



THE TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND DANCE AMONG THE JECHIRA PEOPLE OF BENUE STATE (1990 -1998): AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This study explores the pivotal role of traditional music and dance in fostering cultural resilience and economic growth within the Jechira community of Benue State between 1990 and 1998. Amidst a period marked by regional violence and socio-political instability, the Jechira people sustained and enhanced their cultural identity through these art forms, which became vital tools for both social cohesion and economic empowerment. Drawing on oral traditions and historical records, the research examines how traditional music and dance not only preserved the socio-cultural fabric of the community but also contributed to local economic development. The study highlights the transformative impact of the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture, which helped elevate the arts sector, turning it into a significant vehicle for cultural diplomacy. Furthermore, the findings emphasize how these cultural practices facilitated job creation, revenue generation, and poverty alleviation, demonstrating their importance in both cultural preservation and economic growth. Ultimately, the research underscores the enduring relevance of traditional art forms in shaping the socio-economic landscape of the Jechira community and beyond.

Keywords: Tradition, Music, culture, Economics, Growth

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.¹ 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).²

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.

Forms of Music that preceded Swange Music and Dance

The institution, invention, organization or origin of some Jechira traditional music and forms were wrought out of intense and tragic experiences. Essentially, there existed so many Jechira traditional music and dance forms or groups before the awesome emergence of Swange music. Jechira traditional music and dance has contributed immeasurably to life and constitutes life and living not only to a Jechira man but also to the human soul of the entire world populace. Notably, these music and dances that preceded swange music and dance included Ibyamegh, Ange, Ingyough, Diga and Girinya among others.

(a) Ibyamegh

Ibyamegh was a Tiv Religious Rite crowned with Poor, which tradition demanded that the intending initiator must be a product of “Yam'she” (exchange marriage) who would first consult the High Priest (Or-Byam, Orakombo-Biam or Tor-Biam) with official presents such as “BuaTiv” (Tiv cow). The Ibyamegh Religious Rite was accompanied with music and dance, also referred to as Ibyamegh. Songs pattern accompanying this form of music and dance is called “Imo-Biam” (songs of Biam). The most popular composers of “Imo Biam” include Anche Igbaaze, Dagba, Akile Bende, Madza Nomhwange and Amee Jorpo. Akpede admits that Biamegh songs are songs of greatness. They are all attributed to “Or u dughun amo” (a composer of songs).³

(b) Ange

Ange from their time of evolution into Tiv traditional music and dance by Utuku Agire till date have not significantly entertained changes both in context, content and intent. The term Ange carries a plural form and is used only as plural. Ange are basically dance oriented, and are more concerned with traditional aspects of Tiv worldview and life. Nyitse further explains that the Ange song form, freed the society from the unquestioning belief in age and sex as major determiners of one's role in the society. Ange performers were concerned with inculcating communal values as against individualism.⁴

(c) Ingyough

Ingyough literally means kwashiorkor, a disease that makes one emaciate and develops a potbelly so fat and large. The Tiv people used to “tuhwa” or (deride somebody) “nenge aluka hi angbor er Ingyough korlu” meaning (look at your potbelly like you are suffering from Ingyough disease. The Jechira traditional doctors used to hospitalize the Ingyough patients, giving them medications and proper feeding. In the process of time, these Ingyough patients organized themselves in a group that evolved into a cult. Essentially, in order to overcome stigmatization, the Ingyough cult organized a play group that used to dance and entertain themselves and other village folks. In addition, because these fellows looked quite hilarious, their dance was humorous and they instituted regulations associating with myths and witchcraft, which provided that spectators who watch them or the dance and laughed must pay a fine and failure to do so will lead to the contraction of Ingyough disease by the spectator. Importantly, few Ingyough patients like Izua Gbe and Anshira discovered that their calamity became a source of income and as a result introduced proper dancing steps into the



music. Apparently, Ingyough evolved into a comedic form of Jechira traditional music and dance and pioneered by Anshira Akuji about 1902, which grew in stages between 1919 and 1931 into the 1960s and promoted by Benue State Council for Arts and Culture.⁵

Akpede explained that Ingyough is a vigorous dance for men which entail severe body distortions, noting that Ingyough is one of the Jechira traditional dances that have gained international recognition. He further noted that the group featured at the Negro Festival in Dakar, Senegal, in 1964 as well as other national and international festivals.⁶

Hagher describes Ingyough as a dance which entail severe body distortions, as dancers while keeping beat to the music, suddenly seem to throw all their limbs in disarray, the face is distorted with the eyes sunk, nose dilated and tongue limply hanging from the mouth, hands are held out at stiff angles to the body, the stomach is swollen and made to extend at unusual angles to the body.⁷

(d) Diga

Diga literally is a borrowed term from the English digger. The Tiv term for “diga” is called Atsender (elephant hoe). Diga is a farm tool also used in construction. Diga is a memetic dance for both men and women, and was introduced when forced labour was organized by the colonial government to build the railways and mine tin in Jos Plateau.⁸ The term “Diga” evolved into a form of music and dance initiated by Viashima Alo, Akighir Tswem Ayu. According to the veterans (during a verbal interview with Viashima), the idea of this music and dance was conceived in June 1929 to reduce tension from forced labour.⁹

(e) Girinya

“Girinya” is a traditional cult music and dance strictly for men and women of valour distinguished by their dexterity in “ityav” (war), “biem” (organized group hunting) and general adventures. Invariably, to be initiated into this music and dance, you must be “Nomor” or “Nomkwase” (strong man or strong woman), implying that you must have in your life time accomplished great feat and killing of an enemy or enemies in battles or killing of spirit beast like lion, deer, hyena or an elephant. Nyitse reported that the “Girinya” did not originate in Jechira land. It was borrowed from the Kwa speaking peoples of Ogoja in the late 19th century. Borrowed by the Jechira (Gaav and Kunav), “Girinya” was used to mobilise warriors to repulse the Kwa during wars in the late 19th century. He further states that Girinya depends on drum language, accompanied by the horns, which only the initiates can decipher and though membership of “Girinya” cult is not restricted, only few women are initiates.¹⁰

Musical instruments used in Jechira Music and Dance

Significantly, Swange and other forms of the Jechira music and dance is played with the following instruments: “Gbande” (drum), “Gida” (trumpet) and “Kwen” (gong).

Gbande (Drum)



Source: Researchers' Fieldwork, 2019

“Gbande” is a membranophonic wooden musical instrument made of artistically carved wooden pipetry and is covered with animal skin. The Jechira traditional “gbande” produces pellucid and crystal musical sounds. The “gbande” is a hollow cylinder of wood. The construction of “gbande” is a highly technological function that demands skills and training to do and to perfect. The history of “gbande” making dates back to about 1758 under a renowned stone mason and blacksmith Gyar Anyi. In the chronicles of this historic traditional musical instrument, he is one of the most skilful engineers of the 18th century. Essentially, the position of playing “gbande” depends on size, combination and shape. Some of the “gbande” is placed on the ground, on a stand, between the knees or slung over the shoulder of the player. Importantly, in the Jechira traditional technology, the purpose for which a drum is made and meteorological conditions of the geographical location where it will be played are the fundamental factors for choosing the type of materials that will be used for the construction of the “gbande”.¹¹ The best wood used in carving the “gbande” frame is “Gbaaye”, which moth, other insects and water cannot destroy.

Gida



Source: Researchers' Fieldwork, 2019

“Gida” is a borrowed musical instrument. Ancient Jerchira traders dealing in horse merchandize first saw a double-mouthed “alaketa” (trumpet) which was a royal musical instrument blown. The Jechira “Gida” is a wood and brass wind musical instrument sounded by lip vibration against a cup mouth-piece. “Gida”, a witching aeroponic musical instrument with simmering efficacy of candour and originality is the prime factor in the embellishment of all socially inclined Jechira traditional music forms of both Christian and secular activities. “Gida” produces amazingly sweet sounds capable of assuaging the musical thirst of any human soul. When played or blown, the tones ascend in ambrosial essence that disarms anger and softens asperity and persuades the inimical spirit of man into dreamy silence. The Jechira traditional engineers make “Gida” in different sizes and colours. The musical instrument is not a single made unit; it is constructed in parts and assembled. The substantial tradition of the diverse musical tones of “Gida” suites into almost every form of Jechira traditional music. Essentially, “Gida” was modified into what it is today by Antyu Abua around October 1917. Moreover, the best brains in the use of “Gida” in entire Tiv nation were Boniface Orshio, Antyu Abua, Uwu Abor, Anyoon Yav, Ajo Ugor, Ikpya Ugba Agire and Amindi Gwa Tule, just to mention a few.¹²

Kwen



Source: Researchers' Fieldwork, 2019

“Kwen” (gong) is a metallic musical instrument named according to its “kweng-kweng” sound. The instrument is made in different sizes. “Kwen” is made of HSS (High Speed Steel), LSS (Low Speed Steel), and Mild Steel. The position of the player depends on the size and the purpose of “kwen” in a given music.¹³

The richness of African culture has generally been reduced since most aspects of cultures have either been replaced or grossly overshadowed by colonial as well as post-colonial activities of the West and other cultures of the world. However, there are still some ethnic groups in Africa that have not only retained some important cultural practices by way of commemoration but also preserved as well as keep on the production of certain cultural materials of unique appearances to date. One of such groups is the Jechira extraction (Tiv people) of Benue State in Nigeria who have refused to let go the culture of producing their unique and symbolic cultural costume popularly known as the “A’nger” or sometimes called and linked with its cultural source as “A’nger u Tiv”.¹⁴ Since time immemorial, the Jechira people have perfected the art of weaving; a craft passed from generation to generation. Tiv people favour their traditional attire to any other form of attire due to the strong cultural identity it commands. There are many forms of traditional attires or clothes of the Tiv which are worn at specific time and honoured periods in Tiv land, however, the “A’nger” is the most respected and highly valued among the costumes. The “A’nger” is woven with black and white yarns to create beautiful features which makes the cloth to appear like live zebra skin. Traditionally, the “A’nger” is a cloth normally used in the decoration of illustrious sons and daughters of the area. The cloth is also worn by the Tiv elders or chiefs during Tiv traditional council which is usually held in Gboko-the traditional headquarters as well as the permanent place for the seat of the “Tor- Tiv”. The “Tor-Tiv” is a title for the highest chief who rules over Tiv land. The colours (black and white) on the “A’nger” are literally signifying the true nature of the Tiv people, their belief concerning issues of life or existence.



Another way of viewing the black and white features of the “A’nger” is in terms of the peaceful nature of the Tiv people in general.¹⁵ In this way, the black and white symbolically represent the nature of zebra in the wild world. A zebra in the animal kingdom is one among the most peaceful, harmless and beautiful looking animal. Today, “A’nger” is generally used as a form of cultural identification. The Jechira people have a cultural regard for their cultural attire which they use to attend important occasions like political meetings, church service, traditional weddings, among others.

The “A’nger” is also used by various cultural groups in Tiv land during cultural dances. It is used in performing the Swange and other dances. The Jechira people have the Girinya dance, performed either on a social or ritual level. The Girinya dance is done to honour fallen heroes. They also have the “Kwagh-hir” (masquerade) dance which is more of story-telling, and involves puppets. It is performed on special occasions. Also, there is “Tsav-utu” dance based on the belief that there is a spirit world similar to the normal human world. Horse tails, and beads are used alongside the “A’nger” during dance performance.

Tsa (Horse Tail)

The horse tail is part of the costume used during performance of the Jechira music and dance. It comes in different sizes but the one used for the dance is the medium size. The “Tsa” gives colour to the dance, such that, all the dancers at the same time use the “tsa”.¹⁶ The “Tsa” apart from using it to dance, it is also used by elders during meetings.

Asa (Beads)

A bead is a small decorative object that is formed in a variety of shapes and sizes of a material such as stone, bone, shell, glass, plastic, wood or pearl and that a small hole is drilled for threading or stringing. It is also another costume of the Jechira dances. The beads are usually black and white in colour and they are worn on the neck, hands, waist and also on the legs during dance performance by the dancers. Apart from using the beads during dance performance, they are also used during traditional marriage, both worn by the bride and groom in the entire Tiv land.¹⁷

The Role of Music and Dance in the Culture of Jechira People

Music and Dance in many African cultures is not just a past time or entertainment that can be ignored. It is closely connected to the lives of the people, and to so many in Africa, dance is culture and culture is dance. This explains why from infancy, a Jechira child is treated with lullabies. The mother lulls the child to sleep with music and dance rhythms by rocking them in her arms or on her back. She beats time with her arms or while grinding, beats time on the grinding stone. As the children grow up, they join in dancing games among themselves and with other children in their neighbourhood. These early dances are accompanied by singing and clapping with high breathtaking. Again, at this early age, they are introduced to drumming and music making. By the age of twelve (12), a Jechira boy or girl is expected to know all the dance steps of the popular dances, along with the songs that go with them. In fact, the songs are inextricably woven into the music and dance.¹⁸

Nevertheless, young adults in Jechira employ music and dance to clearly express various emotions. It is well known that the typical Jechira, from the remote past to the present, have



used music and dance for courtship. The greater the expressive ability of the dancer, the more attractive he or she is to the opposite sex. Successful dancers have attracted handsome dowries. Dances performed by itinerant dancers going from one village or market square to the other, have been opportunities for girls to elope with the star dancers and become part of the dance group. Among the young, dance is an ideal forum for courtship. When involved in dance, the dancer's true emotions flow out of them and the spectators can observe what they are really like. The response of a male spectator to a female dancer may be so strong that he brings cash rewards and paste it on her forehead, as a sign of her admiration for her.¹⁹

As the youth grow into adult and get married, their dance culture also changes. They move from amateur to professional dancing. They are invited by wealthy people to dance for occasions like the title-taking, celebration of achievement or a funeral.²⁰ Rehearsals last for hours and are held in an open courtyard where everyone is encouraged to join. As people get older, they no longer join the core of dance performance. However, they function as critics of the dance. Older men and women can always be seen moving up and down the dance formation; criticizing and they often form an outer circle to demonstrate the movements.²¹

The Information Value of Music and Dance in the Age of Modern Communication among Jechira People

The notion of information value is predicated on the premise that information has to contribute to the development of the people. If it does not, then it is of no value to the society. This is of course, the main thrust of development media theory. The need for an information should not only be to provide information to the population, it should also determine what the information needs of the people are. Certainly, Jechira traditional music and dance as elements of oral tradition cannot perform better than the modern media when it comes to rapid and swift spread of communication.²²

Nevertheless, modern communications technologies are instruments through which messages are sent to large numbers of people in modern societies. Therefore, modern communications technologies are inventions or discoveries that are tailored towards improving the dissemination of messages connected to mass media in one way or the other.²³ Jechira music and dance have information value when viewed from the long-term effect of their persuasive capacity on their audience especially as one considers the gross inadequacy of modern communication technologies in our developing societies. The message composition of the traditional music and dance takes time during which the artist carefully and creatively compose and package persuasive information using variety of persuasive devices. Some of the devices include figures of speech like imagery, simile, personification, metaphor among others. Sound devices such as consonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia are also employed in the music and dance. These devices are esthetically encoded in the message composition and creatively delivered (sung) in a manner to persuade even the most obstinate audience. Once the news takes on a story telling format, it is bound to grab the audience, compel them to sit down and consume the news to the end.²⁴ Unlike the Newspapers and News Broadcast that is seemingly incomprehensible by many in the area, information presented in traditional music and dance is easy to grab and comprehend. Many of the songs have been identified as having communicative and informative value to the entire Tiv nation. The artists employ unique poetic language and diction aimed at creating a populism designed for educating and mobilizing the masses, raising productivity or informing their audience about political and



other events that are in vogue within the society. Where ever Tiv people are found in Nigeria, the chances are that 70% of Tiv songs whether on audiocassette or Video Compact Disc, are played regularly. People are endeared to the strong information quality of the songs that cover social conditions, education, politics as well as war and peace. Churches in Jechira, as in the rest of Tiv land, communicate religious messages through traditional music and dance. The youth group both in the Catholic church and the dominant protestant denomination (NKST), use music and dance to propagate the gospel more effectively.

Conclusion

The research conducted on the Traditional Music and Dance practices among the Jechira People of Benue State has effectively documented the enduring socio-cultural artistic expressions of the Tiv nation. The regional entertainment sector has reached its pinnacle with the widespread recognition of Swange music and dance, which has undergone enhancements under the auspices of the Benue State Council of Arts and Culture. Since 1980, the council has actively participated in foreign engagements for a range of diplomatic purposes, showcasing the uniqueness of Jechira music and dance to the world.

The Commonwealth Institute, located in London, extended an invitation to Nigeria, in collaboration with the British Council, to participate in a World Music Festival. The Benue State Council of Arts and Culture, representing Nigeria, showcased the traditional Swange Music and Dance during the event. In 1992, a Nigerian troupe was selected to represent their country in Seville, Spain, as part of a World Trade Mission. Additional examples of diplomatic invitations include the Cuban government's offer in 2008 to participate in the handing over ceremony of Fidel Castro to his brother at a period of his indisposition. Furthermore, the Nigerian Embassy extended an invitation to Israel in 2009 to commemorate Nigeria Day in Jerusalem.

The significance of Traditional Music and Dance in the cultural practices of the Jechira people of Benue State and their neighbouring communities is of great importance and should not be underestimated.

Endnotes

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⁴ Oral Interview with Abojov Hyacinth, 60+Years, at Vandeikya, 2019

⁵ D. I. Hagher, *The Origin and nature of Tiv theatre*. 48

⁶ Oral Interview with Yongyer Ayom, 50+Years, at Tsar-Mbaduku, 2021

⁷ D. I. Hagher, *The Origin and nature of Tiv theatre*. 50



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- ⁸ Oral Interview with Yongyer Ayom, 50+Years, at Tsar-Mbaduku, 2021
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