

TRADITION AND CULTURAL PRACTICES OF THE TIV PEOPLE OF BENUE STATE

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Abstract

This study investigates the oral traditions and cultural practices of the Tiv people of Benue State, Nigeria, focusing on their role in cultural transmission and identity preservation. Using qualitative ethnographic methods, the research employed participant observation, interviews, and oral narrative collection from 20 community elders and one cultural custodian across five Tiv settlements. Grounded in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, the study explores how Tiv language shapes cultural perception through proverbs, dirges, folktales, and rituals. Findings reveal that Tiv oral traditions function as sophisticated epistemological systems that encapsulate communal values, historical consciousness, and indigenous knowledge while serving as mechanisms for conflict resolution, social cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. These traditions face threats from modernisation, urbanisation, and cultural erosion. The study recommends comprehensive strategies including community-based documentation, educational integration, intergenerational mentorship, and digital preservation to ensure sustainable cultural continuity whilst maintaining authenticity.

Keywords: Oral Traditions, Culture, Language, Cultural Practices, Tiv People.

Introduction

Oral tradition represents humanity's most enduring form of cultural expression, serving as the primary mechanism for preserving and transmitting collective wisdom, values, and historical consciousness across generations (Ong, 2002). These traditions encompass storytelling, proverbs, songs, rituals, and ceremonies that constitute the cultural DNA of societies worldwide (Foley, 2002). They function as living systems of knowledge that actively shape worldviews, social structures, and cultural identities whilst adapting to contemporary challenges (Bauman, 2004).

Contemporary scholarship recognises oral traditions as sophisticated systems of cultural transmission operating through complex networks of meaning-making, memory, and performance (Finnegan, 2012). Unlike written texts, oral traditions are inherently dynamic, adapting whilst maintaining essential cultural functions (Vansina, 1985). They preserve historical memory, transmit moral values, maintain social cohesion, and provide frameworks for understanding humanity's relationship with the cosmos (Havelock, 1986).

African Oral Traditions in Context

In African contexts, oral traditions have historically served as primary educational systems, legal frameworks, and spiritual foundations (Okpewho, 1992). African oral literature encompasses myths, legends, folktales, praise poetry, work songs, and ritual performances that articulate complex philosophical, religious, and social systems (Finnegan, 2012). These traditions transmit indigenous knowledge systems, environmental wisdom, and cultural values that have sustained African communities for millennia (Yankah, 2004).

The Tiv Cultural Universe

The Tiv people of Benue State represent one of Nigeria's most culturally vibrant communities whose oral traditions embody a sophisticated worldview integrating spiritual, social, and environmental dimensions. The Tiv worldview conceptualises reality as interconnected physical and spiritual realms, with Aôndo (the Supreme Being) as the ultimate source of creation and cosmic order (Rubingh, 1969). This cosmological framework shapes all aspects of Tiv life from agricultural practices to conflict resolution.

Central to Tiv cosmology is *akombo*, sacred rituals and symbolic systems that mediate between physical and spiritual realms, ensuring cosmic balance and community well-being (East, 2003). The Tiv recognise *azôv* (fairies) and *tsav* (witchcraft) as spiritual forces influencing human affairs, requiring constant vigilance and ritual intervention to maintain social harmony (Torkula, 2006).

Problem Statement

Whilst extensive research has documented oral traditions across African societies, significant gaps remain in comprehensive analysis of how these traditions function as mechanisms for cultural preservation among the Tiv people. Previous studies have focused on cataloguing specific genres without examining their interconnected roles in transmitting worldviews and social values. Limited attention has been paid to understanding how these traditions adapt to contemporary challenges or what strategies might ensure their continued vitality.

Tiv oral traditions present a critical paradox: while culturally significant and influential in community life, they are increasingly marginalised by modern communication and entertainment forms. This marginalisation threatens not only specific traditional practices but also transmission of deeper worldview and value systems these traditions embody. The absence of systematic documentation, combined with insufficient institutional support, creates a critical knowledge gap demanding urgent scholarly attention. Contemporary threats include rapid urbanisation disrupting traditional transmission mechanisms, Western education systems marginalising indigenous knowledge, technological advancement competing with traditional cultural forms, and globalisation privileging universal over particular cultural expressions.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Document and analyse various forms of oral traditions and cultural practices among the Tiv people, providing comprehensive analysis of their genres, functions, and cultural significance.
2. Examine transmission mechanisms by analysing how these traditions serve as vehicles for transmitting social values, norms, and historical knowledge.
3. Assess contemporary threats by investigating specific challenges facing preservation and transmission of Tiv oral traditions in globalisation and modernisation contexts.
4. Develop preservation strategies by proposing evidence-based, culturally sensitive strategies for preserving and revitalising Tiv oral traditions whilst maintaining cultural authenticity.

Research Questions

1. What are the primary forms of oral traditions and cultural practices among the Tiv people, and how do they function as integrated systems of cultural transmission?
2. How do these traditions contribute to formation and maintenance of Tiv worldview, social values, and cultural identity?
3. What specific challenges hinder preservation and transmission of Tiv oral traditions in the contemporary era?
4. What evidence-based strategies can ensure preservation and revitalisation of Tiv oral traditions whilst maintaining cultural authenticity and social relevance?

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, the theory of linguistic relativity, as its primary framework. Propounded by Edward Sapir (1929) and developed by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956), this theory posits that language shapes thought and that linguistic structure influences speakers' worldview and cognitive processes. Language functions not merely as communication tool but as fundamental framework through which individuals perceive, understand, and interpret cultural reality. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis comprises linguistic determinism (language determines thought and constrains conceptualisation) and linguistic relativity (different languages create different cognitive frameworks). Together, these components highlight the profound relationship between language, culture, and consciousness.

This framework proves particularly relevant because it provides analytical tools for understanding how Tiv oral traditions function beyond simple cultural information repositories. Through the Sapir-Whorf perspective, Tiv oral traditions can be understood as active forces shaping how community members perceive reality, organise experiences, and construct cultural identity. Tiv proverbs, stories, songs, and ritual performances are not merely reflections of cultural values but generative forces that create and maintain cultural worldview.

Literature Review

The study of oral traditions has evolved significantly, with scholars recognising their crucial role in human cultural development. Early work by Bronisław Malinowski (1922) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955) established foundations for understanding oral traditions as complex meaning systems operating according to internal logic rather than as primitive precursors to written literature. Contemporary scholarship has expanded understanding by examining oral traditions as performative practices that create social reality through enactment (Bauman, 2004). Performance theory emphasizes the active, creative nature of oral traditions and their role in constructing cultural meaning through live performance in specific social contexts. Ruth Finnegan's "Oral Literature in Africa" (2012) provides comprehensive overview of African oral traditions, demonstrating their sophistication and cultural importance. Isidore Okpe's contributions (1992) show how African oral traditions have influenced contemporary African literature and continue shaping African cultural expression.

Within Nigeria, scholars like Chinua Achebe (1975) and Wole Soyinka (1976) have drawn on oral traditions in their work, demonstrating their continued relevance in contemporary cultural expression. Previous research on Tiv oral traditions includes Akiga Sai's pioneering "Akiga's Story" (1939), which provided comprehensive accounts of Tiv culture. Recent scholarship by Azenda (2023), Lan (2007), Veunch (2011), and Igbe (2010) has focused on specific aspects like child language development, national orientation, communication functions, and symbolism. However, gaps remain in scholarly understanding. Most research has focused on specific genres without comprehensive analysis of interconnected functions within Tiv society. Limited attention has been paid to adaptation to contemporary challenges or strategies for ensuring continued vitality.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach rooted in the interpretive paradigm, employing ethnographic methods to explore Tiv oral traditions and cultural practices. Ethnography allows researchers to immerse in daily lives, rituals, and verbal expressions, enabling contextualised understanding of

meanings embedded in Tiv oral forms. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis underlines the importance of studying oral traditions within linguistic and cultural systems that produce them, highlighting language, thought, and culture. The study employs participant observation, enabling documentation of oral traditions during festivals, rituals, and social interactions. This provides a rich, contextual understanding of performance settings, audience participation, and non-verbal communication nuances integral to meaning making in Tiv oral discourse.

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with purposively selected informants, including elders, traditional rulers, a cultural custodian, and community leaders chosen for their deep familiarity with Tiv oral forms and cultural values. Oral narratives collected include dirges, proverbs, folktales, and historical accounts, which are transcribed and translated. Data analysis follows interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) principles, focusing on participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes through initial familiarisation with raw data, identification of emergent themes, development of an analytical framework, cross-case analysis, and interpretation within broader cultural contexts.

Forms of Oral Traditions and Cultural Practices in Tiv Society **Oral Poetry and Performance Traditions**

Tiv oral poetry represents sophisticated cultural expression encompassing various genres serving different social and spiritual functions. Analysis reveals a complex taxonomy of poetic forms with distinct formal characteristics, performance contexts, and cultural significance.

Dirges (Funeral Songs): Dirges provide structured ways for communities to process grief and honour the deceased. These performances combine linguistic artistry with emotional expression, creating powerful communal experiences that reinforce social bonds. Collected dirges demonstrate sophisticated use of metaphor, repetition, and rhythmic patterns, facilitating both individual emotional expression and collective healing.

Dirge 1

Tiv: Shiee, shiee shiee a yem veoo

English: Silently, silently, silently, she has gone oo

Tiv: Shiee a yem ve-oo
English: Silently she has gone
Tiv: Shiee me vaa
English: Silently, I will cry
Tiv: Mama wam oo
English: for my mother
Tiv: A yav akwati shiee
English: she sleeps in the coffin silently

This dirge employs the rhetorical device of anaphora through repetitive use of “shiee” (silently), creating a meditative rhythm that mirrors the gradual acceptance of loss. The progression from observation (“she has gone”) to personal response (“I will cry”) to final acceptance (“she sleeps”) demonstrates the psychological journey of grief processing embedded within the poetic structure.

Dirge 2

Tiv: Ndiir man mo m keren ye
English: he has disappeared, that is why I am searching
Tiv: Baba ne diir man mo m keren ye
English: father has disappeared that is why I am searching
Tiv: M pine yô a nyôr akwati
English: I asked but I am told he is in the coffin
Tiv: Yar a-oo, nor a-oo
English: O deer, O Elephant
Tiv: Mo m va uwar kindigh tsegh
English: I have only come for the burial

This second dirge reveals different thematic elements, particularly the metaphorical use of animal imagery (“deer,” “elephant”) to represent the deceased’s strength and nobility. The progression from searching to questioning to final acceptance demonstrates cognitive and emotional processing facilitated by poetic structure.

Tiv Proverbs: Repositories of Cultural Wisdom

Analysis of collected proverbs reveals sophisticated systems of moral instruction and practical wisdom encoded in memorable linguistic forms. Proverbs function as condensed philosophical

statements addressing fundamental human experience aspects: social relationships, moral behaviour, practical decision-making, and existential understanding.

Selected Proverbs Analysis

1. Tiv: Wanye kpa ka nan a ôô ave tsembelee yô nan ya kwagh a mba vesen shin ikya

English: Even a child can feed from the same plate with elders when its hands are well washed

Implication: Emphasises proper preparation and respect in social interactions

2. Tiv: Zer gbem hemba ikpyagher

English: Persistence is better than a talisman

Implication: Highlights the value of perseverance over magical solutions

3. Tiv: Nyinya ngu a angahar anyiin kpa gbe

English: A horse has four legs, yet it falls

Implication: Acknowledges human limitations and the necessity of humility

These proverbs demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of human psychology and social dynamics. They employ concrete imagery and familiar experiences to communicate abstract principles, facilitating both memorisation and practical application through parallelism, contrast, and metaphor.

Death-Related Rituals and Spiritual Practices

Ku Ōron (Death Inquisition): The Ku Ōron represents one of the most complex practices in Tiv society, serving simultaneously as an investigative procedure and spiritual ritual. When death occurs, the community conducts a comprehensive inquiry to understand spiritual and social implications, reflecting Tiv belief in the physical and spiritual realm. The process involves multiple stakeholders, including patrilineage (Ityô) and matrilineage (Igbya), participating in determining spiritual causes through divination practices (Ishor-Kpehen). This reflects Tiv understanding that death rarely occurs naturally but typically results from spiritual interventions or social conflicts.

Death Categories Analysis

1. **Ku-Dar (Symbolic Death):** Encompasses non-fatal misfortunes metaphorically understood as death forms. This demonstrates how Tiv language shapes understanding of success and failure through death metaphors.
2. **Ku-Swendegh (Accidental Death):** Includes actual deaths from accidents, warfare, hunting, or diseases beyond normal spiritual causation. Deaths from contagious diseases require special burial procedures preventing spiritual contamination.

Ritual Practices

Ku-tsuwen (Flexing the Dead): Elderly members maintain vigil over deceased to prevent rigor mortis, facilitating traditional flexed burial posture and proper spiritual transition.

Dugh-orkpen (Exhumation Beliefs): Complex beliefs about deceased vulnerability to magical exhumation by witchcraft practitioners, influencing burial practices and post-death rituals.

Cultural Instruments and Spiritual Technologies

Imbyorvyungu (Owl Pipe): Represents complex spiritual technology embodying both positive and negative potentials. Associated with success and wealth but requiring continuous spiritual maintenance through blood sacrifice, reflecting Tiv understanding of power's moral ambiguity and the spiritual costs of material success.

Ingyato (Consent Fee): Reveals Tiv's understanding of death as a social and spiritual transaction involving payment to spiritual practitioners. This demonstrates how Tiv culture understands material and spiritual realm relationships as transactional rather than separate.

Marriage and Social Relationships

Traditional Tiv culture emphasised premarital virginity as a family honour and social integrity marker, involving elaborate verification procedures during the wedding night with symbolic communications between families. This reflected broader Tiv values concerning sexual morality, family responsibility, and

social reputation, revealing a sophisticated understanding of social relationships, balancing individual desires with community expectations.

The Role of Oral Traditions in Tiv Society

Knowledge Transmission and Cultural Continuity

Oral traditions serve as primary mechanisms for transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. These traditions encode information about history, genealogy, and cultural practices, plus deeper philosophical and spiritual frameworks guiding Tiv life. Through repetitive performance and communal participation, oral traditions ensure essential cultural knowledge remains accessible regardless of formal education level. Transmission operates through family gatherings, age-grade associations, religious ceremonies, and community festivals.

Socialisation and Moral Instruction

Tiv oral traditions function as sophisticated educational systems providing moral instruction and social guidance. Through proverbs, folktales, and ceremonial performances, these traditions transmit complex ethical principles and social expectations in accessible, memorable forms. Metaphor, symbolism, and narrative structure make abstract moral concepts concrete and applicable to daily life. Education extends beyond rule transmission to include critical thinking skills, cultural sensitivity, and social awareness development. Stories and proverbs present moral dilemmas requiring audience interpretation and discussion, fostering intellectual development and cultural engagement.

Conflict Resolution and Social Cohesion

Oral traditions play crucial roles in maintaining social harmony and resolving conflicts. Elders employ proverbs and traditional stories as mediation tools, using culturally resonant narratives to help disputing parties understand different perspectives and find common ground. Shared cultural knowledge embedded in these traditions provides common frameworks for negotiation and reconciliation.

Contemporary Challenges and Preservation Strategies Challenges Facing Tiv Oral Traditions

Preservation of Tiv oral traditions faces multiple interconnected challenges. Urbanisation has disrupted traditional transmission mechanisms as younger generations migrate for education and employment. Nuclear family structures in urban areas lack extended family networks that traditionally support oral tradition transmission.

Western education, while providing valuable opportunities, has inadvertently contributed to the marginalisation of the traditional knowledge system. Emphasis on written knowledge and formal certification has led some to view oral traditions as less valuable. This is reinforced by societal attitudes that privilege Western over indigenous cultural forms.

Technological advancement presents both opportunities and challenges. Digital technologies offer new documentation and dissemination possibilities but compete for attention with traditional cultural expression forms. Younger generations may find digital entertainment more appealing than traditional storytelling or ceremonial participation.

Strategies for Preservation and Revitalisation

1. Documentation and Archival Initiatives

Systematic documentation represents crucial first steps in preservation efforts. This involves comprehensive performance recording, detailed text transcription, and thorough cultural context documentation. Digital archives can provide accessible repositories whilst ensuring long-term preservation. Documentation must be conducted in collaboration with community members, ensuring cultural sensitivity and accuracy. Traditional performers and cultural custodians should be involved as partners with appropriate recognition and compensation.

2. Educational Integration

Integrating Tiv oral traditions into formal education curricula can ensure continued relevance and transmission. Integration should occur from primary through university levels with age-appropriate materials and methods, creating complementary systems valuing both traditional and contemporary knowledge. Teacher training should include traditional culture and oral

tradition components. Community elders and cultural experts should be involved as guest instructors and curriculum advisors.

3. Community-Based Preservation Programmes

Community-based initiatives can mobilise local resources and expertise for oral tradition maintenance. These should focus on creating intergenerational transmission opportunities, supporting traditional performers, and organising cultural events celebrating traditional practices. Youth engagement programs can bridge generational gaps by creating meaningful participation ways for younger community members, whilst respecting traditional authority structures and providing innovative cultural participation approaches.

4. Technology-Enhanced Preservation

Digital technologies can enhance rather than replace traditional preservation methods. Mobile applications, online platforms, and digital archives can make oral traditions more accessible to dispersed communities whilst providing new cultural expression and learning venues. Technology use should be guided by community needs and preferences, with attention to cultural ownership and appropriate access issues. Technology should serve cultural empowerment rather than exploitation.

Discussion of Findings

This study reveals that Tiv oral traditions represent sophisticated cultural systems continuing to play vital roles in community life despite significant contemporary challenges. The diversity of these traditions demonstrates Tiv cultural heritage and continued relevance to community identity and social organisation. Findings highlight the interconnected nature of Tiv oral traditions and their role in maintaining cultural continuity. These traditions function as integrated systems reinforcing common values, shared identity, and social cohesion rather than isolated cultural artefacts. The Sapir-Whorf theoretical framework proves useful in understanding how these traditions shape Tiv worldview and cultural consciousness.

Challenges facing Tiv oral traditions are significant but not insurmountable. Research suggests successful preservation efforts require coordinated approaches combining traditional transmission methods with contemporary preservation

technologies. The key is maintaining cultural authenticity while adapting to changing social conditions. Proposed preservation strategies offer practical approaches for addressing current challenges whilst building sustainable systems for long-term cultural maintenance. These recognise that successful preservation requires community ownership and participation rather than external intervention.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Tiv oral traditions represent invaluable repositories of cultural wisdom, continuing to play crucial roles in community life and identity formation. These traditions embody sophisticated systems of knowledge transmission, moral instruction, and social organisation that have sustained Tiv culture for generations. However, they face unprecedented challenges from modernisation, globalisation, and cultural change, threatening their continued vitality. Research reveals that preserving Tiv oral traditions requires comprehensive approaches combining documentation, education, community mobilisation, and technological innovation. These efforts must be guided by respect for traditional authority and cultural authenticity whilst remaining responsive to contemporary needs and circumstances.

The voices of Tiv ancestors, embedded in these oral traditions, continue offering guidance and wisdom relevant to contemporary challenges. Preserving these voices is not merely cultural nostalgia but essential for maintaining cultural diversity, community identity, and human knowledge systems. Proposed strategies offer practical pathways for ensuring future generations continue benefiting from ancestral wisdom whilst adapting to modern life demands. Successful preservation requires sustained commitment from community members, educational institutions, government agencies, and cultural organisations. By working together, these stakeholders can ensure that Tiv oral tradition heritage continues to enrich human culture and provide guidance for future generations.

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