

# TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE ECOLOGY WITH PALMWINE MUSIC AND ITS MATERIAL CULTURE IN GHANA

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In Ghana, most traditional music depends heavily on Ghana's natural environment in its creation and performance practices, but are these practices ecologically sustainable? Almost all traditional musical instruments of Ghanaian origin are made from plants and animal resources; Seperewa (Akan harp-lute), for instance, is made from both. However, Ghanaian researchers and musicians seem indifferent about the natural ecosystems that make music-making possible. This is made evident by the comparative lack of scholarship in this area. As the world faces global warming and climate change, Ghanaian ethnomusicologists, and music researchers, perhaps, have a crucial responsibility in supporting the knowledge and understanding required for sustainable management of its natural resources. This is crucial especially during a time when there is a rise in illegal mining, known in public discourse as *galamsey*--"gathering and selling them" in pidgin English. Galamsey is rampantly destroying natural resources in Ghana, especially rivers.

As Ghanaian musicians and music scholars, the growing concern over environmental degradation in the country leads us to the question: can music contribute to human survival, or is it unconnected to our possible extinction? William Cheng (2020) explores the ways in which our intense allegiances to music distract, release, or hinder us from attending to matters of social justice. However, in response to today's ecological crises, we push Cheng's questions further to explore the connections between music and the natural environment. As much as we continue to protect and continue making music, we must explore ways our music-making activities contribute to the Anthropocene.

Our aim in this paper is to examine the connections between Ghanaian palmwine music and the natural environment. Ghanaian palmwine music is one of the oldest musical traditions in the country, which emerged along the Fanti coast in the early 20th century due to the fusion of external guitar styles with Indigenous musical resources. The musical culture's moniker--*palmwine*-- is derived from palm wine, an alcoholic beverage made from the sap of fallen palm trees which directly connects the music and the natural environment. Thus, this music tradition presents a fertile site for exploring the relationship between music and nature in the Ghanaian context.

By analysing the cultural significance and unique musical characteristics of palmwine music, we highlight how this music tradition promotes awareness and appreciation for Ghana's natural resources. We discuss song lyrics that address environmental issues, the performance contexts, and how they can inspire listeners to act toward building a more sustainable ecology in Ghana and beyond. Moreover, we provide an analysis of the material culture of palmwine music, focusing on its musical instruments, specifically traditional drums.

Overall, we argue that Ghanaian palmwine music's materiality, aesthetics of a contemplative reception, interactive performance structure, and lyrics, do perform and contribute to an increased affection towards a safer natural environment. We aim to contribute to the nascent scholarship on ecomusicology emanating and focusing on Africa.[1] More importantly, through this article we showcase the potential of Ghanaian palmwine music as a unique and powerful tool for ecological sustainability.

Research for this paper was conducted through both ethnographic and autoethnographic methods. Our ethnographic method was through participant observation, where we engaged the audience and performers of Ghanaian palmwine music in a series of formal and informal interactions. Videos and pictures of various musical performances were recorded for further analysis. Our positionality as Ghanaians and palmwine musicians served the autoethnographic aspect of our research method. We draw on our lived cultural and musical experiences to highlight how our interaction with palmwine music has provoked an immediacy with our natural environment. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows; we begin with an overview of Ghanaian palmwine music – its history and instrumental resources. We proceed to provide an analysis of how Ghanaian palmwine music has the efficacy to contribute to ecological sustainability.

### What is Ghanaian palmwine music?

Palmwine music is a transculturation of Indigenous musical resources and western musical ideas that emerged along the West African coastal areas. Sunu Doe (2020) submits that the music tradition could be conceptualised within the context of “neo-traditional and social experimentation explored through synthesising Indigenous musical resources and the guitar's imported music tradition” (42). As a result of the commercial activities along the West African coastal areas around the late 1800s, local musicians (particularly Kru sailors) were introduced to new musical instruments such as guitars, harmonicas, concertinas, and their playing techniques. With interest in the guitar, these musicians blended guitar styles with their Indigenous music. According to Schmidt (1994), in Ghana, the results were a fusion of styles like *Odonson*, which resulted in palmwine music. The music tradition moved inland and became associated with the Akan tradition, *Nsadowase*, where older men gathered under a tree to drink palm wine. Ghanaian palmwine music has thus evolved into a unique musical tradition and is foundational for several popular music styles in Ghana, particularly highlife. Palmwine music is characterised by a two-fingerpicking technique over simple chordal progression and deeply rooted in philosophies and cultural expressions that highlight the Ghanaian's everyday life and values.

However, since the late 1990s, Ghanaian palmwine music has been declining, partly due to the rise of other popular music styles like hiplife, and the absence of active palmwine musicians.[2] As of the late 2000s, only a handful of older palmwine musicians remained bearers of the music tradition. Sunu Doe observes that performances by Agya Koo Nimo and his group, were the last of the older musicians within the period (2020: 4). Subsequently, since 2016 there has been an active attempt to bring some agency to the music tradition and make it relevant to the youth. The efforts of a few bands, notably Legon Palmwine Band (LPB) and Kwan Pa, are actively intervening in revitalising the music tradition via documentation, public performances, and training of Ghanaian

youth in the music tradition. Continuing from the Agya Koo Nimo era, these bands have yielded some gains, thus drawing the attention of many young creatives to the music tradition.[3] Today, palmwine music performances appear to be featured in the mainstream industry, attracting several collaborative projects, like the recent invitation of LPB to perform at the Ghana government's commissioning of the Ashaiman Sewerage Treatment System.

The instrumental resources used in palmwine music consist primarily of soft-sounding instruments. They include a variety of indigenous and foreign musical instruments due to the music's hybrid nature. Since the late 1960s, instrumental resources typically in palmwine ensembles include vocals, guitars, *frikyiwa* (a small metallic clave), rattles, *premprensiwa* (Ghanaian version of a rumba box), and Ghanaian traditional drums.[4] Due to the myriad of Ghanaian traditional drums, palmwine ensembles make use of drums found in their specific geographical area (we discuss this in detail later) like the *Kpanlogo* drums in Accra (see Figure 1).

According to Kaye (1999), the selection of instruments used in Agya Koo Nimo's performances represents the instrumental resources palmwine musicians use today, although there are occasions where these vary. The composition of instrumental resources in a given palmwine performance today depends on numerous factors. In most cases, the type and number of required instruments are determined by the performance due to issues related to compensation or the availability of performers. Additionally, solo instruments are often used in performances, emphasising different types of ensemble performances in the music tradition.



Figure 1. LPB's Kpanlogo drum. Photograph by Josh O. Brew

### “While We Drink, We Contemplate”: Performance Space and Style



The performance of Ghanaian palmwine music is often accompanied by drinking palmwine (see video at 19:30 via QR code).[5] This tradition stems from the aforementioned *Nsadwase* – portmanteau of Akan words “*nsa*” (alcoholic drink) and “*edwaase*” (gathering) – a conceptualisation of drinking spaces in Akan communities. *Nsadwase*, however, was not solely for drinking palm wine but, more so, a space to discuss and provide solutions to critical societal issues. Hence the saying, “while we drink, we contemplate”. As contemporary bands like the LPB and Kwan Pa are actively revitalising the music tradition

(through documentation and regular performances), the critical component of palmwine music, for contemplation and discussion of societal issues (like taxation and education) is still maintained in their performances. Therefore, as Ghana – like the rest of the world – continues to face environmental problems, we contend that palmwine music becomes a productive lens to discuss environmental issues. To explore this, we consider the following about palmwine music: the structure of the performance space and style.

Like *Nsadwase*, palmwine music is typically performed in a circle or semicircle formation where there is no clear separation between performers and the audience. This setup promotes communal and inclusive music-making that can inspire a sense of unity and shared responsibility in communities. By integrating environmental campaigns and events into palmwine music, it is possible to motivate communities towards collective action. One of our interlocutors mentioned that participating in *Nsadwase Nkɔ̃mɔ̃* brought them closer to the revitalization of palmwine music in the Legon community and inspired them to continue participating in the performance circle.[6] Palmwine music has the potential to promote environmental sustainability and foster a sense of shared responsibility within communities in Ghana and around the world. Incorporating palmwine music into environmental education programs and awareness campaigns can be an effective way to engage communities in sustainable practices and inspire collective action toward environmental conservation. *Nsadwase Nkɔ̃mɔ̃*, this could be an ideal space for raising environmental awareness and promoting sustainable practices among audiences.

The spatial structure influences the performance style of palmwine music which is typically participatory: between the musicians and the audience. This musical interaction is evident in the constant call and response, improvisation, and spontaneous musical composition during performances. Such performance style permits musicians to extemporaneously raise issues through singing which is afforded by the soft musical dynamics on the guitar with mostly simple chords (see video via the QR code).



In the first minute, the song focuses on life's human choices. We hear one of the singers call out some of his life preferences, including palm wine, and the rest of the group respond in affirmation. At 00:33, the singer instantly switches to say a few words: "well, maybe my preferences might be different from yours, but in life, we all have choices, and there are always overlaps". As the singer speaks, we notice he and the other musicians still playing the various instruments, but at a lower volume; this allows for the words to be heard and emphasised.

The discussion of issues through songs during palmwine music performance, foregrounds the conduciveness of the music tradition for ecological sustainability. We contend that an ecologically themed palmwine music performance can help raise environmental awareness. For example, galamsey involves the inappropriate methods of mining for natural minerals like gold and diamonds using excavators and heavy earthmoving machinery, which generally leads to the destruction of forest reserves and pollution of water bodies, especially the Pra and Birim rivers in the western part of Ghana. The government has declared galamsey a national emergency because it remains rampant, negatively affecting Ghana's national economy. Not only is galamsey destroying forests and water bodies, but human and animal lives are being lost. However, galamsey has not yet become a theme within the Ghanaian music scene, with very few music focusing on it despite its egregiousness. Akin to what the singer did in the aforementioned video, constant pauses between the singing – of an environmentally themed song – to talk about the consequences of galamsey could be used to educate and raise awareness about this ecological problem.

### Songs, Stories and Lyrics: "Old Man Plants A Coconut Tree"

The inclusion of explicit environmental lyrics can contribute to ecological sustainability. The performance of palmwine music is such that it lays so much emphasis on the lyrics. The songs are meant to be communicative and engaging, which compels the audience to contemplate the subject matter of the song, achieved through storytelling or a narrative prose. A good example is the song, *Old Man Plants A Coconut Tree*.



In this song, Koo Nimo draws on Akan Indigenous ecological knowledge, to provide beautiful melodies, in a storytelling mode, on how humans should relate to the natural environment. As Hamill puts it, "Indigenous landscapes are brought to life through stories, which form ontological bonds that are culturally constituted and reflect unique ways of knowing and being in the world" (Hamill 2021:115).

In *Old Man Plants A Coconut Tree*, Koo Nimo narrates a story about a 90-year-old man who woke up early one morning to plant a coconut tree. The old man was questioned by his grandchild about why he would plant a tree he wouldn't live to harvest. The old man explains that he plants for the future generation. This story can be interpreted in many ways, not necessarily from an ecological perspective.[7] However, in the second verse, Koo Nimo explicitly explains the benefits that humans gain from the natural environment. Moreso, the current rise in environmental degradation warrants such a connection between music and the natural environment.

Drawing on ecomusicology – the study of the relationship between music, culture, sound, and nature in a period of environmental crisis (Allen and Dawe 2016) – it is arguable that in the song, Koo Nimo presents a difference in ecological perspective between the older and the younger generation. For the older generation and Indigenous communities, there is respect and reverence for the natural environment which sustains them. Their ecological views are engraved in Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Ghanaian TEK is rich in connections between humans and nature. Such TEK encompasses a body of knowledge, practice, and belief that has evolved by adaptive processes and has been handed down by generations through cultural transmission about the relationship of living beings with one another and with their natural environment (Berkes 2012).

In the past decades, Ghanaian TEK has aided in environmental protection as Ghanaians were encouraged to revere and protect the natural environment. In the late nineteenth century, “the British colonial government's exclusion of local people [Ghanaians] and their knowledge from the forest management process had exacerbated the rate of deforestation... until the inclusion of locals and their TEK in land protection practices” (Vilgiate 2020:4). However, in contemporary Ghana, such TEK has been abandoned and is less effective due to the changing ways humans perceive the natural environment.[8] The situation is evident in how humans have utilised, dominated, and manipulated natural resources for economic gain, threatening the future of Earth and its inhabitants. Nonetheless, Ghanaians espousing Indigenous knowledge is a step towards a sustainable ecology, just as our ancestors did.

In Ghanaian Indigenous knowledge, humans, nature, and culture are inextricably linked, creating a symbiotic relationship. This perspective further corroborates the effectiveness of Indigenous knowledge for ecological sustainability in Ghana, an approach crucial for decolonising sustainability studies in Africa. This focus is imperative given that scholarship on music and sustainability predominantly comes from western contexts and is informed by western philosophies. To attain a safer and sustainable environment globally, incorporating Indigenous knowledge is essential because Indigenous communities worldwide are similarly prepared to be adapting and relying on Indigenous epistemologies rooted in the land and the traditions formed from it (Hamill 2021).

In the song, Koo Nimo uses the efficacy of Ghanaian palmwine music to *remind* listeners of Indigenous knowledge and how the older generation used to live with nature, highlighting the nostalgic potency of the music tradition. Nostalgic imagination is an effective approach to using music for the environmental movement (Rehding 2011). In *Ecomusicology Between Apocalypse And Nostalgia*, Alexander Rehding suggests that ecomusicologists take a more romantic mode and appeal to the power of memory to invoke a sense of nostalgia to raise ecological awareness. What makes nostalgia a potent and affective modality for ecological efforts? Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia (from *nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing) as a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement (2002: xiii). For Boym, nostalgia exists in two forms, restorative and reflective, which are the ways one expresses a sense of longing. While restorative nostalgia is the reconstruction of the past as truth – not as a romantic notion but as a new reality, reflective nostalgia dwells on longing and romanticising the past.

The nostalgic tenacity of Ghanaian palmwine resists the apocalyptic approach of using music for environmentalism.[9] While each approach – nostalgic and apocalyptic – has its effectiveness,[10] our interest here is not in comparative analysis. Ghanaian palmwine produces a reflective nostalgia characterised by cultural memory. Through the storytelling technique, as evident in *Old Man Plants A Coconut Tree*, Ghanaian palmwine music draws listeners' attention to the past, when humans lived in harmony with nature and there was less environmental degradation.

The song encourages and educates listeners to think about the future of Earth and not think only of the present.

The music's timeless qualities remind us that humans have lived in harmony with nature for millennia and the need to continue to do so to ensure a sustainable future for our planet. Koo Nimo encourages listeners to think critically about the present state of the environment and to take action to reverse the damage that has been done. By teaching us to consider the past, present, and future of the Earth, Ghanaian palmwine music reminds us of our responsibility to be good stewards of the environment and to leave a healthy planet for future generations.

### Of material culture and the natural environment

An increasing number of scholars in the humanities and social sciences are focusing on forms of material mediation of cultural expression and experiences. They are finding that the materiality of these forms is significant. According to Miller and Tilley (1996), "material culture" broadly refers to the investigation of the relationship between people and things, regardless of time and space. In practice, this means studying the role played by material objects, artefacts, and technologies in shaping human societies, cultures, identities, and knowledge. In music, material culture plays an important role, although it is often perceived as a simple and effortless cultural aspect. These material resources form the foundation on which the 'intangibility' of the music and/or its transmissibility are hinged. However, the truth is that while we have easy access to materials for music making and listening, there are hidden but very real environmental costs associated with them (Devine and Boudreault-Fournier 2021). Music making and enjoyment are more complex than they appear.

The relationship between palmwine music and the natural environment manifests most in the genre's material culture. This connection is evident in the palmwine served during performances, the natural spaces used for performances and the materials used in manufacturing musical instruments. Despite this direct relationship, contemporary palmwine musicians do not seem to think about how their music making affects the environment. We will focus here on traditional drums which are made from both trees and animal skin, to reveal its importance in palmwine music and the Akan culture. The aim is to draw the attention of musicians to the natural resources which make instruments available; to strive towards a more responsible way of thinking about the relationship between palmwine music and its environmental cost.

Traditional drums play an essential role in most Ghanaian Indigenous music traditions.

Among the Akans in Ghana, for instance, their musical traditions, including *adowa*, *fontomfrom*, and *ketè*, base their creations and performances around the traditional drum. Incidentally, these musical types are named after the drums. The Akan-dominated areas in Ghana are noted for their artistry in drum carving and subsequent musical cultures. However, the type of drums used are heavily influenced by the geographical locations which afford the trees for making the instrument. For instance, Agya Koo Nimo's *Adadam Agofomma* ensemble is based in Kumasi in the Ashanti region, an area primarily dominated by forest vegetation. Thus, the ensemble boasts of a myriad of drums (See figure 2) as compared to the Legon Palmwine Band or the Kwanpa Band which uses kpanlogo drum because both ensembles are based in Accra, coastal area. In short, despite its relevance to music making, the type and number of drums used by palmwine music ensembles, depends on which part of the country the musical ensembles find themselves, which in turn, is determined by the natural environment (Anku 2009).



Figure 2. Adadam Agofomma's Indigenous drum collection. Picture by Josh O. Brew

In his discussion of the musical repertory of Koo Nimo, Kaye (1999) highlights the significance of the traditional drums amongst the palmwine music tradition. Apart from enhancing their performances, he observes that it aesthetically positions the music tradition within the Akan culture. Quoting Koo Nimo, Sunu Doe reveals that in contemporary palmwine performances, “drums act as a support system to the other instruments by complementing the groove. Hence their sound ground the entire performance” (2020: 79). This means that the drums do not only provide a steady beat for the other instruments to follow, but also serve to create a sense of cohesion and unity within the music. Without the drums, the performance would lack the necessary foundation to truly come together as a whole. Thus, in palmwine music, the drums are not simply an accessory, but an integral part of the overall sound and experience.

But what are the environmental ramifications that make drums available? Drums and other percussion instruments, like the *premprensiwa*, are created from trees and the membrane, from cow skin. Teresa Welch (2001) highlights environmental concerns over the risk of extinction of some natural resources over time that have been used in making musical instruments. Besides cutting these trees to create the resources, they destroy the “natural biological characteristics, distribution, ecology, habitat, reproduction, and growth rate relating to species harvest or protection” (Welch 2001: 502). Are the palmwine musicians oblivious to these concerns, and could the emergent instrumental resources of the musical tradition be argued to have paid attention to these environmental concerns?

Our experience as palmwine musicians and with palmwine ensemble today suggests that the contemporary musicians are hardly conscious of the adverse effects of their instruments. Our



sole prerogative has been how to safeguard a tradition that was on the brink of fading. For instance, in our recent conversation with the drummer of the LPB about these issues, he points out that the environmental consequence of the material culture has never been a part of the band's discussion. He notes that even when the decision was made to purchase the Indigenous drum for the ensemble, that topic never came up.[11] Could it be that these young palmwine bands follow a tradition that has hardly paid attention to some of the pertinent ecological issues material cultures of Indigenous musical tradition raise?

Perhaps not, because as aforementioned, there is current disregard for certain Traditional Ecological Knowledge *and* in music making, which is part of the current environmental crisis. Because as Kyle Devine has made us aware: "modern development, consumption, and waste have strained the environment to the point of crisis--and music is part of the problem" (2015: 367). For instance, among the Akans, drums and other instrumental resources assume some spiritual significance to their people. Hence, they believe that the principal (chief) drummers and drums have a connection between the living and their ancestors. Thus, special rituals are performed for the felling of trees, from which their drums are carved (Nketia 1954; 1974). Such rituals also include particular attempts at reforestation in these areas. Based on this centuries-old reverence for trees, little evidence has suggested that these material resources for music making cause significant environmental damage. Humans must explore how music-making impacts the Anthropocene while still making and protecting music. For palmwine musicians it is imperative to understand the materials and their sources that make the music tradition possible and the implications on the natural environment, for both are deeply and meaningfully connected.

## Conclusion

Ghanaian palmwine music and the natural environment are connected in deep and significant ways, evident in where the music tradition began – during social gatherings held under trees in proximity to nature. Moreover, palm wine is shared during performances, giving rise to the name "palmwine music". Thirdly, the natural environment plays a vital role in creating and performing palmwine music, as musical instruments such as drums are made from trees. But while we enjoy music, it is prudent to think about how our music making affects the Anthropocene, for as Kyle Devine puts it, music is part of the problem (2015: 367).

To interrogate this ontology, we have examined the connections between palmwine music and the environment by analysing the cultural significance and unique salient musical features that highlights how this music tradition promotes awareness and appreciation for natural resources. Specifically, we examined a selected palmwine song's lyrics that address environmental themes, the performance contexts, and how it inspires listeners to actively participate in building sustainable ecology in Ghana. Since the direct relationship between palmwine and the natural environment is explicit in the material culture, we focused on traditional drums, which is crucial to contemporary palmwine music performance, to reveal the current rupture between musicians and the natural environment.

Palmwine music can serve as a powerful tool for promoting environmental awareness and sustainability in Ghana. The music tradition uses stories and incorporates philosophies and values, making the audience attentive and contemplative. It can evoke nostalgia and support environmental activism. By understanding the deep connections between this music tradition and the natural environment, we can appreciate and preserve Ghana's unique cultural heritage while working towards a more sustainable ecology.

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### Endnotes

1. See for example Titus Olusegun (2019) and Sarah Politz (2022).
2. Hiplife music is a hybridisation of hip hop with highlife music. See, for example, Collins 2018.
3. We use ‘creative’ here to include other performing artists like poets, spoken word acts, rap artists, etc.
4. The *premprensiwa* is also known as *ashiwa* and has its origins in the Caribbean.
5. The cited video is a recording from the May 2022 *Nsadwase Nkɔmɔ* (a monthly palmwine performance circle organized by the LPB).
6. Personal Communication, 26 May 2022, University of Ghana, Department of Music.
7. Some palmwine musicians use this song to express their appreciation to Koo Nimo for keeping Ghanaian palmwine music alive, as they continue to benefit from the music today.
8. In Nigeria, Titus Olusegun (2019) reveals how the abandonment of TEK by residents of Ibadan led to now-perennial flood disasters, which were not an issue when TEK was heeded in the past.
9. The apocalyptic approach suggests warning of a looming danger.
10. Sarah Politz (2022) examines how the jazz music of Lionel Loueke features both nostalgic and apocalyptic modes of ecomusical representation in different measures and in markedly different affective registers.
11. Personal Communication, 12 December 2022, Sawnd Factory Studios, Nii Boi town, Lapaz.

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