

PALMWINE TAPPING FESTIVAL: A COMMUNITY-BASED IDENTITY AND ITS ECONOMIC VALUES IN AKWU-UKWU TOWN

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ABSTRACT

Palmwine tapping occupies a central place in the cultural and economic life of many Igbo communities in southeastern Nigeria. This article examines the palmwine tapping festival as a community-based identity and explores its economic values in Akwu-Ukwu Town, Anambra State. Using a qualitative method, culture-centered approach, and the study draws on oral histories, participant observation, and secondary sources to analyze how the festival functions as a medium for preserving indigenous knowledge, reinforcing communal bonds, and expressing collective identity. The findings reveal that the festival transcends mere celebration; it symbolizes continuity between past and present, affirms social roles, and promotes intergenerational transmission of palmwine tapping skills. Economically, the festival contributes to local livelihoods through palmwine production, marketing, and related activities, while also stimulating trade, hospitality, and cultural tourism during festive periods. This palmwine tapping festival is only celebrated as *Nkamanu* in Akwu-Ukwu culture. The study argues that the palmwine tapping festival in Akwu-Ukwu exemplifies how indigenous cultural practices can simultaneously serve as markers of identity and engines of grassroots economic development. It concludes by emphasizing the need for cultural policy support and sustainable management of palm resources to preserve this heritage while enhancing its economic potential.

Keywords: Palmwine tapping, Cultural festival, Community identity, Indigenous economy, Akwu-Ukwu, Igbo society.

INTRODUCTION

Festivals and indigenous cultural practices in African societies are vital mechanisms for articulating communal identity, preserving historical consciousness, and organizing socio-economic life. Far from being mere occasions for entertainment, festivals embody moral values,

systems of cooperation, and shared meanings that sustain social cohesion (Falassi, 1987, pp.1-3). Among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, festivals are closely linked to occupational traditions and environmental resources, reflecting a worldview in which culture, economy, and social ethics are inseparably intertwined (Isichei, 1976, pp.45-48; Uchendu, 1965, pp.89-92).

Palmwine occupies a central place in Igbo cultural life as both a ritual substance and an economic product. It is indispensable in marriage rites, ancestral libations, conflict resolution, and communal celebrations, symbolizing hospitality, unity, and continuity (Basden, 1966, pp.312-315). The practice of palmwine tapping requires specialized indigenous knowledge transmitted across generations, reinforcing its status as a culturally valued occupation rather than a purely commercial enterprise (Okeke, 2010, pp. 140-143). In several palm-rich communities, this occupational tradition has been ritualized and celebrated through festivals that publicly affirm communal identity and heritage.

In Akwu-Ukwu Town, Anambra State, palmwine tapping constitutes a defining element of local identity and livelihood. The palmwine tapping festival functions as a culture space where social interaction, economic exchange, and collective memory converge. This festival is deeply connected to the indigenous institution of *Nkamanu*, a communal socio-economic system grounded in mutual assistance, cooperative labour, and shared responsibility. According to Okolo (2025), *Nkamanu* represents a philosophical framework through which the Akwu-Ukwu people organize collective labour, redistribute resources, and reinforce moral obligations within the community (pp.142-145). This framework provides an ethical foundation for communal practices associated with palmwine tapping and festival organization.

Philosophically, *Nkamanu* embodies values of reciprocity, solidarity, and social justice, situating economic activity within a moral economy rather than an individualistic framework (Okolo, 2025, pp.146-149). These values are enacted during the palmwine tapping festival through shared labour, communal consumption, and collective celebration. The festival thus operates not merely as a cultural performance but as a lived expression of indigenous philosophy and community-based identity.

Economically, palmwine tapping and its associated festive contribute significantly to local livelihoods. Palmwine production supports tappers, vendors, transporters, and hospitality providers, while festival periods stimulate increased trade and consumption within beyond the community (Onyekwelu & Okoh, 2018, pp.525-528). Cultural festivals have been recognized as catalysts for grassroots economic development, particularly in rural settings where indigenous

industries remain central to household sustenance (Get, 2010, pp.3-6). In Akwu-Ukwu, the palmwine tapping festival exemplifies how cultural practices can function simultaneously as markers of identity and viable economic institutions.

Despite this significance, localized philosophical analyses of palmwine tapping festivals remain limited. By integrating the concept of *Nkamanu* into the study of the palmwine tapping festival in Akwu-Ukwu, this article addresses this gap and highlights the enduring relevance of indigenous institutions in shaping community identity and sustainable economic practices.



Palmwine tapper in action with robe (Udoh) and *Nkàmanu*.

Source: Okolo, R. O. C. (2025, p.145).



Palmwinetapper arranging the palm tree for wine.

Palmwine tree with mound Pot.

Source: Okolo, R. O. C. (2025, p.145).

WHAT IS PALMWINE FESTIVAL?

It is good to define “Palmwine,” which according to Okafor (1975), is a traditional alcoholic beverage obtained from the natural sap of various species of palm trees such as the oil palm, raffia palm, date palm, and coconut palm. It is produced by tapping the sap from the tree and allowing it to ferment naturally through the action of yeast and microorganisms present in the environment. The drink is widely consumed in many parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, particularly in West Africa where it holds important social, cultural, economic, and ritual significance(pp. 81–82). Fresh palmwine is usually sweet and milky, but as fermentation progresses, it becomes stronger, sourer, and more alcoholic.

Academically, palmwine is regarded not merely as a local beverage but as a cultural artifact embedded in indigenous traditions and communal life. In many African societies like Igbos, it is used during marriage ceremonies, festivals, libation rites, burial ceremonies, title-taking, and conflict resolution gatherings. Among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, for example,

palmwine symbolizes hospitality, unity, respect, and social acceptance within communal interactions (Achebe, 1958, pp. 5–7). Anthropological studies further describe palmwine as an important element of oral tradition and folklore, especially in African literature where it frequently appears as a symbol of tradition and communal identity.

Nevertheless, from a nutritional and economic perspective, palmwine contains sugars, vitamins, amino acids, and yeast organisms that contribute to its dietary value when consumed fresh. It also serves as a source of livelihood for palm wine tappers, traders, and local communities involved in its production and distribution. However, because fermentation occurs rapidly, palm wine has a short shelf life and changes chemically within hours after tapping. Researcher like Obire (2005), therefore classify it as both a traditional fermented beverage and a socio-cultural commodity within African indigenous economies (p. 26).

Prior to this, palmwine festival is denoted as *Nkamanu* festival for the people of Akwu-Ukwu, and it stands as the major rich cultural heritage of the town. Therefore, a palmwine festival is a culturally specific public celebration that foregrounds the consumption, symbolism, and communal values associated with palmwine – a traditional alcoholic beverage made from the fermented sap of palm trees. Within many African societies, particularly in West Africa, palmwine functions as more than simply a drink; it carries rich symbolic meanings tied to hospitality, community cohesion, rites of passage, and spiritual thanksgiving. In cultural gatherings such as harvest festivals, traditional marriages, weddings, funeral ceremonies, and other social festivities, the shared act of drinking palmwine serves as an emblem of unity, collective identity, togetherness, and interconnectedness among participants. For example, in some Igbo communities of southeastern Nigeria like Akwu-Ukwu community, palm wine is indispensable to cultural ceremonies and seasonal festivals, “where its libation signifies gratitude to ancestors and spiritual reciprocity with the land and community” (Oriire, 2025, p.1).

Beyond traditional seasonal or agricultural rites, the concept of a “palmwine festival” has expanded in contemporary cultural production to include organized cultural events that celebrate African heritage, music, art, and social life using the metaphor of palm wine as a central motif. In these modern manifestations – such as the Palmwine Music Festival – creative practitioners curate spaces where music, performance, cuisine, and communal exchange coalesce, thereby creating a platform that simultaneously honours indigenous symbolism and engages with contemporary artistic expression (Palmwine Music Festival, n.d.).

In literal terms, a palmwine festival can thus be understood as a hybrid cultural phenomenon that bridges *traditional ceremonial practice and festival performance culture*. It encapsulates both the enduring symbolic functions of “palm wine in communal life – such as identity formation and spiritual communication – and its role within evolving social landscapes where culture, creativity, and community are actively negotiated. By foregrounding palm wine as both artefact and metaphor, such festivals illuminate how traditional practices are reinterpreted in the service of cultural sustainability, tourism, and creative economy development” (Oriire, 2025, p.2).

ORIGIN OF PALMWINE FESTIVAL

Nkamanu Festival is also refers as “Palmwine Festival” originated from Akwu-Ukwu town before the coming of colonial era in Nigeria. It is one of the major cultural heritage as well as a community-based identity and form its economic values in Akwu-Ukwu town. Therefore, the roots of the palmwine festival concept lie in centuries-old West African cultural practices surrounding palm wine—a traditional fermented beverage tapped from various species of palm trees and deeply embedded in the social, spiritual, and ceremonial life of many African societies. In traditional settings, palm wine is shared during rites of passage, harvest festivals, marriage ceremonies, and communal gatherings, symbolizing unity, thanksgiving, hospitality, and respect for ancestors and community members (Oriire, 2025, para. 3-5). Ethnographic scholarship on African cultural practices documents how these drinks function beyond nutrition to symbolize unity and continuity within social networks – appearing in rites of passage such as harvest festivals, naming rituals, and ancestors libations (Oriire, 2025, para. 4). These long-standing practices reflect the role of palm wine as a cultural touchstone rather than merely a beverage, and they provide the foundational context for any celebration that foregrounds palm wine as both symbol and medium of communal identity.

Further, broad studies of traditional festivals in Africa characterize these events as multifaceted cultural systems where music, dance, performance, and symbolic consumption intertwine to express communal values and reinforce social structures (Asare-Kumi, 2020, pp.90; Nwanaju, 2024, p.3). Asare-Kumi’s mixed-methods analysis of values in African traditional festivals highlights the *moral, social, and religious dimensions* that underlie indigenous celebrations, a context in which social drink offerings serve as markers of respect, reciprocity, and belonging (Asare-Kumi, 2020, p.92). Similarly, scholarship on Ghanaian cultural festivals emphasizes the historical role of local beverages within broader ceremonial ecologies that pre-date colonial

disruption, illustrating how these ceremonial logics inform contemporary communal performances (Nwanaju, 2024, p.5).

However, the contemporary *Palmwine Festival*- as a named festival event-emerged in the late 2010s as a modern cultural expression that reinterprets these traditional values through an organized festival format. Specifically, the *Palmwine Music Festival* was launched in 2017 by Nigerian hip-hop duo Show Dem Camp as a platform to celebrate Nigeria's emerging alternative music scene, blending local sounds with global influences and situating palm wine as a metaphor for cultural fusion and communal celebration (Pulse Nigeria, 2017, para. 1; Sounds of Africa, 2021, para. 4). While this festival draws its name and symbolic inspiration from the historic social role of palm wine in West African celebrations, its origin as a festival –a packaged, ticked cultural event with live performances, art, food, and, community engagement – represents a contemporary evolution shaped by urban creativity and global artistic networks rather than by purely indigenous ceremonial practices.

In other words, scholarship on African music festivals illustrates how musical performance events have become *sites of cultural reaffirmation and identity negotiation* in post-colonial contexts, often integrating traditional art forms with contemporary expressions (Kwame, 2020, p.1; Lentz & Wiggins, 2017, p.223). For examples, African music festivals such as the Aswan Music Festival engage musical heritage as a medium for both cultural preservation and youth engagement (Kwame, 2020, p.1). Similarly, pan-African music events like *NyegeNyege* in Uganda demonstrate how festival spaces can foreground local sounds in global networks while celebrating African cultural diversity (NyegeNyege, n.d.). These developments suggest that the *Palmwine Festival* is part of a broader trend in which African communities adapt traditional symbolic practices into organized festival forms that serve cultural continuity, economic development, and creative expression simultaneously.



Note: This is different from above palmwine tree but of the same coloured wine. It is called *Nkwu Enu* in Igbo land. Akwu-Ukwu palmwine tappers are not known for this type of palmwine except the few residence tenant in the town. It is also popularly known as palm tree or oil palm.

MUSIC OF PALMWINE FESTIVAL

The music of palmwine tapping festival in Akwu-Ukwu is another cultural act, which is produced exclusively from the tortoise shells (Mbekwu). Madubuonu as cited in Okolo (2025) affirms thus:

The tappers spend the evenings visiting one another. They sometimes move in groups making nice music with tortoise shells (Mbekwu). Anyone whose home is visited feels honoured and brings out what he has to entertain his guest. The palmwine festival (Nkàmanu) till date is a period of merriment. Children visit homes of celebrants “with instrument of tortoise shells (Mbekwu) for music” and they are entertained with food, fish and meat (pp.147-148).

The palmwine tappers or children with instrument of tortoise shell (Mbekwu) sang various to arousing their audience or the celebrants they visited and praise singing to the point of receiving gifts and they are also entertained with eateries and drinks. They sing:

Ube ezenwa ube nracha

Ube ezenwa ube nracha

Dudu du afor nracha.

Finally, another song tune as follow:

Di ochi - ote mmanya ote mmanya

Palmwine tapper Palmwine tapper

Nye mu mmanya ka m nuo ote mmanya

Tapper gives me palmwine to drink

Nye anyi mmanya ka nuo ote mmanya

Tapper gives us palmwine to drink

Chukwu gozie aka oru gi.

God bless your handwork.

PALMWINE TAPPING FESTIVAL: A COMMUNITY-BASED IDENTITY

The Palmwine Tapping Festival may be understood as a community-based cultural celebration that reflects the collective identity, indigenous knowledge, and socio-economic traditions of palm-producing communities. The festival is rooted in the traditional occupation of palmwine tapping, an activity that involves extracting sap from palm trees for communal consumption, ritual use, and local trade. In many African societies, particularly in southeastern Nigeria and parts of West Africa, palmwine tapping is not merely an economic activity but also a cultural institution through which values of cooperation, hospitality, kinship, and communal solidarity are expressed (Okafor, 1975, pp. 81–82). The festival therefore functions as a symbolic public affirmation of the

community's historical relationship with the palm tree and its products, which are basically seen in Akwu-Ukwu town.

From an anthropological perspective, community festivals serve as mechanisms for preserving cultural heritage and reinforcing social identity through shared rituals, music, dance, food, and collective participation. The Palmwine Tapping Festival embodies these characteristics by bringing together members of the community to celebrate indigenous occupation, ancestral traditions, and local craftsmanship associated with palmwine production. Through performances, ceremonial tapping demonstrations, and communal drinking, participants reaffirm a sense of belonging and continuity with their cultural past (Asare-Kumi, 2020, pp. 90–92). Such festivals also strengthen intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge by exposing younger generations to traditional practices and community values.

Furthermore, the Palmwine Tapping Festival contributes to the construction of community-based identity by serving as a cultural marker that distinguishes one community from another within broader national and global contexts. Festivals centered on indigenous resources often become symbols of local pride and cultural tourism, thereby promoting both economic development and cultural sustainability. In this regard, palmwine festivals can be viewed as cultural performances through which communities negotiate modernity while preserving traditional identity systems (Lentz & Wiggins, 2017, pp. 223–225). Consequently, the Palmwine Tapping Festival represents not only a celebration of palmwine production but also a living expression of communal identity, heritage preservation, and socio-cultural continuity.

ECONOMIC VALUES OF PALMWINE TAPPING IN AKWU-UKWU TOWN

Palmwine tapping constitutes one of the major indigenous economic activities in Akwu-Ukwu and many African rural communities, where the abundance of raffia and oil palm trees has historically supported local livelihoods and community development. The town is widely recognized for the production of fresh palmwine, which serves as a major source of income for many households involved in tapping, transportation, retailing, and hospitality services. According to community records, Akwu-Ukwu is “well known for its beautiful and natural palm wine produce,” demonstrating the economic centrality of palmwine within the town's local economy. Palmwine tapping provides direct employment opportunities for skilled tappers known locally as *Di-Ochi*, whose occupation requires physical strength, indigenous knowledge, and technical expertise in climbing and extracting palm sap safely. In Nigeria and other West African countries, palmwine

sales contribute significantly to household livelihoods, especially among rural populations where alternative sources of income may be limited (Okafor, 1975, pp. 81–82).

Economically, palmwine production contributes to household sustenance and rural trade within the community. Fresh palmwine is sold in markets, roadside drinking spots, ceremonies, festivals, and neighboring towns, thereby generating regular income for producers and traders. Studies on palmwine production in Idemili South Local Government Area—which includes Akwu-Ukwu—indicate that palmwine tapping supports food production practices and rural livelihoods through indigenous technology and local entrepreneurship (Ikegwu, 2014, p.12). In addition to the sale of the beverage itself, related economic activities such as raffia harvesting, local gin distillation, transportation, fish sales, and food vending during festivals further expand the economic value chain associated with palm resources in the town.

According to Madubuonu as cited in Okolo (2025), the annual palmwine-related festival in Akwu-Ukwu, known as the *Nkàmanu Festival*, also contributes significantly to the local economy through cultural tourism and communal commerce. Historical accounts describe the festival as an important celebration observed mainly by palmwine tappers and the wider population of the town, often attracting visitors, traders, performers, and cultural enthusiasts (p.147). During the festival period, economic activities increase through the sale of food, drinks, crafts, and hospitality services. The celebration therefore transforms palmwine tapping from a purely occupational activity into a broader economic and cultural enterprise that strengthens communal identity while generating revenue for the community.

In addition to income generation, palmwine tapping contributes to food security and rural development. Palm sap contains sugars, vitamins, amino acids, and yeast organisms, making it both a consumable beverage and a raw material for local industries such as vinegar production and local gin distillation. From the last diagram above, the economic utilization of palm trees extends beyond wine production to include palm oil, palm kernels, raffia materials, and construction products, thereby increasing the overall commercial value of palm resources within indigenous economies (Obire, 2005, pp. 26–28). Because the tools required for tapping are relatively inexpensive and locally accessible, many rural dwellers engage in the occupation as a sustainable means of livelihood and self-employment.

Furthermore, palmwine tapping in Akwu-Ukwu supports intergenerational economic sustainability because the skills and practices associated with the occupation are transmitted from older tappers to younger members of the community. This continuity preserves indigenous

knowledge systems while creating opportunities for self-employment in a region where formal employment opportunities may be limited. Community leaders have similarly emphasized that raffia palm tapping remains one of the major economic activities sustaining the town's population. Certainly, palmwine festivals attract visitors, traders, performers, and researchers, generating revenue for host communities through hospitality services, transportation, craft sales, and cultural exhibitions. Scholars of African festivals argue that indigenous cultural celebrations function not only as social events but also as mechanisms for economic mobilization and cultural commodification within local economies (Asare-Kumi, 2020, pp. 90–94). Consequently, the economic values of palmwine tapping in Akwu-Ukwu extend beyond individual income generation to include rural development, cultural tourism, employment creation, and cultural preservation of indigenous economic heritage. Hence, palmwine tapping promote community-based economic development through festivals and traditional ceremonies associated with palmwine consumption.

EVALUATION

From the above discussion, the economic value of palmwine tapping in Akwu-Ukwu demonstrates a clear intersection between indigenous livelihood systems, cultural heritage, and rural development. The practice remains a reliable source of income for many households, particularly for skilled tappers (Di-Ochi), traders, and local vendors who depend on palmwine for daily subsistence. Its contribution to the informal economy is significant, as it supports small-scale entrepreneurship through the harvesting, transportation, and sale of fresh palmwine in local markets and social gatherings. This confirms earlier findings that palmwine production is not only an agricultural activity but also a structured rural economic system embedded in Igbo indigenous life (Ikegwu, 2014, pp.12–15).

However, despite its economic relevance, palmwine tapping in Akwu-Ukwu faces several structural challenges that limit its full economic potential. These include environmental degradation leading to the decline of palm trees, aging population of skilled tappers, and declining interest among younger generations who increasingly prefer urban employment opportunities. In addition, the highly perishable nature of palmwine reduces its storage and commercial scalability, thereby limiting expansion into large-scale agribusiness. Such constraints suggest that while palmwine tapping remains economically valuable, it is still largely confined to subsistence-level production rather than industrial commercialization (Obire, 2005, pp.26–28).

Culturally, palmwine festivals function as instruments of identity formation and communal solidarity. Through traditional music, dance, rituals, and ceremonial drinking, communities reaffirm their heritage and strengthen social bonds among members. The festival also serves educational purposes by transmitting indigenous values, customs, and occupational skills to younger generations. In many African societies, palmwine symbolizes hospitality, peace, and communal acceptance, making the festival an important medium for cultural continuity and social integration (Achebe, 1958, pp.5–7). Furthermore, the incorporation of palmwine into ceremonies such as marriages, title-taking, and harvest celebrations demonstrates its enduring symbolic significance within African traditional life.

Nevertheless, the cultural integration of palmwine tapping into festivals such as the *Nkàmanu Festival* enhances its economic relevance by expanding opportunities for tourism, hospitality, and local trade. During festival periods, increased commercial activities generate additional income streams for households and small businesses, thereby reinforcing the economic multiplier effect of indigenous cultural celebrations. Therefore, the evaluation of palmwine tapping in Akwu-Ukwu reveals a dual reality: it is both a resilient indigenous economic system and a vulnerable tradition requiring strategic cultural and economic revitalization to ensure long-term sustainability in a rapidly changing socio-economic environment.

CONCLUSION

Palmwine tapping in Akwu-Ukwu remains a significant indigenous economic activity that sustains household livelihoods, supports informal trade, and preserves traditional occupational knowledge. It functions as more than a source of income; it is an embedded cultural practice that connects economic life with social identity, communal values, and indigenous heritage. The continued reliance on palmwine production by skilled tappers and local traders demonstrates its resilience as a rural economic system within the community.

Despite its importance, the sustainability of palmwine tapping is increasingly threatened by environmental pressures, declining palm tree populations, and reduced interest among younger generations. The perishable nature of palmwine also limits its commercial expansion and large-scale industrialization. These challenges indicate that while palmwine tapping remains economically relevant, it requires strategic support, modernization, and cultural revitalization to maintain its viability in the long term.

Nevertheless, the integration of palmwine tapping into cultural festivals such as *Nkàmanu* enhances its economic and social relevance by promoting tourism, local enterprise, and community participation. This dual role—both economic and cultural—positions palmwine tapping as a valuable indigenous system that contributes to rural development and identity preservation. Therefore, sustaining palmwine tapping in Akwu-Ukwu is essential not only for economic reasons but also for safeguarding the cultural heritage and communal identity of the people.

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