

## **SOUND SYMBOLISM AND SEMIOTIC REPRESENTATION OF AVIAN CALLS IN IGBO CULTURE**

**Onyinye Anulika Chiemezie**  
**Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka**  
[oa.chiemezie@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:oa.chiemezie@unizik.edu.ng)

### **Abstract**

This study investigates the mimicry and interpretation of avian calls in the Igbo language through sound symbolism and a semiotic lens. While birdsong has often been studied in biological and acoustic sciences, this work focuses on the ways Igbo oral traditions perceive, represent, and reinterpret bird vocalisations within cultural and linguistic contexts. Data were purposefully drawn from oral narratives, lullabies, folktales, and songs that incorporate avian calls or bird names. Two elderly Igbo males and females of the 55-75 age range were engaged in a semistructured, topic-guided interview. Sound symbolism and Peirce's triadic relationship in Semiotic theory are used to analyse the data. Three principal modes of representation were identified: onomatopoeia, direct imitation, and warblish. Onomatopoeia constitutes the most prominent strategy, as many Igbo bird names are phonologically derived from their characteristic calls, reinforcing sound symbolism and mnemonic identification. Direct imitation, practised particularly by children and hunters, highlights the playful and socialising dimensions of avian mimicry. Warblish, by contrast, involves replacing or extending birdcalls with Igbo syllables or phrases, producing dialogues that encode humour, moral lessons, and cultural values. Phonological analysis further revealed that pitch and vowel quality are culturally indexed to gender, with high-pitched calls interpreted as feminine and low-pitched calls as masculine. The findings underscore the role of avian calls as semiotic resources for ecological knowledge, oral performance, and cultural identity in Igbo society. The study concludes that bird calls are integral to Igbo communicative practices, bridging the natural and human worlds, and recommends documentation and further ethno-phonological research.

**Keywords:** Avian calls, Igbo language, Onomatopoeia, Warblish, Sound symbolism, Semiotics.

### **Introduction**

In the Igbo language, avian calls, e.g. chirps, squeaks, whistles, etc., are perceived that to be encoded, not just for bird communication, but it is expected to be understood by talented humans, and it is usually believed to bring divine messages. This is rare with other animal species. This is not peculiar to the Igbo community. Berwick et al. (2011) record Benbalese finches, a species of birds, capable of vocal sequences very close to the grammar of humans, while Zollinger and Brumm (2015) record the mimicking of sounds in the environment by Lyrebirds and mockingbirds. Other animals' calls, like the bleating of goats and sheep, barking of dogs or mooing of cows, are ordinarily considered animal calls and sometimes mimicked by humans to draw the attention of animals or describe some level of animalistic behaviours in humans, except in animation cases where technology gives speaking roles to animals or in folktales where our imaginations assign human communication roles to animals. However, the associations in bird calls are different. First, they are given a semantic interpretation in some communities. Other times, they evoke songs in folktales or their avian chirps are replaced with human phrases. This

paper attempts to describe the phenomenon of imitation and its linguistic implications in the Igbo language. The objectives of this study are to describe the patterns of birdcalls in Igbo, establish their semantic or sociolinguistic associations in the Igbo community, and ascertain the perception of the Igbo people about birds, investigating the communication network between birds and humans.

### **The Biology of Avian Calls**

Avian calls refer to the different varieties of vocalisations in different ranges, frequencies, organisations, patterns and modulations made by birds to meet diverse communication or biological or ecological needs. Birds are endowed with a unique vocal organ, the syrinx, located inside the chest on top, where the trachea splits into two bronchi. This dual passage enables the production of two different sounds at the same time. The syrinx is a combination of cartilaginous and bony rings situated for support. It has some membranes stretched across the air passage for vibration effect and also muscles that control the tension of the membranes and the shape of the air passage for definite sound modulation. Birds with complex syrinx produce more elaborate songs and are known as songbirds for this ability; others with simpler syringeal structures produce short vocals known as calls. Avian calls refer to the diverse range of these vocalisations, broadly categorised into calls and songs. While calls are generally short and serve immediate functions (e.g. alarms, contact, begging), songs are longer, often more complex, and associated with territoriality or mating (Suthers et al., 1999; Catchpole & Slater, 2003).

### **Representations of Avian calls**

Features of avian calls are perceived and prioritised differently. The sound of bird calls may be most adopted in one culture, the rhythm, modulations or functions in another. This has resulted in grouping of avian calls into the three most prominent representations observed from human languages, traditions and science. These are onomatopoeic transcription, direct imitation, and warblish (Thorpe, 1961; Catchpole & Slater, 2003). Onomatopoeic transcription is the mimicry of the pitch, sound, and rhythm of avian calls using human speech sounds. The common Cock-a-doodle-doo in English and tui-tui-tui of the blackbird in French are good examples of onomatopoeic transcription (Dobson, 2012). This representation thrives in Africa, evidenced in the onomatopoeic naming of some birds and the featuring of onomatopoeic transcriptions in folklores, lullabies and play songs. Other human imitations are direct. This is the attempt of humans to replicate bird calls. While this may be difficult, some people are so good at it that such imitation evokes the response of the birds. The Mozambique/Tanzania honeyguide call is typical of direct imitation (Spottiswoode *et al.*, 2016). This is observed among children, hunters, and bird lovers. This kind of representation is also used for other animals. However, birds spark a unique intrigue because direct imitation can also be seen from the direction of birds imitating human speech, like the African Grey Parrot (Pepperberg, 2007)

The third kind of representation is the act of replacing the general melody and rhythm of bird calls with nonsensical syllables (Catchpole & Slater, 2003). The trill-a-lee, trill-a-loo of Skylark's song in English poetry is a classic example. (Dobson, 2012). Warblish, a term that broadly captures the act of humans using non-iconic phrases to replace the avian calls of birds (Sarvasy, 2022), form part of this representation. In this study, these three representations are investigated, revealing the

mechanisms adopted when using human phonetic features to replace avian calls in Igbo and highlighting instances of direct imitation and warblish in the Igbo language.

### **The Structure of Avian Calls**

The study of the structure of avian calls is simply a study of the physical properties, e.g. the sound waves, pitch, modulation, duration, frequency and general acoustics and functions of such vocalisations. Different studies have shown that avian calls are not random but, like human language, though not quite, there are patterned organisations, variations and rules (Marler, 2004; Taylor, 2017; Sarvasy, 2022). Human perception of avian calls comes in diverse patterns, in their different structures, semantic interpretation, symbolism and functions in different societies. This paper attempts to describe the phenomenon of imitation and the linguistic implications in the Igbo language. However, the structure of avian calls, which include the primary acoustic features like the pitch, rhythm, frequency that distinguish bird calls from other sounds in nature, the organisation, like the repetition, sequence and modulation and the variation in avian calls, will not be captured in this paper due to the technicalities involved in the collection and analysis of data.

### **Birds in African Tradition**

Coetzee *et al.* (2014) studied cultural beliefs and practices associated with the Southern ground hornbill in nine Southern and East African countries using a qualitative content analysis approach on the data collected through interviews and discussion groups involving ninety-eight participants. The findings show that the Southern ground hornbill is not just a bird but a cultural symbol with dual symbolism, both in positive and negative lights. On one side, it is a carrier or symbol for death, loss, destruction and is perceived as a bad omen, announcer of calamities and on the other end, perceived as a protector against evil spirits, lightning and drought. The body parts can also be used for healing and divination, which enables diviners to see remotely, reveal hidden truths, and foresee the future. Strengthening positive beliefs for protective measures and debunking destructive beliefs through intervening programmes form the conclusions of the study. Dederen and Mokakabye (2018) confirm these mystical abilities associated with birds in their study of bird metaphor in Southern African folklore and rites of passage. Though with a focus on gender, there is a magical prowess linked to either males' egoistic authority or females' procreative powers. Birds that are used in traditional medicine are often believed to have healing powers, and when their feathers, bones, and other parts of their bodies are used in traditional medicine, such powers are harnessed and used for treating sicknesses like epilepsy, rheumatism and tuberculosis (Akinola *et al.*, 2018). Birds also play a crucial role in African traditional religion. Roles such as being children or messengers of gods, spirits and possessors of supernatural powers (Aticho *et al.*, 2024; Low, 2011). Birds are also totemic and considered sacred, while some are used in divination and ceremonies to seek protection and healing (Cooker, 2000). Conversely, Weliange *et al.* (2015) outline the uses of birds as sources of food, ornamentation, and symbolism in oral narratives.

African tradition upholds a relative dual symbolism for birds and their varieties. Most birds hold a sacred place in some cultures, while others are considered destructive and should be avoided. These studies have extensively explored the traditional symbolism of birds found in oral histories, tradition, folklore and proverbs. This present research, however, focuses on bird names, birdcalls, songs and oral narratives to investigate birdcalls; how they function specifically in Igbo tradition and the impact they have on the language development or linguistic relationship of birds and humans.

## **Methodology**

This paper is hinged on the fact that onomatopoeic avian sounds are not arbitrary; rather, they carry meaning. In this study, birdcalls are perceived as signs that are culturally significant in the Igbo worldview. Sound symbolism Peirce's triadic relationship in Semiotic theory forms the theoretical framework for this study (Nuckolls, 1999; Perniss *et al.*, 2010 and Chandler, 2007). Sound symbolism posits how phonetic forms can directly evoke sensory, emotional or cognitive associations (Nuckolls, 1999), e.g. acoustic or ideophonic features of bird calls can be perceived as meaningful or how language meaning goes far beyond the shores of formal grammar into iconic and imitative features (Perniss *et al.*, 2010). The birdcalls, however, are often interpreted at different levels. Peirce's triadic relationship in Semiotic theory (Chandler, 2007) proposes that a sign can be interpreted using three interconnected elements: first, is that of sign, functioning as icon, the form of a sign, in the sense of sound patterns e.g. t<sup>w</sup>ii, kwiikwii e.t.c; second as indexes, which serve as direct pointers or connections to objects like the bird itself, as seen in the linguistic or cultural markers pointing to origin or identity or calls linked to death omen; and finally, as symbols or possible interpretations which requires conventionality to thrive (Chandler, 2007). These are used in this study to distinguish birdcall correspondences in the Igbo speech community. Data for this study is collected from the lullabies: *nwá ñnùnù nwá ñnùnù ñtà, nwá ñnùnù nọ n'ìkpéré ñmiri kwé m èkèné*, different birdcalls, bird names and *Hunter and the Python* oral narrative culled from the semi-structured, topic-guided interview. These data were purposefully collected because they are lullabies or songs that portray bird calls, names and functions. Sound symbolism and Peirce's semiotic model are adopted to account for the ways bird calls are represented, interpreted and perceived in the Igbo language. Semiotics, either as icons, indexes or symbols and the ethnolinguistic perspective serve as foregrounding for functions such as naming and warning.

## **Representation of Avian Calls in Igbo**

The three representations of avian calls discussed earlier in this paper are evidenced in Igbo. The two approaches to Warblish representation, which are nonsensical and coherent phrases, are also evidenced in Igbo. These will be discussed in this section.

## **Human Imitation of Birdcalls**

This is somehow difficult because the vocalisation mechanisms of humans and birds differ a great deal. While the former uses the articulations and manipulations of the airstream and larynx, the latter uses beaks and the syrinx. However, some talented humans can mimic animal calls (birds included) with such accuracy that birds cannot differentiate them from bird calls. This is evident when birds respond to avian calls made by humans (Sarvasy, 2022). A vivid example of such attempts is the cockerel's wakeup crow. Children and teenagers try this out, and most times, their mimics evoke the response of any cockerel nearby. Children who attain this proficiency often showcase the talent as an achievement, mostly masking masculinity and an index of growth. Direct imitation is also a tool of play and socialisation. This practice is mostly seen in rural areas and less in semi-urban areas.

## **Onomatopoeic Birdcalls**

Onomatopoeic birdcalls in Igbo are quite symbolic in the Igbo culture because they form the basis for the identification of birds in Igbo. Most bird names in Igbo are onomatopoeic, imitating the

very chirp, howl, and tweet the birds make. Other times, the physical appearances and behaviour contribute too. Onomatopoeic bird names are shown in Example 1.

Example 1:

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Call</b>	<b>Gloss</b>
a.	mbarachikọọ	<i>chichichi chichichi mbara chikọọ chikọọ.</i>	name unknown
b.	ọturukpọkpọ	<i>kpọkpọkpọ</i>	woodpecker
c.	Ikwiikwii	<i>kwikwii kwikwikwii</i>	owl
d.	ọkwa	<i>Kwakwakwaaaaakwaaaaa</i>	goose
e.	Nza	<i>t<sup>w</sup>ituttut<sup>w</sup>iii t<sup>w</sup>ituttut<sup>w</sup>iii</i>	sparrow
f.	Kpalakwukwu	<i>kwukwu kwukwukwuuu</i>	bush pigeon
g.	okeọkpa	<i>Kokoronkoooo</i>	cockrel/rooster

This onomatopoeic iconicity strategy in naming is rooted in phonology and morphology. One or two syllables are taken from the strings and then lexicalised using either an agentive morpheme or an explanatory clause. Note that, for Example 1(a-b, f), parts of the calls are clipped, and a morphemic element is added to each of them to form a name. Also in Example 1(b), two syllables of the sound ‘kpọkpọ’ from wood pecking are clipped and attached to an agentive clause to derive the meaning ‘one who pecks *kpọkpọkpọ*’. In Example 1 (c-d), the forms *kwikwii*, *bu*, *kwa* are extracted from the calls of the owl, grasscutter, pigeon and guinea fowl; lexicalised through the addition of *i-* and *ọ-* respectively, to form *ikwiikwii* and *ọkwa*. The simplified phonology and morphological productivity observed in the name forming show the flexibility of the Igbo language in allowing birdcalls to influence the wider vocabulary. These names have become part of the Igbo cultural lexicon, not just cry imitations.

Onomatopoeic iconicity also demonstrates how Igbo uses sound symbolism to keep bird names close to the source of reference. This suggests that in the Igbo worldview, sound is very important. Choosing to call a bird by its sound teaches the culture of perceptual categorisation. It helps the community identify the bird just by the sound it makes, even when it is not in view. This attributes a mnemonic device to the name in oral ecological knowledge.

### **Warblish**

Warblish is a term that captures the act of humans using phrases to replace the avian calls of birds. These replacements are sometimes complete or mixed with the syllabic version of the cries. Consider example 2.

Example 2:

Onomatopoeic Call:

Nza : *t<sup>w</sup>ituttut<sup>w</sup>iii t<sup>w</sup>ituttut<sup>w</sup>iii*  
 Kpalakwukwu : *Kwukwu kwukwukwuuu*

Warblish:

Call by Nza: *éjèlùm kóleejì éjèlùm kóleejì* (*'I attended college', sung in a high-pitched voice*)

Response by Kpalakwukwu: *ónyé na-ekwu íhé à ámaghìkwanù a, b, gb, d* (*'the person saying this doesn't know the letters of the alphabet' sung in a deep bass male voice*)

Here, the Igbo phrase replacement of the onomatopoeic sounds captures the acoustic iconic qualities of the birdcalls. The first call [t<sup>w</sup>ɪ] by Nza, the Sparrow, makes use of the labialised voiceless alveolar plosive [t<sup>w</sup>] with the lax vowel [ɪ]. These two are considered light and sharp by virtue of their anterior and retracted tongue root features, compared to the second call [k<sup>w</sup>u], which is labelled heavy because of the [+BACK] [+ATR] [+ROUND] features. These acoustic categorisations are further indexed into gender roles through cultural coding of pitch. The front high-pitched articulation [t<sup>w</sup>ɪ] is mapped to female voice, while the back heavy articulation [k<sup>w</sup>u] is mapped to male voice. This is a common perception in most languages. High pitch is often considered femininity, lightness, playfulness or youthfulness, while low pitch reveals masculinity, authority and depth.

Symbolically, this is seen as a call and response between these two birds, and assigning gender roles to the bird calls turns the call into a gendered dialogue in cultural repertoire, evidenced in folkloric performance for humour, teaching morals or storytelling. Birdcalls are not perceived as background noise in Igbo; these illustrations show that they are active resources for meaning making, performance and cultural memory.

### **Warblish as a Dynamic Interpretive Practice**

The traditional semiotic frame, which is the assigning of gendered voices to birdcalls and turning them into dialogue as seen in the previous paragraph, is deeply rooted in Igbo oral culture. However, it is worth noting that structurally, warblish is not defined to be fixed. It is practically a creative reinterpretation of birdcalls into human speech. This suggests that such creativity can be diversified beyond cultural boundaries, yet reflecting the world experiences of the users. This means that the content or lyrics of warblish is open and adaptive, and often reflects the social realities and influences of the people.

The word and letters, 'college' and 'a, b, gb, d' (a,b, gb, d is the older form of the Igbo alphabet, suggesting that the people who created this warblish spent their childhood/teenagehood between 1960s and early 80s before the introduction of the now a,b, ch.d), are colonial imports. Their presence in the play dialogue shows that education among the Igbo people has become a salient cultural theme, strong enough to find its way into the folk imitation play. This reveals how Igbo oral performance negotiates modern experience. This incorporation also demonstrates the adaptive nature of warblish performance. The verbal contents in example 2 reflect contemporary realities, showing how colonial and postcolonial experiences are reinterpreted within indigenous expressive forms.

Although these lyrics contain post-colonial lexicons, the moral and cultural interpretation is deeply rooted in the Igbo culture. The first call, meaning I went to college, is said repeatedly in an emphatic, chattering and boastful way (back in those days, attaining such a height was a great feat).

The second call, which translates to ‘this person saying this does not even know a,b,gb,d’ undercuts the boast, making bare the need for the claim to match reality. This upholds the moral value of humility over arrogance, the need for knowledge to be proven, the essence of hard work and authenticity. This dialogue is also seen as a social corrective measure for false claims, vanity or misplaced pride.

Warblish and onomatopoeic representations of avian calls also perform some cultural functions in the Igbo community. This will form the discussion in the following sections.

## Sociocultural Functions of Avian Calls in Igbo

Culturally, birds are perceived as spirits and messengers. People have claimed to understand their tweets and also tweet in response to the bird's messages. In the Igbo cultural tales and folklore, animation has always been a key ingredient in fiction stories. The animals always seem to live in a community, operate a kingship system and have meetings or friends or projects. They can climb, swim, go to the farm, and cook just like humans. They are also portrayed in these folklores to express affections of love, hate, foolishness, deceit, etc. and can have a human-animal communication (where animals can talk to humans) or animal-animal communication (animals talking to themselves). In this section, we will draw out with data the different instances that support the belief system of the Igbo people with regard to avian calls.

## Avian Calls as Messages

Birdcalls as messages are widely attested in literature, as discussed in the introduction. In Igbo, the example in (3) is observed

Example 3:

## Onomatopoeic Call

Ajo nnunu : *kiririririririiriririri* ookwookwookwoo

## Warblish

Ajo nnunu : *kiriririririiriririri* òbòdò kwà ónwú kwà ónwú kwà ónwú

Example 3 reveals another pattern in avian calls where part of the onomatopoeic string is untampered with, and the other part forms the warblish. This is considered in this work a pattern deliberately structured for attention calling. This can be referred to as an intro or an acoustic key that sets the emotional tone in the minds of the people, which is then followed by the warblish that fits into the rhythm or pitch of the bird call. The Evil bird's (Ajo nnunu) call is harsh and unsettling, an iconic harsh intro mirroring dread. The Igbo people index this call with evil, misfortune or impending death and warning. The bird is perceived as a messenger of death, and the calls foreshadow tragedy. Over time, this warblish has crystallised in the oral tradition as a cultural symbol of death, and humans recognise these signs and prepare socially, ritually or spiritually to ward off evil. The warblish in example 4 carries a slightly different pattern from that of 3. They also differ in the semantic tone of the iconic intro and, consequently, the message that follows.

Example 4:

**Warblish**

Oke ọkpa : *kokoronkooooo chí èfóóóó (day break!)*

Here, the cockerel's call is realised in full, and an interpretation is given parallel to it. The interpretation given to this call stems from the behavioural pattern and the time the roaster's call usually takes place, at dawn. This is seen as a natural acoustic clock that signals communal rhythm. Here, the warblish serves as a meta-commentary stating a daily routine. The iconic sign functions as a timekeeper. Another Warblish, which also serves as a timekeeper, is seen in Example 5.

Example 5:

**Warblish**

Mbarachịkọọ : *chí efosáá chí efosáá ásịsị kọọ sị kọọ (day breaks! If it's a tale, tell)*

The examples given so far show a great level of semiotic strategies and iconicity in avian calls. The next session discusses bird-human interactions and cognition in the Igbo worldview.

**The Ability of Humans to Understand Birdcalls**

Bird communication is further than mere characterisation in fiction stories. Igbo people also believe that birds communicate, directly or indirectly, with humans. The call and response of some lullabies show that somewhere in the belief system of the Igbo people, only birds share in the communication circle and no other animal. This can also be attributed to the fact that it is natural for birds to sing. So be it singing or speaking, the focus is on the communication network that proves that humans understand birds and birds in turn understand and respond to human communication. Let us consider the lullaby or play song in Example 6.

Example 6:

**Human:** *nwá ńnụnụ nwá ńnụnụ ńtà (little birdie. little birdie)*

**Bird:** *tùrùzáńzá tùrùńzá (the bird answers)*

**Human:** *ị nọ ébé áhụ èmé gịni? (what are you doing there)*

**Bird:** *Ànà m átùrụ ńne m ósè (pecking pepper for my mum)*

**Human:** *Tùkéné kà í sị átù (peck like you peck)*

**Bird:** *tụịị tụịị, tù nwóke n'íké n'íké, tù nwányị n'íké n'íké (t<sup>w</sup>u hastily peck the boy, hastily peck the girl)*

**Bird:** *Ázụ mmèrè pípíro pìròò pìròró pììì (nonsensical)*

Example 6 shows the cognitive ability of decoding a message and encoding another one for feedback, being attributed to a bird. This can be argued as personification found within the lines of a folktale and the song clipped out for other purposes. That is possible; however, the peculiarities of the avian calls are still evident in the fact that the chirps or tweets form part of the communication.



Other animal sounds, e.g. wow, meows, meee, muuu, are not included in animated stories and communication. Example 7 shows that birds are also attributed with the ability to create, complete and collocate words in the Igbo worldview.

Example 7:

Human: nwá ònùnù nọ n'ìkpéré òmírì kwé m èkèné (*little bird by the riverbank answer my greetings*)

Bird: èkèné ómá (*good greetings*)

Human: kwé m ómá (*what's good*)

Bird: ómá nà ìkóró (*good and youthful*)

Human: kwé m ìkóró (*what's youthful*)

Bird: ìkóróòbíà (*young men*)

Human: kwé m óbíà (*rhyme*)

Bird: óbíà nwá mbe

Human: kwé m mbe

Bird: mbe ékpírí (*ankle rattle*)

Human: kwé m ékpírí

Bird: ékpírí áwùzó

Bird: kwé m áwùzó

Human: áwùzó òpì

Bird: kwé m òpì

Human: òpì n'úgbó

Bird: kwé m úgbó

Human: ugbo na ami (*nature pipe sucker*)

Bird: kwe m ami

Human: ami kororo iyaaaa

### **Relevance of Birdcalls in Igbo Culture**

Avian calls are relevant across cultures for different reasons. In the Igbo culture, avian calls are used for time keeping and mystical observations, as discussed earlier. They also feature in folklore. See example 8, an excerpt from *Hunter and the Python* moonlight story.

Example 8:

Context: The hunter has positioned his gun to shoot the python, who, thinking no one is around, came out from its hole to get some sunlight.

1st call of the bird to python: éké gbànáwákwa gbànáwákwa dínta ègbúkwé gi o uwiiiiiiiiiiiiii

(*Free Translation: run away, python! You're about to be killed by the hunter!*)

Here, the utterances (depicting human creativity) as well as the speech sounds (imitating the bird call) show the function of warning against impending danger.

And when the bird realised that the hunter noticed that, it gave warning signals to the python, the bird strategically decided to indirectly give the warning without implicating itself. So it sang:

2nd call of the bird to the python: *gàgwòm nímé ọ̀nụ!*

*(Free Translation: IDEO inside the hole!)* The IDEO *gagwom* is the sound of a huge jump into in hollow area.

Here, only the human phrases are employed, but subtly displayed is the ability of the bird to mimic things. This is shown in the bird's ability to imitate the stud noise that the python makes when it throws itself into a hole and its perceived human-like ability to think and manipulate others.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study demonstrate that avian calls in the Igbo worldview transcend mere natural sounds and constitute vital semiotic and ethnolinguistic resources. Three primary modes of representation, onomatopoeia, direct imitation, and warblish were observed in Igbo oral traditions, each serving distinct cultural and communicative purposes. Onomatopoeia functions as a key naming strategy, whereby bird names are phonologically and morphologically derived from their characteristic calls. This reveals the Igbo emphasis on sound symbolism as a means of categorisation, memory, and ecological knowledge. Direct imitation, though limited by the differences in human and avian vocal mechanisms, persists as a social practice, especially among children and hunters, where it serves as a playful form of interaction and socialisation. Warblish, in turn, represents a creative reinterpretation of bird calls into human speech, encoding humour, moral instruction, and even contemporary experiences within oral performances.

The cultural significance of avian calls further underscores their centrality in Igbo tradition. Birds are symbolically positioned as spiritual messengers, timekeepers, and harbingers of both fortune and misfortune. The crow of the cock, for instance, is interpreted as a natural time marker that orders communal life, while ominous calls such as those of the *Ajo nnunu* are indexed to death and tragedy. These interpretations highlight the Igbo people's ability to integrate natural phenomena into systems of meaning, thereby reinforcing social norms, moral values, and ecological consciousness. Moreover, the attribution of communicative abilities to birds in folktales and lullabies demonstrates a cultural perception of birds as participants in a shared communicative network with humans, an attribute rarely extended to other animals.

The semiotic analysis also revealed the cultural coding of pitch into gender roles, with high-pitched calls associated with femininity and low-pitched calls with masculinity. Such coding not only reflects Igbo sociocultural ideologies but also situates bird calls as symbolic resources in the construction of identity. Warblish performances further demonstrate adaptive creativity, incorporating colonial and postcolonial realities (such as references to formal education) into traditional expressive forms, thereby ensuring the continuity of oral traditions in changing sociohistorical contexts.

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that avian calls in Igbo culture are not perceived as background noise but as active contributors to meaning-making, cultural performance, and ecological knowledge. Through onomatopoeic naming, direct imitation, and warblish representation, birds and their calls enrich

the Igbo lexicon, reinforce cultural memory, and sustain oral traditions. They embody mnemonic, moral, and communicative functions that bridge the natural and human worlds, revealing a unique intersection of language, culture, and ecology. In the Igbo worldview, therefore, birds are not only creatures of flight and song but also teachers, messengers, and symbolic actors within the cultural repertoire. The study recommends comprehensive documentation update of Igbo bird calls, names, and their associated cultural meanings should be undertaken as part of linguistic and anthropological archiving, to safeguard this heritage for future generations. Future studies should incorporate acoustic analyses of bird calls in relation to their Igbo onomatopoeic and warblish representations. Comparative ethnolinguistic studies across African languages would also deepen understanding of shared and divergent sound-symbolic practices.

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