

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF TIV INDIGENOUS LITERATURE AND THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSLATION

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### Abstract

*Indigenous oral literatures safeguard the traditions, values and histories of marginalised peoples worldwide, yet translating them is fraught with linguistic, cultural and ideological challenges. This study interrogates existing translation theories and practices, highlighting language barriers, cultural nuance and contextual complexity, as well as risks of misappropriation, unequal power relations and institutional bias. It demonstrates that collaborative, community-based models offer the most culturally sensitive route, ensuring linguistic fidelity and indigenous ownership. Framed by postcolonial translation theory, the paper argues that while translation broadens access and scholarship, it must foreground native voices and protect textual integrity. Practical examples from Tiv oral literature illustrate the need for participatory methods that replace top-down approaches with dialogic, inclusive processes. Findings urge translators and scholars to reassess conventional techniques and adopt frameworks that privilege indigenous epistemologies. The study concludes with concrete recommendations for ethical, community-driven translation protocols and calls for sustained cooperation among indigenous communities, translators and academics to safeguard and share these living traditions responsibly.*

**Keywords:** indigenous oral literatures, translation studies, cultural heritage, linguistic diversity, cultural sensitivity.

### Introduction

Indigenous literature is essential for preserving cultural identity, promoting linguistic diversity, and enriching national literatures. The Tiv people, with a population of over 6 million, have a distinct language and cultural heritage that has been

expressed through various forms of literature. This paper aims to discuss the development of Tiv indigenous literature, the challenges of translation, and potential solutions.

The paper examines the development of Tiv indigenous literature, highlighting its significance, growth, and the challenges associated with translating these works into other languages. The Tiv people, an ethnic group from Benue State, Nigeria, have a rich cultural heritage expressed through their oral traditions, folklore, and written literature. However, the translation of Tiv literature poses significant challenges due to linguistic, cultural, and contextual differences. This study explores these challenges and proposes strategies for overcoming them, ensuring the preservation and promotion of Tiv literature for global appreciation.

### **The Development of Tiv Indigenous Literature**

Tiv literature has its roots in oral traditions, including folklore, myths, legends, and epic stories passed down through generations. Evidence of writing in Tiv language can be traced back to 1848, but it was the evangelisation mission of the Europeans in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that ignited the use of Tiv language in literature (Gundu and Jockers, 1985). From bible translations to moralistic/instructional pamphlets, writing in Tiv language gathered momentum, spawning in its wake several dictionaries and books on Tiv grammar. With the advent of formal education and increased literacy, Tiv literature has witnessed a gradual but significant transition from traditional oral forms – such as folktales, proverbs, and songs – to written expressions (Akiga 13; East xv–xvi). Tiv literary heritage is now being preserved and expanded through novels, plays, poetry, and essays (Terfa and Iorember 95). This shift has been instrumental not only in safeguarding cultural memory but also in empowering Tiv authors to project indigenous worldviews within national and global literary spaces. The written form has enabled the documentation of previously ephemeral traditions, allowing for critical engagement, intergenerational transmission, and broader accessibility. However, this transformation also presents challenges in translation, where nuanced meanings embedded in Tiv expressions are often lost or misrepresented in English (Venuti 20-21; Bassnett 45).

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the emergence of academics like Orban Nyiekura, Iyorwuese Hagher, Tar Ahura and Saint Gbilekaa. These writers drew inspiration from Tiv culture, history, and mythology to create works that reflected the Tiv experience. The development of Tiv indigenous literature represents an important aspect of the cultural heritage of the Tiv people of Nigeria. Over the years, Tiv literature has evolved and grown, reflecting the unique perspectives, values, and experiences of the Tiv people. However, one of the challenges that Tiv literature faces is the issue of translation, which poses obstacles to the wider dissemination and understanding of Tiv literary works outside the Tiv-speaking community.

### **Forms of Tiv Indigenous Literature**

Indigenous literature is essential for preserving cultural identity and promoting linguistic diversity (Kulikoff, 2007). The Tiv people, one of Nigeria's largest and most culturally rich ethnic groups, are primarily located in Benue State and surrounding regions. Estimates of their population vary, ranging from approximately 5 million to over 6.5 million, constituting around 2.4% to 3.5% of Nigeria's total population (PeopleGroups.org; NaijaDetails, 2024). A smaller Tiv community of about 20,000 individuals is also found in neighbouring Cameroon. Despite their significant demographic presence, the literary contributions of the Tiv have remained largely underrepresented in mainstream Nigerian and African literary discourse. Their tradition, rooted in oral storytelling, folktales, proverbs, and ritual songs, forms a vibrant body of indigenous literature that continues to evolve into written forms. However, this development faces considerable challenges – particularly in terms of language preservation and the translation of culturally embedded narratives into English and other dominant languages. The Tiv people have a distinct language and cultural heritage that has been expressed through various forms of literature (Hagher, 1968). Tiv oral narratives serve not only as entertainment but also as a means of passing down important cultural values, history, and wisdom from one generation to the next. In recent years, Tiv literature has also expanded to include written works such as novels, poems, and plays that reflect contemporary issues and concerns of the Tiv people.

Tiv oral literature encompasses various forms, including:

1. Folktales: Stories passed down through generations, conveying moral lessons and cultural values (Gbilekaa, 1976).
2. Myths: Explanatory stories about the origin of the world, gods, and ancestors (Akiga, 1939).
3. Legends: Historical accounts of Tiv heroes and events (Hagher, 1968).
4. Epic Stories: Long narrative poems or stories celebrating Tiv heroes and events (Gbilekaa, 1976).

Characteristics of Tiv Oral Literature include a reflection of communal values and experiences. Tiv mythology influences literary themes and motifs, while symbolism is employed to convey deeper meanings. The literature is also nationalistic. It is written to promote Tiv identity and cultural pride. It also reflects everyday Tiv life and experiences. It aims to educate readers about Tiv culture and history.

Tiv indigenous literature encompasses various forms, including oral literature, written literature, drama, and performance. These forms preserve cultural identity, promote linguistic diversity, and enrich national literatures. Understanding these forms is essential for appreciating Tiv culture and promoting cross-cultural exchange.

### **Challenges of Translation**

Despite the rich literary tradition of the Tiv people, the challenge of translation remains a significant hurdle in bringing Tiv literature to a global audience. The unique linguistic and cultural aspects of Tiv literature make it difficult to accurately translate the nuances, emotions, and imagery present in these works. Translation requires more than just transferring words from one language to another; it involves capturing the essence and spirit of the original text while adapting it to suit the new language and cultural context.

Furthermore, the lack of standardised orthography and literary conventions in Tiv literature poses additional challenges for translators (Adaku, 2015). The question of orthographic standardisation is central to the development and translation of Tiv indigenous literature. Although the Tiv language has long been written using adaptations of the Latin alphabet, a unified

orthographic system has yet to gain full governmental recognition or consistent implementation in educational and literary contexts. The first documented orthographic attempt was developed by Rev. W. A. Malherbe in the early 20th century, culminating in the *Tiv-English Dictionary* (1931), which laid the foundation for written Tiv using Latin script with modifications to represent distinctive phonemes (Malherbe 13–15).

Subsequent decades saw a proliferation of competing orthographies, developed by missionaries, educators, linguists, and local language committees. For example, Kpamor Orkar, Charles Iornumbe, and the NKST Committee each proposed variations of spelling conventions, particularly in vowel representation and tonal marking (Iornumbe 88–89). While these efforts reflect a rich scholarly and communal engagement with the language, the lack of official harmonisation has resulted in orthographic inconsistencies across written texts—including literary works, school materials, and translations.

Efforts to institutionalise Tiv orthography reached a notable peak in 1979, when Benue State Governor Aper Aku launched an initiative to incorporate Tiv and Idoma languages into the state's education system. A committee was commissioned to develop and standardise teaching materials in Tiv, but despite submitting its report in 1980, the policy was never enacted (Orngu 67). Today, although Tiv is spoken by over 5 to 6.5 million people in Nigeria (PeopleGroups.org), the language still lacks a formally endorsed orthographic standard by national or state-level educational authorities.

This fragmented orthographic landscape presents significant challenges to the translation and preservation of Tiv literature. Literary and scholarly works often employ different spelling conventions for the same words or expressions, leading to confusion, especially in intertextual interpretation and comparative analysis. Moreover, the absence of standardised orthography limits the inclusion of Tiv in formal educational curricula and diminishes its visibility in national literary platforms (Iornumbe 91; Ugbabe 45).

Hence, the question of translation in Tiv literature cannot be separated from the issue of orthographic ambiguity. Any meaningful attempt to document, translate, or analyse Tiv literary works must first acknowledge the unsettled status of its writing system and advocate for a more inclusive and

collaborative standardisation process that respects the linguistic realities of native speakers and writers.

The diversity of dialects and variations within the Tiv language can create further complications in translating Tiv works accurately. Translators must navigate these linguistic complexities while also ensuring that the cultural subtleties and nuances of Tiv literature are preserved.

Translating Tiv indigenous literature poses significant challenges due to linguistic, cultural, and contextual differences. Translating indigenous literature is crucial for promoting cultural diversity and understanding (Bassnett, 2014; Lefevere, 1992). However, translating Tiv literature presents unique challenges due to its distinct language and cultural context. The challenge of translating Tiv literature arises from the fact that the Tiv language is not widely spoken outside the Tiv community. As a result, Tiv literary works remain largely inaccessible to non-Tiv speakers who may be interested in learning about Tiv culture and traditions.

A classic work like James Humbe's *Tarhomun u Botwev* remains in obscurity as far as contemporary Tiv literature is concerned, while a host of other illuminative primers remain untranslated. And despite the laudable efforts of the missionaries with regard to the scriptures, prominent religious poets like Tyavger Fate, Kpurkpur Jev, etc., have not enjoyed the same patronage. This is not to belittle the efforts of scholars like Iyorwuese Hagher, Toryima Jenkwe, Tahav Agerzua, etc., who have promoted indigenous oral poets, notably Yanmoel Yashi and Tarker Golozo, through published translation and analysis of their oral poetry. There are also hundreds of projects and theses in various higher institutions of learning which have translated and analysed a large volume of Tiv indigenous literature but remained obscured by the challenges of publication.

Translation is crucial in bridging this gap of inaccessibility and making Tiv literature more available to a broader audience. However, the process of translating Tiv literary works presents several challenges, including linguistic differences, cultural nuances, and the need for skilled translators who are proficient in both Tiv and the target language.

***Linguistic Challenges***

1. Tiv language complexity: Tiv language has complex grammatical structures, tonal systems, and idiomatic expressions (Omenukor, 2013).
2. Linguistic nuances: Tiv language has subtle nuances in meaning, making translation difficult (Gbilekaa, 1976).
3. Vocabulary limitations: Tiv language lacks equivalent words for modern concepts, requiring creative translation solutions (Iorapuu, 2012).
- 4.

***Cultural References***

1. Cultural allusions: Tiv literature contains cultural references unfamiliar to non-Tiv readers.
2. Mythological references: Tiv mythology influences literary themes and motifs, requiring cultural context.
3. Symbolic language: Tiv literature employs symbolic language, which may be lost in translation (Kwenda, 2017).

***Contextual Issues***

1. Historical context: Tiv literature reflects historical events and cultural practices specific to the Tiv people (Rwengwo, 2015).
2. Social context: Tiv literature addresses social issues relevant to the Tiv community, requiring cultural understanding.
3. Geographical context: Tiv literature references specific geographical locations, requiring cultural knowledge.

***Samples***

Translation can be considered an art, and competence in this art can be acquired through formal training. The level of formal training of the translators of Tiv indigenous literature is not clear. What is unquestionable is the fact that most were focused on the goal of making meaning in English language out of the Tiv words of the original texts. Especially for those who would go on to undertake critical analysis of their translation efforts like Jenkwe and Hagher, the imperative of semantic accuracy could not be dismissed.

This is in stark contrast to the motivation of Gundu and Jockers whose ambitious compilation, *Tiv Bibliography* “marks also a big milestone in the history of the development of Tiv studies” (Makar, 1985). In translating the titles of some of the works they annotated, they sacrificed semantic accuracy in their aim to facilitate the documentation of existing texts on Tiv studies.

For example, “The Comedy of Botwev” would appear more suitable than “The Happy World of Botwev” (Gundu and Jockers, 1985). And what does one make of the translation of “Kwagh-Ahir Unyiin” as “Four Kwagh Hir”? It is doubtful that translation has taken place at all. For a non-Tiv reader, the key word to have been translated is “Kwagh-Ahir”.

Which takes us to the case of Tyohdzua Akosu. *The Story of Adan Wade* is the most extensive translation of a Tiv indigenous work. It has also drawn, in unacknowledged circles, the widest critical attention resulting directly from the challenges of translation. Starting with the title, the consensus seems to be that the translation does not fully capture the essence of Tiv cultural norms and language nuances reflected in the original story, *Adan Wade Kohol Ga*.

Yet, Gundu and Jockers translate the title as “Adan Wade did not get it”, while a critic of his work suggested that the title should have read, “Adan Wade did not Meet”! (Akosu, T. personal communication, 2016). These translations should not be disparaged as they represent monumental efforts in the face of limited resources. Such circumstances could have resulted in the Slovenian translator of *Things Fall Apart*, Branco Avsenak, settling for *Okonkwo* as the title; or Wale Ogunyemi titling his Yoruba translation *Igbesi Aye Okonkwo* (Brittle Paper, 2019).

With such evidence of the vacillating nature of the art of translation, Akosu’s work can be viewed in more sympathetic light as an impressive pioneering attempt to broadcast Tiv indigenous literature beyond the confines of a Tiv audience. This is coupled with the fact that about two decades since the publication of *The Story of Adan Wade*, no attempt has been made to dot the ‘i’s Akosu left undotted, or to cross the ‘t’s he left uncrossed. Nor has any such major translation work come to light outside the lecture theatres of higher education institutions.

Historically, apart from translations of written biblical texts, the missionaries employed the services of ill-trained locals to translate their sermons. From available accounts, the challenges today's translators face were prevalent even then. A legendary account of one of the most popular translation fails of that era goes thus:

**Preacher:** I bring you the good news of the bible.

**Translator:** *M va ne a kwagh u dedoo u he.* (literally, "I bring to you a new good thing")

**Preacher:** When Jesus was addressing His disciples...

**Translator:** *Shie u Yesu lu huan Mbahenen nav akondo yô...* (lit., "when Jesus was dressing his disciples")

**Preacher:** He said to them...

**Translator:** *A kaa a ve er...* (lit.: "he said")

**Preacher:** They should not be selfish.

**Translator:** *Ve de lun mba teen ishu ga!* (lit.: "they should not be fish sellers!") Etc.

The contrast with modern day translation scenario is, to say the least, stark. The limitedness of the education of the pioneer church translators was apparent as a stumbling block, but the challenges they faced are like their colleagues of the same stock today. The white missionaries have been replaced by educated pastors and bishops. The translators are mostly well educated. The sermons may be the same thematically, but the translations are now from Tiv to English instead of the other way round. The constitution of the audiences is also more metropolitan.

The innovativeness of both sets of translators is also divergent. The translation cited above is bullish in its ignorance, a far cry from the unconscious, inadvertent creativity of the following translation:

**Preacher:** But the Jews cried, "Crucify Him, crucify him!" (Luke 23:21)

**Translator:** *Tso Mbayuda gba vaan er, "i mande un kahil"* (Gar, L. personal communication, 2018)

Whichever version of the Bible used by the preacher (it could also be a paraphrase), it must be realised that the translator is processing his words off-the-cuff and has no time to consult his Tiv Bible for an equivalent translation. His improvisation is impressive for two reasons. First, the intended meaning is conveyed even if it is not one hundred percent accurate. But

most importantly, in the context of the biblical event being described, the translator's choice of substituting a repetition of "crucify him" (I mande un) for the word "kahi" (which has no direct English equivalent) conveys both the manic, murderous intentions of the Jewish mob and their contempt for the victim in a manner few other Tiv words could have done.

One would be right to add a third reason for being impressed if the function of time is considered. That is, how much time did the translator have to decide his choice of words? Very little time for contemplation compared to translators of written works. The function of time is critical in such spontaneous situations because the possibility of stumbling due to the lack of time to think through your words before uttering them. However, it is the same consideration that elevates a piece of translation if the translator gets it right.

Consider the following as a Preacher eulogises the biblical Samaritan woman:

Preacher: I love the Samaritan woman.

Translator: *Kwagh u kwase u Samaria doom.*

Preacher: Open your Bible and underline the Samaritan woman.

Translator: *Bugh Bibilo you kpile kwase u Samaria bilo shin ity.*

Preacher: I repeat, underline the Samaritan woman.

Translator: *M kimbir me, kpile kwase u Samaria bilo shin ity.* (Bii, O. personal communication, 2016)

The lack of contemplation has led to a sacrilegious indiscretion on the translator's part, considering that the occasion is certainly a religious one. However, dissecting his translation can start with asking what (or how many) options he had. And once the religious colouring is removed from the result of his efforts, the translation glimmers in a new light. If "the Samaritan woman" is subconsciously perceived as the sinful, lost soul that found redemption on encountering Jesus Christ, then the translation becomes a vulgar, obscene and inexpedient rendition of a spiritual message.

If, however, "the Samaritan woman" is scrutinised as a nominal phrase devoid of human attributes, its underside has no better Tiv language equivalents than the foul-sounding "ity". In which case, I believe neither the preacher nor his congregation would have had much to complain about.

### **Strategies for Overcoming Challenges**

Despite the challenges faced by Tiv language translators, initiatives are being undertaken to promote the translation of Tiv literature into other languages. For example, some Tiv writers and scholars are actively working to translate Tiv literary works into English and other major languages to reach a wider audience. Additionally, there is a growing interest in Tiv literature among scholars and researchers, leading to increased academic studies and publications that focus on Tiv culture and literature.

Furthermore, technology has played a significant role in the promotion and preservation of Tiv literature. Digital platforms, such as websites and e-books, provide opportunities for Tiv writers to showcase their works and reach a global audience. In addition, machine translation tools and apps can assist in the translation of Tiv literary works, although human translators are still essential for capturing the cultural nuances and complexities of Tiv language and literature.

Translating Tiv language poses significant challenges due to its complex grammatical structures, cultural references, and linguistic nuances. This section examines strategies for overcoming Tiv language translation challenges, including collaborative translation, cultural annotation, dynamic equivalence, literary criticism, and technology-based solutions.

Tiv language, spoken by over 6 million people in Nigeria, faces translation challenges that hinder cross-cultural exchange and understanding (Hagher, 1968). Effective translation strategies can bridge this gap, promote cultural diversity and preserve Tiv language heritage (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990). Some of these strategies are listed below.

#### ***Collaborative Translation***

1. Native speaker involvement: Collaborate with native Tiv speakers to ensure linguistic accuracy (Omenukor, 2013).
2. *Cultural expert consultation*: Consult cultural experts to clarify cultural references and nuances (Rwengwo, 2015).
3. Team translation: Assemble a team of translators, linguists, and cultural experts for comprehensive translation.

***Cultural Annotation***

1. Footnotes and glossaries: Provide explanatory notes and glossaries for cultural references (Gbilekaa, 1976).
2. Introductions and prefaces: Include contextual information on Tiv culture and history.
3. Illustrations and graphics: Use visual aids to clarify cultural concepts.

***Dynamic Equivalence***

1. Idiomatic expressions: Use equivalent idioms in the target language to convey meaning.
2. Cultural substitution: Replace cultural references with equivalent concepts in the target culture.
3. Functional equivalence: Prioritise functional meaning over literal translation.

***Literary Criticism***

1. Scholarly analysis: Encourage scholarly analysis of Tiv literature to promote understanding.
2. Critique and review: Foster critical review of translations to ensure accuracy.
3. Literary workshops: Organise workshops for translators, writers, and scholars.

***Technology-Based Solutions***

1. Translation software: Utilise translation software with Tiv language support.
2. Online dictionaries: Develop online dictionaries for Tiv language.
3. Digital archives: Create digital archives of Tiv literature and cultural materials.

Overcoming Tiv language translation challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, combining collaborative translation, cultural annotation, dynamic equivalence, literary criticism, and technology-based solutions. By adopting these strategies, we can promote cross-cultural understanding, preserve Tiv language heritage, and facilitate global communication.

***Conclusion***

Translation is crucial for promoting Tiv indigenous literature,

but it requires careful consideration of linguistic, cultural, and ideological complexities. Collaborative approaches, community involvement (Cronin, 2013), and cultural sensitivity are essential for ensuring accurate and respectful translation. The development of Tiv indigenous literature is a valuable cultural asset that reflects the unique heritage and identity of the Tiv people. The challenge of translation presents obstacles to the wider dissemination and understanding of Tiv literary works, but efforts are being made to address this issue through initiatives that promote translation and the use of technology. By overcoming these challenges, Tiv literature can continue to thrive and contribute to the rich tapestry of global literature.

The development of Tiv indigenous literature faces significant challenges, particularly in translation. This paper has examined the linguistic, cultural, and ideological complexities involved in translating Tiv oral literature, highlighting the need for collaborative, community-led approaches.

This study's findings underscore the importance of reconsidering traditional translation practices and adopting more inclusive and participatory methods that prioritise Tiv perspectives and community involvement. By doing so, we can ensure that Tiv indigenous literature is translated accurately, respectfully, and in a manner that promotes cultural diversity and representation. Future studies should continue to explore the intersections between translation, culture, and power, shedding light on the complex dynamics involved in representing marginalized voices (Venuti, 2017).

The implications of this research extend beyond the Tiv context, offering lessons for translation practices globally. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the need for effective, culturally sensitive translation grows. This study contributes to the ongoing conversation about translation's role in promoting cultural diversity, understanding, and exchange.

### **Recommendations**

To address the challenges of translating Tiv literature, collaboration between Tiv writers, linguists, and translators is essential. Training programmes for translators specialising in indigenous languages such as Tiv can help improve the quality and accuracy of translations. Moreover, the creation of bilingual

dictionaries and glossaries can aid in standardising Tiv vocabulary and promoting consistency in translations.

Promoting awareness and appreciation of Tiv literature at the national and international levels can also help create a demand for translated works, encouraging more investment in translation efforts. Technology, such as machine translation tools and language learning apps, can also be leveraged to facilitate the translation process and make Tiv literature more accessible to a wider audience.

To further develop Tiv indigenous literature, we recommend:

1. Establishing a Tiv Language and Literature Institute to promote research, documentation, and translation.
2. Developing Tiv language courses and programmes for non-Tiv speakers.
3. Organising literary festivals and workshops to showcase Tiv literature and facilitate cultural exchange
4. Encouraging collaborative research between Tiv scholars and international translation experts.

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