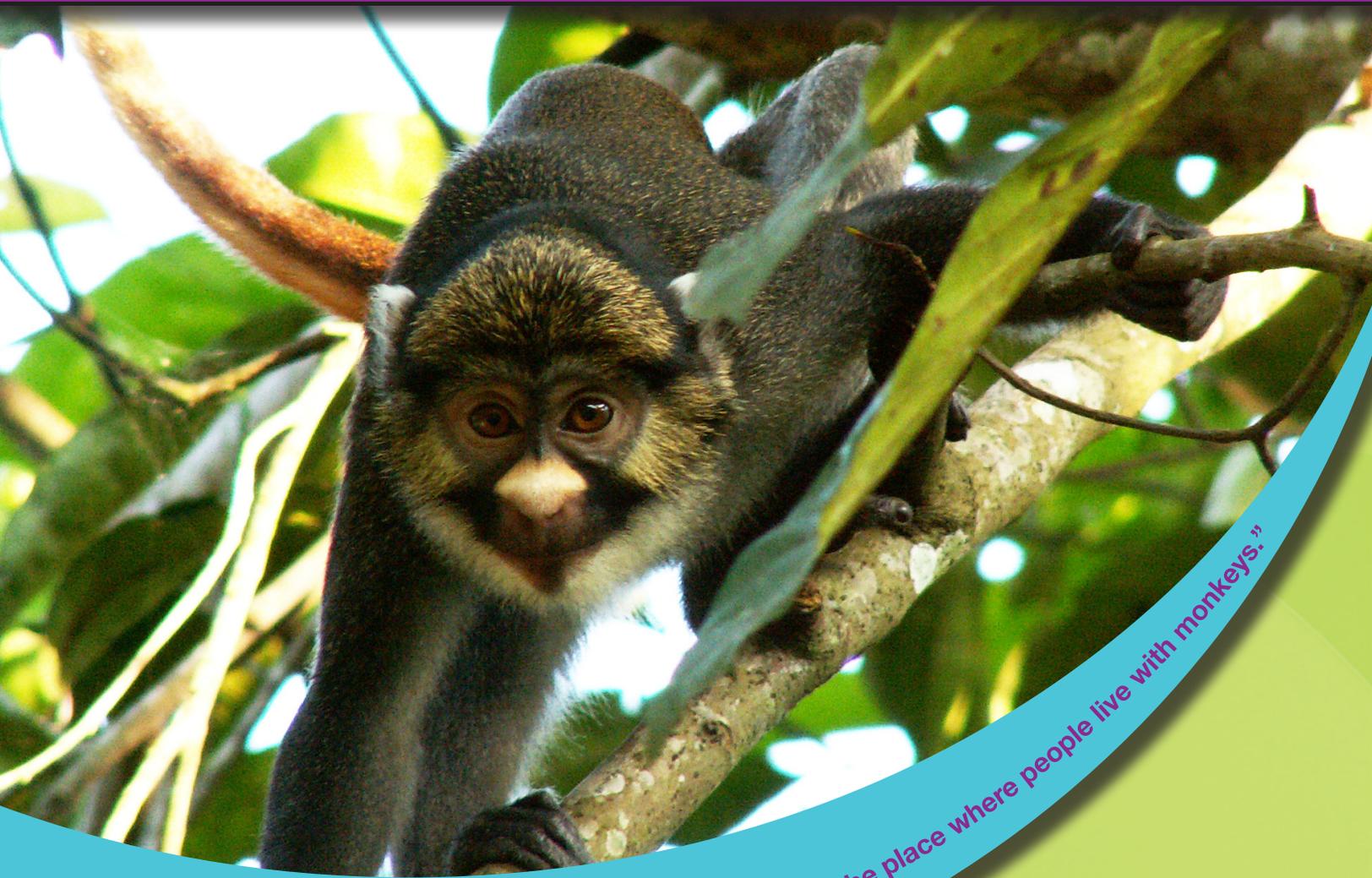


ENWÉ LAGWA

THE MONKEYS OF LAGWA



"Our culture must be preserved.... Tell the whole world, this is the place where people live with monkeys."

**Lagwa and Umunokwu
Autonomous Communities
Okwuato, Aboh Mbaise,
Imo State, Nigeria**



INTRODUCTION

Throughout most of Nigeria, monkeys and other wild animals are hunted by people. This makes them very shy and difficult to see in their natural homes. Due to tradition and culture, however, the people of Lagwa and Umunokwu do not eat, harm, or kill monkeys. Umunokwu, formerly one of the eight villages of Lagwa, is now an autonomous community. In this brochure, “Lagwa” refers to both Lagwa and Umunokwu in Okwuato, Aboh Mbaise Local Government Area, Imo State, Nigeria.

The particular species that inhabits Lagwa is called Sclater’s monkey (scientific name: *Cercopithecus sclateri*). This rare species is special because it is found only in southeastern Nigeria – and nowhere else in the entire world. The people of Lagwa are known as “Imerienwe” because they have always lived together with monkeys. Lagwa people take pride in this. They consider the monkeys to be “daughters of the land” and “gifts from God.” One Chief explained, “When visitors come, we take them to the places where the monkeys are. They will be happy to see them, how they climb, how they jump from one tree to the other, and how they behave.... Such people will eventually start praising the people of Lagwa, and say, ‘Ah, Lagwa people are blessed with these monkeys.’”

In the olden days, monkeys lived in forests where they found enough food to eat. However, due to human population growth and development, nearly all of Lagwa’s forests have been cleared for farms or buildings. As a result, monkeys now seek food near people’s homes and so live very close to people. According to the late HRH Eze Apostle Alex Sonde Iwuh, we “destroyed the forest — felling all the trees where the monkeys enjoyed themselves, where the monkeys plucked bananas, oranges, and other food. Since they have nothing to eat, they have to come and take something to eat.”

Because of the unique relationship between the people and the monkeys, Lagwa is known far and wide. According to HRH Eze Cosmas Onyeneke, “We are known all over the world. The

monkey is the only thing we inherited from our forefathers that still exists today. They are the symbol of Lagwa. We haven’t any other symbol apart from that. We thank Almighty God for making it possible for us to live until today and inherit what our forefathers left for us.”

Indeed, the protection of the monkeys dates back to the origin of the community, and as a result, monkeys are prominently represented in local folklore. This brochure is a compilation of folklore collected by Lynne R. Baker, PhD, during formal and informal interviews conducted with Lagwa residents over the past several years.

“...Ah, **Lagwa people are blessed with these monkeys.**”



WHY ARE MONKEYS PROTECTED IN LAGWA?

Although slightly different variations of the story exist, the following version is commonly known:

Before any person lived on this land, there were monkeys. Monkeys lived in a big forest and ate the foods available there. One day a man called Agwa came to this land. He brought with him his wife, who was pregnant. Each morning Agwa left his home to tend his farm and hunt animals. One day he was delayed in the bush, and his pregnant wife became very weak from hunger. While she was waiting for her husband, monkeys came to their compound and began picking fruits from trees. The monkeys dropped these fruits for the woman, who was then able to eat and nourish herself and the baby growing inside her. When Agwa returned, his wife told him what had happened. After the monkeys helped the woman again the following day, Agwa was so grateful to the monkeys that he proclaimed from that day forward, any animal capable of such behaviour should not be killed or harmed by anyone in his family or village. And that is how the monkeys became cherished by the people of Lagwa.

Two other stories about why Lagwa people do not harm monkeys include...

When people go to farm and leave behind their young children, monkeys will gather around the children and watch over them until the parents return. If any danger is detected, such as a dangerous animal, the monkeys will carry the child to safety or sound an alarm to alert the parents that there is danger.

In the olden days, monkeys assisted Lagwa people during inter-village wars. At that time, the forests served as a bastion or buffer between Lagwa and neighbouring villages. Monkeys lived in the forests. When they sighted a stranger or any non-indigene carrying guns or other weapons, the monkeys would sound an alarm to alert the people of Lagwa. One Lagwa resident explained, “The people would then go out and defend themselves. By so doing, the monkeys became so endeared to the hearts of our ancestors.”



Photo Credit: A. Witzens/CERCOPAN

“...**monkeys** will gather around the **children** and **watch over** them...”



DO THE MONKEYS EVER TRAVEL OUTSIDE OF LAGWA?

Over time, monkeys have learned that they are safe within the borders of Lagwa and so do not, unless by accident, venture outside. According to one Chief, the monkeys “know the boundaries as if they were cautioned by nature not to cross to other places; for if they do, those people kill them.” It is said that anytime a monkey strays to another village, it knows to locate the house of one of Lagwa’s daughters who is married there. Wherever they live, Lagwa indigenes will protect monkeys. The story goes...

A monkey once crossed the boundary and entered a neighbouring village. The inhabitants of that village pursued the monkey and tried to kill it. The monkey ran into the house of a Lagwa daughter who married in that village. The woman saw the monkey, locked her house, and told everyone to go away. Once nightfall came and the others finally left, she opened her house and let the monkey go free.

“...the monkeys “know the boundaries as if they were cautioned by nature...”



A similar story tells how a daughter of Lagwa married into a wicked family that caused her many problems. The people of Lagwa worried and discussed how to bring their daughter home. Before they could take action, a large group of monkeys from Lagwa travelled to the home of that woman. They covered the roof of her house and entered the kitchen. Nobody knows how they got there. When the people there saw the monkeys, they were shocked. Some ran inside the bush. When the woman’s husband saw this, he apologized to his in-laws, and there was peace between the families. And that daughter of Lagwa was never harmed again.



IS THERE A PENALTY FOR KILLING A MONKEY?

There are usually consequences for killing a monkey in Lagwa. Depending on the person asked, the penalty can be small or big. Residents have reported the following...

When an indigene of Lagwa accidentally tastes monkey meat, the person’s mouth or tongue becomes irritated.

There was a woman from this village who claimed that she will be eating monkey because of her new religious beliefs. She was eating them, but up to now, she is yet to give birth.

One person killed and ate a monkey. Afterward, he became mad.

If someone kills a monkey in Lagwa, others will despise him and won’t be friendly with him again.

A man cooked a monkey and ate it with his pregnant wife. After, the woman gave birth to a child that resembled a monkey.

Somebody came here to kill a monkey with a gun. After he killed the monkey, he was arrested and had to perform a burial for the monkey as if it were a human being.

Anyone who ate a monkey would have his speech impaired.

A person who kills or eats a monkey may fall sick, or someone in that person’s family will become sick.



“Somebody came here to kill a monkey with a gun. After..., he was arrested and had to perform a burial for the monkey as if it were a human being.”



When monkeys are wrestling on the ground, it is a sign that a prominent elderly person in the community will soon die.

If a monkey eats part of a fruit and the remaining portion is dropped, that portion can be eaten by anyone who has a cough. The cough will be cured.

Monkeys always know indigenes of Lagwa. Even if someone born in Lagwa lives abroad for many years, when he returns, the monkeys will recognize him.

During pear season, monkeys come to pluck the ripe ones. Children will gather under the pear tree. Monkeys will pluck pears and drop them for the children, just as the monkeys did for Agwa's wife. The children will be happy. The monkeys' character when Agwa was alive is the same as today.

A proverb says that "when you look at monkeys, they won't allow you to go to work." We love watching them. I still remember how I watched them as they wrestled. I forgot my mission and arrived late to where I was supposed to go.



☺☺ **Nature bestowed much sense in monkeys, just like human beings.** ☺☺

Monkeys are wonderful mothers. They carry their young ones on their stomachs and hold them very tight. When the mother monkey is jumping or climbing, the young one on her belly will never fall. When a group of monkeys finds food, the mother will take the food and give it to the young ones. She will not eat until the young ones are well fed first.

During the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War, all of Lagwa was ravaged, but the monkeys were never killed. If any soldier tried to shoot them, the monkeys would become invisible.

Monkeys discipline one another. They will excommunicate any monkey that has disobeyed by banishing it from Lagwa.

Monkeys deserted my kindred's compound because of an incident that took place many years ago. One of our brothers killed his younger brother. The monkeys saw this and started crying. They stayed for many days at the back of the compound and left after the burial and never returned.

Monkeys are very clever. Formerly, there were only bicycles and a few motorcycles in Lagwa, but now there are big cars. Monkeys will stand at the edge of the tarred road, and very carefully look left then right, before crossing.

I once saw monkeys on a tree behind our home. One was beating part of the tree like a drum, and the others started dancing to the sound.

The monkey is a funny animal – when you stone a monkey, it will collect the stone and throw it back at you.

When you are trying to collect firewood with a machete, monkeys will sometimes help you by breaking the branches of trees.

When any monkey is electrocuted by power lines, other monkeys gather around it until that monkey recovers or carry it off and wait for it to recover.

Monkeys wrestle according to their age groups. The adults act as referees. Females and other young ones cheer them. The defeated one leaves the ring for another competitor to face the victor.

Monkeys have taught me great lessons. I use the fruits of one particular tree almost every two days for my health; the fruits are medicinal. I discovered this by watching the monkeys eating the fruits. One day I said, "Okay, I will taste it." After tasting it, I saw the effectiveness of that tree.

Nature bestowed much sense in monkeys, just like human beings. Even some of them reason better than some human beings. You see, I have never seen a mad monkey, but I do see mad people.

From monkeys, we have learned a lot about love because they do not fight. It is not only from human beings that we can learn lessons, but also from the lives of animals, from how some animals behave. You see some husbands beating their wives, but you don't see monkeys beating their own wives.



I once went with a friend to a restaurant in another town. My friend asked the person serving us to bring bushmeat. The person brought meat with the plate covered and put it on the table with some bottles of beer. I asked, "My friend, what type of meat is this?" He said, "Monkey." I got up and went away.

Monkeys used to come every day to drink palm wine and finished all. So one day, the palm-wine tapper set a trap. A monkey climbed the palm tree and was caught by the leg. The monkey fell to the ground, still caught in the trap. The monkey cried and cried. Some monkeys surrounded and guarded over it. Others began to jump on the trap, and they continued to do so until the trap opened and the monkey was freed. They then helped carry that monkey and began to nurse it.



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For more information, contact Lynne R. Baker

Email: sclateri@yahoo.com

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† = Deceased