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## LEGACY OF CONFLICT: TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN THE NYMBUAN REVOLT OF 1939

*Ibrahim Yusuf Abdullahi and Fatima Bello Ahmed*

Department of History & International Studies, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria

**Abstract:** Tradition and modernity, two contrasting forces, have significantly shaped the course of human society. This paper aims to provide a working interpretation of these complex concepts in the context of this discourse, offering insights into their meanings and implications.

Tradition, like many other concepts, has been subject to diverse interpretations by scholars. According to Thomas Green (1997), tradition encompasses beliefs and behaviors passed down within a group or society, bearing symbolic meaning or special significance, with roots in the past. Edward Shils (2006) expands this definition, viewing tradition as a complex web of ideas, objects, and customs that have their origins in the past, persisting through time as they are passed from one generation to the next, and finding expression in the present. In this paper, tradition is closely linked to culture, signifying the typical behaviors and attitudes of a group, especially of an ethnic community, often manifested in their artistic creations, and transmitted from one generation to the next. Tradition embodies the uniqueness of a group's natural attributes, which are characteristic of them and resilient to external influences.

Understanding tradition and its dynamics is crucial in comprehending its interactions with modernity, as they often collide and coexist within societies. This paper delves into the interplay of tradition and modernity and their impact on various aspects of human life, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities presented by their coexistence.

**Keywords:** Tradition, Modernity, Culture, Heritage, Society

### Introduction

At this juncture, it is germane to explain these two concepts, tradition and modernity, in the context of this discourse. Tradition and modernity have been quite incompatible forces in the development of the human society. However, the intention here is not to overburden oneself with the intricacies of these rival concepts, suffice to provide a working interpretation for this paper.

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Like many other concepts, tradition has been differently interpreted by different scholars. According to Thomas Green (1997: 800), tradition is a belief or behaviour passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. To Edward Shils (2006: 23), tradition includes a number of interrelated ideas, all revolving around beliefs, objects or customs performed or believed in the past, originating in it, transmitted through time by being taught by one generation to the next, and are performed or believed in the present. This paper sees the concept, tradition as closely linked to culture and can be interpreted to mean the behaviour or attitudes that are typical of a group, especially of an ethnic group, which sometimes are represented in their arts work and are passed from one generation to another. Tradition signifies originality in the natural attributes of a group, typical of them and which resists any interference.

Being culture therefore, tradition is dynamic because it keeps changing overtime, even though such changes are always faced with resistance. The changes that are introduced reflect what E. J. Hobsbawm (1992: 1-4) refers to as invention of tradition, which is a situation when a new practice or object is introduced in a manner that implies a connection with the past that is not necessarily present. Thus, Anthony Giddens (2003: 39) sees the application of the concept of tradition today as having evolved from European discourse in the last two hundred years, during the Enlightenment period, as philosophers and thinkers counter posed the concept of modernity with the concept of tradition, in the context of progress. Thus both tradition and modernity are interrelated, as what was termed modern becomes a tradition when deeply rooted, persists over a long time and become the accepted values that define social relations. Though, modernity is a recurrent phenomenon, at its initial interplay, it is significantly different from tradition.

Modernity can therefore be seen as the changes introduced to tradition or to a people's way of life, which are quite alien to them. Perhaps, this explains why Barker (1998: 94) sees modernity as typically referring to a post-traditional, post-medieval historical period, one marked by the move from feudalism or agrarianism toward capitalism, industrialization, secularization, rationalization, the nation-state and its constituent institutions and forms of surveillance. As a sociological concept, modernity is seen as: A shorthand term for modern society, or industrial civilization . . . it is associated with (1) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation, by human intervention; (2) a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy; (3) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy (Giddens, 1994: 94).

To the Tiv people, modernity is no other thing but the White man's alien way of life that had drastic consequences on their culture or tradition. Since the alien rule was anchored on capitalism, modernity can be defined as the rise of capitalism. The interesting aspect of this discussion is that if modernity is seen as foreign values, then it will be obvious to explain the phenomenon to some considerable length. For one thing, the introduction of the capitalist values was not the first time that the Tiv came in contact with foreign influence in their history. The Jukun way of life, it has been attested, had greatly influenced the Tiv tradition and vice-versa. The symbiotic relationship in the interplay of the Jukun and the Tiv way of life can be seen in the mutual cultural cross-borrowing (Varvar, 2004: 6). Therefore, the issue is not simply of the Tiv being faced with alien values and rejecting them, but of the allsweeping negative consequences of colonial capitalism in Tiv society.

### **Understanding Tiv Traditional Society As A Basis For Understanding Nyambuan**

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Tiv is one of the ethnic groups that occupy the valley of the Benue River of central Nigeria. As a homogeneous and pure ethnic group, they evolved a society that strived on strict adherence to the Tiv tradition. Their daily communal relations were governed by respect for the virtues that defined their homogeneity. As farmers, the central issue that preoccupied the minds of Tiv people was love for, and protection of their land. Land was/is an important factor because it determined other spheres of relations in society like economic and political relations, even as the economy was principally subsistence and the society, largely egalitarian. Land, though very valuable and important to production, it was not a commodity to be sold. Each individual held land by right of his being an agnate member of the family. Each family considered land as their natural endowment and most prized commodity for which members were prepared to die. Nobody contemplated selling his piece of land because this amounted to selling a genealogical position (Bohannans, 1968: 6). Labour, inbuilt in individuals, was the collective asset of the entire community. Mobilization of labour occurred at different levels, however, the basic unit was the household; made of a father, his wife, children, and in some cases, members of the extended family living with them. Apart from this, labour was also mobilised at the level of community, in which case, young men were organised to work for members of the community. Perhaps, this accounts for the Bohannans' assertion that "the rights and duties involved in work relationships are seen in terms of family and lineage values" (already cited).

The socio-political administration in traditional Tiv society was based on lineage system. There was no central authority in form of a king, so the eldest man, not really a ruler, but Orya, head of his compound (usually comprised members of immediate lineage) acted as a political administrator, a custodian of his people's land and culture. Many compounds clustered in a place to form a village, while the villages formed a particular Ipaven, a larger section of a distant lineage. The institution of traditional administration was Tyo, elders' council, with the village Tyo being a subordinate of the Ipaven Tyo. Each Compound head presided over affairs of his compound, and unless such issues could not be resolved, they were not brought for attention of the village Tyo. Equally, a Family head could only forward the problems of his family to the Orya, if he failed to resolve them. Though, it was not in the process of Tiv administration to refer issues to the Tyo of TarTiv (Tiv world council), however, it was possible to act in that way, giving the nature and scope of the problem. So, it was seen that the elders of two or three Itar (pl. world), and indeed the entire Tar Tiv, assemble to discuss, especially, issues relating to external aggression on Tar Tiv or as the case may be. Though, the elders had no agents to enforce their decisions, nobody attempted to defer them. What prevented deferment of the elders' decisions was the people's belief in tsav, witchcraft, which every elder presumably possessed. Tsav was used for protection and destruction, and once an elder withdrew his protective tsav over a person, he was certainly going to die. Therefore, the people feared not to invoke the displeasure of the elders, and given this circumstance, the society strived peaceful. Due to the communal nature and belief system of the traditional Tiv society, it could be understood why the people revolted against the changes introduced through colonial rule.

### **Colonialism In Tiv Land: The Roots Of Modernity**

By 1900, there was aggressive pursuit of the colonial policy of conquest in Nigeria such that those areas, which were not yet under colonial administrative influence, like Tiv land had to be conquered. This era marked the beginning of brutal military expeditions in Tiv land, resulting to its conquest in 1915 (Ikime, 1873: 106). The conquest and instituting of the machinery for political administration was just a second phase in the whole process

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of supplanting the Tiv tradition with modernity, as this had been pursued by the Christian Missions operating in the land. It is therefore logical to start the discussion with the first phase, the activities of the Christian Missions in Tiv land.

Though, several Missions traversed Tiv land for purpose of evangelism, it is noted that in 1879 the J. H. Ashcroft-led expedition landed in Tiv territory, seeking a site for developing a station for the Church Missionary Society (Mockler-Ferryman, 1892: 65). However, the proper laying of the structure for modernising Tiv society was carried out by the Dutch Reformed Church Mission and the Roman Catholic Mission. Through evangelism, converts were taught to denigrate Tiv beliefs such as the protective power of their gods and the influence of tsav on an individual. Indeed, the Tiv culture was said to be timid and barbaric and the people had to turn to the one being taught by the Missionaries. Apart from establishing Churches, the Missionaries established schools. The DRCM was noted for establishing in 1913, the Mkar settlement, which had, a hospital, a school, apart from the earlier one established at Saaitu in 1911. However, due to its radical approaches of effecting changes in Tiv society, the people also rejected it and embraced the RCM. This explains why by 1955, the RCM had its schools in Tiv land numbered over 150. The colonial government also established schools; however, it never really regarded it as a prerogative, since its missionary arm effectively took up the task. The early impact of Christianity and Western education was the birth in Tiv society of people who began to reject the traditional values and the first apparent victims were the Tiv elders.

So, by the 1915 when colonial administration was put in place, it was manned by people who had absorbed Western influence. These were ambitious young men who had accepted the superiority of the Western modern values and wanted to be seen as modernised and civilised. It is no doubt that the elders lost their relevance in Tiv society; no longer exercised political control, never seen as custodians of their people's land and labour. With the passage of time, the social disarticulation was driven rather so far, into other facets of the people's daily life. Tiv young men, educated in the Western sense, who reasoned alike, increased in their numbers. They provided clerical duties to the colonial administration and considered themselves as a class apart and looked at their kith and kin as inferior. As a reaction to the manner in which they were being perceived, the uneducated group despised them as fall-outs from Tiv society. Consequently, there emerged a polarised Tiv society; a society where modern values were at war with traditional values.

The situation was exacerbated by the modern capitalist economic philosophy of wealth accumulation. The introduction of export commodity production, currency and wage labour overturned the hitherto existing status-quo; the communal land ownership, communal labour and the authority of the elders as the managers of the process of production. Land could therefore be owned privately and exclusively from other members of a lineage group, to increase the production of export crops like soya bean, beni seed and groundnuts. Wealth accumulation was greatly induced and it was the function of one's success in outplaying his kinsmen to secure large parcels of land. Given this platform, 'the educated'; in the colonial civil service and the chiefs began to carve out private land. The colonial government that had already proclaimed government ownership of all land within Nigeria supported the holding of private land by people subservient to it.

Successful farmers acquired wealth at the expense of their fellow lineage members by selling their wares at designated sales points known as Canteens. It was an opportunity for some Tiv men to turn to full-time

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businessmen of acting as middlemen between the White company agents and the Local producers. The turning of these sales depots into urban centres made life a bizarre.

### **Nyambuan Of 1939: An Anti-Modernity Revolt**

The most difficult problem faced by the British administrators in Tiv land was adopting a workable system of government. This problem led to attempts at a variety of administrative reorganizations, one after another, ranging from consolidation of the Native Administration already in place to the balkanisation of the Tiv society and placing some under the reign of

Aku Uka of Wukari. However, the Nyambuan began in 1939, two years after the Captain Downes' initiated reorganization was completed. According to Dorward (1975: 96), the revolt, which suggested the failure of Downes' reform, was directed at:

the clan spokesmen and executive officials, the representatives of the colonial government...during Nyambuan, the Tiv not only attempted to overthrow the representatives of the colonial authority, they tried to establish an alternative organization of their own.

Originally, Nyambuan started as an anti-witch craft revolt, but it was soon discovered that the adherents only concealed their intention. Initiation into Nyambuan involved among others, the paying of a certain fee, slaughtering of a fowl and drinking of a concoction prepared by its master. These made a man equipped with powers to dictate a counterfeit human being (Jebu), in other words, a witch or a wizard. The scenario during the time was one that the Nyambuan adherents were found almost throughout the day, pursuing suspected witches and wizards, who only they seemed to see. Since every death was believed to be caused by witches and wizards, presumably with intention to eat the human flesh, adherents of Nyambuan took charge of corpses, for guard, until they decomposed, to prevent witches and wizards from consuming them.

But no sooner that the Nyambuan started that it turned to revolting against the colonial agents and policies in Tiv land. So, the revolt can be traced to political, economic, social and cultural factors, all being the antecedents of colonial rule. From the inception of colonial administration in Tiv land to the later days, British interest has been to secure a favourable environment for economic exploitation. To Tseayo (1975: 69), the Nyambuan was an organised attempt by the Tiv to regenerate its society, and cleanse it of the state of anomie created by the modern sector. Of course, the appointment of Tiv youths as chiefs, to specifically collect taxes and ensure production of cash crops for the colonial administration was the first act of the usurpation of the elders' powers and social disintegration that later culminated in the Nyambuan revolt. Indeed, Lugard had instructed earlier that the people to appoint as chiefs should be intelligent and influential Tiv men, whom Makar (1975: 271-272) describes as "men who had shown interest in European affairs and were willing to cooperate with the British in their conquest of the land". The Tiv had not known the kind of leadership imposed on them by the British, as the instrument of traditional administration was the authority of the elders. However, the colonial administration failed to appreciate this system of gerontocracy and appointed its Chiefs, who were contemptuously regarded as "British chiefs". In fact, even at the time that these Chiefs took-over affairs of local administration, the Tiv people pledged their loyalty to the traditional elders. The position of Rubingh (1969: 147) underscores the point being addressed. According to him, the movement established its own Chiefs, Courts, Messengers, Policemen, and so on, as rivals to the ones imposed on Tiv land by the British officials.



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Apart from the problems emanating from British style of administration, its economic policy founded on taxation and cash crops production at the neglect of Tiv staples like guinea corn, millet and yam resulted to famine in the land. Even the so-called cash crops were sold at prices fixed by the government agent companies. So, the Nyambuam was not just a revolt against the political policy but also against the economic policy and the group demonstrated its rejection by harassing the missionary cum colonial officials, their native agents and refusing to pay the colonial taxes, among others. Due to unending demand for production of cash crops by the colonial administration, severe food shortages occurred in the society leading to malnutrition. The period of hunger was so long, between the 1920s and 1930s, that famine was officially recognized by the administration. The situation was even more worrisome after World War II and the government admitted that the native courts have become engaged in no other duty than trial of cases of theft of foodstuffs (SNP, 1945). Consequently, alarm was raised by one of the colonial officials, Britten about the neglect of food crops production; that Tiv farmers are eating their seed yams (Britten, 1953). Perhaps this explains why the Nyambuam was an all embracing revolt. The submission of the Resident, Beck (1939) that it spread like wildfire and seriously threatened the authority of the administration confirms the situation. Yet, rather than accept the reality of the situation, he blamed the crisis on the inability of the Tiv clan councils to maintain law and order.

A further illustration of the economic motive of the Nyambuam is necessary to enhance understanding of the discourse. During the world economic crisis, or rather depression of the 1930s, the prices of Tiv exports were drastically affected, because the cash crops economy was strongly tied to the vagaries of the international economy. Meanwhile, prices of the Tiv produce were cut down as a result of the world economic glut, those of the imported European products, which the Tiv bought, remained very high and taxes were not reduced either. In response, a revolt called Adzov broke out in Tiv land, which the colonial administration failed to interpret in the context of the economic situation on ground, creating a stage for the rise of Nyambuam as more violent substitute. The Church as an arm of colonialism, led in the process of eroding Tiv society of its traditional values. Like it is already stated, through its education and teaching, it portrayed Tiv culture as barbaric, turned its converts against the elders, whom it accused of possession Tsav (witchcraft) and using it for destruction of the youths. They abolished Yamshe, exchange marriage, taught the people to reject Akombo (fetishes) and in most cases, attempted to physically force people to do their will. Obviously, the resultant effects of the Church evangelism and teachings were the overturn of Tiv society; the subjection of the elders and relegation of the Tiv cultural values to the background. In light of this prevailing circumstance, the Nyambuam was meant to wage war against the missionary, so as to reintegrate the fallen values into Tiv world view.

However, up to the period of independence, happenings in Tiv land, such as the Nande (burn) and Atemtyough (smasher of head) were to prove that the Nyambuam revolt did not cause any significant change in the values introduced by modernity, apart from the reforms in the Tiv Native Authority, which guaranteed more involvement of the Tiv people.

### **Tiv Society, 1960-2013: Towards Re-Traditionalisation**

By 1960, colonial rule was no more in Tiv land and Nigeria in general. However, its legacies in terms of the physical structures it bequeathed to the people and the mental erosion it had caused the same people, continued to hold sway, guaranteeing continuity of the struggle between the two forces. To the Tiv, the devil they had fought during colonial was gone, and therefore the task was to reintegrate those fallen values. However, today, the Tiv

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continue to lament the hopelessness of their war against modernity instituted by capitalism, in a way that makes every other person believe that Or Buter Vihi Tar, White man spoilt the world. It explains the extent to which the Tiv have found great difficulty in absorbing the White man's way of life even in the present times.

It also explains the seemingly gloomy outcome of the re-traditionalisation project. Indeed, the Tiv have felt even more, the impact of modernity on their culture as globalization sweeps across the entire world communities. Thus, the battle shifts from a complete return to tradition to a mutual peaceful coexistence of these two social variables, since the quest for a return to tradition, typical of the Tiv appears not feasible. Perhaps, Inglehart's (2004 13) statement underlines the above point. According to him:

The growing globalization of the world makes it increasingly important to understand...diversity.

People with varying beliefs and values can live together and work together productively, but for this to happen it is crucial to understand and appreciate their distinctive worldviews.

The project is being carried out through cultural re-awakening, to bear on the socio-economic and political life of the people. In this regard, behaviour is a sphere that is mostly targeted for the cultural re-awakening. A Tiv man must show by his behaviour, typically Tiv, that he is a Tiv man. Aspects of the behaviour, which are being addressed include; upholding Tiv language as a medium of social relations amongst the Tiv people, dressing to depict Tiv culture and imbibing Tiv norms and values as stipulated in the principle of ya na angbian (eat and let your brother eat too), to regulate inter-personal relationship.

It is therefore logical to consider the areas of compromise one after the other, and the first is Traditional Medicare, which the Tiv have exhibited profound excellence. Apart from the modern hospitals that engage in westernised medication, the Tiv Association of Traditional Medical Practitioners parades healers who adopt methods, which are consistent with the Tiv tradition, to cure ailments. In terms of administration, the traditional apparatus, the elders have become used in the regulation of social activities and ensuring the traverse of peace, order and security in Tiv land. It is now common to have conflict over land handled by the elders, and unless the problem defers solution, it could not be referred to the modern-style chiefs.

In the sphere of religion, much has been done to reintegrate Tiv values into the modern religions, to make them more meaningful to the people. For instance the belief that only the White man's name depicted holiness and qualified to be borne by an individual during baptism is gradually being eroded, giving room for the use of Tiv names such as Mnena and Aondengu, for example. The optimism surrounding the whole phenomenon indicates that despite the incursion of Christianity, traditional practices still persist in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. These include; puberty rites, marriage rituals, funeral ceremonies, witchcraft, divination, traditional medicine, libation to ancestors, ancestral veneration, priesthood and chieftaincy (Gbenda, 2012: 126). Equally, Nigerian people have become conscious of maintaining a cultural identity that reflects their needs, to resist the impact of the modernity agent, globalisation. This is completely in response to the insinuation by the government that Nigeria has to be called our country and not USA, Britain or France, and our attitudes, values and beliefs should expressly portray us as Nigerians (Ahokegh, 2010: 7).

## **Conclusion**

This paper discusses the struggle between tradition and modernity, using the Nyambuan revolt in Tiv land in 1939 as a case study. It sees the revolt as culminating from British colonial policies in the area, which introduced capitalist-oriented values that supplanted the indigenous ones. Though colonial rule has long exited Tiv society,

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modernity as introduced during its rule and in the present era of globalisation continues to loom large. It is concluded that a complete return to the Tiv tradition is not quite feasible; instead, what goes on is a quest for mutual peaceful coexistence between the Tiv traditional values and the modern ones.

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