

***Christianity, Modernity, and Cultural Abandonment in Africa:  
The Example of the Ivyom Ritual Dance Performance Among the Tiv People***

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**Abstract**

Historically, *Ivyom* ritual dance performance among the Tiv people of Nigeria have been integral to their spiritual and cultural identity, serving not only as a religious ceremony but also as a vital expression of social cohesion, identity and traditional knowledge. However, the advent of Christianity and the subsequent processes of modernisation have precipitated significant transformations within the Tiv society, leading to the marginalisation of this indigenous practice. This study, through adopting a multidisciplinary approach that combine ethnographic fieldwork, historical analysis, as well as cultural studies, examines the complex dynamics between the persistence of traditional rituals and the pressure of religious and cultural change. Through in-depth analysis of historical records and corroboration of research on the subject, the study highlights the tensions and negotiations that characterise the Tiv people's responses to these external influences. While Christianity and modernisation have introduced new forms of spiritual and cultural expression, they have also engendered a loss of traditional knowledge and practices, creating a crisis of cultural continuity. This research contributes to broader discussions on the impact of religious conversion and modernity on indigenous cultures in Africa, offering insights into the ways in which the Tiv people navigate their cultural heritage in the face of profound change. The findings underscore the importance of preserving indigenous rituals as living traditions that adapt to contemporary realities while maintaining their historical and cultural significance.

Keywords: Christianity, Modernisation, Cultural Abandonment, Ivyom, Ritual, Dance, Tiv

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## **Introduction**

Christianity and western modern civilisation to a large extent has contributed to cultural erosion in most African societies today. In fact, contemporary generations in Africa may have come to measure African traditional worldview along the parameters of Christianity and modern civilisation; being that, it is that with which they are most familiar. That is to say, even in interpersonal interactions, Africans of contemporary generations adjudge what is the acceptable standard of behavioural code with the yardstick of Christianity and western modern standards. Thus, what is today considered as being African, invariably, translates as what is acceptable in the Christian worldview, in that regard. Before the onslaught of Christianity and modern civilisation, however, most traditional African cultures demonstrated originality of identity through cultural expressions of rituals, festivals, celebration, worship, etcetera, that resonated with the underlying character peculiar to that society. This phenomenon of cultural expressivity was no different with the Tiv people of central Nigeria. Being an oral-oriented culture, the preservation of the Tiv worldview was achieved through folk-media, traditional performances and/or indigenous theatre. Unfortunately, the incursion of Christianity in the Tiv society in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century redefined the trajectory of the cultural expressivity and preservation of sociocultural ethos, changing the way the people think, relate with one another, and respect the social standards unique to their collective behaviour as a people. Consequently, the cultural expressivity of their unique identity has been largely replaced by what is generally Christian, or modern. However, in order to understand the impact of Christianity and modernity on the cultural behaviour of the Tiv people, it is pertinent to bring to bear, the generic composition of the Tiv society in the pre-Christian age. It is hoped that with such a historical perspective, it shall be easier to establish the level of infiltration of Christianity in the Tiv society and to deduce its impact on the erosion of the cultural behaviour of the people.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The *Ivyom* ritual dance performance is one of the most prominent occasions in the Tiv traditional society of the pre-colonial and colonial eras. In fact, remnants of this august cultural occasion filtered into the modern Tiv society, with clinical references as recent as the late 1990s. This ceremony was one of socio-cultural and religious significance in the life of the Tiv man as it used to represent a transformation of social status and attainment of affluent and powerful social recognition within the community. Its custom and rituals were deeply rooted in the religious ontology, and cosmo-spiritual belief system of the Tiv. However, the practice and performance of the *Ivyom* ritual dance and the corresponding cultural expression faded away with the increasing influence of Christianity and modernity. This study explores and analyses the ritual's historical and cultural significance and examining the influential impact of the aforementioned trends of Christianity and modernity, resulting in a clinical reference of the phenomenon of cultural abandonment.

## **Methodology**

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology with an ethnographic approach, focusing on the *Ivyom* ritual. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and observation. Through the Observation method, despite the *Ivyom* ritual's decline, the researcher, being an insider, attended one ceremony, observing attitudes and informal discussions across generations. Personal memories and contemporary ceremonies, such as religious gatherings, were also observed, where elements of the *Ivyom* ritual appeared in

modified forms. Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with Ivyom practitioners and initiates to gather authentic details about the ritual dance. In-depth interviews included various members of the Tiv community, such as elders, religious leaders, and youth, to understand diverse perspectives on the Ivyom ritual dance. The study also analysed the historical and cultural contexts of the Ivyom dance ritual and Tiv customs. This contextualization provided insights into cultural shifts over time and the community's ways of reconciling or resisting these changes.

### **The Pre-colonial Tiv Society**

There are various versions relating the migration of the Tiv to the Benue valley. Although most of these have been documented variously in published literatures, the original versions had been largely oral-based. These oral-based versions served greatly for the inspiration of the first literary text ever written on the subject matter by Ezekiel Akiga Sai in his – *Akiga's Story*, annotated by Rupert East (1939). However, as more researches are carried out, the more advanced, authenticated and official the written versions become today (Dura et al., 2022).

The important point of consideration however, is that the Tiv form part of the Bantu continuum and the last habitat before their descent into the lower Benue Valley was the border between Nigeria and Cameroon, around the Obudu complex (Iyo, 2007). This area is still inhabited by groups that share linguistic and cultural similarities with the Tiv. Generally, the Tiv people were known to be a nihilistic lot with no allegiance to a particular conventional authority; be it physical or spiritual, long before the colonialist incursion. Each family existed with its leader at their compound administrative level referred to as *Orya*. However, in times of need for coherence such as war or conflict resolutions, such families came together to achieve the desired end (Dura et al., 2022). Most researchers and writers on the pre-colonial Tiv society such as East (1939), Bohannon and Bohannon (1953), and Dorward (1971) offer that the Tiv were a stateless and egalitarian society. This statelessness is characterised by the absence of a central authority to support administrative and judicial machinery. However, their political system was characterised by law and order maintained by elders meeting at the different levels and departments of various lineages (Agber, 2012). In spite of these summations, many indigenous scholars like Mude (1987), Dzurgba (2007) and Agber (2012) prefer to maintain that the Tiv administrative system was a complex machinery peculiar only to the Tiv citizens and which could not be comprehended by western ideology, hence such jaundiced speculations of nihilism and statelessness.

The basic unit of political organisation was the *Ya*, or household. Based on the description of Sorkaa (1993), a collection of closely related households therefore, made up a compound. Each compound was then headed by the oldest living male known as the *Orya*, directly translated as “man of the household.” Each Tiv compound is named after its *Orya* and is generally administered by a council made up of senior members of the compound. The council is chaired by the *Orya* who has many responsibilities including the pursuit of the political, social, religious and economic wellbeing of all members of the compound and settling the disputes that could arise between members of the compound (Agber, 2012).

Central to the Tiv social life was marriage. The centrality of marriage in the Tiv social life lays upon the fact that various other aspects of the social milieu are tied to its institution. The Tiv practiced the *Yamisha* marriage in the pre-colonial era and the system was abolished circa 1928, by the colonial authorities as influenced by the Christian missionaries (Wegh, 2003).

*Yamishe* was a system of marriage in which a young man took his sister and exchanged with another man's sister, both to have as wives. There was no form of dowry. However, this system of marriage had its downside, as a man born without a sister, or sisters found the exchange system difficult to transact. In such cases, a man could borrow a sister from a cousin, half-brother or even a friend, with the arrangement to pay back when the wife he acquires gives birth to a daughter. Largely, the Tiv practiced polygyny (Dzurgba, 2007). It was customary for a man to marry more than one wife in Tivland. A wealthy man could have as much as fifty wives, but an average man could have three or four. Polygamy amongst the Tiv was a show of wealth and ability, encouraging healthy competition amongst the age-grade or *kwav*. Thus, the more wives a man took, the more merry-making was attracted. So the complex marriage of *yamishe* fostered intricately woven social relationships by kin and association as well as paved way for merry-making and festivities which occupied the Tiv social milieu. Amase (2013) explains this phenomenon better where the author opines that, marriage is very significant in the life of the Tiv man. This is because the wife/wives and their children provide the much needed labour for effective work on the farm. In fact, the size of a man's family determines his farm size and of course, the wealth he acquires. No matter how wealthy a Tiv man may be, if he is not married, he is by traditional standards considered irresponsible. His social status is thus greatly reduced and he cannot therefore compete with his age-mates. Being married is a pre-requisite for hosting both the *Inyamtswam* and *Ivyom* dance festivals. Bachelors cannot host festivals because the wife must perform alongside her husband.

### **Christianity and Modernity in Tiv Society: A Case of Cultural Abandonment**

Like most other African societies, the incursion of colonialism in Tiv land held sway with the institution of Christianity that advanced with the olive branch while paving the way for the colonialists to travel and establish farther into the hinterlands of Africa. Religion in Africa is the strongest element of the people's culture while the culture is the core of the society's identity. Hence, it is difficult to separate African cultural practices from African Indigenous religion because religion is embedded in African culture (Bienose–Osagiede, 2015). In as much as one can argue that culture and religion can be separated, it is important to note that most African creation narratives always have a religious dimension which is intrinsically connected to cultural habits and actions (Sanni, 2016). Mbiti (1991) asserts that “to be an African in the traditional setting is to be truly religious”. Hence, the author identified religion in five aspects of culture which include; beliefs and practices, ceremonies and festivals, religious objects and places, values and morals, and religious officials and leaders. As a matter of fact, African religion is found in all aspects of life. One may argue that religion and culture play enormous role in shaping a people's worldviews and participation in social life. Religion and culture define a particular people and what is at the core of their worldview and attitude towards life.

In Africa, African Indigenous Religion existed many years before the advent of Christianity. However, the early missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa presented the religion as being contradictory to African Indigenous religion and cultural practices (Bienose–Osagiede, 2015). In other words, these practices were termed pagan practices and hence, outlawed by these missionaries. As a result, the African people developed inferiority complexes concerning their cultural identity. This is because they now believe that in order to be a Christian; one must abandon his or her culture since they are thought to be “barbaric” and “heathen” (Nwosu, 1988). It can therefore be averred that, in order to de-Africanise an African, it is easier when the line of attack is aimed at their religion and belief system. This

was the success the White missionaries and colonialist registered in Tivland beginning from the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In as much as the colonial authorities instituted a policy of military conquest in Tivland, Christianity created easy inroads for the colonial authorities into the Tiv country. According to Rubingh (1969), the Tiv were the last to be subdued and brought under the British Colonial Government in Nigeria. Iorngurum (2017) explains that, through tactical peace, missionaries were able to penetrate Tivland, and they brought with them changes in the two most important aspects of a people, 'religion and culture'. While the missionaries were changing the people's belief system; their counterparts, the colonialists, were able to have access to the people and they were quietly changing the Tiv system of administration or governance in collaboration with the missionaries. The occupation of the Tiv country by the colonialist which had begun in 1899 had come to full circle completion by 1906 (Dzurgba, 2007). By 11<sup>th</sup> April 1911, the missionaries had established their first mission station in Sai, a settlement in Shitire in the present day Katsina-Ala Local Government.

Colonial conquest and the introduction of colonial rule by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century further contributed to the distortion of Tiv customs and traditions (Agber, 2012). Agber (2013) accentuates this position, where the author states that the colonial rule and western Christian religion brought to Tivland some anomalous permutations of cultural adulteration on the Tiv culture and at the apogee of their operation in the land, life had been arrested, as the horologist, with interjected finger, arrests the beating of the clock. All these have undermined African culture by demeaning the African's own sense of worth and dignity. In the Tiv society, Tiv traditional music and dance has suffered a callous and conscienceless brute from the colonial masters and the Christian religious vendors of the West and as such, the non-preservation and documentation of the Tiv traditional music and dance invariably became a factor that evaded the status of oral and calligraphic tradition in the making of Tiv philosophy, science and technology (Agber & Mngutyo, 2013).

As cited above, the erosion of the Tiv culture has tranquilised their indigenous cultural expression which translated as their original identity. Festivals, ceremonies, rituals, pacts, marriage rites and other customary and cultural institutions are no longer practiced in the identity of a true traditional Tiv society. One of such festivals which today has gone passé is the *Ivyom* ritual dance which occupied a central place in the Tiv social milieu in the pre-colonial Tiv society.

### **The *Ivyom* Ritual Dance Phenomenon**

The study of the Tiv history reveals that the *Ivyom* festival occupied a prominent place in the sociocultural composition of the people. This notion is made reference to, in past tense, in the sense that much of the *Ivyom* ritual dance has eroded and is no longer found active in the present cultural behaviour of the Tiv. *Ivyom* itself primarily describes an earth mound, or heap, raised for the purpose of planting yams. In the plural fashion, *Ivyom* is referred to as *avom*, meaning many heaps. When reference is made of *Ivyom* in pluralistic terms, being *avom*, such reference may refer more or less about the farm. This is because, the Tiv people are generally agrarian people and their worldview is largely influenced from a farmer's point of view, hence this influence on the *Ivyom* ritual dance performance. Amase (2013) clarifies this position by stating that, according to some Tiv elders, the origin of *Ivyom* dance is not unconnected with the major occupation of the Tiv, which is farming. *Ivyom* being a mound or heap of soil, yam and other staple crops of the Tiv are grown on mounds of soil. Farming is

thus considered as the major source of wealth among the Tiv, hence the emergence of *Ivyom* dance.

The *Ivyom* as a performance occupied a central position in the Tiv sociocultural behaviour in the earlier Tiv society. The event of the *Ivyom* was what we could refer to on more informal terms as a ‘talk-of-the-town’ show. The dance festival had the potential to enhance a man’s prestige and guarantee his acceptability in the community (Amase, 2013). Mude (1987) also clarifies that, the *Ivyom* dance was held for entertainment, moral instruction and a general upliftment of the social status of the celebrant. It grants him the opportunity to enter into *Shagba* (prestige/affluence) competitions with his age-mates both within and outside his immediate environment. Being associated with wealth acquired through farming, the organiser of the festival uses the opportunity to make a show of his wealth as obtained from his vast agricultural enterprise. He can thereafter count on the unreserved support of his *Ityô* (patrilineage) on account of popularity and socioeconomic worthiness. In this regard, age-mates or *kwav* compete and each member of an age group strives to out-dance his mates by hosting a more elaborate festival. Amase (2013) is of the opinion that, apart from enhancing a man’s prestige, staging of *Ivyom* brings good fortune to the host and his immediate family members, especially if the *Ivyom* rituals are properly carried out.

The average height of *Ivyom* in the farm is about half a metre, while the base and top circumference of the *Ivyom* ranges from 50-70 metres in diameter (Waapela, 2019). In the context of the festival celebration, the mound of earth is specially constructed and treated with ritualistic reverence and embodying rites, sometimes involving a plethora of human sacrifices. The mound is constructed in a giant size ranging from three to five metres, and with a flat top and either conical or square-like edge forms. The theatrical perspective of *Ivyom* as *amar* or dance is intrinsically connected to the festival prerequisite of *Amar-a-mirin/amar a wan* or ‘organising the dance/putting up the dance.’ Amase (2013) corroborates this position, stating that *amar-a-mirin* literally means organising a traditional dance festival. The practice of *amar-a-mirin* is as old as the existence of the Tiv. From time immemorial, the Tiv have always found dance as a way of expressing their joy or excitement. Of the need to organise the dance, certain dances serve for the purpose of religio-cultural/prestigious significance, inclusive also of the *Ivyom*.

Heroic dance festivals also serve as a way of encouraging hard work and dedication to one’s occupation (Amase, 2013). In the Tiv context of old, one was considered a ‘man’ only when he must have been able to host at least one prestigious dance, preferably the *Ivyom* which was more socially inclined.

A man that wants to host the *Ivyom* has to obtain permission from the community elders (Amase, 2013; Waapela, 2019). It is at the instance of the preliminary prerequisites that rituals involving human sacrifices are required. This information is corroborated further by Elder Iordye Akutsev of Mbayegh clan in Ushongo Local Government of Benue State, in an oral interview (sic). Once the approval has been given and a date fixed, the host then invites the *Ivyom* priest to indicate and consecrate the point at which the *Ivyom* platform is to be built. After the *Ivyom* site has been chosen, the host goes ahead with other preparations to ensure a successful festival celebration. This includes inviting his *Igba* (matrilineage), organising dances, inviting ballads and folk singers and preparing food and drink. On the eve of the festival day, the ritual known as *asetá* is performed by the priest to clear the way for a successful festival. This final rite of initiation is performed beside the raised *Ivyom* platform. According to tradition, this ritual purifies the earth and ensures more yield for the celebrants

and their families. The rites also cleanse the celebrants from iniquities, thereby preparing them for a grand entrance into a new and esteemed class. Being a prestigious dance therefore, marriage by exchange such as the *yamishe* does not qualify a man to host the *Ivyom* festival. This is because, a man is said to have used his sister to contract a marriage, instead of using the products of his sweat to marry. During the pre-colonial Tiv era when only the *yamishe* marriage held sway, a man was expected to slaughter a cow for his wife as prerequisite for hosting the *Ivyom* (Waapela, 2019). A man can equally host the *Ivyom* if he is able to marry from another tribe.

The significance of *Ivyom* lies in the fact that it potentially served for enhancing an individual's personality traits, thereby letting him into the functional and affluent part of the social constitution of the community. Having raised the *Ivyom* platform it carefully and artistically painted with pictures of wild animals like lions, leopard, buffalos, and crocodiles depicting the bravery of the celebrant (Amase, 2013). The celebrant must be married and have access to wealth before he is allowed to host the *Ivyom*. While the chief celebrant dances or performs the ritual on the *Ivyom* with his wife, a spear and/or horsetail in hand, his age-mates who have never done the dance, shower money or gifts on the couple from a distance or through an initiate as anybody who is not initiated is forbidden to go near the *Ivyom* let alone touch it. The event was usually hosted between January and April to be sure that the rains would not disrupt the occasion. There was lavish entertainment comprising of drink, food and meat and the aftermath of the primary ceremony went on for days.

### **The Impact of Cultural Abandonment on the *Ivyom* Ritual Festival: A Discussion of Findings**

As asserted earlier in this discourse, Christianity and modern civilization has played a large role in the erosion of original cultural tenets of the Tiv people. In this guise, the *Ivyom*, being one of the cultural expressions of the Tiv people has been found at cross-purposes with the tenets of Christianity and modernisation. The following opinions serve as the evidence of the erosion of the festival and as such, cultural abandonment.

**i. Loss of Cultural Continuity and Sustainability:** the decline of *Ivyom* ritual dance festival has precipitated a loss of cultural continuity and sustainability such that contemporary generations have no experience of this festival. The character of a Tiv man being deeply religious naturally influenced his generous embrace and assimilation of the Christian religion such that cultural practices such as *Ivyom* are regarded as anti-Christian. In fact, some Christian denominations in Tivland such as the *Nongo u Kristu u i Ser Sha Tar* (NKST), being the transition from the Sudan United Mission (SUM) and the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM), which was the first Christian mission instituted in Tivland in 1911, have laid down stringent punitive measures for member who engage in such traditional practices. Such 'recalcitrant' members are either excommunicated or restricted from taking the Holy Communion for a period of time. Even the Catholic Church which seem to exercise some level of accommodation of the African Traditional Religion may not tolerate a congregation member going out to host a cultural festival that embody original traditional rituals which are frowned upon as barbaric, crude, immoral or generally uncivilised. This widespread Christian orientation has affected a collective disposition of the people such that hosting the *Ivyom* ritual dance festival may underscore the host as being backward and uncivilised. Based on this religious restraint, many generations of Tiv origin in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may not have heard about the *Ivyom* festival.

**ii. Replacement of Agriculture by Western Education:** the *Ivyom* festival was borne from a Tiv man's pride in engagement in agricultural enterprises, hence its celebration to display the wealth gathered thereof. Cultural continuity in this regard would have seen the Tiv man leading in agriculture and also celebrating their agricultural products. Up till today, the Igede neighbours in Benue State still celebrate the *Igede-Agba* new yam festival, which have Igede sons in the diaspora attending and in the process encouraging agriculture. In the Tiv society however, inasmuch as the practice of agriculture naturally prevails, the passion for cultivation has been replaced by western education. An average educated person prefers to work a white collar job and leave agriculture to the rural dwellers. In fact, agriculture is perceived as an occupation for the uneducated.

**iii. Status and Social Structure:** the study revealed that the dance was a key social instrument, conferring and celebrating social status and hierarchy. Hosting or participating in the ritual held a mark of prestige and identity within the community. The respondent one (anonymous) during the fieldwork stated that, "Once I participated in the ritual, I commanded a lot of respect amongst my peers and even the orderly because mounting the *Ivyom* is the highest peak of social status to be attained in tiv community."

**iv. Spiritual and Symbolic Meanings:** The *Ivyom* Ritual dance hold tremendous spiritual beliefs and symbolism. The *Ivyom* ritual is a spiritual activity, only those who have prepared themselves can mount it and for each participant there is a pattern and style of dance that they must perform. "Even those who play drums and other musical instruments at the ceremony are not ordinary people. Also such a person must be very pure of heart else the die mysteriously soon after the celebration" (Respondent II [sic]).

**v. Changing Perception and Practice:** The influence of Christianity and modernisation has transformed or even diminished the *Ivyom* dance role within Tiv community. Respondent III offered that,

"my father was an adherent of *Ivyom*, he wanted to induct me but I wasn't interested because there are better ways to make my mark in the community. I am too exposed to believe in such an archaic practice that adds nothing tangible to one."

Meanwhile, Respondent II averred that,

"*Ivyom* is an evil practice that must never be allowed to re-emerge amongst our people, many lives were lost upholding this practice. As a born again Christian, I can always go to church to thank God for his many benefit, why should I sacrifice human life for what is completely worthless, it is God who gives life and only he has the right to take it."

## Conclusion

Christianity and modernisation may have impacted positively on the development of the Tiv society, giving it an edge to participate in the activities of the rest of the world. However, this impact is not without its negative influences as it has engendered a loss of cultural continuity in Tivland, replacing the people's cultural expression with modern trends, hence a loss of cultural identity. In the face of this change, the Tiv, being a culturally resilient people have found a way to revive their cultural heritage. These have been made manifest in the forms maiden festivals which have emerged since 2015, inclusive of the *Kyegh Sha Shwa* festival,



Free Fish Festival, *Mba-apostoli* festival and *Iber sha Akpukpa* festival amongst other. Also, the most Tiv dances have survived today even in the face of this cultural crisis. Most of these dances find expression during these festivals, including the popular *Swange* dance, *ange*, *tembe duen*, etcetera.

## Appendix

### Oral Interviews

S/N	Name	State	Kindred/Clan	Age
01.	Iordye Akutsev	Benue	Mbayegh/Ushongo	68
02.	Respondent II (Anonymous)	Benue	Mbayegh/Ushongo	80
03.	Respondent III (Anonymous)	Benue	Mbayegh/Ushongo	70
04.	Iorfa Vembera	Benue	Mbayegh/Ushongo	42

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