



CULTURAL RESILIENCE AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND DANCE IN THE JECHIRA COMMUNITY OF BENUE STATE (1968 - 1998)

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Abstract

The present study investigates the traditional music and dance practices observed within the cultural context of the Jechira community residing in Benue State. The selection of the time frame from 1990 to 1998 is motivated by the intention to examine the factors contributing to the significant growth of the music industry in the region during this period, despite the ongoing and frequent acts of violence perpetrated by neighbouring entities. This study employs both oral and written sources of historical reconstruction to examine the extent to which the Jechira Area of Benue State has successfully preserved its socio-cultural existence by utilising traditional music and dance. The research findings suggest that Jechira possesses both comparative and competitive advantages in the realm of traditional Music and Dance. This ancient art form has been deeply rooted in the region since the early 19th century, offering significant potential for harnessing socio-cultural and economic benefits, among other advantages. The research additionally asserts that the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture has successfully enhanced the field of art and transformed it into a valuable tool for Cultural Diplomacy within Nigeria and other regions. The entertainment business has been unequivocally proven to have a positive impact on the local economy, contributing to increased employment opportunities, revenue--e generation, and poverty alleviation, among other benefits.

Keywords: Economic Empowerment, Cultural resilience, Music, Dance

Introduction

Where words often fail, music can be instrumental in successful communication between divided individuals or communities. Music can help to treat the traumas and mend the scars of war. Music may also help by giving people the sense of the good that can come from working well together, trusting and supporting one another in reaching a goal. However, music has been employed in battle for centuries, sometimes to intimidate the enemy and other times to encourage combatants, or to assist in organization and timing of actions in warfare.

Music and dance adumbrate the temper of life of the entire Tiv society. It is considered a communication medium for ideas and life patterns and is more often than not elaborated to tell a story (Bohanna, 1933). It has been in evolution since 19th Century but has not been properly documented in the area of music theatre as far as the history of Jechira traditional



music and dance is concerned. Interestingly, music is at the helms of the culture of Jechira and by extension that of the Tiv people. It therefore explains why there is hardly any occasion where traditional music and dance are not played and performed respectively. Swange for example, is a spirited traditional music and dance that is so recreational among the people such that it is been promoted for its art through the Benue State Council of Arts and Culture (BSAC) (Korinya & Bazza, 2025).

Incidentally, Swange music was always been played at camps especially when the Jechira warriors were resting away from a fierce battle, in order to entertain and boost their morale. Yet, it has not been properly documented, the same way, warfare among the Jechira people and their neighbours has no prior detailed and systematic work and hence the rationale for this study.

Conceptual Clarification

Some words that are used in this study are clarified to avoid ambiguity. Moreso, some are in Tiv language so there is need for clarity especially since it is an academic paper. Below are the words, including but not limited to traditional instruments of music and costumes used during the performance.

Music – This is sound usually produced by the use of instruments or voices that are arranged or played in order to create effects. It is concerned with creating vocal or instrumental sounds for beauty of form or emotional expression, usually according to cultural standards of rhythm, melody and in most Western music, harmony. Music is an art that, in one guise or another permeates every human society (East, 1939).

All music has rhythm. If the rhythm contains a regular succession of pulses, these pulses are referred to as beat; the organization of beats of equal duration into small groups (usually divisible by two or three) is called meter. Throughout history, music has been an important adjunct to ritual or drama and has been credited with the capacity to reflect and influence human emotion. Essentially, music has instruments used in playing it, and therefore, anything that can produce sound may be used as a musical instrument. However, professionals of music use the term musical instrument to generally confine to objects made or adapted to serve musical purposes primarily.

Dance – It is a performing art form consisting of purposefully selected sequences of human movement. This movement has aesthetic and symbolic value, and is acknowledged as dance by performers and observers within a particular culture. Dance can be categorized and described by its choreography, by its repertoire of movements, or by its historical period or place of origin. It is performed in many cultures as a form of emotional expression, social interaction or exercise in a spiritual setting and is sometimes used to express ideas or tell a story. Music and dance, largely serving entertainment function also inform, mobilize, educate and bring about correlation of parts of society. By these functions, music and dance bring about social change. In his argument, Ayu maintained



that Tiv traditional music and dance (which Jechira is part of) serve similar functions in the society.

Gbande - It is a drum, a wooden musical instrument made of artistically carved wooden pipe try and is covered with animal skin. Hands are used to hit the gbande to bring out its sound. A person who knows how to hit the drum so well is called “Tor Gbande” (chief drummer). The gbande is the main musical instrument of the Jechira traditional dance.

Gida – This means trumpet. It is a musical instrument traditionally used during music and dance performance among Jechira people. The gida is a wood and brass wind musical instrument sounded by lip vibration against a cup- mouthpiece. The person who bows the gida is called “Orgida” in Tiv language. The gida can be used to sing the song of performance without dancers singing with their mouth.

Kwen – It means gong. The gong is a metallic musical instrument named according to its kweng-kweng sound. It is usually hit by a stick covered at the top-end with a piece of cloth to produce the kweng- kweng sound.

A’nger – It is the black and white (Tiv) traditional cloth. The “A’nger” woven fabric, since its invention has become the most important and significant woven fabric of the Tiv. The A’nger is woven with black and white yarns to create beautiful features which make the cloth to appear like Zebra skin. Thus, the A’nger is used as the costume during performance of music and dance by the people such as Swange. The A’nger is highly recognized costume among other traditional attires in the entire of Tivland.

Tsa – This is a horse-tail or other animal tail. The ‘Tsa’ is either in white or black colour depending on the colour of the horse or animal and it comes in big and small sizes. The “Tsa” is used during performance of the music and dance. It’s usually held with the right hand by the dancers during the dance performance.

Asa – “Asa” refers to beads. The beads are among the costumes used during the music and dance performance. These “Asa” are worn on the neck, hands, waist and legs by dancers. They are usually in black and white. The “Asa” produces scintillating sounds while dancing.

The intra-trade and Inter-trade interactions and its significance on the Economy of the Jechira People

Substantial trade relations existed between the Jechira and their neighbours in the Benue valley. Besides their immediate neighbours, the Jechira had been able to exploit trading relations with Borno Empire and the Hausa States. According to Afigbo and Dorward, the bulk of Tiv external trade revolved around the exchange of cloth, salt, dried fish, ivory, cattle, and agricultural surpluses, especially yams and grains. Since the main economic



activity of the Jechira is farming, crops were cultivated for both home consumption and export (Varvar, 2003).

Food crops constituted the greater part of what the Jechira had to offer to their neighbours all around them in exchange for what they needed. Two essential export crops included benniseeds and cotton. Elsewhere, Dorward has stressed the significance of benniseeds as an export crop in the Tiv pre-colonial economy. The importance of cotton derived from the fact that the Jechira cloth, *tugudu* was used extensively as a form of currency within Jechira land and had a good market in Hausa land. The bulk of the woven cloth went to the Udam of Cross River State, the Bamenda and Bafum of Cameroun, for they had neither cotton nor weavers (Korinya & Bazza, 2025). The cloth was generally the only item of trade which the Jechira exchanged to Ugep at the Usan market. General business between Jechira and Ugep was transacted at the Iyon market, not at Usan.

The agrarian nature of the Jechira promoted economic ties with their neighbours. The Jechira supplied agricultural produce to virtually all their neighbours. Of particular significance was the supply of food requirements to the Alago. While the Alago specialized and subsequently were pre-occupied with the production of salt, their food needs were supplied by the Jechira (Avav, 1993). Salt was also a very crucial item of trade, which also served as a currency in pre-colonial transactions between the Jechira and their neighbours. By the middle of the 19th century, the use of salt had permeated the entire Tiv society so much that salt stood out as the most important product of trade in Tiv land. The significance of salt cannot be over-emphasized. Apart from its dietary indispensability, it was also imported as a chemical in the processing of hides and skin. The large-scale production and marketing of salt resulted into closer interaction among the various Benue Valley people. Salt production became the pivot around, which revolved other economic and political activities which the Jechira became deeply involved. The 19th century saw the production of large quantities of salt in the region which were exported to long distances up north to Hausa land and Borno (Korinya & Baza, 2005). Other important commodities of trade imported into Jechira land included iron bars, cam-wood, palm oil and livestock. These imports originated particularly from the Udam community. These items were indispensable among the Jechira. Principally, women, for personal adornment for example, used cam-wood (a tree whereby red powder was produced after peeling the bark of the tree, it was used by the women as a beauty regimen in cleansing both the body and the face.). There was constant demand for it in every household. It was considered a necessity for infants. Being farmers, the Jechira found the purchase of iron bars as a necessity. Iron bars were needed for making of farm tools or weapons. Bearing in mind that the appearance of iron revolutionized agriculture, the importance of iron cannot be over-emphasized. The Jechira gave yams, millet, guinea corn, and Tiv cloth in exchange for the above items (Denga, 1995).

From the above discussion, it is now evident that the Jechira and their neighbours did not live in isolation. On the contrary, they entered into very rich diplomatic and socio-



economic relations. Such relations promoted good neighbourliness and enhanced overall unity among the generality of the people.

The Jechira Traditional Music in Context: A Preliminary Appraisal

Jechira traditional music and dance has suffered a callous and conscienceless brute from the colonialists and the Christian Religious vendors of the west and as such, the non-preservation and documentation of the Jechira traditional music and dance invariably became one factor that evaded the status of oral and calligraphic tradition in the making of Tiv philosophy, science and technology (Makar, 1996).

The concept of Tiv traditional music is quite broad in nature and so entwined that a Tiv man does not talk about music, singing and dancing separately. Jechira traditional music (kwaghkuhan ú Jechira) is a form of music involving song (imo), dance (amar) and music (kwaghkuhan) that originates from a Jechira man or the entire Tiv people of any geographical location in the world. The Jechira traditional music, a phenomenon quite appealing to the urgent temper of the aged folks and youth, capable of uprooting unpleasant and heavy sensation that sit at the hearts of men, is an institution of its own organized into different forms. In any case, Jechira traditional music recognized three sections of music and dance, namely: *Imo Yilan, Amar á Kohol; Imo Dughun, Amar or Ishor í Karen; and Amar a Wan*. This entails organization, practice and performance. Notably, in the beginning, the Jechira had their oral poetry or traditional music and dance classified into five major groups, ages or forms. These classifications are basically categorized into Imo Shagba, Imo Biam, Ange, Imo Gbanyi and Imo Zaar.

In the Imo shagba classification of Jechira traditional music and dance, the most prominent artistes were Aginde Agena Leke, Ndyar Chinge Yegh Aka of tar Gaav in Jechira world. This is in line with the argument of Tsenõngu who identified this artiste under the age of Aginde Agena and further explained that the artiste praised himself too because he had also accomplished nobility by fulfilling the status-attracting requirements of the day; inciting that for instance, he bought a horse, possessed an Indyer drum, married numerous wives, had an endless farm and built a large compound. The tradition of Jechira songs was aligned in norms that songs were sectioned into parts by purpose or reasons. This was first in the structure of indiranimo or mnder (lead) and iryumunimo or mrumun (response). The verse of the song is imo and the chorus is icham, and the two can be sung independently. Gercham is a plurality-oriented concept of the chorus. The lead singer *ngorimo* (raise a song) and the entire choir whether organized conventionally or not, *ta gercham* (choruses), which means the crowd or multitude sing the chorus in determined unison. *Ger* is shout or chorus and *cham* is song (Korinya & Baza, 2025). Charles Keil writing on Tiv song contended that the “Tiv see and hear, know and understand the great value of songs, drama and dance in the struggle for justice and equality.” This is true of all the various communities that make up Benue State. Song was, and still is the Jechira person’s great weapons for resisting oppression. During the first republic in Nigeria when the Tiv found themselves in the political opposition, the government in power then dished out laws recklessly to suppress the Tiv, song became their most viable tool for resisting oppression.



For example, it is a known fact that a Tiv man generally, cannot do without music and dance. The ruling party then (National Party of Nigeria) enacted laws making it a punishable offence to play traditional music since this invariably tended to make the Tiv people congregate. Songs were composed to enable the people defy the laws and they did. Significantly the most popular songs of defiance during this period went without known composers. They were generally known by most insiders but up till now the composers of many of them remain unknown. This was for security reasons (Azevede, 1975). The Jechira people are particularly gifted with folk singers whose main function is to give folk entertainment to the community. Under this entertainment function, there is usually a lot of educative values to their songs. As Ahura stated in one of his articles, “if the artist understands his community very well, he structures his information in the entertainment programme in such a way that the members of the community cannot help but discuss it actively (Yakera, Personal Communication, December 20, 2021)”. Some of the folk singers regard themselves as development communicators. They try to use the resources of their environment to pass on development information to the other members of the society by using the popular entertainment media as carriers of development messages. Youghur Ute belongs to this category of folk singers. His numerous songs on agriculture have contributed a lot to the Jechira people’s acceptance of modern agricultural development (Hagher, 1978).

A Historical Overview of the Jechira Music and Dance and its Socio-cultural and Economic Impacts on the Lives and People of Jechira

The accounts of chroniclers regarding kinds of Jechira traditional music and dance into what is ultimately known today as “Swange” music was an evolution of different genres of traditional music in stages, from “kwaghalom” or “kikya” songs (folktales) music and dance through “Ibyamegh” and “Ange” to a dynamic and more refined hybrid stage of a special form called Swange. Swange music is a subject of serious debate especially when it comes to its origin and survival over more than a century of its existence. Significantly, Swange music started its evolution process as “Ange” by Utuku Agire in January 28, 1897. Notably, Ange is not Swange but one of the forms of Jechira traditional music from which “Gbanyi” music came through Gbanyi *ú mirin* auspices and evolved into Swange from the concept of “Sangen á Sangeishor or amar” (F. Avur, Personal Communication, October 20, 2022). *Ange* is translated to mean ‘slandorous rumors’, where two quarrelling parties engage each other with songs and broadcast the vices of each in a bid to shame the other (A. Akor, Personal communication, August 10, 2019). Nyitse observed that like all the entire Tiv songs, Ange are basically dance oriented. Like *Biamegh*, they are more concerned with traditional aspects of Tiv worldview and life. Ange was performed by everyone in contrast to *Biamegh* which was performed by wealthy *Biamegh* initiates. Ange was used to compose dirges about individuals as well as the passing away of a whole way of life as the norms and values of traditional society were being eroded. Ange is one of the oldest Jechira traditional dances. Jechira people believe that the first or their oldest music and dance emanated from *kwagh-alom* (folktales) and *kikya* songs. *Biamegh* music is also one of the early comers. Essentially, Swange was birthed as Gbanyi by Ange at the apogee of Tiv



social civilization movement (TSCM) that swept across the entire Tiv world that suddenly slumped into the ambush of the Western Christian Religion and colonial cold war (Nytse, 2006).

Gbanyi, which literally means basin, was an important asset in Jechira homes. Gbanyi was a domestic utensil introduced by the British in all their colonies for domestic and agricultural use. Many changes accompanied British rule: Western education, the English language, and Christianity spread during the period; new forms of money, transportation, and communication were developed; and the Nigerian economy became based on the export of cash crops (J. Amaafu, Personal Communication, March 14, 2021).

Incidentally, the changes that accompanied the British rule included the Jechira medium of economic exchange to a new conceptual medium of money, in which prices and values were expressed. Money, the new medium of economic exchange – as currency and principal measure of wealth – became a schematic psychosocial fundraising paradigm that transformed into a new custom in all of Jechira. Essentially, *kase vJechira* (Jechira women) in a bid to acquire the Western basin of the British, introduced into the social tradition of Jechira people a special fundraising autonomous pattern called *Gbanyi u mirin*, a concept that actually originated from Dio Nenda in Mbagbeer hamlet of Ayati vicinity in Ukum around September 17th in 1922 and immediately spread over the Tiv world. The Gbanyi (Gbangi) *ú mirin* (Gbanyi launching or fund raising) produced good results, since it contributed greatly in boosting the economy, not only of the Jechira, but that of the entire Tiv world by affecting the general market, traditional breweries, pottery industries and commercial farmers among other aspects of Jechira nation's economy. In the Gbanyi fundraising event, different types of music and dance groups used to come and perform and essentially, it was out of these groups or bands that some veterans merged to form the Gbanyi music and dance sometime around 1913 (Dzurgba, 1977).

Yamuel Yashi alongside with Samuel Amase, the big names in Jechira Music and dance history as composers, singers, dancers and musicians (drummers), introduced into the Gbanyi music unique dancing steps and generally brought dynamic modifications in the music and dance.

Essentially, it was from the diverse music and dances that were performed at the Gbanyi *ú mirin* occasion that evolved into Gbanyi Music pioneered by the duo in 1946. The Tiv people used to vine ishor or amar and tirigh or chagh (cagh) amar and ishor until the new dancing steps introduced into Gbanyi music and dance, that the term “Sangeishor” came into the Jechira music vocabulary (Baza & Korinya, 2019). Ostensibly, the *sangen á Sangeishor* concept, been new in the Jechira traditional music vocabulary became difficult for the pronunciation especially by non-Tiv speakers. This gave rise to the pronouncing of “Sange” as Swange about 1948 and of course, that is the origin of the term Swange (Udoo, 1974). Significantly, in spite of the fact that Christian religion has made people to be biased concerning issues of Jechira traditional music and dance especially Swange music, the



music has remained the most cherished music and dance not only to a Tiv man but also to other tribes of the world in general and importantly, Swange music is admired by both sinners and the greatest men of God in Nigeria today. This is in agreement with Gbilekaa, who rightly observed that the patronage Swange receives from both the public and private organizations shows that it is not an immoral or erotic dance. He further notes that Swange music is used in correcting aberrant social behavior (Agber, 2013).

It is a known fact that an ideal Jechira man cannot do without music and dance and that is why the Swange music and dance is very popular and has not lost value among the Jechira people. Swange music and dance is the most decent, popular and loved music of the Jechira man that will or cannot be destroyed till the end of the world since it survived the religious and colonial invasions on the people's culture. The colonial and Western religious tyrants in uncircumcised purpose brought a cruel objurgation on Jechira traditional music. Music is at the helms of the culture of the Jechira people so much that there is virtually no occasion among or involving Jechira people at which one type of Jechira music or the other is not played and therefore, it will not be an aberration to note that the life and philosophy of a Jechira person is not complete without music. Swange, a spirited music is one of the major types and the most esteemed non-ritual Jechira music that enjoys both local and international patronage. Music among the Jechira forms a bridge between the political life of the people and their cultural values (Baza & Korinya, 2019).

Swange is the name given to the traditional dance of the Tiv-speaking people of Benue state. The dance is characterized by rhythmic contortion in slow mode & vibrant display, typical of African dance forms. It has wonderful beat and beautiful rhythm. It is heavily percussion-based, aided by a traditional horn (Al-Gaita), which blows in an unbroken succession for as long as the drumming, singing and dancing continue. Swange is a very popular Jechira music/dance which is played all over Tiv land and wherever they reside in large numbers. It is a contemporary, popular and urban recreational social dance that exhibits bodily movement akin to oriental dances. It is a dance with fast, slow, rhythmic and undulating movements, expressing youth and vigor which makes some refer to it as the 'boneless dance'. It is danced in unison by both men and women. The dance uses the circle formation familiar in village dances and adapts traditional musical themes to highlife rhythms played on a combination of Tiv and Hausa instruments. The climax of an evening of Swange dance is provided by a solo dancer who improvises freely, using movements from many Tiv dance styles.

Among the Jechira, dances have male and female qualities. Peggy Harper asserts that the male dances start at a walking pace and accelerate to a fast tempo with vigorous stamping and jumping step patterns and abrupt contractions of the shoulders while the female dances are remarkable for the grace, fluidity and sustained quality of the movement (Keil, 1974). Qualities of the Jechira male dances are strength, vigour, speed and precision while the women are slow, smooth, gentle and controlled. To the Jechira, the ability to dance as if there is no bone in the body is the most remarkable quality of a female dancer. Music helps



to rally the community, to provide a structure for some aspects of the performance, to generate and sustain the desired level of physical upliftment for the actors and audience alike, to establish the mood of performance and to celebrate an event. That is to say, it is music that invokes certain emotional states in both the performer and the audience so that the heavier the musical quality the more likely it is to engender positive response, thus the musical creativity is always tailored to fulfil specific dance intentions. The Swange dance rely heavily on music produced from a large number of drums and other musical instruments (Agber, 2013). The musical richness in the Jechira Swange dance may be one reason why even a mixed audience of Tiv, Idoma and other tribal groups in the state get greater emotional upliftment from the dances presented by the performing troupe of the Benue State for Arts and Culture. Presently, the performing Troup of Benue State Arts Council and Culture made up of ladies and gentlemen have since promoted Swange dance to a professional status. What Geoffrey Gorer wrote of all Africans is even more true of the Tiv people because “they dance for joy and they dance for grief, they dance for love and for hate; they dance to bring prosperity and they dance to avert calamity; they dance for religion and they dance to pass time.” Swange dance is performed at various types of social and religious functions for the enjoyment of the old and the young (Mbiti, 1970).

Tiv traditional attire (A’nger)



“Swange” Dancers dressed, performing with the Tiv attire popularly known as “A’nger”.

Source: Researchers’ Fieldwork

In conclusion, the study underscores the profound role that traditional music and dance have played in both preserving the cultural identity and driving economic growth within the Jechira community of Benue State. Despite the challenges posed by regional instability, the resilience of the Jechira people is evident in their commitment to safeguarding these art forms, which have not only fostered social cohesion but also acted as a catalyst for local



economic development. The preservation and promotion of Swange music, alongside other traditional expressions, have created opportunities for employment, revenue generation, and cultural diplomacy, thus benefiting the broader community. The proactive involvement of the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture has been instrumental in harnessing the potential of these artistic practices, ensuring their sustainability and broader recognition. Ultimately, this research highlights the importance of traditional music and dance as tools for cultural preservation, economic empowerment, and regional unity, offering valuable lessons for other communities facing similar socio-political challenges.

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