

Cameroon's Elixir: Palm wine

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Legend has it that Buea, a small town which is the capital of Southwest region of Cameroon, was a village founded by Njia Tama Lifanje, a hunter from the Bomboko area. He named the land “Ebe’eya”, meaning literally a “place of happenings”. The town, which was previously the colonial capital of German Kamerun is known for its tea plantations, diverse peri-urban landscape and is the home to the only Anglo-phone university, the university of Buea. A lesser known aspect of this area is that of palm wine production. Wine from palm has been an important part of the traditions of Cameroonians for centuries. Palm grows in the wild and is also planted in households and the wine is made by tapping the palm tree’s sap. This case study is about Ntoh Joseph, a 48 year old security guard who considers himself a part-time security guard and a full-time palm wine tapper. A lucrative business, palm wine tapping provides Ntoh with income far greater than what he earns as a security guard.

I come from the north-west region of Cameroon, but I have been living in Buea almost all my life. I am married and have four children with 3 grandchildren, all living with me. I started tapping around 1999, so it has been 18 years now. I was able to bring up all my children from the income I get from tapping. I don’t have any other farm like cocoa or coffee and so that’s what I harvest (palmwine) and it is what gives me money

The process of tapping palm wine involves first felling or cutting down the tree, leaving the felled tree for a period of about 2 weeks for the sap to concentrate, followed by tapping for up to 3-4 weeks (Figs. 1, 2 and 3). The freshly tapped wine is usually very sweet and has very little alcohol, but it becomes less sweet and the alcohol content increases when it ferments. Usually tapping starts in the morning and the wine is sold the same day. A beverage of high demand, Ntoh has a number of regular customers and is often able to sell all his stock in time.

Of a day like today, I come back home with 30 litres of palm wine especially when the tree starts producing. It has a life span of three to four weeks but its peak of production is in the second week. Sometimes, I return home with 10 litres of palm wine when trees start to die and produces less. Years back, we used to sell a cup of palm wine for 50frs CFA (approximately 0.09USD). While other people will sell their palmwine at 50frs, I sold mine for 75frs (around 0.13USD) because I do not add water into it. Now they say we must sell a litre at 200frs CFA (0.36USD) but I sell mine for 300frsCFA (0.54USD). This is because I do not dilute my palm wine. I remove from the tree’s mouth (the eye) and sell as it is. I only mix water when my customers demand I mix for them.

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Fig. 1 Ntoh prepared the palm for tapping by cutting its head into a conical shape

Ntoh buys the palm trees that he taps. The price varies according to the size of the tree and distance from the community. It can cost between 300frs (0.89USD) to 700frs (1.25USD) per tree. If the trees are exceptionally large, it costs 1000frs (1.8USD). One can buy trees from CDC (Cameroon Development Cooperation) which deals with the production of palm oil. Palm trees which have been used for oil extraction and “spent” are put for sale, however, this is not done regularly and one needs to wait for the sale to be announced. Ntoh found that middle

men inflate the prices when buying through the CDC, and therefore he buys palms from individuals.

So, you see, this is my life and I love this tapping business. It is less strenuous like the security guard job that I do. When I return from tapping my palmwine I go for my job which begins from 4:30pm in the evening till 5:00am in the morning. When I return home, I go straight to the farm by 6:00am to start tapping from the different trees. And you know sometimes you must move from one farm or forest to the next to collect what has entered the different jugs I set under the tree. That



Fig. 2 The head of the palm tree is tied with the bark of the tree and sap is allowed to flow into a container

job to be honest, does not pay me like the tapping I do. In a day if I estimate. I must get at least 6000frsCFA (10.8USD) from tapping palmwine only. So, you can imagine, it's a good business many people don't know. In one week, I sell 42000frsCFA (75.6USD) since I sell Monday to Sunday which means by the end of one month, I make a profit of 168000frsCFA (302.3USD). This is not bad at all as it is even almost three times more than what I get from my security job. So, I do my best to get palmwine for sale as much as I can especially as work does not pay like palmwine.

The palm wine tapping work is not without challenges, says Ndou. When cutting a palm in an individual's farm, if it falls on crops, the buyer is often fined or taken to the police for charging for damages caused. Damages paid could be up to 10000frsCFA (18USD) and if a brawl breaks out, the seller of the tree could throw away the jugs used for tapping, causing losses for the tapper. Challenges from customers include late payment and sometimes even refusal to pay.

In some cases, some customers will come to drink palm wine at the bar and will pour all sorts of insults on you but they will still stay and drink. And what can you do, except to bear all the insults...ha ha ha, you are the one who needs the money you know. There are many who owe me money from drinking but will refuse to pay their debt. For such people, I just sit and wait and if God will help them remember. When they pay for another drink and come to pay, I just include the

past debts. Remember, the man who borrows from you can forget, but the one who gives to him can never forget. I have seen cases where customers deny that they have money and claim that their money belongs to someone else, even a lady. They may even go ahead to bring someone to claim the money belonged to him/her just because he does not want to pay his past debts

Ntoh noticed that over the years, the business has gradually been dropping. But, he has made enough money previously and was able to send his children to school and continue to send the younger children to school.

I did not tap for the month of June and July because I barely had trees to tap from especially as it was also the rainy season. If I had a huge capital, I would have left my security job for this palm wine business. When I am in the farm, I must think of returning home early so that I can sell and rest before going out for my job. You must go to the farm or forest two times a day to collect the wine that has entered. If you tap just once a day, you make a lot of loss. But if the distance is far, you go just once.

I plan to continue with my tapping till I die or stop to have strength to go into the farm. Unfortunately, none of my kids have picked interest in it. I continue to pray that I have money from it so I can send my kids to schools especially as my three grandkids live with me. Now you know that even in a good business, you still have challenges. But I really love tapping palm wine.



Fig. 3 Ntoh tying the bark around the head of the tree after he has tapped wine



Fig. 4 The containers of palm wine tapped by Ntoh for sale to customers

The local community enjoys palm wine, which they claim possesses health benefits such as maintaining good eye sight, reducing chances of cardio-vascular diseases and being useful for

maintaining a normal hair, skin and nails (Fig. 4). With people like Ntoh, Cameroon's elixir continues to be consumed in Buea, the "place of happenings".