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Beyond Ritual Preservation: Sustainable Economic Frameworks for Àpẹ́pẹ́ Music in Contemporary Rẹ́mọ Society

Beyond Ritual Preservation: Sustainable Economic Frameworks for Apepe Music in Contemporary Remo Society

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Abstract
Àpẹ́pẹ́ is a communal musical tradition of the Rẹ́mọ people of Ogun State, Nigeria, bound to the Orò festival and the secrecy that protects it. Communal duty has kept the tradition alive, but its practitioners earn little from it, and its economic potential for musicians and for Remoland's hospitality economy remains largely untapped. This article asks how economic value might be generated around Àpẹ́pẹ́ without commercialising its restricted ritual core. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork with seventeen purposively selected participants, including Àpẹ́pẹ́ musicians, Orò custodians, Ifá priests, and tourism practitioners, in five Rẹ́mọ towns. The article distinguishes three objects that discussions of commercialisation often conflate: the restricted ritual core, communal Àpẹ́pẹ́ in open settings, and derivative genres such as Èkùtẹ̀. It examines six pathways: cultural infrastructure, the direct performance economy, the cultural tourism economy, event-based commercialisation, creative entrepreneurship, and the digital cultural economy. Each is classified by evidence status and assessed against four sustainability criteria: financial viability, equitable distribution, institutional continuity, and cultural integrity. Commissioning of communal groups is the only pathway observed in practice for Àpẹ́pẹ́ itself; the custodian-organised secular window before the Orò lockdown and the Isara carnival both feature Èkùtẹ̀. No pathway yet meets all four criteria, and financial viability remains unestablished. The article therefore proposes a three-tier conceptual framework of infrastructure, events, and digital economy under community governance, offered as a basis for testing rather than as a validated model.

Introduction

Indigenous music across Africa rarely exists for its own sake, although its aesthetic dimensions deserve recognition in their own right (Agawu, 2003). It instructs the young, regulates conduct, and binds communities to their history through song (Mbaegbu, 2015). Among the Rẹ́mọ, a Yorùbá sub-group in Ogun State, Nigeria, this inheritance is expressed most vividly through Àpẹ́pẹ́, a communal musical tradition performed on carved bamboo trunks and leather hand fans. Àpẹ́pẹ́ accompanies the Orò festival, during which women are confined indoors for a one-day lockdown. Women may hear Àpẹ́pẹ́, but they may not watch the ritual itself, a restriction that custodians regard as protecting the festival's cleansing function. The songs, instruments, and performance calendar belong to the community rather than to any individual.

This communal structure has sustained Àpẹ́pẹ́ across generations, but it has also limited its economic return. Musicians perform largely out of cultural duty, receiving occasional gifts rather than a sustained income, even though Remoland's position on the Lagos–Ibadan expressway gives it evident and largely untapped appeal for cultural tourism. Èkùtẹ̀, a genre formed by singers trained in Àpẹ́pẹ́ groups, already offers young Rẹ́mọ men a commercial route (Akanbi, 2023). Àpẹ́pẹ́'s cultural value, however, is inseparable from its association with Orò. Any attempt to commercialise it must therefore acknowledge this sacred and restrictive structure, so that the tradition's indigenous essence is not lost, and careless commercialisation risks resistance from custodians who fear the erosion of its sanctity.

This article asks how economic value might be generated around Àpẹ́pẹ́ for its practitioners and for Remoland's hospitality economy without compromising the sanctity of the ritual it accompanies. It addresses three sub-questions: what commercial pathways stakeholders have enacted or proposed; how these pathways treat the boundary between restricted ritual and open performance; and what governance arrangements would make them sustainable rather than merely profitable.

The article makes four contributions. First, it distinguishes three objects that are often conflated: the restricted ritual core, communal Àpẹ́pẹ́ in open settings, and derivative genres such as Èkùtẹ̀. Second, drawing on exploratory evidence, it suggests how economic activity might be organised beside a restricted ritual without commercialising its core. Third, it examines what communal ownership implies once commissions, recordings, and licences arise, and proposes that communal anonymity, which allows Àpẹ́pẹ́ to criticise the powerful without exposing individuals, may carry social and economic value that individual branding could erode. Fourth, it proposes a three-tier conceptual framework under community governance, offered for testing rather than as a validated model. Next is the review of the literature, the conceptual framework, methodology, presentation and discussion of the findings, and conclusion.

Literature Review

This section explores existing research related to the study.

Indigenous Music as a Vehicle for Economic Empowerment

A growing body of scholarship treats indigenous music as an active resource for livelihood creation. Grant et al. (2021), drawing on cases from Indonesia, Vanuatu, and Australia, show that music-based interventions advance development goals when they are embedded in existing community structures rather than imposed from outside.

Isabirye (2021a, 2021b) shows that informal, community-based learning of indigenous music can turn participants into independent creative entrepreneurs, a transition that mirrors how young Àpẹ́pẹ́ participants graduate into forming Èkùtẹ̀ bands. Bolger (2015) similarly found that participatory music projects can serve as vocational incubators for marginalised young people.

Taken together, these studies suggest that indigenous music becomes economically sustainable when communities retain control over how skills are transmitted and monetised. Recent evidence from Southwest Nigeria is consistent with this view. Mubarak et al. (2025), studying the Osun-Osogbo and Egungun festivals, found that cultural preservation, economic empowerment, and membership participation were significant predictors of tourism sustainability, together explaining about half of the variance, while also reporting that festival revenue was not always shared evenly.

Digitisation adds further reach. Chan (2018) argues that folk traditions endure when they innovate without losing their cultural core, and Crandall (2023) shows that community-led videographic and musical partnerships can support decolonisation, provided the community retains creative control.

Two limits in this literature shape the present study. First, much of it treats commercialisation as an opportunity that community structures can manage, whereas heritage and festival-tourism research shows that commercialisation can reorganise practices, marginalise their communities, and concentrate benefits among those with capital or influence (Niedźwiedź & Baraniecka-Olszewska, 2020; Okafor & Agbo, 2020; Mubarak et al., 2025). Second, these studies concern music without a gender-restricted ritual core, or festivals that already draw wide audiences. Àpẹ́pẹ́ differs on both counts, so the transferability of their lessons cannot be assumed.

The Sacred-Secular Boundary in Cultural and Religious Tourism

When sacred practices are opened to tourism, recent work rejects a rigid separation between pilgrim and tourist. De La Ballina Ballina and Fernández-Moya (2026) describe the Camino de Santiago as a "dual path" along which tourist motivations evolve into spiritual ones, and Kalender and Tari Kasnakoglu (2022) identify Hajj travellers who blend devotion with tourist behaviour.

Thouki (2022) shows that managers of religious heritage sites often convert aspects of practice into revenue to fund conservation, and Nilsson (2018) reads the merging of All Saints' Day with Halloween in Sweden as adaptation rather than decay. Niedźwiedź and Baraniecka-Olszewska (2020), by contrast, show through the case of Hagia Sophia how commercial and political interests can marginalise living religious communities. Closer to the present study, Okafor and Agbo (2020) warn that unchecked commercialisation can compromise the authenticity of Nigerian cultural festivals, while arguing that the tension can be managed.

This literature suggests that the sacred-secular boundary is negotiated rather than fixed. Two cautions apply. It treats sacredness mainly as a property of places and journeys, whereas in Àpẹ́pẹ́ it attaches to a gendered ritual and to rules about who may see what. And the Hagia Sophia case shows that negotiation does not guarantee protection. The literature supports the claim that some boundaries can be negotiated, not that every boundary can be.

Digital Heritage and Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Digital platforms are reshaping who controls access to sacred and communal knowledge. Christen (2015) argues that indigenous communities require licensing and access frameworks beyond conventional copyright, since open-access models were not designed for customary restrictions on who may view or circulate cultural material. Kukutai and Taylor (2016) frame this as data sovereignty: indigenous peoples hold inherent rights over data about their lifeways, and these rights persist after material has been copied or shared. Although this work arose in Māori, Aboriginal, and First Nations contexts, its principles have since been generalised in the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance (Carroll et al., 2020), whose emphasis on collective benefit and authority to control applies to any community that holds cultural knowledge collectively, as Rẹ́mọ communities hold Àpẹ́pẹ́. Applied here, consent to be recorded at one performance does not amount to consent for indefinite circulation. Chisa and Ngulube (2017) add that digitising indigenous music without reconciling customary law and copyright can generate new disputes over ownership.

Formal law points in a similar direction. The UNESCO (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage places communities at the centre of safeguarding, and Nigeria's Copyright Act 2022 protects expressions of folklore, including folk songs, against unauthorised reproduction, performance, and adaptation, and requires authorisation for their commercial use (Copyright Act, 2022, ss. 74–75). These instruments recognise collective interests but do not settle who, within a community, may authorise a licence or receive its proceeds. This study therefore extends the data sovereignty argument from control of circulation to control of economic rights, a point developed in Sections 3 and 5.6.

Not all scholarship treats digitisation as a threat. Van der Hoeven (2019) shows how social media have shifted authority over urban heritage from professionals to practitioners and audiences. A similar shift is visible in Remoland, where Àpẹ́pẹ́ and Èkùtẹ̀ performers upload their own footage without institutional sanction, unsettling the gatekeeping role of Orò priests. Short, decontextualised clips may also become the dominant public account of what Àpẹ́pẹ́ is.

Access is also uneven. A Pew Research Centre (2018) survey in six sub-Saharan African countries, including Nigeria, found smartphone ownership lower among older, less educated, and lower-income adults. If this holds in Remoland, which the study did not test, older custodians who hold the deepest ritual knowledge may be the least equipped to shape digital promotion.

Digital tools therefore require a locally negotiated protocol that specifies who may record, what may be shared, how consent is obtained and renewed, and who may licence and profit from the result.

Àpẹ́pẹ́ and Èkùtẹ̀ in Existing Rẹ́mọ Scholarship

Scholarship specific to Àpẹ́pẹ́ remains thin. Ademola (2014) documents the master instrumentalist's role in Ikenne Rẹ́mọ but confines his analysis to one town. Owolabi (2020) shows that the genre already has a foothold in school and social events, though her focus is documentary rather than economic. Sanni and Boge (2021) describe its instrumentation and link to Orò from outside Rẹ́mọ society. Akanbi (2023), the most relevant precedent, traces how Èkùtẹ̀ emerged from Àpẹ́pẹ́ and was restructured by individual musicians to compete commercially with Fújì, Jùjú, and Àpàla.

These studies establish Àpẹ́pẹ́'s organisation, instrumentation, and presence in secular settings, and the emergence of Èkùtẹ̀ from it. They leave open the economic arrangements of the communal form, the relationship between individualised derivatives and communal practice, and how ownership, recording, and revenue would be governed if Àpẹ́pẹ́ were opened to wider audiences. These questions are the concern of the present article.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This section situates the discourse within existing theoretical worldviews.

Three Objects of Commercialisation

The article's title concerns Àpẹ́pẹ́, yet much of the commercial activity found in Rẹ́mọ society involves Èkùtẹ̀ and other adaptations. To keep the argument clear, three objects are distinguished, summarised in Table 1 (See appendix 1). Commercial success in one does not show that the same model would work in another. In this article, "commercialising Àpẹ́pẹ́" refers to the second row. The first row is outside the scope of any commercial proposal, and the third supplies comparative evidence whose transferability is assessed in Section 5.5 rather than assumed. The wider study treats Wọ́rọ̀ as Àpẹ́pẹ́ performed in social contexts that are not gender-restricted (Sofola, 2026), so the second row is a real category.

What the Article Means by Sustainability

The article uses three terms in a fixed order. An *economic opportunity* is a possibility that participants identified or described. A *commercialisation strategy* is an organised way of acting on that opportunity. A *sustainable economic framework* is a set of strategies together with the governance that allows them to meet four criteria:

Financial viability. Revenue covers the costs of performing, maintaining facilities, and coordinating activity, beyond initial sponsorship and outside the festival season. Equitable distribution. Benefits reach musicians, custodians, and organisers, and safeguards exist against capture by a few influential individuals. Institutional continuity. Arrangements survive the energy or lifespan of any single person. Both the Ibùdó Àṣà centre and Bombata's personal brand,

discussed below, ended with their founders. Cultural integrity. The restricted ritual core, communal ownership, and communal anonymity remain intact.

The study did not measure any of these. It uses them as evaluative criteria to state, for each pathway, what the evidence shows and what remains to be established. *Community governance* is used here in a layered sense. Orò custodians retain sole authority over the restricted ritual core, while decisions about open performance, recording, and revenue would be taken by a wider body that includes group leaders, the king and chiefs in council, community organisations, and representatives of those affected, such as women, young people, and non-custodian musicians. The term does not imply that the restricted Orò societies govern the wider public.

Three Perspectives and Their Analytical Roles

Three perspectives guide the analysis, each with a defined task (Table 2 [See appendix 2]): the literature on sacred-secular negotiation in cultural tourism (Kalender & Tari Kasnakoglu, 2022; Thouki, 2022); Sociotechnical Systems Theory (Trist, 1981); and indigenous data sovereignty (Christen, 2015; Kukutai & Taylor, 2016), a normative position on community control over cultural information. They are used as complementary lenses rather than as a single integrated theory.

The sacred-secular perspective is used in modified form. Where the tourism literature speaks of a continuum, the Rẹ́mọ data suggest that some matters can be opened on negotiated terms while others are restricted absolutely. The perspective is therefore used to ask where an activity sits relative to a boundary and who has the authority to move it.

Sociotechnical Systems Theory holds that a community comprises interdependent technical and social systems, and that good outcomes require both to be developed together (Trist, 1981). Here, a cultural centre, a ticketing arrangement, a recording device, or a streaming platform belongs to the technical system, while Orò custodianship, group leadership, and the Rẹ́mọ Growth and Development Foundation belong to the social system. The theory is operationalised by asking of each pathway who designs, governs, books, and shares, and whether the technical arrangement is being designed with the social system or ahead of it.

Indigenous data sovereignty sharpens what joint design means once recording enters the picture. Consent is an ongoing relationship that a community must be able to renew or withdraw, and this study extends it to economic rights: licensing, monetisation, reuse, and attribution.

The three perspectives work in sequence. The boundary perspective identifies what may be opened; Sociotechnical Systems Theory asks which arrangements can open it without damaging the social system that confers authority; and data sovereignty asks who controls the resulting recordings and revenue.

Methodology

This section details the methodological strategy with which the study was carried out, focusing on the design, positionality, sites and participants, data generation, analysis and evidence base, and ethical procedure.

Design and Positionality

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic design within a constructivist paradigm (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The first author is an indigene of Remoland with practical experience of Àpẹ́pẹ́ and occupied an insider position, which brought unhindered access, fluency in the dialect of the songs, and rapport with gatekeepers. It also brought risks: familiarity can make practices seem too obvious to question, and the first author's participation in Èkùtẹ̀-type bands as a keyboard player between 2008 and 2017 may incline the analysis towards sympathy with commercial adaptation.

Several measures addressed these risks. The first author applied phenomenological bracketing (epoché) during fieldwork and analysis, kept a reflexive journal after observation sessions, held peer-debriefing sessions with academic mentors, kept interview transcripts verbatim, and returned transcribed musical texts and thematic deductions to key master musicians for verification.

Sites and Participants

Fieldwork was carried out across five towns in Remoland, Ogun State: Ipara Rẹ́mọ, Ode Rẹ́mọ, Isara Rẹ́mọ, Irolu Rẹ́mọ, and Ikenne Rẹ́mọ, all of which maintain active Àpẹ́pẹ́ traditions. The first three lie in Rẹ́mọ North Local Government Area and the last two in Ikenne Local Government Area. Seventeen participants were purposively selected for their expertise and lived experience, following the rationale that purposive sampling seeks information-rich cases rather than statistical representativeness (Etikan et al., 2016). Table 3 (See appendix 3) gives the breakdown.

The distribution is deliberately uneven. Rẹ́mọ North Local Government Area contributes most participants, reflecting the strength of its Àpẹ́pẹ́ groups and the first author's access. Locations are reported at this level because the smaller categories could otherwise identify individuals. Each participant is counted once, under the principal role in which they were interviewed, although some hold more than one role. P1, for example, is both an Orò custodian and an Èkùtẹ̀ bandleader, and the article identifies in each case the role in which he speaks. Because Orò and Àpẹ́pẹ́ are male-led institutions, the sample is predominantly male, and women are represented chiefly through the Ìyá Orò. Participants quoted are identified by code: P1 (Orò custodian and Èkùtẹ̀ bandleader), P2 (a participant who commented on diaspora attachment and digitisation), P3 (an Àpẹ́pẹ́ musician), and P4 and P5 (tourism and hospitality practitioners).

Data Generation

Data were generated through semi-structured expert interviews, participant and non-participant observation of live performances, field notes guided by an observation checklist, audio recording of interviews by two trained research assistants, and archival song material, including cassette dubs of early-2000s Orò festivals held in private collections and early digital recordings of Bombata on YouTube and Audiomack. Interviews were conducted in Yorùbá and the Rẹ́mọ dialect and translated into English by the first author. The interview guide and observation checklist were piloted with two experts and an Àpẹ́pẹ́ group.

The interviews quoted in this article were conducted between April 2025 and April 2026. The first author's participant observation of Orò festival performances extended over several annual festival cycles, and it builds on earlier involvement in Rẹ́mọ musical life between 2002 and 2018, prior to the research-centred fieldwork that occurred between 2025 and 2026.

Analysis and Evidence Base

All data were analysed using content and thematic analysis. Recordings were transcribed verbatim in the Rẹ́mọ dialect and translated; transcripts were open-coded using thematic indexing and cross-case coding matrices; and codes were clustered into candidate sub-themes, which were audited against raw excerpts and field notes. This article draws on the subset of the broader doctoral dataset (Sofola, 2026) concerned with tourism, cultural entrepreneurship, and the commercial adaptation of indigenous performance. The six pathways discussed later are an organising frame derived from the wider study's objectives. The findings are what the data show about each pathway and its evidence status, not the pathways themselves.

Two features of the evidence matter. The commercial material in this article rests on fewer accounts than the wider study, and Table 4 (See appendix 4) identifies the source of each finding so that readers can see where an account is uncorroborated. The findings also differ in kind: some describe

what participants do, some what they propose, and some attitudes they report, and the analysis keeps these apart.

Ethical Procedures

The study received ethical approval from the Kabarak University Research Ethics Committee (KUREC-030226) and the University of Ibadan Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Committee (UI/SSHREC/2026/056). Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and their role in it, and were told they could withdraw at any point. Informed consent, including separate permission to audio-record, was obtained verbally in line with participants' preference, and this verbal consent was recorded in audio format alongside the interviews. All participants were adults. Although participants did not object to being named, they are anonymised and identified only by code (P1 to P5), and details of role, location, and events that could identify them have been generalised, to protect them and the restricted knowledge they hold.

The study also followed customary protocols. No recording devices were introduced into the sacred grove (Igbó Orò) or used during Àpẹ́pẹ́ performance in its sacred context. Recorded songs and narratives were reviewed with the engaged experts before academic presentation, so that published material did not reveal restricted knowledge. The study distinguished the open, secular domain of Eré Wọ́rọ̀, suitable for open dissemination, from the restricted sacred soundscape of Orò. Social media footage referred to in the discourse had already circulated publicly; it is described only in general terms and is neither reproduced nor linked. Interview data are held on a secured drive accessible only to the first author.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The analysis examined six pathways of economic activity: cultural infrastructure, the direct performance economy, the cultural tourism economy, event-based commercialisation, creative entrepreneurship, and the digital cultural economy. What the data revealed is that these pathways differ sharply in evidential standing. Commissioning of communal Àpẹ́pẹ́ groups is already practised; the event-based and entrepreneurial activity observed involves the derivative genre Èkùtẹ̀; diaspora tourism rests on reported attachment; and the cultural centre and digital protocol remain proposals. Table 4 (See appendix 4) records the source, evidence status, and what remains unestablished for each. Sections 5.1 to 5.6 discuss each pathway, and Section 5.7 draws them into a framework.

Cultural Infrastructure: A Cultural Centre at the Crossroads

The most ambitious proposal to emerge from the fieldwork came from Participant P4, a tourism and hospitality expert. He envisions a community centre that takes advantage of Remoland's position on the Lagos–Ibadan expressway to draw in visitors who would otherwise pass through the area without stopping. He put it this way:

> I am of the opinion that if we establish a community centre where people can come to relax, visitors could drive in from places like Shagamu or Lagos. While they are there, they will spend money, creating a valuable economic ecosystem. Local vendors will come to sell their crafts, drinks, and foods. You can also generate revenue through gate fees and by bringing in photographers and videographers. Ultimately, young people will make a living from it, creating a thriving cultural ecosystem. (P4, oral interview, April 2025)

This is a proposal, not an established model. It names plausible revenue sources, but the fieldwork supplies no estimate of visitor numbers, costs, or income. It is nonetheless instructive, because it implies a programme of Àpẹ́pẹ́ and other Rẹ́mọ arts broader than the annual festival.

The idea has a precedent. The late Jimi Solanke, composer of the Rẹ́mọ anthem, established a similar hub, Ibùdó Àṣà, which achieved little as he grew too old to sustain it. This illustrates the

criterion of institutional continuity: a hub built around one individual risks stalling once that individual's energy declines. A viable centre would therefore need distributed ownership among traditional institutions, the Rẹ́mọ Growth and Development Foundation, and local government.

Against the four criteria, the proposal is strongest on the logic of an ecosystem and weakest on evidence of viability. Grant et al. (2021) show that music-based interventions succeed when they build economic ecosystems around a cultural anchor embedded in community structures, and the centre would follow that pattern, but resemblance to a successful pattern is not evidence of viability. The proposal does not say how receipts would reach musicians, and whether custodians would accept Àpẹ́pẹ́ staged away from the festival calendar was not tested. In sociotechnical terms, a building is only the technical half of the system; who governs, books, and shares remains open.

The Direct Performance Economy: From Communal Duty to Commercial Commission

Alongside these proposals, the fieldwork recorded an already-occurring form of commercialisation. P1, speaking as a participant in communal Àpẹ́pẹ́, described how his group accepts paid invitations to perform at secular functions:

> People who were getting married have invited us to perform, just as those hosting farewell events have invited us to play. If we put our heads together and organise, we will truly see the benefits. (P1, oral interview, April 2025)

P4 independently described a comparable case. He recalled facilitating the attendance of an Àpẹ́pẹ́ group from one of the study towns at a cultural event in Abuja, because of the energy of the performance, the Rẹ́mọ dialect, and the instrumentation. Patronage of this kind has older roots. Well-to-do individuals often sponsor uniform fabric for groups that perform at town festivals, and gifts received during the Orò festival are shared among participating members, though participants stressed that such gifts are secondary to the motivation for taking part.

This is the commercialisation of the second object in Table 1 (See appendix 1): a communal group commissioned as a group, outside the ritual context. It emerges from within the tradition, as musicians respond to demand for their distinctive sound.

What the data do not show is how these commissions are organised: fees, frequency, who accepts a booking on a group's behalf, or whether commissioned income is shared as festival gifts are. Without a shared booking structure, pricing standard, or revenue-sharing agreement, commissions remain ad hoc and fall short of the criterion of financial viability. The customary sharing of festival gifts offers a precedent that a booking arrangement could extend, but that extension is a recommendation and not a finding.

The Cultural Tourism Economy: Diaspora, Nostalgia, and Digital Reach

The case for tourism draws on evidence of attachment among Rẹ́mọ indigenes living outside Remoland. P1 observed that diaspora indigenes time their annual homecoming to coincide with the Orò festival in order to experience Àpẹ́pẹ́, often bringing non-indigene friends. P2 described the lengths to which some go to remain connected to the festival:

> In fact, some prefer to receive a query from their work places than missing the Orò festival. They would come without taking permission because they know it might not be granted. In fact, flight tickets are purchased by the diaspora just to be part of it. So, Orò is a festival that the entire town holds in high esteem. (P2, oral interview, April 2025)

P2 went further, describing how those who cannot return still seek out recordings online:

> ...we have also seen that on the world stage, our people who are abroad love it more than we do. Because when they were at home, they saw and heard things. Even the ones who are overseas. When they see it on the internet, it makes them laugh, it makes them remember when they were at home, that they were there too. (**P2**, oral interview, April 2025)

P5, a tourism and hospitality practitioner whose work promotes Rẹ́mọ culture internationally, described social media as central to this effort, as a means of using "technology and social media to protect, preserve, and promote Rẹ́mọ traditions" (P5, oral interview, April 2025).

These accounts are strong evidence of cultural attachment and, by report, of attendance, but weaker evidence of a market. Willingness to risk professional consequences and to buy flight tickets shows readiness to spend on travel, and money-spraying at performances is customary but unmeasured. No participant described paying for a structured Àpẹ́pẹ́ offering, such as a ticketed performance, a homecoming package, or a livestream, and the data say nothing about the size or stability of such demand.

Because P5's work is the promotion of Rẹ́mọ culture, his view is that of an advocate, and the claim that demand exists and only infrastructure is missing is a hypothesis these data make plausible but do not test. Recordings already circulate on terms the community does not control, so any tourism offer built on them inherits the governance questions taken up in Section 5.6.

Event-Based Commercialisation and the Sacred Boundary

The most theoretically significant finding concerns a strategy P1 has developed to reconcile commercial opportunity with ritual protection. On the Friday that marks the start of the Orò festival, before the one-day lockdown, P1 organises a musical event with his own Èkùtẹ̀ band from about four in the afternoon into the late evening. During this window, women, the elderly, and visitors attend freely. They may record, dance, and spray money on performers, a customary gesture of appreciation in Yorùbá musical culture. By the time attendees go home ahead of the lockdown, they have taken part in the festival's musical life without approaching the restricted core of the ritual.

Two qualifications apply. First, the band is Èkùtẹ̀, not Àpẹ́pẹ́, so the window shows how a custodian has placed a commercial performance beside the Orò calendar, not that Àpẹ́pẹ́ itself has been commercialised. Second, the account comes from its organiser. P1's custodial standing gives the window authority locally, but the data do not show that other custodians have endorsed it or that its effects have been observed independently. That the sacred boundary remains intact is his assessment, not a finding the study tested.

The acceptability of such arrangements is contested, as a 2024 episode referred to by three participants shows. When an Àpẹ́pẹ́ group performed at a palace, an attempt to record the performance for upload met stiff resistance until it was agreed that everything pertaining to Orò that women may not see would be excluded from the frame. The recording was uploaded and still drew disapproval from core adherents and from musicians in neighbouring towns, who feared that young men would take it as the norm and so expose the mechanisms that have sustained Orò across generations.

The episode shows three things. Acceptability is negotiated case by case. A boundary agreed locally can still be contested by people outside the agreement. And the live worry is drift, meaning that a precedent changes expectations about what is permissible. Practice also varies by town. P2 reported that in his town digitisation is becoming normalised:

> It is actually nothing special. Even our last year's performance can be found on Facebook. There were times our performances had gained attention from the

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> diaspora. There had been the use of tape recorders a long time ago, which helped to play out the Orò songs. (P2, oral interview, April 2025)

These cases suggest that the relationship between sacred and secular is better described as a boundary with two kinds of territory than as a continuum. Participants indicated that Àpẹ́pẹ́'s instruments carry no restriction barring women or non-indigenes from seeing them, and that its songs may be heard by everyone. The limiting factor is the Orò ritual. That territory, comprising the rite, the sacred grove, and what women may not see, is categorical. The other, comprising songs, instruments, and performance outside the ritual context, can be opened on negotiated terms, and the negotiation is the work of custodians, not of commercial interests. Commercial success may itself create pressure to extend a window closer to the ritual core, and whether the arrangement withstands that pressure is untested.

Unauthorised circulation shows the other side of the boundary. In 2024, footage of Agẹmọ, a related masquerade tradition observed under similar secrecy in Remoland, circulated on the social media platform X, where online viewers slowed it frame by frame in an attempt to demystify what the physical audience had experienced as a display of spiritual potency. Elders' alarm at its circulation was discussed during fieldwork. Christen (2015) would frame this as context collapse: once a fragment escapes its setting, the community loses control of how it is interpreted. P1's window, by contrast, is designed to be watched, recorded, and shared because it sits outside the ritual's protected core. The difference is not the presence of a camera but whether the community has decided that the moment filmed is meant for outside eyes.

A related arrangement was observed during fieldwork at a carnival in Isara Rẹ́mọ featuring young Èkùtẹ̀ musicians. Because several acts wish to appear on the same stage, organisers allocate each a strictly regulated stage time, so that no single group monopolises the audience's attention or the evening's takings. Like the Friday window, it involves Èkùtẹ̀ and is a separate event; it offers a scheduling rule that could be borrowed, but its extension to Àpẹ́pẹ́ remains a proposal.

Creative Entrepreneurship: Èkùtẹ̀ and the Bombata Blueprint

Young performers also need a route into professional competence, and this pipeline already exists inside Àpẹ́pẹ́. Children join rehearsals from a young age and are corrected as they learn. P3, an Àpẹ́pẹ́ musician, described this pedagogy:

> When we are performing, we let the children know how to sing, how to take the pitch up, and how to bring the pitch down... if needs be, we make corrections in between, saying, "It is not like that; it is like this." (P3, oral interview, April 2025)

This hands-on training is what eventually equips young singers to lead their own Èkùtẹ̀ bands, some of which now compete commercially alongside Fújì, Jùjú, and Àpàla. Fújì itself shows how a Yorùbá genre can absorb new instruments and styles while retaining its traditional core (Owoaje & Sofola, 2025). The communal form thus functions as an apprenticeship that feeds the commercial derivative. The fieldwork contains no earnings figures for Èkùtẹ̀, so "viable" here means that a commercial niche exists, not that income has been measured.

P1 offers an example of how communal and individual roles can be held together. Beyond his custodial role and communal Àpẹ́pẹ́ participation, he has led his own Èkùtẹ̀ band for many years and runs related music enterprises. His career suggests that individual entrepreneurship and communal duty can be complementary income streams, provided the boundaries between them are clear.

A more individualised model is associated with the late Adekunle Oshikabala, popularly known as Bombata, an Àpẹ́pẹ́ musician who owned his own band in Ikorodu. Bombata built the band around his identity as lead vocalist and composer and released recordings on Audiomack,

YouTube, and Facebook, carrying Àpẹ́pẹ́'s popularity beyond communal performance. Digital distribution has become central to how Nigerian musicians reach transnational audiences (Sofola & Wanyama, 2025). Bombata's recordings remain accessible, but the personal brand died with him, whereas communal groups persist through structured succession. This is the criterion of institutional continuity again.

Bombata's model depends on a song leader whose identity is the brand and who is treated as the owner of the songs. The communal tradition rests on the opposite principle, that no single person may claim or personally monetise a communal song. His model is therefore treated as a commercial derivative and a complementary route for individual musicians, not as a template for communal Àpẹ́pẹ́. The transfer of the Isara format and the Friday window to communal groups is likewise a design task, not a demonstrated result. A sustainable framework need not choose between the communal and individual models, but it must keep them distinct so that the second does not displace the first.

The Digital Cultural Economy: Governance, Ownership, and Anonymity

Digital promotion is now a prerequisite for tourism, and Àpẹ́pẹ́ is already online. An instance of the footage of an Agẹmọ (a certain sacred masquerade) performance surfacing online and being subjected to fram-by-frame scrutiny and demystification in 2024, and the palace recording of Àpẹ́pẹ́ show the risk, while P2's account shows that digitisation can become routine. Resolving the tension requires what this article terms a community-led digital protocol, extending Christen's (2015) argument for indigenous-controlled licensing. Such a protocol would not ban recording. It would specify in advance, with the authority of Orò priests, which moments are open to recording and circulation, who may record and distribute, how recordings are contextualised, and which moments remain off-limits.

The economic dimension is where the fieldwork says least and where the framework needs most. Communal ownership does not mean that every community member holds equal authority over cultural material, and Table 5 (See appendix 5) separates the layers of authority in play.

A protocol that governs only who may record leaves open who may licence a recording, who is credited, and where the proceeds go. The data cannot answer these questions, and the framework in Section 5.7 treats them as matters for community decision, on the principle that no licence is granted without the authority of the body holding custodial and collective standing.

A final reason for caution concerns anonymity. One participant explained that Àpẹ́pẹ́ functions as a form of social accountability, since musicians may name and shame wrongdoing without fear of reprisal, a role satirical song continues to play in Nigerian public life (Owoaje & Sofola, 2021; Sofola, 2020):

> If anyone misbehaves, irrespective of his or her reputation, it is usually disclosed and brought to light by the Àpẹ́pẹ́ musicians. This makes the entire town filled with people at that period because they want to listen to the songs to be sung at the festival.

This function depends on the immunity that communal, anonymous authorship provides. Another participant recalled being called to account by traditional authorities after a song criticised the handling of communal affairs. He protected his group by refusing to name individual composers or recordists, explaining that responsibility for a communal song cannot legally or culturally be pinned on one person. If Àpẹ́pẹ́ were restructured around individual branding, this protective anonymity, and with it the tradition's capacity for social critique, would be lost. Because that capacity is also part of why audiences gather, it is an economic as well as a civic asset, and recording and licensing arrangements must not turn communal songs into identifiable personal property.

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Beyond Ritual Preservation: Sustainable Economic Frameworks for Àpẹ́pẹ́ Music in Contemporary Rẹ́mọ Society

Towards an Integrated Framework

Read together, the findings suggest a three-tier framework for developing economic opportunities around Àpẹ́pẹ́ while protecting its ritual and communal foundations. The first tier is infrastructural, comprising a cultural centre of the kind P4 proposes under distributed institutional ownership. The second is the event tier, combining formalised commissioning of communal groups, a secular performance window of the kind P1 organises, and an Isara-style regulated carnival, each at a bounded distance from the ritual core. The third is the digital tier, governed by the community-led protocol outlined above. Figure 1 sets out the structure.

Community governance and cultural authority Traditional institutions, Orò custodians, group leaders, musicians, and community representatives		
Tier 1: Infrastructure Cultural centre, visitor facilities, local vendors, institutional support	Tier 2: Events Commissioned performances, secular windows, regulated carnival activities	Tier 3: Digital economy Recording permissions, licensing, distribution, digital promotion
Economic and cultural outcomes (to be tested) Fair remuneration, local enterprise, cultural continuity, intergenerational transmission, protection of the restricted ritual core		

Figure 1: Conceptual representation of the proposed framework. It is not an empirically validated model. The relationships shown are proposals derived from the findings and would need to be tested.

Community governance is shown as the foundation rather than a fourth tier, since it provides the authority through which the tiers operate. Consistent with Sociotechnical Systems Theory (Trist, 1981), infrastructure, events, and digital tools must be developed alongside the community's social and religious institutions, not ahead of them. Participants named Orò custodians, the king and chiefs in council, Àpẹ́pẹ́ group leaders, and the Rẹ́mọ Growth and Development Foundation as relevant authorities; as listed, such a body would be largely male-led. Custodial authority over the ritual core is not in question, but decisions about open performances, recordings, and revenue need not be confined to ritual custodians. Women, who would attend secular windows and could serve as vendors, performers, and organisers, as well as young and non-custodian musicians, have a claim to a voice in those decisions and a share in their benefits. How such a body is constituted is for Rẹ́mọ communities to decide. Table 6 (See appendix 6) outlines its responsibilities.

On revenue-sharing, the data support only the principle that arrangements should be agreed in advance with musicians and their traditional leaders, and that equitable distribution should extend to women, young people, and non-custodian musicians who contribute to open events. Specific proportions are for the community to determine. Table 7 (See appendix 7) assesses the framework against the four criteria.

Two risks deserve particular caution. The first is elite capture, which Mubarak et al. (2025) identified in Yorùbá festival-tourism. A cultural centre driven by a single entrepreneur could concentrate gate fees and sponsorship among a small circle, leaving ordinary Àpẹ́pẹ́ musicians with the same occasional gifts they receive today. The second is boundary drift: once a secular window proves profitable, there may be pressure to extend it closer to the ritual core, and the 2024 palace episode shows that such precedents are watched. Guarding against both requires community-agreed rules on timing, content, and benefit, monitored by the custodians who police the sacred boundary. The framework should accordingly be read as a basis for testing, not as a demonstration that sustainability has been achieved.

Conclusion

Àpẹ́pẹ́ holds economic potential that Rẹ́mọ society has only begun to explore. The fieldwork suggests that this potential need not come at the expense of the Orò ritual, provided commercial

activity is organised around the ritual and not through it. A proposed cultural centre could anchor a wider hospitality ecosystem but remains a proposal. Àpẹ́pẹ́ groups already accept direct commissions, which formal coordination might turn into a dependable livelihood. Diaspora attachment makes a structured tourism offer plausible, though willingness to pay is untested. P1's Friday window is reported by its organiser to have opened a recordable secular space beside the protected ritual. Because it features Èkùtẹ̀, it demonstrates how a secular space can be placed beside the ritual, not that communal Àpẹ́pẹ́ has itself been commercialised, and its transfer to Àpẹ́pẹ́ remains to be tested.

The Isara carnival and the Bombata model show that communal and individual approaches can coexist, but they are derivatives and not models for the communal form. Participants were clear that the communal, anonymous form must be preserved alongside commercial spin-offs, since that anonymity allows the genre to hold power accountable. Across these examples, the boundary between restricted and open performance was drawn by custodians rather than by outside commercial pressure, and some boundaries proved negotiable while others did not.

The article distinguishes the communal tradition from its adaptations and derivatives, so that evidence about each can be weighed properly. It suggests how economic activity might be organised beside a restricted ritual without commercialising its core, identifies the layers of authority that communal ownership leaves unresolved once recordings and commissions arise, and offers a governance-centred conceptual framework for testing. Its central proposition is that the economic sustainability of indigenous music need not require the commercialisation of its sacred or communal core, and may instead be pursued through community-governed activity, creative adaptation, and complementary commercial structures that preserve the authority, ownership arrangements, and social functions of the original tradition.

For this to be realised, Rẹ́mọ traditional institutions, the Rẹ́mọ Growth and Development Foundation, tourism stakeholders, and Àpẹ́pẹ́ practitioners must coordinate rather than act separately. A community-led digital protocol, agreed collectively and not imposed by any single actor, would allow Remoland to promote Àpẹ́pẹ́ widely while protecting the ritual secrecy that gives the tradition its meaning.

This analysis rests on the accounts and observations of seventeen participants, several findings rest on one or two accounts, and P1 is at once custodian, organiser, and beneficiary of the Friday window. The study collected no financial data, so none of the four criteria was measured. Interviews were translated by the first author, whose insider position eased access but may incline the analysis towards sympathy with commercial adaptation, and custodians sceptical of commercialisation may be under-represented. Women were represented mainly through the Ìyá Orò, so their views on commercialisation, and those of young and non-custodian musicians, were not separately examined. The convergence of concerns across participants is encouraging, but it is not a demonstrated community-wide consensus.

Future studies might track a pilot cultural centre or a formalised commissioning scheme over several festival cycles to establish whether the proposed revenue-sharing and boundary-monitoring safeguards hold. Quantitative work on willingness to pay and cost and revenue modelling for a centre would test the viability claims this study could only pose, and research-centred on women's and young people's perspectives would strengthen the governance proposals. Comparative work with other Yorùbá and West African sacred musical traditions would show whether the framework travels beyond Remoland.

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Appendix 1: Table 1

Table 1: Three objects of commercialisation

Object	What it is	Ownership and authority	Commercial status
Restricted ritual core	The Orò rite and Àpẹ́pẹ́ performed within its sacred context, including the sacred grove (Igbó Orò) and everything women may not see	Orò custodians, on behalf of the community	Not open to commercialisation. Protected categorically.
Communal Àpẹ́pẹ́ in open settings	Àpẹ́pẹ́ groups performing as groups outside the restricted ritual context, for example at town festivals, weddings, and farewell events, and Wọ́rọ̀ music in social contexts	The group and community, with leadership by succession; no individual owns a communal song	Open to negotiation: commissioning, scheduling, and recording under agreed rules
Commercial derivatives	Èkùtẹ̀ bands and individually branded models such as Bombata's	The individual lead singer or bandleader	Open to individual enterprise. Evidence about derivatives is not evidence about the second row unless transferability is shown.

Appendix 2: Table 2

Table 2: Analytical responsibility of each perspective

Perspective	What it explains in this study	Where it is applied
Sacred-secular boundary	How access to musical activity is negotiated and regulated, and which boundaries are negotiable and which are categorical	Sections 5.4 and 5.7
Sociotechnical Systems Theory	How people, institutions, technologies, and commercial arrangements interact, and why technical interventions must be designed jointly with the social system that carries authority	Sections 5.1, 5.2, and 5.7
Indigenous data sovereignty	Who controls recordings, their circulation, and the associated economic rights	Sections 5.3 and 5.6

Appendix 3: Table 3

Table 3: Participants by category and location (N = 17)

Category	Roles	Location	N
Àpẹ́pẹ́ master musicians	Lead vocalists (*Olórin*) and lead drummers	Rẹ́mọ North LGA (6), Ikenne LGA (2)	8
Orò custodians	*Olúmalẹ̀* (chief priest) and *Aláhà* (second-in-command)	Rẹ́mọ North LGA	2

Category	Roles	Location	N
Orò invocation custodian	*Ìyá Orò*, female ritual leader	Rẹ́mọ North LGA	1
Ifá priests	*Babaláwo*	Rẹ́mọ North LGA	3
Tourism and creative arts practitioners	Cultural festival organisers and Èkùtẹ̀ bandleaders	Rẹ́mọ North LGA (2); outside the five towns (1)	3
		Total	**17**

Appendix 4: Table 4

Table 4: Findings, sources, and evidence status

Finding	Source in the data	Evidence status	Not yet established
5.1 Cultural infrastructure	P4 (tourism and hospitality expert); precedent of Ibùdó Àṣà	Participant proposal	Visitor numbers, costs, revenue, ownership model, programme outside the festival season
5.2 Direct performance economy	P1 (weddings, farewells); P4 (Abuja event)	Observed practice, ad hoc	Fees, frequency, booking and revenue-sharing rules
5.3 Cultural tourism economy	P1 and P2; P5	Reported attachment and attendance	Willingness to pay, actual expenditure, size and stability of any market
5.4 Event-based commercialisation	P1 (Friday window); Isara carnival observed during fieldwork	Reported practice, involving Èkùtẹ̀ rather than Àpẹ́pẹ́	Endorsement by other custodians, effect on the festival, income earned
5.5 Creative entrepreneurship	P1 and P3; archival recordings of Bombata	Observed practice by individuals	Earnings; transferability to communal Àpẹ́pẹ́
5.6 Digital cultural economy	P2; P5; three participants on a 2024 palace recording; accounts of anonymity	Mixed: partial practice and contested episodes; the protocol is a proposal	Custodial acceptance of a protocol; licensing and revenue arrangements

Appendix 5: Table 5

Table 5: Layers of authority over a communal tradition

Layer	Question	What the data indicate	Open issue
Cultural custodianship	Who decides what may be shown	Orò custodians govern access to the ritual; the palace recording was settled by negotiation with the group and elders	Whether custodial authority extends to commercial decisions about open performances
Collective ownership	Who owns songs, instruments, and calendar	The community or group; no individual may claim or monetise a communal song	How a group acts as a commercial party, for example in booking or contracts
Individual performers	Who is rewarded and who is responsible	Festival gifts are shared among members; a group's leader may be held responsible for a song, while members decline to name individual composers	Whether performers are entitled to a share of recording or commission revenue
Recording rights	Who may record	Recording at the palace required negotiation with the group and elders	Whether a recordist holds any rights over the recording

Layer	Question	What the data indicate	Open issue
Commercial licensing	Who may licence, monetise, and reuse	The fieldwork records no arrangement	The entire layer

Appendix 6: Table 6

Table 6: Operational outline of the proposed framework

Element	Principal actors and responsibilities	Economic mechanisms	Cultural safeguards	Evidence status
Community governance	Orò custodians, king and council, group leaders, RemoGDF. Authorise open activities, approve commissions, hold the digital protocol, monitor compliance, resolve disputes	Agree fee floors and revenue-sharing rules in advance	Categorical protection of ritual core; custodial review	Proposal
Infrastructure	Cultural centre under distributed ownership; local vendors; institutional supporters	Gate fees, vendors, media services, programmes beyond the festival season	Ritual core never staged; centre programming approved by custodians	Participant proposal
Events	Group leaders and booking coordinator; custodians who approve windows; carnival organisers	Commissions, secular windows, scheduled carnival slots	Fixed timing and content rules for each window; monitoring against drift	Observed in part (commissions, Friday window)
Digital economy	Custodians and group representatives; designated recording experts	Licensed distribution and promotion under agreed terms	Protocol on what may be recorded, by whom, and how consent is renewed	Proposal; partial local practice

Appendix 7

Table 7: The framework assessed against the four sustainability criteria

Criterion	What the framework offers	What remains unestablished
Financial viability	Several income streams at different distances from the ritual core; year-round activity if a centre operates	Costs, revenues, visitor numbers, and willingness to pay; how the model works between festivals and beyond initial sponsorship
Equitable distribution	Governance body and advance revenue-sharing agreements; distributed ownership of the centre	The actual shares; how disputes would be resolved; protection against elite capture in practice
Institutional continuity	Anchoring in traditional institutions and succession-based group leadership rather than in individuals	Whether a governance body can be constituted and sustained; whether the arrangement outlasts its initiators
Cultural integrity	Categorical protection of the ritual core; protocol; preservation of the communal, anonymous form	Custodial acceptance beyond the towns studied; the effect of commercial success on the boundary over time