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TIV TRADITIONAL POLITICAL SYSTEMS: A STUDY OF GOVERNANCE AND SOCIAL ORDER

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Abstract

The Tiv people of central Nigeria possess a rich and distinctive traditional political system that has sustained their governance and social order for centuries. Rooted in a decentralized, acephalous structure, the Tiv political system exemplifies the intricate interplay between governance, kinship, and cultural norms. This study examines the essential elements of Tiv traditional political systems, exploring their historical foundations, organizational frameworks, and roles in maintaining social cohesion and order within the community. The Tiv society operates on the principle of egalitarianism, with governance embedded in a segmentary lineage system. This system, underpinned by kinship ties, emphasizes collective decision-making and conflict resolution through councils of elders, clan heads, and family representatives. At its core, the Tiv political system embodies principles of participatory democracy, with authority distributed horizontally rather than concentrated in hierarchical structures. The relevance of studying the Tiv traditional political systems lies in their resilience and adaptability in the face of external influences, including colonial and post-colonial interventions. These systems provide a framework for understanding indigenous approaches to governance, law, and conflict resolution that are often overlooked in favour of centralized, Western-style governance models. The study highlights how these indigenous systems contribute to social harmony, economic organization, and cultural identity among the Tiv people. By analyzing the Tiv people's traditional governance mechanisms, this study offers valuable insights into the broader discourse on African political systems and the importance of integrating indigenous governance practices into modern political frameworks. It underscores the need to preserve and adapt these systems to contemporary challenges while respecting their cultural significance. This exploration contributes to a deeper understanding of how traditional political systems can coexist with modern governance structures to enhance political stability and social order.

Keywords: Tiv Tradition Political System, Governance, Leadership and Social Order

Introduction

Philosophy has always played a vital role in shaping governance and leadership by providing foundational principles for order and cohesion. As such, this is not missing in the case of the Tiv people. In the Tiv context, philosophy informs governance practices, leadership behaviors, and mechanisms for resolving conflicts, all of which are essential for maintaining social order. The Tiv people, predominantly found in Nigeria, possess a rich cultural heritage deeply interwoven with their traditional political systems. Known for their agrarian lifestyle, the Tiv people have developed a sophisticated socio-political structure centered on kinship and communal living. Their political systems reflect the philosophies embedded in their worldview, including values such as justice, communalism, and respect for hierarchy. This paper aims to examine Tiv's traditional political systems, emphasizing governance, leadership, and social order. The paper seeks to illuminate the enduring wisdom in Tiv practices and its relevance to contemporary governance challenges.

Tiv: Worldview and Cosmology

The Tiv perceives the world as a dynamic interplay of spiritual and physical realities. The Tiv people believe that the universe is divided into two primary spheres: the visible (*iyol*) and the invisible (*Akombo*). The visible world encompasses the tangible elements of life, such as the land (tar), rivers, and plants. The invisible world consists of spiritual beings, forces, and ancestral spirits. *Akombo* is central to Tiv cosmology. They are spiritual forces or manifestations believed to influence natural and human activities. Each *akombo* has a specific role, and rituals are conducted to appease or invoke their powers. For example, *Swem*, one of the most revered *akombo*, serves as a symbol of justice and truth in Tiv society (Ayanga 53). The Tiv cosmological structure includes a hierarchy of beings. This cosmology includes a hierarchical structure of beings, which governs their spiritual, social, and moral life. Central to this hierarchy is the Tiv concept of *Aondo*, (Supreme Being) alongside other spiritual entities and ancestral spirits. This structure reflects the Tiv's understanding of the universe and its organization, which shapes their cultural practices, beliefs, and interactions.

Aondo is at the apex of Tiv's cosmological hierarchy and is considered the Supreme Being. *Aondo* is often associated with the sky and is perceived as the creator and ultimate authority in the Tiv spiritual worldview. This deity is transcendent, playing a minimal role in the daily lives of the Tiv people, similar to the concept of a *deus otiosus* or a *withdrawn god* in comparative religious studies. However, *Aondo* is occasionally invoked during extraordinary events, such as natural disasters or severe communal challenges, symbolizing ultimate power and control over the cosmos (Bohannon, 28). Beneath *Aondo* in the Tiv spiritual hierarchy are spirits, broadly categorized into beneficial and malevolent types. A significant group within this category is the *mbatsav*, which are associated with witchcraft. *Mbatsav* encapsulates ideas of spiritual power, knowledge, and morality. It refers to a mystical form of power often associated with witchcraft but not limited to malevolent uses. In Tiv's thought, *Tsav* (singular) is an intrinsic quality of the soul, which enables individuals to influence events and people beyond physical means (Rubingh 71). *Tsav* itself refers to a mystical force or power inherent in individuals, often utilized in secretive societies or cults that regulate societal norms and behavior. While *Mbatsav* is often viewed negatively due to its association with sorcery, it also has positive connotations. It is considered essential for leadership, wisdom, and social well-being when used responsibly. However, the misuse of *Tsav* can lead to chaos and suffering, highlighting the moral ambiguities of power in Tiv's philosophy. The dual nature of *Mbatsav* illustrates the Tiv people's distinct understanding of morality, where intent and context determine ethical judgment. *Mbatarev* is

believed to influence the community's fortune, health, and social harmony. Depending on whether their influence is perceived as beneficial or harmful, they are sometimes invoked or appeased through rituals. The Tiv attribute misfortunes, such as illness or unexplained deaths, to the activity of malevolent spirits within this group, emphasizing the need for divination and ritual interventions to restore balance (Bohannan, 75).

Another crucial aspect of Tiv cosmology is the role of ancestral spirits, known as *Ujijingi mba uter asev*. These spirits are considered guardians of morality and communal welfare. Ancestors are venerated through rituals and sacrifices, as they are believed to mediate between the living and the divine. Properly honoring the ancestors ensures blessings, protection, and continuity of the family lineage. Ancestral spirits function as enforcers of social norms. When societal values are violated, it is believed that the ancestors can express their displeasure through misfortunes or spiritual punishments. Conversely, harmonious living and adherence to cultural expectations are thought to attract their blessings (Downes, 45). The Tiv people also recognize other lesser spirits and deities associated with specific natural elements, such as rivers, forests, and the earth. These spirits are often localized, and their influence is tied to particular geographic areas or communities. Ritual specialists, such as diviners or priests, often mediate between humans and these entities, performing ceremonies to seek favor or avert calamity.

In *Tiv* cosmology, Human beings occupy a central position as they are the ones who interact directly with the various spiritual entities. Tiv cosmology emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings, with human beings acting as stewards of moral and social order. Through rituals, ceremonies, and daily practices, human beings strive to maintain harmony within the cosmological framework. This position of stewardship also comes with responsibilities. Tiv culture places a strong emphasis on communal living, where an individual's action is seen as impacting the collective. The belief in spiritual retribution reinforces the importance of ethical behavior and accountability within the community.

In contemporary times, Tiv Cosmology has undergone significant evolution and adaptation. The advent of colonialism, Christianity, and Islam introduced new religious paradigms, which reshaped Tiv cosmology. In the period of colonialism and post-colonialism, Missionaries often dismissed indigenous practices as pagan, leading to the erosion of traditional beliefs and practices (Burton, 45). However, many Tiv people have synthesized elements of Christianity and Islam with their indigenous spirituality, resulting in mixed religious expressions. In contemporary times, Tiv cosmology faces challenges from urbanization, education, and globalization. Urbanized Tiv individuals prioritize modern lifestyles, thereby distancing themselves from traditional practices. Nonetheless, rural Tiv communities often maintain these practices, albeit with adaptations to modern realities (Makar, 87). Despite external pressures, Tiv cosmology retains relevance in areas such as conflict resolution, environmental management, and cultural identity. The belief in communal harmony and the role of elders as custodians of spiritual and social order has been instrumental in resolving disputes.

In Tiv cosmology, the concept of reality and storytelling is connected with the term *kwagh Hir*. The term *Kwagh Hir* in Tiv translates to *things of magic* or *something wonderful*. It embodies the Tiv worldview regarding the nature of reality, storytelling, and moral education. The *Kwagh Hir* is most notably represented through traditional puppet theatres such as *kwagh Alom* and *Ajirgber*, which blend performance, narrative, and spirituality. This medium conveys philosophical insights, which address themes such as justice, social order, and communal well-

being (Makar 42). The performances serve as a reflective tool to address contemporary issues in Tiv society. According to Akiga Sai, a Tiv historian, *Kwagh Hir* provides an avenue for moral and ethical discourse, often through satire and symbolism (39). It suggests that the Tiv see storytelling not merely as entertainment but as a means to teach and reflect more profound truths about existence.

Tiv Traditional Political Systems

The Tiv people have a unique and intricate traditional political system that has evolved over centuries, which reflects their socio-cultural beliefs, communal lifestyle, and resistance to hierarchical authority. The Tiv society is structured around clans and lineages rooted in their ancestral belief system. The primary unit of political organization is the lineage, which operates under the principle of kinship. Tiv political systems lack centralized authority; instead, they function through a segmentary system where power is decentralized and dispersed among kinship groups (Bohannan, 53). This system is hierarchical but not in the traditional sense of centralized leadership. At the base are the nuclear families, which form extended families, then lineages, sub-clans, and finally, clans. Each level of this hierarchy has a leader, often the eldest or most respected male, who acts as the custodian of traditions and arbitrates disputes (Bohannan, 57). This system is often referred to as an *acephalous* or stateless society, as it does not conform to the centralized political structures typical of many African ethnic groups. At the clan level, decisions are made collectively by the elders, who represent their respective lineages. These elders form a council that deliberates on critical issues such as land disputes, inter-clan conflicts, and communal ceremonies. The absence of a centralized figure, such as a king or chief, reinforces the egalitarian nature of Tiv society, where power is distributed among many rather than concentrated in one individual. In the Tiv traditional political system, the *Or-ya* is a significant figure. While not a monarch, the *Or-ya* serves as a unifying figure for a particular lineage or sub-clan. Their authority is derived from wisdom, age and the ability to mediate conflicts effectively. They play a vital role in maintaining harmony within the community and ensuring that traditions are upheld (Makar, 34).

In the Tiv Traditional system, decision-making processes are highly participatory and consensus-driven. Meetings, known as *tsombur*, are convened to address community issues. These gatherings involve extensive discussions, with every member allowed to voice their opinion. Decisions are made collectively, ensuring that all viewpoints are considered. This democratic approach underscores the Tiv people's commitment to fairness and communal harmony. On the other hand, the Tiv people rely on various mechanisms to maintain order and resolve conflicts. These include customary laws, moral codes, and religious practices. Disputes are typically resolved through negotiation and mediation, with the *mbayaav* (a council of elders) playing a crucial role. The *mbayaav* also serve as spiritual leaders, using their knowledge of Tiv religion and traditions to guide their decisions.

Justice and Social Order in Tiv

Justice in Tiv society often referred to as *u tilen sha mimi* is a moral concept tied to fairness, reciprocity, and the preservation of communal harmony. This principle mandates fairness and honesty in interpersonal relationships and decision-making processes. It discourages actions that disrupt communal peace, such as theft, deceit, or violence, ensuring that individuals act in ways that promote unity and trust (Downes, 71). Justice in Tiv society is both restorative and distributive, focusing on reparation and fairness rather than punitive measures. The Tiv legal system is built on customary laws that prioritize the restoration of relationships and

community equilibrium. Disputes are often resolved through dialogue, mediation and negotiation with the aim of achieving *Bem man yongu ihimen* (peace and reconciliation). The Tiv people believe that justice is not about punishment but about restoring harmony and mending broken relationships (Rubingh, 69).

The Tiv justice system prioritizes reconciliation over punishment and also communal values. Communal values underpin the administration of justice as it ensures that legal decisions promote social cohesion rather than individualism. Similarly, the pursuit of justice strengthens communal bonds by addressing grievances and preventing conflicts from escalating. For instance, in cases of homicide, the Tiv practice of *kimbin kwagh* (compensation) illustrates the integration of justice and communalism. Rather than exacting vengeance, the family of the victim receives compensation from the offender's lineage, a process that acknowledges the collective responsibility of kinship groups while averting cycles of retaliation (Bohannan, 71). Offenders are expected to make amends, often through compensation or public apologies, to repair the social fabric disrupted by their actions. This approach underscores the communal nature of Tiv society, where individual behaviour is seen as intricately linked to collective welfare. Justice among the Tiv is also perceived as divinely ordained. Ancestral spirits or *akombo*, are believed to oversee human affairs, ensuring that moral order is maintained.

Violations of justice are thought to incur both social and spiritual consequences, necessitating rituals to appease the ancestors and restore balance (Downes, 90). Unlike the Western conception of justice, which may emphasize retribution or individual rights, Tiv justice is rooted in restorative principles. It seeks to restore relationships disrupted by wrongdoing and to reintegrate offenders into the community (Bohannan, 66). Tiv justice is fundamentally concerned with fairness and equity, ensuring that all parties in a dispute are treated with respect and dignity. Decisions are often made collectively by elders or councils, who aim to balance the interests of individuals with the well-being of the larger community (Bohannan, 68).

On the other hand, is social order, which in Tiv society is underpinned by the concept of Tar, which represents the collective existence and unity of the community. The Tiv see themselves as interconnected, where individual well-being is inseparably linked to the collective good. This interconnectedness is expressed through their kinship system (*ya*) and extended family structure (*Atse*). The *ya* system organizes Tiv society into cohesive units that share resources, responsibilities, and obligations, creating a framework for mutual support and accountability (Makar, 44). The Tiv people also emphasize the role of elders in maintaining social order. Elders serve as custodians of culture, mediators in disputes, and guides for moral conduct. Their authority is derived from both their age and accumulated wisdom, which all members of the community respect. The role of the *mbatsav*, a council of traditional spiritual leaders, is instrumental in dispensing justice. The *mbatsav* use their spiritual authority and wisdom to mediate conflicts, interpret customary laws and deliver verdicts that are binding on all parties involved. Their judgments are guided by the principles of equity, impartiality and the common good (Aver, 33). Through dialogue and consensus, elders ensure that conflicts are resolved amicably, thus preserving harmony and preventing societal fragmentation (Bohannan, 53).

An outstanding part of the Tiv political system is *Tyem miongu* - communal living. The Tiv communal ethos is encapsulated in the concept of *Tyem miongu*, meaning mutual dependence or living together. This philosophy underscores the importance of collective well-being over

individualism. *Tyem mjiyonu* promotes values such as cooperation, reciprocity, and accountability. It is reflected in communal labor practices, conflict resolution mechanisms, and the sharing of resources. For the Tiv people, individual success is inseparable from communal harmony, which reinforces the idea that one's identity and purpose are derived from one's role within the community. In Tiv communalism, there is collective ownership. Land, livestock and other resources are generally regarded as communal assets rather than individual property. This ensures equitable access to resources and prevents economic disparities that could disrupt social harmony (Makar, 33). On the other hand, Tiv communalism mandates that members of the community should support one another in times of need. This extends to sharing food, assisting with agricultural tasks, and providing care for the sick and elderly (Wegh, 52).

Tiv Traditional Political System and Contemporary Governance Challenges

The Tiv traditional political system is fundamentally acephalous, meaning it lacks a centralized authority or a hierarchical leadership structure. Instead, governance revolves around the concept of "gerontocracy," where elders, known as the *mbayaav* play crucial roles in decision-making and conflict resolution (Makar 42). These elders are revered for their wisdom, experience, and knowledge of customary laws, enabling them to guide the community effectively. At the core of the Tiv people's political organization is the kinship structure, which is segmented into clans ("Ipyaven") and extended families ("Tse"). Each family unit operates autonomously but collaborates with other units to maintain harmony and address collective issues (Bohannan 18). This system fosters a strong sense of unity and mutual responsibility among the Tiv people.

In Tiv's traditional belief system, there is what is known as "Tsav," often translated as mystical power or authority, underpins their political ideology. Tsav is considered a spiritual force that guides the *mbayaav* in their leadership roles, ensuring that their decisions align with the community's values and traditions (Rubingh 67). This integration of spirituality and governance reflects the holistic nature of the Tiv political system. However, the introduction of colonial rule and the subsequent establishment of modern state systems disrupted the Tiv traditional governance structure. The imposition of centralized authority, represented by chiefs and local government officials, often conflicted with the Tiv people's acephalous traditions (Khan 154). This tension continues to manifest in contemporary governance, where attempts to integrate traditional and modern systems have faced significant obstacles.

One major challenge is the erosion of the *mbayaav*'s authority. As modern political institutions gain prominence, the role of elders in decision-making has diminished. Younger generations, influenced by globalization and modern education, often question the relevance of traditional practices (Ahire 92). This generational divide weakens the communal bonds that underpin the Tiv political system.

Another issue is the politicization of traditional institutions. In some cases, modern political actors co-opt traditional leaders to advance their agendas, undermining the impartiality and integrity of these institutions. This manipulation erodes trust in both traditional and modern governance structures (Nyerere 118). Furthermore, land and resource disputes, exacerbated by population growth and climate change, pose significant governance challenges. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, rooted in communal dialogue and consensus, often struggle to address the complexities of contemporary disputes (Akanji 37). The lack of effective

integration between traditional and modern legal systems further complicates these issues. To address these challenges, efforts must be made to harmonize the Tiv traditional political system with contemporary governance structures. This integration requires a distinct approach that respects the Tiv people's cultural heritage while accommodating the demands of modern governance.

One potential solution is to institutionalize traditional councils within the modern political framework. These councils, which are made up of *mbayaav* and other community representatives, could act as advisory bodies to local governments, ensuring that governance decisions align with the community's values and priorities (Mamdani 210). Such collaboration could enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance in Tiv areas. Additionally, efforts should be made to educate younger generations about the significance of Tiv traditions. Integrating cultural education into school curricula could foster a deeper appreciation for traditional values and encourage their preservation (Olayemi 65). This approach would help bridge the generational divide and strengthen communal identity.

Finally, conflict resolution mechanisms must be reformed to incorporate both traditional and modern approaches. Training traditional leaders in mediation and legal principles could enhance their capacity to address contemporary disputes effectively. Similarly, modern courts could collaborate with traditional councils to provide comprehensive and culturally sensitive solutions (Ekanem 84).

Conclusion

The advent of British colonization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries introduced profound changes to Tiv traditional political systems. The British imposed indirect rule, appointing warrant chiefs to govern the Tiv people. This was met with resistance, as it conflicted with the acephalous nature of Tiv governance (East, 19). Despite these challenges, the Tiv people have managed to preserve many aspects of their traditional systems, which continue to co-exist with modern political structures. In contemporary times, Tiv traditional institutions have adapted to modern governance. Traditional rulers, although not part of the formal government, play advisory roles and act as custodians of culture. The resilience of Tiv's political systems highlights their ability to adapt while maintaining their core principles. The Tiv traditional political system exemplifies a complex and well-organized society that values collective decision-making, egalitarian principles, and cultural preservation. Its acephalous nature, rooted in kinship and lineage, contrasts sharply with hierarchical governance structures. While external influences have brought about changes, the Tiv people have maintained the essence of their political traditions, demonstrating their cultural resilience. Thus, this paper underscores the profound influence of philosophical thought on Tiv traditional political systems, demonstrating how concepts like justice, communalism, and humility shape governance, leadership, and social order. Tiv philosophy provides a rich resource for understanding alternative governance models and addressing contemporary challenges.

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