing questions and decoding answers from the universe, Afa operates as the navigational compass for the Igbo cosmological universe. Divination represents a dynamic form of world-making that enables the diviner (Dibia Afa) to decipher the intentionalities of the metaphysical realm through physical media, including the observed behaviours, physical parts, and symbolic presences of specialised animal species. Therefore, the physical survival and socio-cultural valuation of animal fauna are intrinsically bound to this divinatory logic. Crucially, relational ontology extends beyond human-nature interactions to encompass communication itself as an ontological force. If existence is constituted through dynamic relationships rather than isolated individual units, then communication represents the primary process through which these cosmic relationships are sustained, recalibrated, and preserved across temporal spaces. The complex relationships connecting humans, ancestors, deities, fauna, sacred forests, and streams require continuous operational renewal through ritual performances and robust indigenous media infrastructures capable of transmitting collective ecological memory across successive generations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY AND ORAL HISTORIES

This research utilises a qualitative ethnographic research design tailored to investigate deep-seated cosmological beliefs, ritual practices, and indigenous communication structures. Given that eco-spiritual knowledge in Igbo

society is predominantly held within specialised traditional institutions and oral repositories, ethnography provides the methodological tools necessary to capture nuanced socio-cultural realities without forcing them into reductionist quantitative categories.

The study's sampling strategy was purposive and theoretical, selecting four key primary informants ('voices') who represent distinct, highly specialised niches within the Igbo spiritual-ecological network. Four participants were purposively selected because they represented four complementary perspectives relevant to the research questions: divination, scholarly interpretation, spiritual practice, and fauna trade. Data collection continued until the researchers judged that additional interviews were unlikely to generate substantially different information within these four categories. The participant selection criteria included a minimum of 10 years of professional/traditional experience, geographical location within Ebonyi and Enugu States, active involvement with fauna-related practices and indigenous communication, and explicit willingness to participate under informed consent protocols. The four participants are:

1. The Diviner (Onyemечи Ariwa): Representing the 'custodian' perspective. As a practising traditional diviner operating in Ebonyi State with over twenty years of professional experience, his interview was conducted on June 15 and 16, 2025. His narrative offers deep insight into the operational mechanics of *Afa* divination, the sacred enforcement of *Nso-Ala* taboos, and how traditional spiritual protocols simultaneously establish inadvertent fauna sanctuaries while mandating specific animal sacrifices.
2. The Diviner-Scholar (Emeritus Professor John Anenechukwu Umeh): Representing the 'philosophical and cosmological' perspective. As an accomplished Igbo diviner and renowned emeritus professor at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and author of the authoritative text *After God is Dibia*, his interview took place on July 10, 2025. Professor Umeh provides profound theoretical grounding regarding Igbo intellectual traditions, cosmic cybernetics, and the metaphysical foundation of *Afa*.
3. The Spiritualist (Onyeozu Ezenagu Chinonso): Representing the 'interpreter and syncretic practitioner' perspective. Her interview was conducted on July 14, 2025, drawing on over a decade of practice. Her narrative reveals the practical application of spiritual fauna utility, surrogate life-replacement rituals (*Igbata Mmadu / Igbalu Isi*), and the operational integration of traditional fauna symbolism within contemporary spiritual care.
4. The Spiritual Fauna Vendor (Melody Chinemerem): Representing the 'market and trade' perspective. Her interview was conducted on July 14, 2025. Operating within major regional markets with extensive trade

experience, her empirical insights illuminate the commercial political economy, supply chain dynamics, regional fauna scarcities, and cross-border trade networks driving the demand for ritual animal pharmacopoeia.

Geographically, the study was anchored within Igbo communities of southeastern Nigeria, with extensive fieldwork concentrated in Ebonyi State and Enugu State. Primary qualitative data were gathered between June 6th and July 25, 2025, through semi-structured, in-depth oral history interview(s) consisting of in-depth interview session per participant lasting approximately 2 to 3 hours, supplemented by naturalistic observations of shrine sites, ritual spaces, and specialised spiritual supply markets. All interviews were conducted in a bilingual medium combining English and Igbo, recorded in video format, and transcribed verbatim without requiring external translation as the researcher was fully fluent in both languages. Interview recordings and field notes were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. Initial codes were developed from recurrent concepts in the data, including sacred protection, ritual utilisation, animal symbolism, fauna scarcity, indigenous communication, and conservation practices. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes corresponding to the study objectives.

Recognising the delicate nature of sacred knowledge, research ethics were rigorously maintained through culturally sensitive protocols. In dealing with esoteric ritual practices, informed consent extended beyond standard written documentation to encompass 'spiritual consent', respecting strict boundaries regarding sacred items that could not be photographed, recorded, or publicly disclosed. Verbal and written informed consent were secured from all participants prior to audio-visual recording. Participants were fully briefed on the scholarly objectives of the study, guaranteed autonomy, and granted the right to review or restrict specific disclosures to ensure the research serves to empower and document indigenous heritage rather than exoticise traditional knowledge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: ECO-SPIRITUALITY AND ANIMAL UTILITY

In Western secular paradigms, non-human animals are predominantly classified through biological, ecological, or utilitarian economic taxonomies. Within the Igbo cosmological worldview, however, animal fauna transcends biological categorisation to function as active spiritual 'workers' embedded within a dynamic cosmic hierarchy. At the core of Igbo ontology is the concept of *Ike* (vital force), an animating spiritual energy that permeates the cosmos, establishing direct operational continuity between the visible physical world (*Ala Mmadu*) and the

invisible metaphysical realm (*Ala Mmuo*). Animating this cyclical universe are continuous interactions among supreme deities, earth spirits, ancestors, humans, and non-human fauna.

In his seminal treatise *After God is Dibia* (1997), Emeritus Professor John Anenechukwu Umeh defines *Afa* divination not as a superstitious fortune-telling technique, but as the primary intellectual language of the spirit world and the foundational pillar of Igbo sacred science. Umeh conceptualises *Afa* as a complex cybernetic information system utilised by traditional societies to decode universal mysteries, diagnose socio-spiritual disequilibrium, and maintain equilibrium between physical communities and metaphysical forces. The *Dibia Afa* (diviner) functions as a cosmic information technician who, through consecrated diagnostic instruments, most notably the *Nkpulu Afa* (divination seeds derived from the sacred *Offor* tree), accesses a vast matrix of symbolic codes. While Umeh clarifies that *Afa* divination itself is conducted using consecrated seeds rather than animal bodies, the divinatory process routinely identifies specific sacred animals required to perform therapeutic, protective, or apotropaic rituals designed to avert impending individual or communal catastrophes (J. A. Umeh, personal communication, July 10, 2025).

This triadic spiritual linkage (Ancestors/Deities – Humans – Fauna) profoundly shapes ecological management through the deployment of 'ecological imaginations.' As Clingerman *et al.* (2011) demonstrate, ethnographic realities across traditional societies reveal that spiritual belief systems frequently operate as potent mechanisms for fauna conservation, generating a framework of 'spiritual accountability' that preserves ecosystems. In Igbo communities, traditional taboo systems known as *Nso-Ala* enforce strict behavioural boundaries. Specific animal species are designated as divine totems, consubstantial kin to particular human lineages, rendering their killing, hunting, or consumption an egregious moral and spiritual offence.

Accounts obtained from the study participants indicate that certain taboo systems may contribute to the protection of culturally significant species in selected communities. For example, participant accounts and broader contextual observations note how taboo systems operate across various locales: in Awka (Anambra State), sacred monkey populations (*Enwe*) roam unmolested through human settlements; in Uburu (Ebonyi State), the green snake is revered and protected; while across various Igbo communities, species such as the Royal Python (*Eke*) are held sacred as earthly symbols of aquatic deities. Harming these totemic species constitutes an act of *Nso-Ala* that attracts severe spiritual retribution, requiring elaborate purification rituals to cleanse the offender and the land. This sacred ecology may provide a strong culturally embedded mechanism for environmental protection, particularly where formal conservation enforcement is limited. Diviners and spiritual custodians express a direct

religious obligation to ensure the survival of these species, as the total eradication of sacred fauna would irreparably disrupt the empirical media through which their spiritual arts operate.

The existential paradox: Sacred protection versus ritual exploitation

Crucially, the empirical findings of this study uncover a profound existential paradox embedded within this eco-spiritual system (Table 1). The same 'metaphysical potency' that affords sacred protection to certain species simultaneously drives their systematic physical destruction to satisfy ritual demands. Because specific fauna is recognised as possessing unique spiritual properties, diagnostic divinatory inquiries frequently mandate their physical sacrifice, dismemberment, or utilisation in ritual pharmacopoeia. This dynamic creates an intense, specialised ecological pressure on specific fauna populations.

While modern international conservation organisations focus almost exclusively on bushmeat hunting, habitat loss, and commercial wildlife trade, they systematically ignore the significant pressure exerted by 'spiritual utility.' As Professor Umeh highlighted, an animal within Igbo cosmology occupies a dual space: it is simultaneously revered as a sacred spiritual worker and demanded as an indispensable sacrificial surrogate (personal communication, July 10, 2025). This paradox exposes the tension between existential survival and ritual annihilation.

This ecological vulnerability is further amplified by socio-cultural shifts. Contemporary scholarship (Okonkwo and Achunike, 2024; Nkama *et al.*, 2022) highlights how rapid urbanisation, land commercialisation, and aggressive Christian evangelicalism have systematically degraded traditional eco-spiritual practices. Ancient ecological conservation rites, such as *Igwo-Iyi* (the sacred annual purification of communal streams, which historically protected aquatic fauna) and the preservation of sacred groves (which provided unmolested avian nesting canopies), are increasingly abandoned or destroyed as 'demonic.' As Nkama *et al.* (2022) observe, demographic mobility and urban expansions have introduced large populations of non-indigenous settlers into traditional communities. These transient populations lack cosmological bonds with the local landscape and do not recognise local *Nso-Ala* taboos. Consequently, species such as *Eke* (python), *Ewi* (giant rat), and *Enwe* (monkeys), which once thrived under sacred protection, are now aggressively hunted for commercial bushmeat. When the spiritual fear of taboo dissipates, traditional fauna protection mechanisms collapse.

This breakdown underscores what Simanjuntak *et al.* (2024) term the urgent necessity of 'faith-based pedagogy', an integrative educational approach that

Table 1. The existential paradox: Sacred protection versus ritual exploitation of key fauna.

Species	Sacred Significance	Protection Mechanism	Ritual Demand	Conservation Implication
Python (Eke)	Held sacred as the earthly symbol of aquatic deities (e.g., Idemili) and cosmic balance.	Traditional Nso-Ala taboos prohibit killing, hunting, or harming the python under threat of severe spiritual retribution.	Utilised in cleansing rites and diagnostic remedies; skin/body elements serve as universal ritual catalysts.	Potential conflict between traditional spiritual protection and increasing vulnerability due to demographic shifts and commercial bushmeat hunting.
Owl (Ikwikwi)	Regarded as a mandatory spiritual herald and messenger that navigates celestial, terrestrial, and subterranean planes.	Cultural reverence and fear of spiritual repercussions associated with bringing deliberate harm to nocturnal messengers.	High demand for averting impending mortality, neutralizing enemy spiritual mirrors, and breaking fatal plots.	Potential localised depletion and severe harvesting pressure on nocturnal avian populations, as noted by field informants.
Male Vulture (Ezeku-Udele)	Classified as the paramount spiritual vessel and ultimate mediator across existential planes.	High sacred/rare status within traditional cosmology; protected by customary norms governing sacred birds.	Essential component in high-potency life-replacement (Igbalu Isi) rituals and toxicological antitoxin remedies.	Acute risk of severe extraction pressure leading to local extinction, forcing reliance on external regional trade networks.
Monkey / Chimpanzee (Enwe / Adaka)	Associated with ancestral links and human-like intelligence; protected in specific sacred groves (e.g., Awka).	Cultural prohibitions and sacred grove sanctuaries where hunting is traditionally banned.	Hands (Aka Enwe) or head (Isi Enwe) deployed as human sacrificial surrogates to sever deep spiritual chains.	Severe tension between traditional sacred preservation and habitat loss or commercial bushmeat exploitation.
Parrot / Malimbe (Awume)	Prized for its vibrant communication capabilities and high-altitude flight across spiritual dimensions.	General cultural valuation of intelligent avian fauna within traditional institutional frameworks.	Highly sought after for complex divinatory inquiries, diagnostic communication, and spiritual proxies when live specimens are scarce.	Localised population decline in regional forests, driving cross-border sourcing from neighboring West and Central African nations.

Source: Authors computation.

combines deep ecology with indigenous faith systems to restore sustainable environmental stewardship. Understanding this dynamic requires recognising the African cosmological view of nature articulated by Appiah-Kubi and Aabaa Matai (2019) and Zeitlyn (2020), wherein non-human fauna act as the 'long legs of the law', metaphysical heralds whose physical presence, vocalisations, and behavioural anomalies convey direct diagnostic warnings from the spirit world. However, as Onuorah (2024) note, because traditional rituals require specific biological components to activate esoteric spiritual mechanics, ritual demand for high-potency fauna remains relentless.

The empirical consequences of this demand were detailed during key informant interviews with Melody Chinemerem, a major vendor of spiritual fauna in Ebonyi State. Melody reported that, based on her experience in the spiritual-fauna trade, she had observed substantial declines in the local availability of avian and mammalian species such as *Ikwikwi* (Owl), *Awume* (Parrot species),

and *Ezeku-Udele* (Male Vulture). This localised depletion has forced spiritual vendors to establish cross-border trade infrastructures, importing live animals and biological parts from neighbouring West, Central, and East African nations, including Cameroon, Ghana, and Kenya, representing Central, West, and East African sources, respectively (Personal communication, July 14, 2025).

Melody further explained the esoteric logic underlying the exceptionally high demand for avian species, attributing it to their operational 'triple cycle of nature.' Within Igbo eco-spiritual mechanics, birds represent supreme spiritual instruments because they seamlessly navigate across three distinct physical and metaphysical planes of existence: the celestial plane (flying through the atmosphere), the terrestrial plane (perching and nesting on trees and land), and the subterranean plane (foraging within the soil). Birds like the white pigeon (*Nduru Ocha*) and the owl (*Ikwikwi*) are thus viewed as ultimate spiritual proxies capable of ascending to metaphysical heights to intercept mortality and avert impending death (Personal

communication, July 14, 2025).

This dynamic is exemplified in the ritual of *Igbalu Isi* or *Igbata Mmadu* (head replacement / substitution ritual), as elaborated by spiritualist Onyezi Ezenagu Chinonso. In cases where divination reveals that an individual is marked by severe spiritual affliction or impending death, fauna elements are deployed as physical surrogates for human life. Ezenagu recounted a case in which a patient whom she described as critically ill reportedly improved following a ritual involving a live *Nduru Ocha*. This account is presented as the practitioner's interpretation of the event and is not independently verified by clinical evidence. In extreme cases where human life hangs in critical balance, *Ezeku-Udele* (the male vulture) is classified as the paramount spiritual vessel for head-replacement rites (Personal communication, July 14, 2025).

Interestingly, Melody Chinemerem offered a profound eco-spiritual explanation for the localised disappearance of fauna in Abakaliki, Ebonyi State. She posited that wildlife scarcity is not merely a biological phenomenon of deforestation, but a direct consequence of moral desecration. In her view, guardian fauna species voluntarily desert lands where sacred moral boundaries have been shattered, specifically through the spilling of fraternal blood. She cited historical inter-communal conflicts between the Izzi, Ezza, and Ikwo sub-groups who share a common ancestral lineage originating from Ekwemenyi, as severe spiritual violations (fratricide). This blood pollution desecrates the earth goddess *Ala*, prompting guardian fauna to spiritually withdraw, thereby exacerbating the local scarcity of essential ritual species.

Categorisation of spiritual fauna and ritual applications

Based on extensive empirical field interviews conducted with key traditional practitioners (Onyemечи Ariwa, Emeritus Professor John Umeh, Onyezi Ezenagu Chinonso, and Melody Chinemerem), Table 2 comprehensively categorises the primary animal fauna utilised within Igbo eco-spiritual practices, detailing their Igbo and English names, spiritual classifications, diagnostic conditions, and specific ritual applications.

Oramedia Systems as Ecological Knowledge Archives

Addressing the third objective of this study requires interrogating how indigenous communication systems function as the primary structural mechanism for sustaining the intergenerational transmission of eco-spiritual knowledge. Participants reported that the decline of indigenous communication infrastructures may contribute to the weakening of culturally embedded conservation norms and, consequently, may increase vulnerability to biodiversity loss. When traditional media

platforms atrophy, the cosmological narratives that articulate the spiritual significance of animal fauna cease to circulate, leading directly to the collapse of community conservation ethics.

Within Igbo society, indigenous communication technology operates through a sophisticated array of acoustic, visual, oral, and performance-based channels. Participants reported that acoustic sound instruments are used to communicate community-level directives and environmental activities:

1. The *Ikoro* (Grand Slit Drum): Carved from massive hardwood trunks, the *Ikoro* is the supreme voice of communal authority. Reserved for extraordinary announcements, its deep acoustic reverberations transmit messages across vast spatial distances, summoning village elders, declaring sacred sanctions, inaugurating major ecological festivals, and announcing mandatory community labour for watershed management.
2. The *Ekwe* (Wooden Slit Gong): A medium-like acoustic instrument utilised by civic authorities, age-grades, and title societies to communicate operational directives, enforce local laws, and assemble citizens for routine environmental sanitation and stream clearance.
3. The *Ogene* (Forged Iron Gong): Participants reported that the *Ogene* may be used by town criers (*Onye Ogene*) to summon community members and broadcast public notices at dawn or dusk, including announcements relating to customary restrictions, environmental activities, and taboo enforcement.

Complementing these acoustic technologies are oral performance structures, including moonlight storytelling, sacred songs, heroic poetry, proverb recitations, masquerade theatricality (*Mmanwu*), and age-grade initiations. During moonlight storytelling and masquerade performances, children and youth do not merely consume entertainment; they are systematically instructed in indigenous ecological science. Narratives explicitly detail why the Royal Python must never be harmed, how the Woodpecker (*Otulu-kpokpo*) teaches perseverance, why sacred groves house ancestral spirits, and what spiritual penalties follow the desecration of land (*Ala*). Oral traditions thus function as living historical archives (Vansina, 1985), continuously converting abstract ecological principles into shared socio-cultural consciousness.

The decline of these traditional media platforms under the weight of modern electronic media, Western urbanisation, and religious shifts has created a profound communicative void. As traditional stories, drum signals, and ritual performances fade from daily community life, younger generations inherit no cognitive framework regarding *Nso-Ala* or the spiritual utility of non-human fauna. Devoid of their cosmological narratives, sacred pythons, monkeys, and vultures are degraded from

Table 2. Categories of the primary animal fauna utilised within Igbo eco-spiritual practices.

Category of Spiritual Work	Fauna (Igbo & English Name)	Key Informants	Diagnostic Situation / Condition	Spiritual Utility & Ritual Application / Evidence Statement
Sacrificial Animals	Ogazi (Guinea Fowl)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	High-potency sacrificial rites requiring elevated spiritual power.	Deployed as a highly potent alternative to standard domestic fowl (Okuko); valued for its resilience, wild energy, and rapid spiritual mediation (Participant Statement).
Sacrificial Animals	Avuke (Species of Fowl / Okuko)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Rituals addressing cognitive perspective or terrestrial limitations.	Mythologically held to possess vision transcending physical flight; utilised in specialised rites balancing terrestrial and celestial sight (Participant Statement).
Medicinal Animals	Nkene (Small Bird Species)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Severe chronic respiratory afflictions (e.g., persistent cough).	The skull of the bird is prepared as a consecrated drinking vessel, traditionally believed to absorb and heal respiratory ailments; requires a sacrificed bird (Participant Statement).
Medicinal Animals	Anugwu / Ichok (Small Bird Species)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Epidemic skin diseases, viral outbreaks, or severe poxes.	Utilised through esoteric medicinal preparations to neutralise or cure complex bodily afflictions and skin infections; formulas remain guarded (Participant Statement).
Messenger Animals	Awume (Parrot / Malimbe)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Complex divinatory inquiry and diagnostic communication.	Highly prized for divinatory clarity; when live specimens are unavailable, its vibrant feathers serve as physical proxies for spiritual inquiry (Participant Statement).
Messenger Animals	Agu-ulo (Wall Gecko)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Nocturnal monitoring, defence, or retribution rites.	Functions as a silent spiritual monitor within domestic spaces; employed in apotropaic self-defence and targeted counter-surveillance (Participant Statement).
Messenger Animals	Ikwikwi (Owl)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Averting impending mortality; blocking enemy surveillance.	Acts as a mandatory herald warning of evil; deployed to neutralise enemy spiritual mirrors and dismantle fatal spiritual plots (Participant Statement).
Messenger Animals	Egbe (Kite / Hawk)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Long-range spiritual delivery and high-altitude inquiry.	Serves as an operational substitute for the rare Eagle (Ugo); leveraged for its soaring capacity to dispatch petitions to high spiritual coordinates (Participant Statement).
Protective Animals	Agwuogwu (Praying Mantis)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Repelling witchcraft; bulletproof fortification (Odeshi).	Despite small physical stature, utilised to construct potent protective charms that repel malevolent attacks; requires periodic ritual renewal (Participant Statement).
Protective Animals	Nkita (Dog)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Spiritual exorcism; pursuing malevolent entities.	Possesses immense spiritual resonance; its barking disrupts negative spectral forces, pursuing malevolent entities to rescue distressed human souls (Participant Statement).
Protective Animals	Nkapi (Shrew / Small Mouse)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Detecting or executing nocturnal malevolent projections.	Associated with nocturnal surveillance; utilised as a physical vessel through which spiritual projections are monitored or repelled (Participant Statement).
Protective Animals	Mbe-mmiri / Mbe-ala (Water & Land Tortoise)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Fortification against physical and spiritual violence.	Central component in constructing invulnerability charms and bulletproof defences owing to its impenetrable shell; symbolises endurance (Participant Statement).
Protective Animals	Ngwere (Lizard)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Binding adversaries or neutralising afflictions.	Used to symbolically bind adversaries to hinder negative progress; conversely, breaking its limb transfers human affliction onto the creature (Participant Statement).
Progress / Awale	Ugo (Eagle)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	High-level advancement, divine favor, financial breakthroughs.	The supreme symbol of spiritual authority; utilised in Olu-Awele rites to elevate practitioners above adversaries and secure breakthroughs (Participant Statement).

Table 2. Contd.

Category of Spiritual Work	Fauna (Igbo & English Name)	Key Informants	Diagnostic Situation / Condition	Spiritual Utility & Ritual Application / Evidence Statement
Progress / Awale	Obagwu (Duck)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Financial restitution, smooth life flow, accident prevention.	Associated with balance and fluidity; unauthorised killing mandates instant ritual restitution (placing money) to avert persistent mechanical failures (Participant Statement).
Progress / Awale	Osa / Ururu (Squirrel & Ground Squirrel)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Overcoming stagnation; rapid progress; invisibility rites.	Praised for agility and speed; integrated into progress remedies to accelerate outcomes and construct invisibility charms during danger (Participant Statement).
Progress / Awale	Ogwumagala (Chameleon)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Enhancing spiritual vision; environmental adaptability.	Employed to clear blurred spiritual vision and facilitate seamless adaptation within hostile environments; often imported from regional trade (Participant Statement).
Progress / Awale	Agwo (Snake)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Neutralising lethal charms; universal ritual catalyst.	Venom and body elements act as universal spiritual solvents; essential foundational catalyst required to activate complex protective charms (Participant Statement).
Release / Itopu n'agbụ	Otulu-kpokpo (Woodpecker)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Breaking through severe structural obstacles and barriers.	Symbolises persistent labor and barrier destruction; utilised in high-potency breakthrough rites to shatter persistent life blockages (Participant Statement).
Release / Itopu n'agbụ	Ezeku-Udele (Male Vulture)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Ezenagu	Life replacement (Igbalu Isi); powerful antitoxin remedies.	Extremely rare; according to informants, one egg is traditionally believed to function as an emetic in poisoning-related ritual practices, while the bird serves as a supreme surrogate for human life.
Release / Itopu n'agbụ	Enwe / Adaka (Monkey / Chimpanzee)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Deliverance from deep spiritual bondage and chains.	Hands (Aka Enwe) or head (Isi Enwe) are deployed as proxies to sever spiritual chains binding human victims; acts as human sacrificial surrogate (Participant Statement).
Release / Itopu n'agbụ	Atulu / Ewu (Sheep / Goat)	Onyemechi, Umeh, Melody	Substitution rites for terminal illness or barrenness.	The sheep (Atulu) is ontologically closest to human life; slicing its ear transfers terminal illness, barrenness, or impending death from human to animal (Participant Statement).

Source: Authors computation.

protected spiritual kin into mere biological commodities or targets for hunting. Consequently, the breakdown of indigenous communication institutions severely diminishes the public arenas in which ecological obligations were historically rehearsed, reinforced, and socially sanctioned.

To arrest this decline, this study advocates for what Simanjuntak et al. (2024) describe as a 'faith-based pedagogy' integrated with modern communication technologies. Rather than viewing modern digital media as inherently antagonistic to traditional knowledge, digital platforms, including podcasts, digital video archives, community radio, and interactive educational media, should be strategically deployed to archive, curate, and broadcast indigenous ecological narratives. Digitising the acoustic rhythms of the Ikoro, recording oral histories of elder practitioners, and documenting sacred fauna taboos creates a complementary digital archive capable of preserving endangered indigenous knowledge systems for future generations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings indicate that cosmological beliefs constitute an important social and cultural factor influencing how selected animal species are perceived, protected, and utilised within the communities represented in this study. These indigenous belief systems impose severe ritual demands upon specific fauna while simultaneously establishing robust, culturally enforced sanctuaries that protect species from commercial exploitation. As destablished through qualitative field inquiries, when critical species, such as *Ngwere*, *Nkene*, *Awume*, *Ikwikwi*, *Egbe*, *Ugo*, *Agwo*, *Otulu-kpokpo*, and *Ezeku-Udele* face localised extinction, an essential channel of communication between the human community and the metaphysical realm is permanently severed. Divinatory diagnostic practices and ritual therapeutic interventions cannot function effectively if these foundational fauna species disappear.

Consequently, contemporary conservation interventions

may face limitations where they do not adequately recognise locally embedded cultural values, customary institutions, and indigenous environmental knowledge. Standard statutory frameworks that rely exclusively on legal bans, state rangers, and national park boundaries remain largely ineffective in rural African landscapes where state enforcement is weak and socio-cultural values dominate. To bridge this divide, this paper proposes a Hybridised Model of Biodiversity Conservation. This integrative model explicitly incorporates the 'metaphysical potency' and cultural valuation of animal fauna into formal environmental policy. Based on the findings of this study, the following policy and research recommendations are advanced:

1. Establishment of Community-Based Conservation Committees: Environmental agencies and conservation organisations should establish community-based conservation committees that include recognised traditional custodians, community leaders, women and youth representatives, and conservation professionals. Such committees could identify culturally protected species, document community conservation rules, and develop agreed protocols for resolving conflicts between ritual utilisation and wildlife protection.
2. Institutional Revitalisation of Indigenous Media Channels: Community leadership and local government authorities should actively support the preservation and public performance of traditional acoustic media (Ikoro, Ekwe, Ogene) and oral performance arts to regularly reinforce community ecological regulations, taboo boundaries, and environmental ethics.
3. Development of Digital Knowledge Repositories: Academic institutions and cultural ministries must leverage modern digital media technologies to document, record, and archive indigenous eco-spiritual knowledge, oral histories, and fauna taxonomies, creating open-access educational resources for secondary and tertiary institutions.
4. Establishment of Sacred Grove Protection Frameworks: Statutory environmental laws should officially recognise and legally fortify traditional Nso-Ala sacred groves and community fauna sanctuaries, granting legal protection to community-managed ecological zones.

List of Interviews

Name	Town	Occupation	Method of collection	Date of collection
Mr. Onyemechi Ariwa	Nkalagu, Ebonyi State	Diviner	Audio Visual Recording	June 15 and 16, 2025
Emeritus Professor John Anenechukwu Umeh	Enugu City, Enugu State	Diviner-scholar	Audio Visual Recording	July 10, 2025
Mrs. Onyeozu Ezenagu Chinonso	Abakaliki, Ebonyi State	Spiritualist	Audio Visual Recording	July 14, 2025
Mrs. Melody Chinemerem	Abakaliki, Ebonyi State	Spiritual Fauna Vendor	Audio Visual Recording	July 14, 2025

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