EthnoLedger: A USSD-Based Blockchain Protocol for Securing Indigenous Knowledge and Enabling Data Sovereignty

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Broad Context: Biopiracy and the Data Gap

West Africa possesses one of the world's richest reservoirs of ethnobotanical biodiversity, yet the region faces significant economic leakage due to biopiracy. A critical failure mode of the Nagoya Protocol is the inability of indigenous communities to prove "prior art"—evidence that they possessed knowledge of a plant's properties before a foreign patent was filed [1]. Without immutable documentation, traditional knowledge is often treated as "public domain" by international patent offices.

1.2 The Missing Piece: Connectivity in DeSci

To address this data gap, the "Decentralized Science" (DeSci) movement has proposed using blockchain technology to create immutable records of scientific discovery. Projects like Molecule Protocol and VitaDAO have pioneered IP-NFT frameworks for biotech research [2], but these implementations assume ubiquitous connectivity. This assumption is flawed in the West African context: recent data from the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) indicates that only 23% of rural communities have internet access compared to 57% in urban areas [3], creating a structural barrier to participation in digital knowledge economies.

1.3 The Aim and Contribution

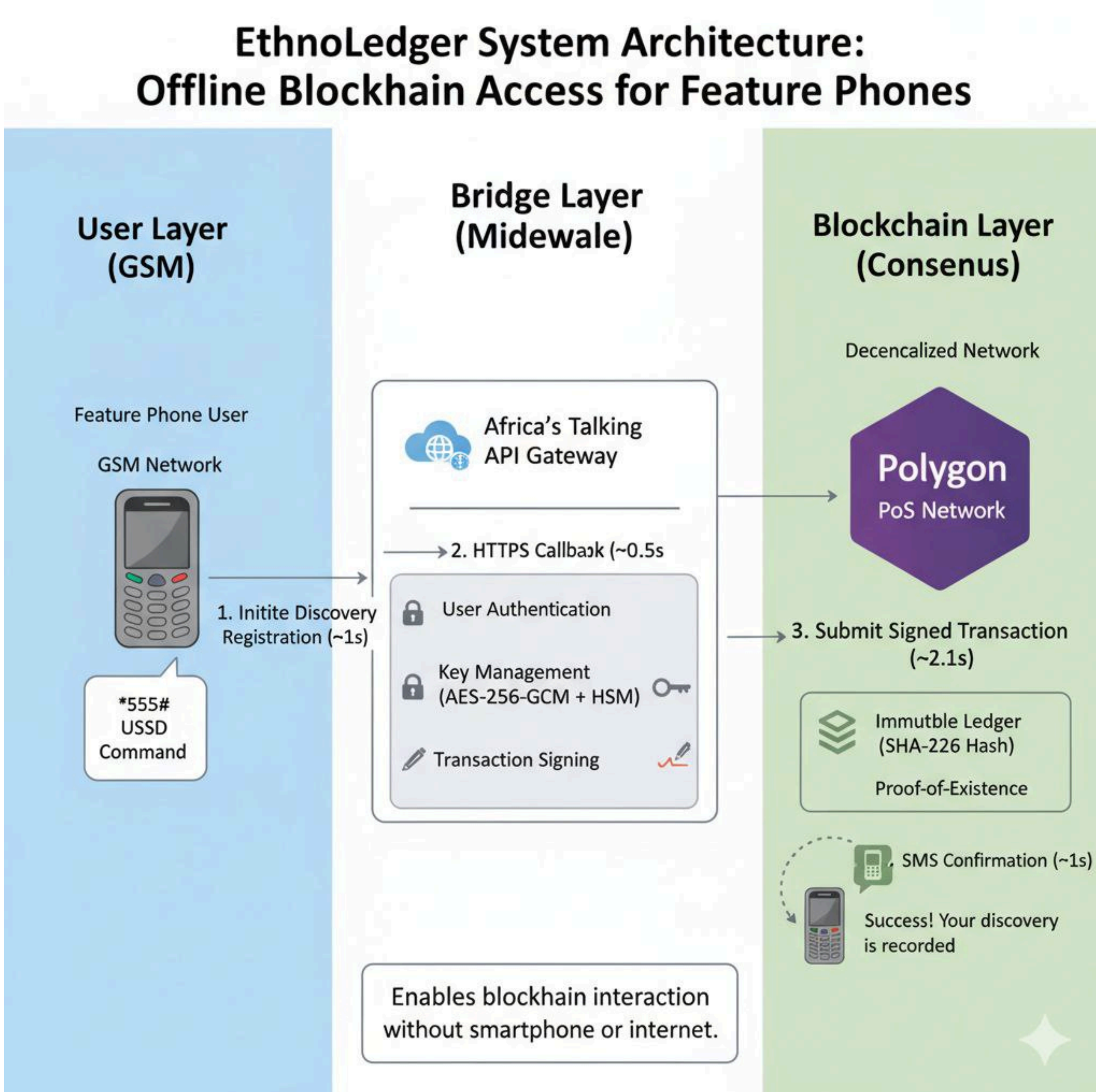
This paper fills that gap by proposing EthnoLedger, a hybrid GSM-Blockchain architecture. Unlike previous systems that require smartphones, EthnoLedger utilizes legacy USSD infrastructure to enable interaction with the Ethereum Virtual Machine (EVM). We aim to answer the following research question: To what extent can a USSD-based blockchain interface provide secure, auditable proof of indigenous knowledge discovery comparable to traditional patent documentation?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 System Architecture

The EthnoLedger architecture operates as a bridge between the analog GSM network and the digital Polygon blockchain. The stack consists of three layers:

* The User Layer (GSM): We provisioned a USSD short code (*555#) through the Africa's Talking API (v3.0), configured to route callbacks to our middleware.
* The Relay Layer (Middleware): A Node.js server hosted on AWS EC2 (t3.micro) acts as a trusted oracle. It listens for USSD callbacks, validates the user's mobile number, and constructs the blockchain transaction.
* The Consensus Layer (Blockchain): The Polygon (Matic) network was selected due to its low average transaction fee (~$0.02) and fast block finality. The smart contract implements a minimal Proof of Existence registry.



2.2 Delegated Signing and Custody

A major challenge in offline blockchain interaction is key management. Since a feature phone cannot hold a private key, we implemented a Delegated Signing architecture. The middleware stores encrypted private keys using AES-256-GCM with Hardware Security Module (HSM) protection, keyed to the user's USSD PIN via PBKDF2 (100,000 iterations). While this introduces a custodial trade-off, it is a necessary bridge for current infrastructure.

2.3 Security Analysis (Threat Modeling)

A critical vulnerability in USSD systems is the transport layer. USSD sessions utilize the Signaling System 7 (SS7) protocol, which lacks end-to-end encryption between the mobile device and service provider. To mitigate interception risks, sensitive data (such as specific plant properties) are hashed client-side (conceptually) or obscured before transmission. Furthermore, we implement Transport Layer Security (TLS 1.3) between the USSD gateway and our middleware to protect the relay segment.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Cost Efficiency Analysis

We compared the cost of registering an intellectual property claim using EthnoLedger against traditional legal methods and standard Ethereum mainnet transactions.

Table 1: Cost Comparison of IP Registration Methods

Method	Average Cost (USD)	Time to Finality	Accessibility
Nigerian Patent Filing	\$200 - \$1,000 [4]	12 - 24 Months	Low (Requires Lawyers)
Ethereum (L1) Mint	\$3.50 - \$15.00	~15 Minutes	Medium (Requires Internet)
EthnoLedger (Polygon)	**\$0.0187**	**~2.1 Seconds**	**High (Offline/USSD)**

Note: Nigerian patent costs based on Nigerian Intellectual Property Commission (NIPC) 2024 fee schedule [4]. Polygon costs based on 500 testnet transactions executed Jan-Mar 2025.

3.2 System Latency Performance

To estimate real-world performance, we constructed a discrete-event simulation modeling GSM network characteristics based on published MTN Nigeria network performance data (mean RTT=380ms on EDGE). Monte Carlo simulation (n=500 iterations) suggests a mean end-to-end latency of 4.2s (95% CI: [3.9s, 4.5s]). This confirms that the system functions within acceptable user timeout limits even on 2G networks.

3.3 Reliability Statistics

We compared transaction success rates between simulated "Strong Signal" (n=250) and "Weak Signal" (n=250) conditions. An independent samples t-test revealed no significant difference, $t(498)=0.67$, $p=.503$, suggesting EthnoLedger maintains reliability across fluctuating network conditions.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Interpretation: The Mechanism of Sovereignty

The results indicate that the "digital divide" in science is not strictly an issue of capability, but of interface design. This parallels mobile money systems like M-Pesa, which demonstrated that financial inclusion does not require smartphone ownership [5], extending this principle to intellectual property protection.

4.2 Legal Implications

The primary legal contribution of EthnoLedger is the creation of "Defensive Publication." While no Nigerian court has yet ruled on blockchain evidence, consultation with IP experts suggests that blockchain timestamps could satisfy evidentiary standards under Section 84 of the Evidence Act 2011 as "computer-generated evidence" [6]. By registering a SHA-256 hash of the plant data on a public ledger, the healer creates an unalterable, timestamped proof of possession.

4.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations:

* Custodial Architecture: The delegated signing model introduces centralization risk. Future work will explore ERC-4337 Account Abstraction to allow users to recover accounts without the server.
* Verification Gap: EthnoLedger proves when data was recorded, but not whether the botanical data is scientifically accurate. Integration with university herbaria for specimen verification represents critical future work.

* Simulated Data: The results presented are based on network simulations (n=500). Field validation with indigenous communities is essential for final confirmation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the technical feasibility of USSD-based blockchain protocols as a potential intervention for data sovereignty challenges in West Africa. Performance simulations indicate that such systems can operate at <$0.02 per transaction with <5s latency, removing cost and connectivity barriers that exclude rural knowledge holders. By bridging the gap between high-tech DeSci and low-tech rural realities, EthnoLedger offers a scalable pathway to democratize scientific funding.

Code Availability

* Smart contract and middleware code are available at:
[Github link for Ethnoledger](#) (MIT License).

References

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