

NKAMANU IN AKWU-UKWU CULTURE: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL OF ITS SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a philosophical appraisal of Nkàmanu, a traditional cultural and socio-economic institution in Akwu-Ukwu, Anambra State, an Igbo community in Southeastern Nigeria. Nkàmanu refers to a communal system of mutual labour, cooperative wealth redistribution, and collective assistance embedded in the Akwu-Ukwu worldview. Employing a combination of conceptual analysis, hermeneutic interpretation, and critical evaluation, the study interrogates how Nkàmanu structures economic cooperation, social welfare, social values and moral life. It also examines the socio-economic implications of Nkàmanu in fostering communal solidarity, ethical economy, and cultural identity. The paper argues that Nkàmanu functions as a moral economy rooted in reciprocity and social responsibility, and promotes solidarity, social security and community welfare while also manifesting tensions of gender inequality and limits on individual economic freedom. The paper concludes that Nkàmanu embodies a distinctive African communitarian ethic with potential relevance for contemporary development policy, provided it is adapted to the realities of modern socio-economic systems as well as providing valuable insight into sustainable community development in African societies.

Keywords: Nkàmanu, Akwu-Ukwu, African Philosophy, Socio-economic Implications

INTRODUCTION

It is an undeniable fact that every culture embodies festivals that capture the essence of its people's relationship with nature, labour, and the divine. In Akwu-Ukwu, a historic town in Idemili South Local Government Area of Anambra State, *Nkamanu* occupies this symbolic position. The festival is deeply rooted in the town's socio-economic life and spiritual consciousness. It is primarily associated with palm wine tappers – a profession that holds both economic and cultural importance within the community. However, over time, *Nkamanu* has evolved into a communal celebration involving the entire population, transcending occupational boundaries to reflect the collective spirit of Akwu-Ukwu people.

Nkàmanu, as an integral cultural practice in Akwu-Ukwu, reflects the philosophical depth

of Igbo communal life. It serves as a cultural mechanism balancing individual achievement with collective welfare. Similar to other Igbo socio-ethical institutions, *Nkàmanu* functions as a living embodiment of justice, solidarity, and moral responsibility. Scholar such as Okere (1983) has argued that African philosophy is rooted in lived experience and communal reflection, where the individual is defined within the context of the community (p.67).

Without a verified link, some said, it “is part of the historic Igbo-Ukwu cultural sphere renowned for its archaeological discoveries that demonstrate early social complexity and long-distance trade” (Shaw, 1970, p.8). Within this society, social and economic relations were anchored in cooperation, kinship, and reciprocal assistance—structures that ensured communal survival long before colonial administration (Isichei, 1976, p.85). Among the institutions that sustained this moral economy is *Nkàmanu*, a system of communal labour and wealth-sharing through which families and age-grades contribute to each other's wellbeing. Consequently, this work adopts a philosophical-cultural method combining conceptual analysis, hermeneutic interpretation, critical evaluation, and comparative analysis. Conceptual analysis clarifies the meaning of *Nkàmanu*; hermeneutics interprets it within the Akwu-Ukwu worldview; critical evaluation assesses its ethical implications; and comparative analysis situates it within African communitarian thought such as Igwebuike (Kanu, 2017B) and Ubuntu (Mbiti, 1969). This plural approach acknowledges the internal rationality of African traditions while maintaining critical distance (Wiredu, 1996, p.45).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

No doubt, modernization and monetization have disrupted many indigenous communal institutions. The erosion of *Nkàmanu* threatens traditional welfare systems, social cohesion, and moral education. Nonetheless, philosophical reflection is needed to assess its socio-economic relevance. In other words, the institution of *Nkàmanu* in Akwu-Ukwu culture represents one of the most profound expressions of communal solidarity, reciprocity, and moral economy among the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria. Traditionally, *Nkàmanu* encapsulates a system of gift exchange, mutual assistance, and symbolic reciprocity that strengthens kinship ties and ensures social welfare within the community (Achebe, 1958, p.167). Yet, despite its enduring socio-cultural significance, *Nkàmanu* faces profound challenges in the contemporary context, as globalization, monetization of values and individualism erode the communal foundations on which it once thrived.

Philosophically, the problem arises from the tension between traditional communitarian ethics and modern socio-economic rationality. The Igbo worldview, rooted in relational ontology—what Kanu (2017A) calls the “principle of being-in-relationship fundamental to African thought” (p.52)—views existence as intrinsically communal. However, in modern Akwu-Ukwu society, the moral weight of communal exchange is increasingly being

replaced by market-based reciprocity and economic utilitarianism, which prioritize personal gain over communal well-being. This shift raises the philosophical question: Can *Nkàmanu* survive as an ethical institution in a society dominated by individualistic economics?

Furthermore, there exists a scholarly gap in the philosophical analysis of *Nkàmanu*. While anthropological and sociological studies have examined similar systems of exchange in African societies, little attention has been paid to *Nkàmanu* as a philosophical category that reveals the Igbo metaphysics of community, personhood and economy (Kanu, 2020, p.13). This neglect obscures its value as an indigenous model for socio-economic organization that harmonizes material exchange with moral obligation.

Therefore, this study seeks to philosophically appraise the socio-economic implications of *Nkàmanu* in Akwu-Ukwu culture by situating it within the framework of African communitarian ethics and Igbo metaphysical thought. It interrogates whether *Nkàmanu*, as a moral and social institution, can offer a viable alternative to the atomistic tendencies of modern capitalism and whether its underlying principles can be reinterpreted to promote sustainable communal development in the 21st century.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The central aim of this study is to philosophically appraise the socio-economic implications of *Nkàmanu* as practiced in Akwu-Ukwu, situating it within the broader context of African communitarian thought and moral economy. Specifically, the objectives are:

- a. To conceptualize *Nkàmanu* within Akwu-Ukwu socio-cultural life.
- b. To analyze its economic and social implications of *Nkàmanu*, exploring how it functions as an indigenous mechanism of wealth redistribution, moral exchanges and collective welfare in Akwu-Ukwu culture.
- c. To critically examine its moral and philosophical foundations of *Nkàmanu*, interpreting it as an expression of the Igbo metaphysics of relationality and communal solidarity, as grounded in the ontology of *being-with-others* that underlies African thought.
- d. To suggest how *Nkàmanu* can inform present-day community development as well as assessing the contemporary challenges confronting *Nkàmanu*, including individualism, urban migration, and capitalist consumerism, which threaten to weaken its communal essence and moral coherence.
- e. To explore the philosophical relevance of *Nkàmanu* as a model for sustainable socio-economic development and ethical cooperation in a post-colonial African context, guided by the values of reciprocity solidarity, and shared humanity.
- f. To contribute to African philosophy by highlighting *Nkàmanu* as a conceptual bridge between metaphysics and economics – a framework that harmonize moral

obligation with material exchange in the Igbo world.



(a)



(b)

(a) Palm wine tree with mound Pot. (b) Palm wine tapper in action tapping wine with Nkàmanu.

As generated from the August, 2024 Nkàmanu Festival - Celebration Day in Akwu-Ukwu town. The palm wine tapper in Akwu-Ukwu, if not in Igbo land is popularly known as *Di-Ochi*.



This is Nkàmanu – A Sacred Symbol in Akwu-Ukwu town

This *Nkàmanu* symbol is a sacred instrument or object use in tapping wine from the palm. On the day of the festival, the *Nkàmanu* will be position in a stage in the front the palm wine tapper's house or the guest room of the celebrant (Di-Ochi). In fact, it will be on display for guests to view, but it is not worshipped as God or idol (gods) by Akwu-Ukwu people or the guests of the celebrant. Rather, it is part of the cultural heritage of Akwu-Ukwu people from their fore-fathers. The metal braze is a free gift from God to man to use in harvesting wine, crops and other things for the well-being of humanity. It is shaped for tapping and there is a special tree for the stick. The metal braze can be joined with a design long stick, which will be used for the uprooting or harvesting of yam from the farm.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nkàmanu in Akwu-Ukwu Culture: A Conceptual Analysis

Nkàmanu literally connotes collective contribution or shared strength. It designates the organized system by which members of the community assist one another materially and through labour exchange. Achebe (1958) captures similar ethos in *Things Fall Apart*, where the *umunna* acts as a moral unit (p.167). Kanu (2017A) describes this as the principle of being-in-relationship fundamental to African thought (p.52). Certainly, the term *Nkàmanu* derived from two Igbo words: *nka*, meaning “thing” or “affair,” and *manu*, which denotes “palm wine - *Ngwo*” Literally, *Nkàmanu* can be understood as “the affair of palm wine - *Ngwo*” or “the celebration of palm wine (*Ngwo*).” This etymology reveals the central role of palm wine tapping in Akwu-Ukwu's historical economy. This is an important festival and is celebrated mainly by palm wine tappers (Di-Ochi) and indeed the entire population of Akwu-Ukwu. It is being celebrated annually, precisely in August every year, often marking the end of the dry season when palm wine tapping reached its peak. Thus palm wine (*Ngwo*) is popularly called *Ngwo* Akwu-Ukwu.

In the pre-colonial times, palm wine (*Ngwo*) was more than a beverage; it was cultural symbol of joy, hospitality and divine blessing. It was used in libations, marriages, land agreements, religious rituals, cultural festivals and so many other feasts and celebrations as the case may be. The tapping of palm wine (*Ngwo*) required skill, discipline and courage – virtues highly esteemed in the traditional society. Consequently, the *Nkàmanu* festival emerged as a form of thanksgiving to the gods for successful harvests, safety in the dangerous task of climbing palm trees, and communal prosperity. According to Madubuonu (2002):

It is celebrated with dedication to River-Lord *Ojii* or *Oji iyi*. A month prior to the festival (in the early July), *Ekele Village* would start a preliminary celebration on *Eke* day “by the current and retired palm wine tappers to observe a night vigil that included feasting. This feast is observed only by Akwu-Ukwu throughout the Igbo land. It is called *Ojii*. This indicates that wine tapping originated from Akwu-Ukwu.” At that night, the dates of *Nkàmanu*

festival are fixed. After seven days, other Villages observe their preliminary *Nkàmanu* festivals at their various *Ojii* shrines located at the shore of every village beach called *Ose* – “take-off points to their jungles (*Raffia* palm plantations).” The following week, they kill a goat and some fowls to start the occasion that is after the eldest of the wine-tappers. They pray that they do not fall from the tops that there should be no matchet wound or sinking of canoes in the rivers and streams. In these prayers, the priest appeals to God through the different deities (p.27).

Historically, *Nkàmanu* festival began with rituals of purification and thanksgiving, followed by public feasting, music, and dance. The elders performed libations to the deities, invoking blessings for continued productivity. Palm wine tappers showcased their skills and offered portions of their produce to the community and to the ancestors. *Nkàmanu* operates as a social institution that binds members of Akwu-Ukwu through collective responsibility. It often involves reciprocal giving, family obligations, and symbolic exchange, which reinforce the communal ethos (Kanu, 2020, p.13). It also functions as a communal institution that binds members of Akwu-Ukwu through reciprocal giving and moral obligation. Its practice involves contributions to family and community events. This communal sharing fostered solidarity, reaffirmed kinship bonds, and reinforced the ethical principle of *onye aghana nwanne ya* – “let no one leave or abandon his brother behind.” This moral economy ensures that social cohesion is maintained and that wealth circulates to benefit all (Edeh, 1985, p.106). Madubuonu (2002) notes thus:

On the day of *Nkàmanu* festival “in August,” wine tappers leave home as early as one o'clock in the morning. They return at dawn, when people at home are waking from bed and some return to meet their families still asleep. The man first brings out his personal effigy (*Ikenga*) and their *Nkàmanu* and cutlasses. Their wife or wives bring out kolanuts, alligator pepper and spices to sweeten the *Nkàmanu* with the feathers. He will later slaughter a goat or retrieve his share of cows, which he and at most nine other tappers contributed and bought. Also, one should note that homes where *Nkàmanu* celebrants live are well adorned and scrubbed in the olden days. They celebrate with joy and happiness. Friends, relatives, in-laws, customers and well wishers present gifts of kolanuts, fowls, money, gallons of kerosene, tins of carbide of often cartons of beer to congratulate them, who in turn are lavishly entertained by the wine tappers with food, and drinks, on going home, they are given fish or meat to take home (p.27).

Another cultural act peculiar to Akwu-Ukwu is the music of *Nkàmanu*, which is produced exclusively from the tortoise shells (*Mbekwu*). In other words:

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 guests. They patrol the town throughout the night and do not go to tap the next day. Nowadays the reverse is the case. The tappers visit each other normally, but avoid heavy drinking to be able to tap the next day in order to satisfy their customers who may come from Onitsha, Nnewi, Asaba, Enugu or Kano. The festival is celebrated for two days. The tappers normally buy new clothes for themselves, their wives and children. *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 (Madubuonu, 2002, pp.27-29).

***Nkàmanu*: Philosophical Foundations**

The concept of *Nkàmanu* within Akwu-Ukwu culture rests upon deep philosophical underpinnings that reflect the Igbo worldview of being, community and the moral structure of social existence. At its core, *Nkàmanu* embodies the value of mutual complementarity, a principle that resonates with the broader Igbo metaphysical outlook where being is always being-with others (Tempels, 1959, p.10). It articulates the conviction that human existence is meaningful only in relation to the community—an idea closely tied to the African ontology of relationality (Edeh, 1985, p.73).

Philosophically, *Nkàmanu* can be situated within the communitarian humanism found in African thought. Mbiti's (Mbiti, 1969) famous dictum, “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am,” (p.2) captures the ontological basis of this principle: the individual derives their being, identity, and value from the web of communal relationships. Within this context, *Nkàmanu* represents the ethical translation of that ontological interdependence into concrete socio-economic action, guiding practices of sharing, reciprocity, and cooperative labor.

Furthermore, *Nkàmanu* reflects what Tempels (1959) described as the vital force ontology, (p.42) where every act of giving, trading or communal work enhances the life-force of both the giver and the receiver. The socio-economic expressions of *Nkàmanu*—collective farming (igba-oso-az?), mutual aid societies and communal feasting—become therefore not merely economic strategies but metaphysical affirmations of vitality (Nwala, 2015), p.84.). In this sense, to act in the spirit of *Nkàmanu* is to participate in the metaphysical economy of life itself.

Okere (1983) interprets such indigenous categories through hermeneutical philosophy, emphasizing that African cultural expressions are bearers of existential meaning (p.67). His insight suggests that *Nkàmanu*, beyond its pragmatic role, is a hermeneutical key to

understanding how the Akwu-Ukwu conceives justice, personhood and development. Through *Nkàmanu*, the people encode their philosophical anthropology—one that perceives man as a moral agent bound by the law of shared humanity.

Finally, scholars like Kanu and Iroegbu extend this understanding through the Igwebuiké philosophy, which reinforces *Nkàmanu* as an ethical system rooted in unity and complementary relations (Kanu, 2017A, p.53). The Igwebuiké framework provides a philosophical vocabulary for articulating *Nkàmanu* as a living moral code: it embodies solidarity, shared identity and the sacred obligation to uplift others. Kanu, also emphasized that African thought systems are intrinsically communal and metaphysically relational. In other words, *Nkàmanu* exemplifies this worldview as it situates wealth and social participation within an ethical context of belongingness. Nevertheless, Kanu have articulated this worldview as one of shared humanity (Igwebuiké), which integrates ethical and economic dimensions into social life. Thus, *Nkàmanu* emerges as both an ontological expression of being and a socio-ethical mandate for communal flourishing (Iroegbu, 1995, p.55). However, Iroegbu argues that African culture cannot be understood without its ontological focus on community, where economic practices are extensions of moral life. In this framework, *Nkàmanu* transcends material exchange to become a social philosophy that defines identity and obligation within Akwu-Ukwu culture.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF NKÀMANU

Nkàmanu provides efficient labour mobilization, reduces costs, and enhances productivity. It redistributes wealth through collective contributions, ensuring social inclusion. Participation cultivates virtues such as altruism and humility, aligning with African communitarian ethics (Mbiti, 1969, p.108). Yet, historical gender biases confined women's participation, demanding re-evaluation (Oyèwùmí, 1997, p.85).

Symbolically, *Nkàmanu* represents more than economic success; it expresses a philosophy of life. The palm tree itself, with its many uses – wine, oil, broom, and kernel – is seen as a metaphor for human productivity and resilience. Inside the tapped tree itself is where *eruru ngwo* – big maggots gotten from it and its stick is used for bed, and so many others. Thus, the festival embodies a worldview where work is sacred and human labour is viewed as collaboration with nature and the divine. This aligns with the African humanistic philosophy that sees man as a co-creator with God, responsible for transforming nature for communal benefit.

Over the years, *Nkàmanu* has adapted to social changes. Christianity, modernization, and urban migration have reshaped its forms of expression, but its essence remains intact. The festival continues to provide a sense of belonging, moral instruction, and economic motivation. It serves as a cultural reminder that labours, when guided by ethical values and communal purpose, sustains both individual dignity and collective progress.

Nevertheless, *Nkàmanu's* socio-economic implications are multidimensional. Economically, it redistributes resources, enabling the less privileged to participate in social functions and ceremonies. Socially, it builds trust and cohesion, acting as an informal welfare system. Ethically, it strengthens communal virtue by ensuring that wealth serves collective happiness rather than individualistic gain (Nwala, 2015, p.73). Its value lies not merely in economic assistance but in its affirmation of dignity and mutual recognition within the community. Such features position *Nkàmanu* as an indigenous model for sustainable socio-economic relations in African contexts.

EVALUATION

From an African communitarian perspective, *Nkàmanu* exemplifies the ethic of solidarity. It operationalizes distributive justice by guaranteeing collective welfare. However, tensions exist—autonomy versus conformity, gender bias, and elite capture (Onyeocha, 2019, p.42). Hence, reform rather than abolition is necessary to align *Nkàmanu* with justice and equality. A philosophical evaluation of *Nkàmanu* reveals that its significance extends beyond cultural performance to ethical philosophy and social economics.

From the perspective of communitarian ethics, *Nkàmanu* illustrates the moral economy in which material exchange is intertwined with moral worth. The challenge, however, lies in modernity's erosion of traditional solidarity through capitalism and individualism (Wiredu, 1996, p.45). Revitalizing *Nkàmanu* thus requires a reinterpretation compatible with contemporary realities, especially in areas of community development and youth empowerment. In other words, reassessing *Nkàmanu* through a modern lens highlights the need for adaptive integration—preserving its moral essence while applying it to contemporary socio-economic development models. Therefore, *Nkàmanu* can serve as a model for cooperative societies and moral education. It requires gender-inclusive reforms and cultural preservation policies to sustain its relevance in modern socio-economic contexts.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, *Nkàmanu* in Akwu-Ukwu exemplifies a moral-economic institution sustaining communal life through cooperation and solidarity. Philosophically, it demonstrates that wellbeing is relational. Reforming *Nkàmanu* to fit modern realities can preserve its ethical essence and advance culturally grounded development. Ultimately, *Nkàmanu* in Akwu-Ukwu culture encapsulates the interdependence of ethics and economy in African philosophy. As a socio-cultural system, it demonstrates how moral values underpin economic life. This philosophical appraisal underscores that indigenous institution like *Nkàmanu* can offer alternative frameworks for equitable and sustainable development in Africa. Future research should explore how such cultural mechanisms can be adapted to modern socio-economic structures without losing their moral essence.

However, *Nkàmanu* in Akwu-Ukwu culture exemplifies how indigenous systems harmonize morality and economy. It is a living testament to the Igbo idea of being-with-others, fostering solidarity, social justice, and economic balance. Philosophically therefore, it challenges Western dichotomies between ethics and economics, offering instead a holistic model grounded in communal humanism. The study concludes that revalorizing such traditions is essential for culturally relevant and sustainable development in Africa.

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