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CULTURAL HERITAGE

Totemic Animals and Conservation in Igbo Communities: *The Case of Sclater's Guenon*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

the Amina (or enwe ngenembo/ akaanweze/arikwu, 'Sclater's guenons'), (pictured) is a monkey endemic to southeastern Nigeria is sacred and their killing taboo in many communities near Owerri and

Lagwa.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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In many traditional Igbo communities in southeastern Nigeria, totemic animals hold a special place in cultural and spiritual life. These animals are often viewed as sacred protectors of the community, with taboos surrounding their killing or harm. This practice has not only reinforced the spiritual and cultural identity of these communities but has also played a significant role in the conservation of various species. One prominent example is Sclater's guenon (*Cercopithecus sclateri*), locally known as Amina, which is regarded as sacred in several Igbo communities near Owerri and Lagwa.

01

The Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Totemic Animals

In Igbo cosmology, animals often serve as mediators between the spiritual and physical realms. Totemic animals are believed to embody the presence of ancestral spirits or deities, offering protection, guidance, or blessings to the community. For communities near Owerri and Lagwa, the Amina holds such a position of reverence.

The Amina, also referred to as enwe ngenembo, akaanweze, or arikwu, is a monkey species endemic to southeastern Nigeria.



Historically, these monkeys have been regarded as sacred, with myths and oral traditions linking them to the spiritual heritage of the Igbo people. Killing or harming the Amina is taboo, and they are often associated with sacred forests, which serve as their primary habitat. These forests, in turn, are protected spaces, further contributing to biodiversity conservation.

02

Conservation Impact of Sacred Totems

The reverence for totemic animals like the Amina has inadvertently supported conservation efforts in Igboland. By establishing taboos against their killing, Igbo communities have effectively created localized conservation zones, safeguarding not only the Amina but also other flora and fauna within sacred forests.

Lynne R. Baker, in her study on sacred monkeys in Igboland, highlights the positive conservation outcomes of these traditional practices. Sclater's guenons have maintained relatively healthy populations in regions where their sacred status is upheld. Sacred forests, often designated as the dwelling places of spirits or deities, serve as sanctuaries for these animals, offering refuge from hunting and habitat destruction.

03

Challenges to the Sacred Status of Totemic Animals

Despite their historical protection, totemic animals like the Amina face mounting threats due to modern societal changes:



1. **Urbanization and Deforestation:** The rapid growth of urban areas and population pressures in southeastern Nigeria have led to significant deforestation. Sacred forests, once integral to Igbo communities, are being encroached upon or destroyed for agricultural, industrial, and residential purposes.
2. **Oil Industry and Economic Activities:** The expansion of the oil industry in the Niger Delta region has exacerbated environmental degradation. Pollution, land clearing, and industrial development have significantly impacted the ecosystems that support sacred species like Sclater's guenons.
3. **Changing Religious and Cultural Beliefs:** The spread of Christianity and other modern religions has diminished the influence of traditional beliefs in many Igbo communities. Practices once deemed sacred are increasingly viewed as outdated or superstitious, eroding the cultural frameworks that protected totemic animals.
4. **Hunting and Bushmeat Trade:** Economic hardships have also driven some communities to hunt animals previously considered sacred. The bushmeat trade, fueled by demand in urban centers, further endangers species like the Amina.

04

Efforts to Preserve Sacred Species

Recognizing the ecological and cultural importance of totemic animals, conservationists have sought to integrate traditional beliefs with modern conservation strategies. Collaborative initiatives between local communities, government agencies, and NGOs aim to:

- Promote environmental education and awareness of the ecological benefits of protecting sacred forests and species.



- Empower communities to conserve their natural heritage through sustainable livelihood programs.
- Establish legal protections for sacred forests and their inhabitants.

Lynne R. Baker's research emphasizes the need to involve local communities in conservation efforts. By respecting and revitalizing traditional beliefs, conservationists can align ecological goals with cultural practices, ensuring the long-term survival of species like Sclater's guenons.

05

Conclusion

The sacred status of totemic animals in Igbo communities, exemplified by the Amina, represents a unique intersection of culture and conservation. While traditional beliefs have historically safeguarded these species, modern challenges threaten their survival. Addressing these threats requires a holistic approach that blends respect for cultural traditions with contemporary conservation strategies.

By preserving the totemic animals and the ecosystems they inhabit, we not only protect biodiversity but also honor the cultural heritage of communities that have long served as stewards of their natural environment.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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