

## **PALM WINE ECONOMY AND LABOUR MIGRANTS OF MGBOWO COMMUNITY OF IGBO SOCIETY**

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### **Abstract**

The palm tree is a blessing of inestimable value to the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria. The resourcefulness of the palm tree is hinged on its diverse productivity, output and yields such as palm wine, palm oil, timber, palm kernel, palm pomade and palm paste used as candles in African villages. Among the palm products, palm wine has continued to attract prominent attention in the academia, largely due to the socio-religious and economic relevance of palm wine to the Igbo. Studies on palm wine drinking cultures, ethics, economy and rituals have been conducted by sociologists and historians of Igbo studies. However, despite the scholarly attention on palm wine and palm economy largely, there seem to be some dearth in research on labour mobility, migration and inter-cultural relations established through the itinerancy of the palm wine tappers across cultural boundaries, using the migrant palm wine tappers of Mgbowo as the research focus. Unlike several palm wine tapping communities in Igbo land whose enterprises are large lyhome based, Mgbowo palm wine tappers have overtime established some network of palm wine tapping spots across the nation and beyond. This labour migration has created some socio-economic, religious and political interactions between the migrant palm wine tappers of Mgbowo and their non-Igbo hosts. The study explores the myriad of socio-cultural assimilation, adaptations and interactions that have culminated from the age-long economic intercourse. The impact of the inter-ethnic relationship in the course of the peregrination to Mgbowo community will be examined. The study adopts quantitative research Methodology, it provides insights to the pricing, marketing and capital accumulation from sale of palm

wine. Oral interviews are conducted among the palm wine tappers both active and retired in Mgbowo community, just as relevant literature on palm wine economy among the Igbo are consulted for an objective and balanced research.

**Keywords: Mgbowo, palm wine, migration, culture, agriculture**

### **Introduction**

Scholarship on palm wine among the Igbo have overtime focused on the socio-religious and economic relevance of palm wine, tapping methods and strategies, drinking habits, health implications and the contest between the indigenous palm wine and the imported spirituous liquors from Europe at the advent of colonialism in Nigeria<sup>1</sup>. However, there have been some gaps in the study of palm wine economy with reference to labour migration and culture contacts across nationalities in Nigeria. Researches on palm wine sometimes paint pictures of home-based economic venture, with tapping mostly domesticated within the community level, inasmuch as marketing could be extended farther through the market forces of demand and supply<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, scholarship on labour migration and itinerancy in Igbo land never acknowledged Mgbowo migrant palm wine tappers, rather, attention is usually focused on the celebrated Aro slave traders, the itinerant Awka smiths, the Nri ritual priests, the Nkwerre wood carvers and the Ohafia 'war mercenaries'. A figbo accounts that

The Aro were very influential in Ibibio land, as well as among the Ijo, the Bantoid people of the Cross River and in Idoma land. The Abiriba dominated smithing in much of Ibibio land and the Cross River Valley where they so exploited the people that they came to be known as rogues. The Awka penetrated parts of the Delta as smiths and oracular agents and in these spheres of activity constituted an influence to reckon with as far west as Isoko. Nkwere smiths penetrated the Eastern Delta and were particularly active in Ogoni<sup>3</sup>.

Similarly, Njoku affirmed the myriad of labour migration, interactions and culture contacts between the Igbo and their Northern and Southern neighbours in the pre-colonial times and emphasised the ubiquity of Igbo labour in the Niger Delta with special reference to Igbo population in

Bonny, thus “European visitors to the Niger Delta observed evidence of centuries of the flow of Igbo population (free and enslaved) into the delta communities. They mistook Bonny, for instance, for an Igbo town, particularly because there Igbo was the language of commerce and partly because a substantial number of the population was of Igbo ethnic origin”<sup>4</sup>. Sadly, of all the labour migrations, contacts and intermixing of cultures between the Igbo and their neighbours, the exploits of the migrant palm wine tappers of Mgbowo community never featured in any historical research. This study explores the palm wine industry among the Mgbowo with reference to labour migration within and outside Igbo land, culture-contacts and impact, assimilation and challenges.

### **Palm Wine Economy among the Igbo**

The palm trees indigenous to the Igbo country are blessings of inestimable value. Every part of them can be used-timber, leaves, sap and fruits. From the trunk the favourite timber for building is obtained, the leaves are used for thatching, the stem yields copious supplies of palm wine, and the fruit is not only good for food but is also a very profitable source of income<sup>5</sup>.

Palm wine, one of the products of palm economy has featured prominently in the Igbo socio-religious and economic endeavours. Pre-colonial Igbo society presented some notifications on the monopoly enjoyed by palm wine in Igbo drinking culture, as Olaudah Equiano remembered that the pre-colonial Igbo were ‘totally unacquainted with strong or spirituous liquors’, as their principal beverage was palm wine<sup>6</sup>. The good fortunes of palm wine tapping in Igbo land are based on the fact that apart from offering employment to a wide range of the population as tappers, a good percentage of others were offered gainful employment through trading and distribution of the products. Okonkwo argued that the palm wine tapper was a respected professional in the same way farmers, iron smiths or craft designers were regarded in pre-colonial Igboland<sup>7</sup>. The degree of respect and honour accorded to every profession in Igbo land could be peculiar to a given community and culture, as not every Igbo community practiced palm wine tapping. This will save the study from unwarranted generalization. Honours and titles are peculiar to communities and sometimes shaped by the people’s socio-religious and economic endeavours.

Apart from the economic benefits derived from sales and marketing, palm wine occupies a prominent position in the spiritual, religious and cultural

living of the Igbo. It is not an exaggeration that almost every traditional ritual, feast, sacrifice and invocations have palm wine as part of the religious collections. Among the Mgbowo of Igbo society, marriage contracts, oath-taking and vows are sealed with exchange of palm wine drinks among the parties involved. Ancestral beings, gods and deities are invoked through the pouring of libation of palm wine or any alcoholic drinks to the shrines<sup>8</sup>. Olaudah Equiano accented to this claim as he remembered that his pre-colonial Igbo society was a society fond of pouring libation and tossing small balls of food on the ground to the spirits of the departed relations which the community suppose to preside over their conducts<sup>9</sup>. The myriad of socio-economic and spiritual benefits of palm wine to the Igbo cannot be over-emphasised, as the palm tree is a blessing of inestimable benefit and important to the people, none of its components can be wasted, as the Igbo had developed the mastery of exploitation of the palm tree.

### **Mgbowo and Palm Wine Enterprise**

This study is a survey of palm wine enterprise in Mgbowo community with reference to labour migration, and socio-cultural and economic impact of such labour itinerancy to the people of Mgbowo. Geographically, Mgbowois located about forty four kilometres south of the state capital (Enugu), along Enugu- Awgu- Okigwe – Port Harcourt expressway. The community lies at the foot of Udi hill. Mgbowo is bounded in the north by Nenwe, on the south by Awgu, on the east by Ndeaboh and on the west by Mmaku<sup>10</sup>. Although fertile in terms of arable land, the community is challenged by land scarcity when compared to her neighbours, a phenomenon attributed to their late settlement in the area. Land question and the quest for expansion and appropriation of lands for agricultural and residential purposes had lured the Mgbowo into series of wars of expansion with her neighbours in the pre-colonial times<sup>11</sup>. It was the scarcity of land that led to the diversion from crop farming to palm wine tapping, most especially the development of migrant palm wine tappers of Mgbowo extraction across the nation and beyond. Supporting the above explanation, Stapleton observed that:

The Mgbowo are the Ibos (sic) but are distinct from the rest of the Division in that they are travellers and traders rather than farmers, a condition resulting from pre-Government Aro influence.....While the young men go abroad as palm wine tappers to Calabar, as native doctors to Degema and Brass, as soft oil traders to Jos and as dry

goods traders to various places. They are thus less parochial than the other towns of the area and more advanced in that they are wealthier and wear more and better clothing<sup>12</sup>.

The origin of palm wine tapping in Mgbowo is subsumed in the people's oral tradition and legends which claimed that

A certain man had embarked upon trimming of dwarfish palm trees on his plot of land. In the process he cut off the spidax from one of the numerous oil palm trees on the land. later, when he went to the same land, he observed that some fowls clustered around one of the bases of the oil palm trees that had its spidax cut off, drinking from the liquid found from the base of the cut spidax. After rapt observation, the man thought that if the liquid was good and harmless to fowls, it would therefore be harmless to man, so he tasted it and found it good. Then on his next round of trimming palm trees in the other half of the same plot of land, he cut horizontal holes on the bases of the spidaxes around , and fixed collectors to them<sup>13</sup>. This was assumed to mark the beginning of palm wine tapping in Mgbowo.

Inasmuch as there are four wine yielding varieties of palms in Nigeria, namely; Oil Palm (*elaeisguineensis*), Raffia Palm (*Venifera*), Dele palm(*Phoenicdecty life*) and *Cocosmicifera*<sup>14</sup>. Of these four, it is however, the oil palm that the migrant palm wine tappers of Mgbowo focused their economic attention on. This does not mean that other varieties were of substandard, but environmental factors often influence the choice of palm to be tapped. The longevity of the oil palm tree, the gradual but continuous dripping of oil palm wine year after year, its ubiquity around the palm belt of Igbo land and the low risk of its survival at adoption led to its preference ahead of others<sup>15</sup>. Palm wine tapping is a 'three times job' of (morning, afternoon and night) daily. The Mgbowo had devised the three basic methods of oil palm wine tapping, thus:

NkwuElu (Up Wine : Obtained from the Spidax)

A. Itii ( Obtained from the base of the palm fronds)

B. Oguda Ali (Obtained from a felled Palm tree)<sup>16</sup>. Apeh aptly described the tapping technique of the three varieties of palm wine as follows:

The inflorescence tapping method which yields the NkwuElu involves cutting a triangular hole of about 2.5cm deep at the base of the male flower bud. The hole is covered with a piece of felt so that the hole will not dry up. The hole is enlarged gradually every morning, afternoon and night to cover it of the muscoid substance that tend to cover the xylem vessels until the third day when wine begins to ooze out. A funnel-like apparatus ( ami), usually made of bamboo or cassava stem, is fixed to a hole and the other end inserted into a bottle or calabash. This is held in a position by a rope. As wine oozes out of the hole, it passes through the funnel and is collected in the container at the end. Up wine tapping lasts between 12-16 days. The peak period is after the sixth days, by this method, a tree can be tapped up to six times or more in a year. The *Ekpo* palm wine is collected from a felled palm tree. It is usually a forceful means of extracting palm wine from a felled palm tree before it decays. Having felled the tree, a square hole of about 15cm made on the bud, with a tiny exit hole. At the other side of it, a funnel as in the first method is placed to collect the wine. It is through this tiny hole via the funnel that wine oozes out into a container partially buried below the bud. Iti method is almost the same with *Ekpo* except that the palm is tapped while standing<sup>17</sup>.

In terms of patronage and hygiene, the up wine is preferred because it is tapped from a life palm tree. Up wine is fresher and devoid of any infections and dirt. It is priced very highly because of its freshness, lower contamination with impurities and high quality in terms of hygiene and cleanliness. Not many patronize the *Ogudaliand Itti*. This is largely due to system of tapping the duo. In the case of *Ogudali*, since the container is partially buried on the ground, the tendency of the wine been infested by reptiles and insects is high. Sometimes, a careless palm wine tapper might not take cognisance of the poor environment associated with *Ogudali*, especially during the rainy season when impurities and flood might overwhelm the gallon fixed to the fallen palm tree. *Itti* wine is never

preferred because it is assumed to be forced out of the palm tree; this is evident in the large quantity of palm collected from a palm tree under itti. Itti system produces large quantity of wine, but its longevity is doubtful because most palm trees die after this forceful extraction of palm wine. The Mgbowo never regarded any tapper who applies this method a serious fellow. The price of Itti wine is always the lowest in the market.

The basic tapping equipment of the Mgbowo palm wine tappers include:

- a. A climbing rope( Agbuu)
- b. A small knife (MmaNkwu)
- c. A big machete ( MmaOgbu Edali)
- d. Wine Collector ( Mbubo/bottles or small gallons)
- e. Wine Container (gallons/earthen pots)
- f. Wine Mesh( Nyor)
- g. Funnels
- h. Cups(oba) for mixing wine and water)
- i. Clean water( for dilution )
- j. Straw hat( for protection against bees)<sup>18</sup>



Photo showing One Gallon (sky blue), Two Gallons (Black) and Agbu (The Climbing Rope)

Photo credit: Kaunda Photos, Mgbowo.

Arguably, the economy of Mgbowo rested on palm wine tapping, the palm wine tappers were largely migrants that had established their palm wine businesses across the nation and beyond. The labour migrants had overtime maintained high level of corporation, interaction and coexistence with their Igbo and non-Igbo hosts. It was the itinerancy, migration and the dispersal of Mgbowo palm wine tappers across cultural and ethnic nationalities that distinguished the Mgbowo from other palm wine tapping communities of Udi, Enugu –Ezike , the Ngwo and the Mgbidi who were prolific palm wine tappers but localized within their various communities and local markets. Mgbowo palm wine tappers are known in the swampy coastal regions of Calabar, Ugep, Uyo, Ibibio, Ngwa, Umunnede, Brass to mention but a few. In the northern region, Mgbowo palm wine tappers dominated the cold and mountainous forests of Jos, Gembu, Yola, Makurdi, Ibi, Kafanchan, Abbong, Baissa, Igede, Idoma among others. In the West, the thick forests of Ibadan, Ife, Oshogbo, Benin, Akure and Ekiti were transverse by the Mgbowo. Beyond the shores of Nigeria, the Mgbowo recorded massive labour migration to southern Cameroon (Bameda, Manfee), Equatorial Guinea and other West African countries<sup>19</sup>. While the men travelled out as migrant Palm wine tappers, the home economy was entrusted on the women who were subsistence farmers and petty traders of perishables, trading within the local markets on articles such as oil bean, vegetables, fruits and palm oil.

### **Palm Wine Apprenticeship among the Mgbowo**

Popularly called *Ije –Oku (Palm wine adventure or training)*, the activities of the palm wine tappers were well organized and streamlined to avoid unnecessary bottlenecks in their migration, settlement and interactions with their hosts. It was a combination of spiritual and economic arrangement. Prior to the adventure, the migrants were traditionally bound to submit their supplications, itinerancy and adventures through sacrifices to a deity named *Okporouzo* (Road Safety). Sacrifices are offered to the deity for protection and good fortunes throughout the period of their sojourn outside home, as contracts and business bonds are sealed with oaths and covenants before the *okporouzo* deity to avoid fraud among the



business partners in the palm wine business<sup>20</sup>. The apprenticeship system of palm wine tapping was similar to the feudal economic system of medieval Europe; there were lords and servants in Mgbowo Palm wine enterprise. The Lord (Nna –Oku), having gone out first to locate the ‘greener pasture’ and paid for the palm forests, comes back to the village (Mgbowo) to take the young apprentices or servants for detailed teachings and practical lessons on palm wine tapping. Before embarking on *Ije-Oku* (Palm wine adventure or training), an agreement was reached between the Master and the apprentice’s family on the duration of service, mode of apprenticeship, year of graduation and the general welfare of the apprentice. A master could have more than 20 apprentices. It was the duty of the master to provide accommodation, feeding and possibly medicals if it were full time apprenticeship. NwamgbowoJoku recalled that the life of an apprentice under a wicked Master could be very horrible and unimaginable. The apprentice lived at the mercy of the Master’s wife in terms of provision of primary needs. The apartment was a separate house from the master’s building, it was a simple room with a bamboo- made bed (akpakara), raffia mat as foam, climbing ropes (Agbu), Axe (Atuko) and cutlasses (Ogbuedali) for their daily business<sup>21</sup>. Most times, the apprentices were fed by the master’s wife who may decide to starve any ‘obstinate’ apprentice. There were cases of obstinacy, rebellion and looting of master’s treasures by some fraudulent apprentices. In such scenario, the master would report the case to the apprentice kinsmen at home, preferably during the Annual Mass Return for eka-okuko (General Meeting of all kindreds) at new yam festival. However, cases of such were adjudicated at kindred level, but could be taken to the council of Ali Priests (Nde-Ali) when the kindred had failed or to the final arbiters, Okporouzo and Ngeleishi deities for resolution and verdict. When threats to life were involved, the oracle (Ngeleishi) in Mgbowo would serve as the final arbiter of justice as the disputants would be made to take oaths or contract a covenant to avert any future damages<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, there were exceptions to the above. There existed masters who nurtured, pampered and afterwards created opportunities for the independence of their apprentice after the stipulated length of service. There are two major systems of apprenticeship among the migrant palmwine tappers thus:

- a. Full Time Apprenticeship
- b. Combined or partial Apprenticeship (Akuta-Ekee).

a. The first system involved total submission to the master. The apprentice in the system was almost a novice and needed full tutorial and guidance. He learnt the art of palm wine tapping courtesy of his master, and all the palm wine tapped were largely for the master, as he was not interested in any pecuniary gains until he was certified a graduate by the master. The master provided accommodation, medical care and food for the apprentice. After the duration of apprenticeship, the master will settle the apprentice by giving him a portion of palm plantation either on lease or as a gift for his meritorious service. It was incumbent on the master to provide the basic tapping equipment such as cutlass, ropes and calabashes for the graduating fellow. The apprentice's duration of service was determined at home before such adventure was taken. The length of service ranged from 2- 3 years. Palm wine agreements and settlements were mostly sealed on the 9<sup>th</sup> month of Mgbowo traditional calendar (New Yam Festival) which is usually July. The new yam festival also served as avenue for mass return, annual general meeting of families, associations and clans<sup>23</sup>.

b. The second system was a kind of partnership production between the servant and the master. The master pays the servant monthly or weekly depending on the terms of agreement and the quantity of palm wine tapped over the period of agreement. In this case, the servant is not totally considered an apprentice but an employed labourer on salary or wage voucher. The servant was not entitled to the basic social needs enjoyed by the apprentice on full time, unless the master wished to provide those. He was not tenured nor were there any arrangement for his graduation since he was already a 'professional'. He could resign his duty when the service and terms of agreements were no longer favourable.<sup>24</sup> A palm wine tapper on combined service could earn between £10-12 a month in 1960<sup>25</sup>. A clearer example of part-time apprenticeship was palm wine enterprise and business line of EgwuonwuUdeinya and OnoyeChukwu in Kafanchan Kaduna State. The duo expanded their palm wine business beyond the old Kaduna State to Jos and Bauchi. There was a retinue of servants and workers who tapped their palm plantations, marketed the palm wine, and kept records of sales. It was a multi-purpose business centre as they combined hotel business with palm wine sales. The partnership of Egwuonwu

and Onoye created employment opportunities for Mgbowo men who eked out living through tapping for the big palm wine moguls<sup>26</sup>. The gradual accumulation of capital through palm wine led the two partners into diversifying their economies by investing in hotels, motor transport business and crude oil marketing in the 1950s<sup>27</sup>.

### **Acquisition of Palm Plantation**

Since the Mgbowo were migrants and visitors to their places of primary assignment, the first task of the migrant palm wine tappers upon settlement was the acquisition of palm plantation. There were several systems of acquisition of palm plantation, depending on the socio-cultural and economic practices of their hosts. The several means of acquisition of palm plantation include lease system, annual payment of land rent and outright buying of palm plantation by the Mgbowo palm wine tappers.

In Calabar area, the major owners of palm plantations were the Akwaobia and the Ikpai of Efik nation. Michael Eze recalled that in 1949, payment for palm plantation of about four hectares ranged from £6-10 a year. The agreement is yearly and could be renewed if there were no defilements from any of the parties. Sometimes, the cordiality might be extended to the point of leasing the palm plantation to the Mgbowo, while the land and other economic trees remain the property of the landlord. Apart from the annual renewal, Mgbowo migrant palm wine tappers were traditionally bound to pay annual homage to the king, chiefs and other leaders of the host community by providing gift items, livestock, spirituous liquor, kolanuts, and tubers of yam as mark of respect, cordiality and obedience to the laws of the community.

In Ngwaland and Isukwuato axis of present Abia State, Chiefs Aaron Ogbu and NwosuKele established enviable trading routes and palm wine enterprise in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The ubiquity of palm trees in Ngwaland attracted the Mgbowo to the palm belt region of Igboland even before the 1920s. Prior to the coming of the Mgbowo, the major product of palm economy among the Ngwa was palm oil. It was the coming of the Mgbowo that brought a revolution to the palm economy of the Ngwa following the introduction of palm wine business as a commercial venture, a venture that was hitherto not part of the economic schedule of the people. Just like Calabar, payment for palm plantation of

about seven hectares in 1922 was £7 for 2 years which could be renewed if there was no defiance<sup>28</sup>.

Apart from paying for the palm forest, the palm wine tappers were obligated to register and obtain tapping permit from the Department of Forestry. The permit is the guarantee upon which palm trees could be tapped. The issuance of permit also helped in regulation deforestation, unpermitted hunting and bush burning as Forest Guards were empowered to arrest any tapper without such permit. Based on forest regulations, the palm wine tappers were not allowed to cut down palm trees without a prior permission from the Forestry Department<sup>29</sup>. Notable among the early palm wine tappers in Aba Ngwa were: UdeinyaEze, UdeOhagwu, UdeOnyebor, EzeokeIho, KamaluIbibi, Uzoigwe Ekpa, Egbonshi Olu among others<sup>30</sup>. This group of Mgbowo tappers lived together and organized their business in a form of guild. Sometimes, wealthy palm wine tappers among the Mgbowo paid the land rent of on behalf of their brothers for onward reimbursement afterwards. This collective responsibility of the tappers helped in forming a stronger bargain in terms of price fixing and regulation of market forces in palm wine trade.

In the northern part of Nigeria, Mgbowo palm wine tappers discovered early routes and settlements in Makurdi, Jos, Kafanchan, Katsinala, Gembu among others. Aware of the dangers of travelling long distance in an age dominated by inter-communal wars, the palm wine tappers' guild underwent some religious inoculations at home (Mgbowo) before setting off. Prominent deity whose responsibility was to safeguard the itinerant Mgbowo palm wine merchants and traders was *Okporouzo* (Road Safety). Sacrifices and appeasements were made to this deity for hitch-free journey and successful business trip<sup>31</sup>.

Makurdi, the state capital of Benue has the highest concentration of Mgbowo people in the northern region of Nigeria<sup>32</sup>, the migration to Makurdi was a pre-colonial adventure. Owned by the Tiv ethnic group of Benue state, Makurdi became a centre of attraction to the palm wine tappers due to the following factors:

- a. There was high number of palm trees on the bank of the Benue River
- b. Favourable markets for sale of palm wine in the commercial city of Makurdi. The Benue River became a unifying factor as several ethnic

nationalities utilized the river route for commerce and fishing, thus making Makurdi a sort of metropolitan city.

c. The fertility of the river beds provided opportunities for Mgbowo women to cultivate vegetables, maize and melons on commercial quantities. The women complemented their male counterparts in terms of economic provisions and family upkeep through their vegetable trade along the river banks.

Major palm plantations in Makurdi were North Bank, 72 Barracks, and Lower River Benue Development Authority Palm Plantations. Application for use of palm plantation was made to the Chief Forest Officer if the plantation was owned by the Local Government or any other governmental agencies such as the 72 Barracks plantation owned by the Nigerian Army and Lower River Benue owned by the state government. It was the Forest Officer that monitored the activities of the migrant palm wine tappers, issued permits and through him, palm plantation agreements were renewed on behalf of the government.<sup>33</sup>

More so, when the ownership of the plantation was communal, payment for palm plantation was made through the chiefs, village heads and community leaders. Sometimes, palm wine tappers under communal arrangement evade taxation, permit and other necessary dues for forest users. This sometimes created some atmosphere of invasion, seizure of palm wine and arrest of the tax evaders<sup>34</sup>. In 2002, Mr. Aloysius Ngala paid an annual fee of N5,000(Five Thousand Naira) to the Lower Benue Rivers Development Authority for three hectares of palm plantation<sup>35</sup>.



Palm wine tapping implements; Axe (Atuko) and Cutlass (Ogbuedali) use for cutting palm fronds before creating platforms for wine tapping on the tree. Photo credit: Photo taken by the Author in Mgbowo on 25/4/2019

### Marketing and Pricing

Palm wine tapping in Calabar and other coastal areas were done on the swampy, marshy palm plantation called *Mbari*. The palm plantation was so large that a master could employ the services of about 20 apprentices in a plantation. The level of Productivity and yields were determined by the seriousness of the apprentices and the nature of the palm tree. Suffice it to say that irrespective of the biotic and anthropogenic challenges, an average palm wine Lord was sure of 4 jars (80 gallons) of palm wine daily.

The market prices of palm wine in the popular Calabar White Market in 1952 were:

1 Cup	=	2d.
1 Gallon (5litres)	=	1s
1 Jar ( 4gallons or 20 litres)	=	3s
4 Jars (80 litres)	=	12s <sup>36</sup>



Mgbowo palm wine tappers in Afor Market in Ndeaboh, Enugu State. An old palm wine tapper taking measurements of his products in the market. Photo credit: Kaunda photos, Mgbowo.

The main market for the sale of Mgbowo wine in Calabar was the popular White Market, while major customers were the Efik, Ibibio, Kalabari, Abiriba, Ohafia communities who usually visit the market to patronize Mgbowo palm wine<sup>37</sup>.

Marketing and sale of palm wine in Ngwaland was done in the fast growing city of Aba. A gallon (5 litres) of palm wine was sold for 9s in 1941<sup>38</sup>. Apart from the sale of palm wine in the open market, and the intermittent street itinerancy, Mgbowo palm wine tappers were the first set of traders to opened drinking spaces popularly called *Beer parlour* in Aba as early as 1935<sup>39</sup>. The palm wine drinking centres served as public spaces for relaxation and entertainment. The beer parlour encouraged cordiality, collegiality and brotherhood not only for the Mgbowo but among the emerging urban population in Aba. The frontline palm wine joints in Aba established in the mid 1930s by the Mgbowo were located at numbers 79, 56, 55, and 53 Market Road street, Aba. Others were in Danfodio, Ogbor Hills and Ehi Roads all in Aba<sup>40</sup>.

It is important to note that apart from the career palm wine tappers of Mgbowo, some other Mgbowo men exclusively engaged on marketing of palm wine other than tapping, sometimes on a large scale. The merchants of palm wine developed network of markets for the supply of palm wine, even beyond Makurdi to Ibi, kasinala, kaduroko and Lafia. Having bought the wine from the palm wine tappers, the merchants would take the product to areas of relative scarcity to sell. Again, the Mgbowo Palm wine merchants in Makurdi like their Aba brothers developed many palm wine outlets (palm wine joints). Some of the palm wine joints or public spaces were manned by retired palm wine tappers who could no longer engage in the stressful exercise of climbing the palm trees. These palm wine joints were mostly located at the family houses of the palm wine merchants. The palm wine drinking joints or bars ran from 2pm to 11pm daily. The relative lateness in the opening of the drinking bars was due to the bottlenecks in product delivery from the place of production to the drinking joints. Mr. Aloysius Ngala owned a popular palm wine joint in Makurdi. In 2002, an average of 50litres of palm wine was consumed daily at his joint<sup>41</sup>. A cup of palm wine at Ngala's joint was sold at #50 (Fifty Naira). Mgbowo palm wine joints were more than a relaxation centre, the joints were public spheres. Public spheres refer to areas in social life where people congregate and freely discuss and identify societal

problems and through discussions, influence politics<sup>42</sup>. The public sphere created by palm wine joints fostered unity among the Mgbowo in the 'Diaspora'. Apart from providing avenues for relaxation, the palm wine joints served as important links between home and Diaspora. Since telecommunication and postal services were almost out of the reach of the tappers due to the low literacy level, information flowed through the drinking joints. News from home must get to the drinking joints before 48 hours through travellers. Oftentimes, home bound goods were kept at the drinking joint until the scheduled day of departure. Colours and glamour were added to the drinking joints by the activities of the wives of the proprietors who run rickety food café beside the palm wine joint. This was another avenue by which some Mgbowo women started their independent economic ventures, especially in hotel management and cafeteria in Makurdi and beyond. The drinking joints were resting places and transit points for Mgbowo people visiting makurdi for the first time first time. Visitors were advised to alight at notable drinking joints of Mgbowo merchants for safety and cordiality. Awason affirmed the above arguments in his survey of drinking joints in Bamenda Cameroon. He argued that "drinking joints developed and functioned as regular meeting and discursive places for men and women; thus providing the avenue for the dissemination of information and rumour"<sup>43</sup>. Apart from the drinking joints, there were itinerant palm wine merchants of Mgbowo extraction that hauled their goods from one street to another with bicycles in Makurdi. One major advantage of street hawking was that palm wine was taken to the remotest streets and families. Secondly, hawking helped the itinerant merchantsto 'evade'the obnoxious colonial taxes on business premises. Nevertheless, the itinerancy was a very tedious venture as the trade routes were not always favourable for rickety bicycles with huge luggage to ply<sup>44</sup>.

### **Impact of Palm Wine Tapping to Mgbowo Community**

Recall that the Mgbowo are Igbo but are distinct from the rest of the Division in that they are travellers and traders rather than farmers<sup>45</sup>. Following the expansion of palm wine business across the nation and beyond, the tendency of intermixing, borrowing, assimilation and clash of cultures became very high. Pre-colonial Igbo society presented some cross border merchants and itinerants. Evidences abound in the activities of Nri priests, Awka Smiths and Umudioka carvers whose itinerancy extended beyond Igbo frontiers. Njoku noted that:



The Awka smiths travelled to as far north as the Niger-Benue confluence, as far west as Siluko in eastern Yoruba land, and as far south as the eastern Niger Delta. Nkwere smiths itinerated in the Ogoni country and also in the Delta area, Udi Smiths, as far east as Bali district in Cameroon. Abiriba smiths were dominant in the Cross River area<sup>46</sup>.

The myriads of social and economic intercourse between the Igbo and their neighbours went hand in hand with mutual cultural interpretation and synthesis<sup>47</sup>. Afigbo described such inter-ethnic interaction as an exchange of the best and the worst aspects of the two peoples through war, diplomacy, trade, marriage and other forms<sup>48</sup>.

The activities of Mgbowo palm wine tappers created veritable platforms for the exchange and intermixing of cultures. Culturally, the exposure created by labour migration of the Mgbowo guaranteed for the first time, the introduction of foreign languages in Mgbowo. Among the Umuaja Kindred of Ezioha village of Mgbowo, Efik, and Ibibio languages are commonly spoken. This is due to their palm wine tapping enterprises in the coastal region of Niger Delta. From the north, the palm wine tappers in Makurdi acquired Tiv language and transmitted such to even their families at home. The palm wine tappers in the Western region of Nigeria are known for their fluency in Yoruba language. The infiltration of foreign languages to Mgbowo community created the platform for the emergence of polyglots in the community. The advantage of the new attribute is that important or confidential discussions are done in foreign languages within the family circle. The acquisition of foreign languages became a status symbol among the migrants as they showcased their uniqueness by speaking the foreign language proudly. This knowledge of foreign language also created some sense of unity and friendliness between the migrant palm wine tappers and their hosts, as the bond became brotherly instead of indigene-settler relationship. The ability to communicate fluently in other languages other than Igbo had helped in creating some sense of national identity and comeliness in a nation of diverse ethnic and cultural coloration. The migrants served as bridges for inter-group relationship, as there were exchange of visits among the communities and actors involved, especially during cultural festivals and events<sup>49</sup>.

Inter-ethnic marriages were contracted in the course of migration and business escapades. Evidence abounds of such relationship and nuptial contracts between Mgbowo migrant palm wine tappers and their non-Igbo hosts. Notable among these inter-ethnic marriages were Ononye Chukwuand EmeUdemmadu who married from Kafanchan (Northern Nigeria) and Calabar (Cross River State) respectively<sup>50</sup>. A host of Mgbowo migrants in Makurdi, Ezilo, Manfee (Cameroon) and other places intermarried with their hosts. The influx of 'foreign women' to Mgbowo has some impact to the socio-cultural development of the community. In Mgbowo Azunkwo a group of 'foreign wives' named Umumba had formed a kind of cooperative organization for mutual aid and assistance in all their endeavours in the community. At the death of any foreign wife, the cooperative society would assist in providing coffin and some other basic items such as food and wines needed for the traditional burial, this was in the spirit of oneness irrespective of cultural ties and affiliation<sup>51</sup>. In his affirmation to relationship between long-distance trading and inter-ethnic marriages, Njoku postulates that:

As a result of the coming and going (trading) between the Igbo and these neighbours, inter-ethnic marriage was a common feature of their relationships. Southern Igala, especially those of the Achadu clans, intermarried commonly with the Umueri Igbo people, just as the Nsukka villages of Enugu Ezike, Imilike and EhaAmufu intermarried freely with the southern Igala and southern Idoma peoples, especially the Otukpa. In the southern parts, itinerant Nkwere, Abiriba and Awka Smiths usually returned home from their professional tours with Ijo, Ogoni, Efik, and Ibibio wives<sup>52</sup>.

Furthermore, religio-cultural exchanges and acculturation also characterized the itinerancy of the Mgbowo. In the Niger Delta area, the Mgbowo palm wine tappers adopted the Ibibio traditional inoculation practice of *Akpan*,<sup>53</sup>. The inoculation was a protective measure against witchcraft, bad fortune and evil. The initiate would be made to wear some strings on the waist. Sometimes, families may hang the string at the entrance gate or lintel for protection and warding off evil. The *Akpan* ritual was introduced in Mgbowo by the palm wine tappers from the coastal villages of Ibibio and Ijo<sup>54</sup>. Similarly, some group of migrant palm wine tappers of Mgbowo formed a cultural dance group named *Okom*,

adopted from the Ibibio-Calabar area, members of Okom cultural dance performed during festivals in Mgbowo, their regalia were largely Ibibio, as they wore safari shirt on loin checkers geroge wrappers tied on the waist with a long traditional Ibibio cap. The songs were purely Ibibio/Calabar as they adopted some elements of Ekpe cult cultures in their songs and dance<sup>55</sup>

Economically, the palm wine industry and migration guaranteed capital accumulation and investment among the palm wine tappers. The migrant palm wine tappers established some business investments outside Mgbowo. *Thenouveaux riches* of the palm wine business acquired and accumulated wealth. The surplus capitals accumulated were largely invested in landed property and education. In Aba, the likes of Mr.UzoigweEkpa, UdeEze, Ezeokelho, Udeonye Ebor, Ndubueze Igbo built commercial and residential buildings from the proceeds of Palm wine. Similarly, Mr. Ononye Chukwu and Egwuonwu Udeinya established hotels in Kafanchan (Kaduan state) and Jos (Plateau State), Mr. Abba Uzuenwu bought a house in Lafia in 1958 from the proceeds of palm wine sales. Mr. Basil Azih, Joe Nwosu, Michael Eze, had houses for commercial purposes in Calabar, while the likes of Chief Ibekwe of Imeama had large estate of buildings in Bermuda Cameroon, courtesy of age-long palm wine tapping in Cameroon. In Ogoja, Abakaliki and Afikpo areas, Chief Sunday Udeorji had a large yard for tenants in Abakaliki<sup>56</sup>.The myriad of Mgbowo investments outside their traditional homeland (Igboland) have demonstrated the sense of national unity and desire for nation building in a nation characterized by ethnic sensitivities and dichotomy.

The migration of Mgbowo palm wine tappers beyond Igboland provided the opportunity for the formation of Pan Mgbowo socio-political organization (Mgbowo Improvement Union) with branches in all the states of the federation in the early 1960s. The organization provided mutual-aid and assistance to members within and outside Mgbowo. It was a link between home and the Diaspora, as information and news from home were disseminated through the union. The union assisted the community in areas of infrastructural and social development, provision of scholarship and skill acquisition to the community members<sup>57</sup>.

Furthermore, the migrant palm wine tappers also filled an economic gap in Mgbowo and other neighbouring communities by serving as links between

the north and the south in terms of trade and commerce. The migrants were among the first set of traders that engaged in the importation of northern goods, food stuffs and articles to Mgbowo. Such articles were animal skin, hides, dried meat, bene-seed, egusi, beans, Cameroon pepper and groundnut. The imported goods were sold on wholesale basis to the home traders (Retailers) as the palm wine tappers would return to their places of primary assignment in the north timely.

### **Challenges of Palm Wine Tapping among the Migrant Palm Wine Tappers of Mgbowo**

Palm wine tapping is a risky adventure, given the fact that most of the activities are done on top of the tree with little or no protective and safety measures. Basden's survey reveals the two climbing systems of single and double rope<sup>58</sup>. Although the Mgbowo adopted the single rope system of climbing, none of the systems guaranteed maximum safety on the tree. Basden's observation that occasionally, the rope breaks or slips, or the climber misses his grip and the rest is always horribly painful if not fatal<sup>59</sup> has been the lot of some Mgbowo palm wine tappers over time. Despite the dearth of statistics on deaths resulting from such accidents, several Mgbowo palm wine tappers have lost their lives in this risky but money-spinning business. Survival from the accident is always rare, as the victims sometimes land on sharp objects or thorn-infested ditches. In any case of survival, the victim may be permanently disfigured. Since most of their business was carried out in the bush or rural areas, there were lack of adequate medical attention and treatment of victims of such accident, this also exacerbated the plights of the migrant palm wine tappers.

Biotic or environmental factors were another major challenge to the palm wine tappers. Environmental factors severe cold in the swampy palm plantation, malaria and attacks from wild animals.



Mr. Paul Nwosutapping palm wine in the mangrove forest of Calabar. Photo retrieved from Mr.Nwosu

Although Okonkwo exonerated the business of any danger but the accident of falling from the tree<sup>60</sup>, the Mgbowo suffered myriads of disturbances in their adventures.

In the swampy plantations (Mbari) of Calabar, Ugep, Brass, Ikom, Uyo among others, the palm wine tappers were exposed to unbearable mosquito and tse-tse fly bites and cold were constant in the palm forests. This made malaria, typhoid, rheumatism and pneumonia very common among the migrants palm wine tappers. Furthermore, the researcher observed the pandemic nature of rheumatism and arthritics on the retired migrant palm wine tappers at old age. This was due to their age-long exposure to the cold and waterlogged swampy plantations.

Apart from the diseases associated with palm wine tapping, the migrants were also at the mercy of an 'earthworm-like' blood sucking creature called *Etu*. *Etu* created fear among the palm wine tappers on the swamp until they devised the means of killing it with tobacco or potash. Eze observed that the parasite (*Etu*) could pierce through the victim's foot and live in the host for months. Laser Surgery and traditional medical measures such as the application of hot palm oil and traditional balm were used to cure the menace<sup>61</sup>.

The emergence of colonial urban centres at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had series of impact to the traditional African economy. Apart from the unregulated rural-urban migration which depopulated the rural economic workforce, the emergence of colonial urban centres in Igbo land led to massive expansion and opening of suburbs to accommodate the teeming urban population. However, in spite the benefits the urban centre granted to the people in terms of capitalist industrial economy, global economic integration and a robust civil service system, urbanization was a major challenge to palm wine tapping since the business was largely done in the rural areas, urban suburbs and forested zones, the quest for expansion of cities due to population surge and urbanization often displace the means of livelihood of the palm wine tappers, as plantations were cleared for infrastructural development. Notable examples were the displacement of Mgbowo palm wine tappers in Emene (Enugu) during the construction of AkanuIbiam International Airport in the mid 1970s. Similar incidents occurred during the expansion of Abakaliki town after the creation of Ebonyi State in 1996. The establishment of University of Calabar in 1976 on the palm belt displaced the palm wine tappers following the unrestricted uprooting of thousands of palm trees on the site. The massive urbanization and expansions have not only dislodged the tappers, but forced majority of them into finding alternative means of livelihood outside palm wine<sup>62</sup>.

Colonial Government ‘disturbances’ in form of arbitrary taxation on forest permit challenged the business of Mgbowo palm wine tappers. Taxation came in the form of issuance of permit, tax on business premises and tolls. Oftentimes, the tappers were harassed, their implements seized and their permit revoked by the government<sup>63</sup>. These were measures adopted to retard or disrupt the supply of palm wine to the local distillation centres in an era of competition between the imported spirituous liquors and the locally distilled gins in the rural communities. It was the importation of spirituous liquors and the natives attempt to replicate European made spirituous liquors that gave rise to the establishment of the purported ‘illicit’ distillation centres. The distillation of palm wine into spirituous liquor challenged the European markets in the colony, thus making the colonial administration to adopt stringent measures against the trading, distribution and tapping of palm wine especially along the coastal areas of Calabar<sup>64</sup>. Mgbowo community along the coast were not distillers but

major suppliers of palm wine to the 'illicit' distillation centres. Although the constant harassments from the colonial government affected the palm wine economy badly, it did not stop the business and the supplies.

### **Conclusion**

This study is a survey of the itineration and labour migration within the confines of the Mgbowo palm wine tappers. The study revealed the socio-economic and cultural impact of the myriads of itinerancies of the migrant Mgbowo palm wine tappers to the community and the nation at large. As culture carriers, the age-long interactions between the Mgbowo palm wine tappers and their non-Igbo hosts, business partners and colleagues have culminated in culture assimilation, adoption and transformation in the community. This include the introduction of Ibibio/Calabar, Tiv, Plateau, Cameroon, Benin, Yoruba cultures, rituals, dances and festivals in Mgbowo as inspired by the migrant palm wine tappers. There was the emergence of 'foreign wives' (Umumba) who also aided the campaign of culture assimilation and adoption in Mgbowo. The accumulation of capital from the palm wine business led to the massive investment outside Igboland. The palm wine tappers were harbingers of nation building and detribalization in an ethnic and religious conscious nation, Nigeria. Their massive investments across the nation, and their cordial interactions with their non-Igbo hosts regardless of ethno-religious sentiments were testimonies of unity in diversity.

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