

TIV WRITTEN LITERATURE AND GENRES

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Abstract

This paper investigates the varied attempts of selected Tiv artists and artistes to foster discourse on the topical subject of Tiv Written Literature and Genres. The purpose of this research is to examine how these creative practitioners employ different literary forms and genres to explore human experience and address pressing social concerns such as nation-building. By analysing long-narrated prose, dramatic works in acts and scenes, and poetic or musical expressions that use condensed, symbolic language, the study highlights the rich diversity of Tiv written literature. It contributes to knowledge by showing how literature not only represents society and culture but also sustains life, shapes identity, and engages in creative storytelling that intertwines music, drama, and narrative art. In the hands of poets, musicians, thespians, and writers, literature moves beyond mere communication to become a vital tool for cultural preservation and social development in Tiv society.

Keywords: Tiv literature, drama, prose, poetry, culture.

Introduction

Within the realm of literary practices, literature (be it through poetry, drama or prose), acquires a much broader dimension of usage and interpretation far beyond its basic signification as a human system of communication that uses unusual vocal sounds, signs, and even written symbols, in the transmission of feelings, ideas, thoughts, to mention but a few. The beauty of literature (which encompasses music, theatre, and prose) is that it awakens and exposes one's consciousness to the world around, from the common to the magnificent. Indeed, literature introduces one to a new world of experience; not just by speaking to, but also by affecting one in a myriad of ways. Hakes (2015) says that, "literature, *the mother of all arts* (italics mine), is like

a mirror that reflect life for us” and “appeals to our senses and to our feelings, as well as to our minds. It enables us to see, hear and feel characters in action. In a sense, it recreates experience.” (www.phc.edu).

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that, literature creates a mental picture or images and appeals to our senses: (the ones that appeal to our hearing are called aural/auditory; those for seeing are called visual; those for taste are called gustatory; those for touch are called tactile; those for movement are called kinaesthetic and those for smell are called olfactory).

Literature, in simple terms, can be seen as a work of art which uses creative imagination to give a fiction and non-fiction account of human experiences. As a mirror, literature x-rays society, thereby revealing its flaws and foibles.

Nzerem (2002) says: “literature is vertically and horizontally expressed or communicated and time-bound to the timeless. By vertical communication, we mean, literature is handed down through the generations. Thus, we say, literature lives forever. By horizontal communication, we mean that literary works move from one geographical area to another. Hence, literature is not limited by time and space. It is eternal and universal.” One cannot dispute the succinct assertion of the author. This is because literature transcends time and place, making itself accessible to the old and young generation, especially those interested in reading.

Tiv literature, like other African literatures, or indeed, other literatures of the world, has its roots in orality; from the verbal conveyance of messages from one generation to another. Kerekaa (2019) corroborates this notion when he stated that:

One of the critical consequences of the transition from oral literature to written form that is frozen and cast hard in print is the paucity of recognition of the role of oral literature in national development. For instance, there is a disturbing evidence of a dearth of recognition of Tiv oral poetry as a tool for national development. The fact is, the role of this expressive and emotive oral art form among the Tiv of Central Nigeria in national development have received extremely sparse recognition in the scholarly circle. This is rooted in the praxis of sheer sentiment that oral literature belongs to the non-literate society and therefore, lacks capacity for development. With the emergence of the written form of

literature, the expressive oral form of literature has suffered the stigma of inferiority and certainly what should not be heard of in a literate society.

Although quoted here at length, this submission is potent and affects an express definition of written literature as an attempt to refute the essence of orality is to deny literariness. It's the verbal expressiveness that makes literature literature. A working definition could be that 'written literature refers to any form of literature that is rendered into hard print and recorded in a fixed form. These include novels, poems, play-texts, and other forms of creative expressions that are recorded on paper, parchment, or any other form of written medium.' In a layman's definition, Tiv written literature can be viewed in simple terms, as the literary expressions in Tiv language or by Tiv authors, in the received colonial languages (specifically English for the Tiv), exploring their various philosophies, ideologies and experiences.

Literature has a way of staying indelible on people's minds, thereby serving as a repository of their culture. A compelling story needs to be told in a way that resonates and inspires its audience. And by adding engaging, relatable visuals, it creates a very powerful combination indeed. This truth is extended to the communication world, and literature cannot be extracted or removed from communication. People love stories, especially ones that are didactic, educative, impactful, edifying, just to mention a few. Since the dawn of humanity, stories have excited, warned, taught and informed. A story (be it through drama, poetry or prose), takes your audience on a journey down memory lane to a period when human laws and rules were written about human existence, their environment, norms, beliefs, technology, music, and what could generally be referred to as culture. It gives structure to your message-which could be hope, despondency, dejection, caution, encouragement, and many more. Creative stories appear too thrilling, and there is always a narrative that the right audience can relate to and buy into. A creative rendition of a people's culture, which focuses on the visual aids, through the employment of select imagery, has a way of communicating volumes of information. For instance, a story about the origin of man, by a select race or ethnicity, told by its descendants, and handed down from

generation to generation, albeit transformations, with the aid of visuals and audio visuals, will communicate volumes of information and clarity, and become a part and parcel of their history, to an extent that, disputation by any authority will be non-existent, and it will be accepted as the authentic story, no matter the mythical or legendary undertones associated to it. By so doing, literature transcends space and time.

Tiv literature and genres are very rich and inspiring. Perhaps the earliest form of literature in every society is oral. This existed with man before the discovery of paper or writing materials. According to Tarhemba (2021:1):

All pre-literate societies had no written literature but possessed one form of oral performance or the other, as handed down by their forbears. These are transmitted or handed over by word of mouth, through successive generations. The transmission is through stories or songs. The desire of writers of African oral literature to preserve, assert and showcase their rich cultural heritage to the outside world informed the transfer of oral traditions into the written form.

This clearly depicts, oral literature is mostly transmitted through words of mouth and does not need an educated agency for the rendition. In line with the aforementioned, this paper aims to explore the various genres of Tiv written literature, with specific references to some notable works to drive home the point.

Tiv written literature, although rich, has many challenges; as the majority who should read have no access to it. This is because the language is approached with disdain and reluctance. Since the 1990s, many parents prefer their children to speak English or any other foreign language, as they regard to sophistication. To this end, the Tiv literature and language have suffered a huge decline. Senator Suemo Chia, the author of *Adan Wade Kohol Ga*, was quoted to have said in an interview that: “Tyodzua Akosu’s translation of his book into English had a wider readership even amongst the Tiv people. This is a confirmation that many Tiv readers shy away from books written in the Tiv Language.” Literature and language go hand in hand, and there is no way one can be detached from the other. The question begging for an answer, therefore, is: ‘What is the fate

of Tiv written literature?’ This and a few other questions are the focus of this paper.

Drama in Tivland

This is perhaps the oldest form of literature in the world, largely due to its communicative nature, which, like oral literature, must not undergo writing before performance. Drama is liberal and embraces both written and oral forms, through commitment to memory and improvisation. Drama is a genre of literature which creates or recreates human experience through dramatisation; it is the representation of human action. It can occur on a built stage, motor park, or village square or on a village pathway, in the case of communal celebrations and displays. The basic elements of drama are plot, characters, action, act/scenes, and setting, while dialogue serves as its distinguishing style. Characters are the persons that the playwright has created in the play, and they are referred to as the *dramatis personae*. Drama is about persons in action, so we cannot have drama without characters.

Yerima (2020) opines that, “theatre (i.e drama), is a representational art; it can fuse, separate and also remain an entity or subject of identification of the society, which it mirrors. I always define theatre as ‘the representation of life, with a twist, in the time, space and place.’” (2020:47).

Perhaps, the oldest form of drama in Tivland is the *Kwagh-hir* puppet theatre, which was in vogue till the late 90s. This form of drama thrived among the Tiv and proclaimed varying themes, styles and language. It helped to spread morality and sanity in the land, especially amongst the children and youth, who watched it with glee, and took home with them moral lessons that helped in shaping their lives. The *Kwagh-hir* was both a fascination, entertainment education, as the performers were mostly itinerant and only performed where they were invited. Gradually, this art declined amongst the Tiv people. Drama in Tivland took a dive to stardom, with the adaptation of popular works of art and new written scripts in the early 2000s. For instance, the adaptation of Suemo Chia’s *Adam Wade Kohol Ga*, by the Tiv filmmakers, generated a lot of interest among the elderly Tiv people, who saw a recreation of cultural beliefs embedded in it.

Ayange a Ormbaiv kpen Ngeen by George Iortema is a 21st Century play, which x-rays the moral and social decadence in society. Set in Tivland of Benue State, the play revolves around three main characters, and explores the themes of betrayal, adultery, promiscuity and many more. The playwright assumes the position of an arbiter to warn and ridicule the Tiv society, so they can pave the way for reformation. The play's beauty and Tiv authenticity lie in the rich use of language and proverbs. This can be put side by side with great playwrights in the country.

There are several other playwrights who did justice and are still doing justice to the written drama in Tivland, albeit written in English; what Ngugi wa Thiong'o calls "the oppressor's language." These authors, however, excel in their arts by portraying the rich cultural heritage of the Tiv people, as they explore the romantic and metaphysical world, depicting their state of being. The aim of this paper is not to analyse individual texts, but to expose the potency and validity which Tiv authors place in their written literature. Suffice it to say that these playwrights expose the very core of society, without mincing words. Drama is always an improvisation of human actions and character on stage, in that the nakedness of society is revealed and magnified.

For instance, *Swem Karagbe* by Iorwuese Hagher is a critical exposé into the Tiv world of occult and tradition. It offers the audience an insight into the dreaded yet most functional totem of the Tiv people, without which they would merely be existing. He, however, satirises the corruption surrounding it, which seems to be the most disturbing, because the potency is lost due to manipulation. This play is therefore an eye-opener and a clarion call for the Tiv sons to retrace their steps and embrace their culture, in the face of encroaching Western civilisations and religion.

Sons of Akpe by Boniface Leva projects the misunderstanding and conflict between the feuding sons of Akpe, which tears the family apart due to their personal choices and unbending lifestyles. This representation is not only about the Akpe family, but by extension, the entire Tivland. Since their encounter with Western civilisation and religion, most Tiv have abandoned their cultures and are not willing to be identified as Tiv people again. Western Christianity abhors listening to tribal songs and equates it to ancestral and heathen worship. This is an

erroneous notion that needs to be dispelled, and Boniface Leva did not hide his dissatisfaction.

Constantly dramatising such issues is to put a check on society, so as to pave the way for reformation. Nwagbo Pat Obi speaks very highly of theatre:

Nigerian theatre practice contributes to the survival of the economy, especially in recession periods. Theatre enriches the practitioners with creativity...to deploy creativity with cultural knowledge to create wealth, thus contributing to the economic development. Culture is theatrical. Government promotes theatre through cultural administration to orientate the people using musical concerts, dance performance, drama productions, film shows, etc. (2020:86).

One cannot help but agree to her assertion wholly, as theatre creates wealth. At the national level, (just as it was with *Kwagh-hir* performances) since the early 90s till date, Nollywood has been doing a marvellous job, in not only retelling our cultural stories, but also accruing huge budgets to the government treasury, with the production of films. Recently, at the state and local levels, there has been a dynamic increase in the number of theatrical industries, who are determined to tell their stories, rather than the bastardisation of the same by people who might have read or heard of them and decide to script them. This venture not only brings about cultural sustainability but also provides huge economic benefits for the state and local governments they hail from, as well as offering employment to the teeming youths, thereby reducing the crime rate. It is our earnest desire that, government can look in this direction and refurbish local industries, so as to encourage creativity and the creation of wealth.

Poetry in Tivland

Poetry means many things to many people, based on the context and situation of composition. It is seen by many as an art form, expressed or written in verse, which usually uses a condensed language, different from day-to-day speech. The Tiv people equally experiment with different forms, ranging from elegies, to epics, to ballads and eulogies, etc, with their corresponding themes and meanings.

Ikyer (2017) asserts that:

Poetry is one of the most vibrant artistic forms for socio-economic and political reconstruction of society among the Tiv of North Central Nigeria. The poets fix themselves in the forefront of arousing and propagating cultural consciousness, exposing vices, extolling virtues and personalities with such attributes, mobilizing people for unity and development, ensuring progressive change, maintaining social order and cohesion, unmasking socio-economic contradictions of class and polity, expressing the unheard voices of the voiceless in society and charting out a direction for the future of society. By reflecting the jeers, fears, aspirations, visions and general character of the society, they occupy a popular place and position in the social structure of Tiv society and their poetry is reinvigorated, in the usual popular way, in the new sensibilities of the digital technology, being dynamic in thematic exploration, traditional or modern.

His assertion, albeit quoted at length, all but sums up what poetry stands for in Tivland. Perhaps, Tiv poetry stems from oral renditions. The oral poets occupy an important place in the socio-economic structure of the Tiv people. This is because, their compositions, renditions and performances can make or mar the growth of the society. Agreeing with Ikyer above, these oral artists are responsible for the remodelling of society, as they constantly serve as a moral compass to both the privileged and not-too-privileged masses, in shaping their social, political, economic, and moral lives. These oral artists present themselves as the arbiters of truth, even if it means sticking out their necks for the benefit of society. For instance, Amee Yongo Aboki cautioned poetically thus:

Tiv version

Me er nan ve me de zamber?
 Pyen Akughur kpa Ityô na Mbakyuran wua wa shin inya
 Ve kende Wan Nyamshar Ayua
 Hen ice er Akinde oo

Mba Zam Nema mba her kpa é
 Ku cier mo iyol u vaan ken Mbakyuran oo
 Sha á ci u iyange m vaa Cahur Uce ken Mbakyuran

M zua á ihua je ka ú hungur ga, hen kwa ne me kera vaa
Mbakyuran ze

Translation

What will I do to stop begging?
Pyen Akughur is killed by his kinsmen and buried
Leaving the daughter of Nyamshar Ayua
In his house like Akinde oo.
Elders like Zam Nema are alive but
I am afraid to mourn in Mbakyuran oo
Because when I mourned Chahur Uche in Mbakyuran
I was afflicted with a deadly infirmity I can't forget
This time I won't mourn in Mbakyuran at all.

Tsenongu Moses, in his essay: "Nuptial poetry among the Tiv of Nigeria" and his unpublished thesis: *Artistic Ornateness in African Poetry: A study of Tiv Ibamegh Poems of Amee Jorpo*. The former first:

introduces briefly, ethnological data of the Tiv, focusing particularly on their marriage forms. The important place of the marriage dance in their marriage ceremony is identified. Also identified is the involvement of poetry in the dance. Three kinds of poetic performances are highlighted. These are the solicited poems from professional poets, the solos performed individually by elderly women during the dances, and the dominant antiphonies that are of general participation.

His analysis and expositions of the poems are, as usual, second to none; as he takes the reader, be he a native or non-native, down memory lane, of what used to be before the current state of things. In the latter, he exposes readers to the metaphysics of the Tiv people, using the songs of Amee Jorpo, whose superb use of metaphors, imagery and symbolism in his oral renditions is top-notch. Although originally oral, Tsenongu's appraisal gives them life and avails an interesting audience with a worthwhile read.

Mbaiver Nyitse's *Tangled Threads*, like several female writings, heaps more on filial and matrimonial experiences. The collection provides a reader with colourful imagery and symbols, which are able to drive home her messages, which

are both pre-modern, modern and contemporary. The messages, like the title itself, encompass a spiral of threads into the experiences and lives of women in society. Beautifully written in the slavers' language, the collection invokes feelings of love, pity, nostalgia, dejection, decadence, and despondency, to mention but a few.

Tsenongu Moses in his 2006 poetry collection, *Sun the Male, Moon the Female*, dives into a new dimension: realism. The collection is packed with meanings, and like most realists, lampoons societal ills; mockery, treachery and more. His treatment of these serious themes lightly, by even engaging animal characters and personages, makes the collection sublime, and lays bare humanity, as a surgeon would lay bare a patient in the theatre. Indeed, he deserves his flowers, for putting Tiv literature, especially poetry, on the global map. His poetry invokes not feelings of dismay, dejection, distrust and despondency, but evokes the spirit of sober reflection and genuine love and hospitality and generosity for which the Tiv people are known.

Against the backdrop of obscurity that is often associated with poetry, Tsenongo believes that poetry can be simple yet achieve its efficacy, indirection and suggestiveness. His poems in the above collection, written in English and translated in Tiv, offer a pleasurable and insightful reading into the Tiv culture and tradition. The simple but rich language used in the collection offers new vistas and sensibilities into the perception of poetry. His contribution to the body of Tiv literature in general, and poetry in particular, is tremendous and worthy to be applause.

Prose in Tivland

Creative storytelling has a way of preserving and/or reviving a people's cultural values and attitudes, in the face of daring encroachment or erosion of values. The creative writer attempts or aspires to apprehend life while reflecting on its meaning. Like the celebrated writer, Chinua Achebe, puts it, "until the lions learn how to write their stories, the story of the hunt will always glorify hunters." There is no iota of lie in this assertion. This is because the story is best told by the person who has the experience. These narratives were the hallmark and/or birthed creative storytelling in Nigeria. For instance, Chinua Achebe, quoted above, in his magnum opus, *Things Fall Apart*, corrected

the erroneous submission by Western imperialists, notably Joyce Carey in *Mister Johnson*, where he equated Africans to 'beasts', without a system of governance. Achebe countered this notion by chronicling the lifestyle of the Igbo people before their encounter with the Europeans. He pointed to them that, there was an established system of governance: as the age grade were responsible for the maintenance of law and order; the *egwugwu* cult was responsible for law interpretation and adjudication and; the village assembly, headed by the *Okpara* (the eldest man in the community), was vested with the law making and policy formulation, to see to the orderliness of the community. Although they had no king due to the acephalous nature of their society, there was a system of governance that was admirable.

The role and responsibility of the creative writer, primarily, is his pondering, wondering and interpretation, which do not end with him, but by making his work available to an audience, he deliberately and consciously invites them to do the same. In the words of Ijeoma Nwajiaku: "he draws them into a world he created and hopes for their understanding of the issues raised and also expects they would see and hear with their senses and feel with their hearts too." (2020:355).

This is apt of storytellers as novelists are fondly addressed. Going back to the point raised earlier about oral literature, griots were known to be a reservoir of knowledge and the repository of the people's history and culture, long before the invention of pen and paper. Tiv communities equally had their fair share of these griots, who made sure to transfer such knowledge to others before their passing. This is what written literature is doing; as it preserves and stores these stories and knowledge in books, for future purposes. I teach creative writing in high school, and it's intriguing to see the stories that students write. The only consequences are their preferred settings and characters, which usually depict the Western environments they visit. Some Tiv people, home and abroad (not necessarily outside Nigeria, but beyond the shores of Benue State) have never encountered Tiv literature, due to its rarity. A deliberate action in making it available for those who could and would read will be a right step in the right direction.

Prose is the most widely read of all three genres of literature because of its personal nature. Ijeoma Nwajiaku adds further that, "the writer in any society believes he has the responsibility

to observe life, further, to record and analyse it. It is generally believed that the writer is endowed with intuitive and perceptive powers. He is equally regarded as a seer cum prophet of sorts. It is the ability to see, hear, feel and perceive more than others that distinguishes him.” (2020:3570). Her assertion is devoid of fictitious inclinations; it is the perceptive ability that makes the writer a cynosure of all eyes, as he can confront the past, analyse the present and correctly predict the future.

The first text that readily comes to mind on the Tiv novel is *Tarhomon U Botwev* by Terrumun Humbe, which is a collection of beautifully written and didactic stories which span several themes, with the eponymous character Botwev featuring in all the stories. The stories are very fascinating as well as diagrammatically presented to both the young and old alike. Not only are they written for entertainment but feature some Tiv philosophies and ideologies. One is amazed at the creativity and effortless rendition of the stories, especially for those who can read in the indigenous tongue, as it holds the aesthetic of the Tiv people, while keeping the reader spellbound. Closely following, albeit not in chronological order, should be *Adan Wade Kohol Ga* by Sen. Suemo Chia. This classical novel by the second republic senator extols the cultural underpinnings and religious cum social values of the Tiv people. The potency of *Inbiorvyungu* (the Tiv totem for power, authority and wealth) is elevated in this timeless novel for lovers of the Tiv culture and literature. These are among the first indigenous texts, written by Tiv authors in their indigenous language.

In *Long Shadows*, a more recent publication, the author, Vicky Sylvester, narrates the Tiv experiences of interaction with the colonialists from WW I through WW II and later, their involvement in divisional and regional politics in the young Nigerian nation, through the first military coup to the civil war that began in 1967 to its end in 1970. Mnguember Vicky Sylvester writes a hybrid novel, which is partly historical and partly fictional, which recounts the Tiv experience through the actions of characters reflecting some known figures such as Joseph Tarka and others during the tumultuous period. With this novel, Sylvester inscribes minority discourse into Nigerian/national and regional political experience. So often does one hear or read about what majority groups do in history, but it is refreshing that here, Sylvester does something different by

registering in a compelling narrative mode not only Tiv resistance to oppression, discrimination, marginalisation, and exploitation but also the search for plurality and fair government in the regional dispensation of the time. The novel also proffers a vision of what other ethnic groups can imbibe for a free, fair, and just society.

The Siege, The Saga, a 21st Century novel by Terhemba Shija, is another phenomenal novel, written by an astute academic, exploring fictional and non-fictional characters and events, exploring varying themes and preoccupations, with a tinge of Tiv philosophical underpinnings. Shija's unrivalled rendition is second to none and helps to put Tiv literature on the global map. The novel explores the Nigerian politics of maim and break, filled with debauchery and treachery. Of more interest, however, is the author's painting of the Tiv culture and metaphysical world, with *Ibiamegh* and *Poor* featuring greatly in the affairs of men. The novel equally projects two of the deadliest 21st century scourges: politics and seduction, through Hon. Shaagee and Mama Zanaliala and her daughter, on whose lives the life of the protagonist revolves. It's a perfect portrayal of the present woes.

Aerenakaa a Akoodo, Kwaghalom man Anzaakaa by Msughter Raphael Chekwa, is a compilation of twenty short stories about the character, Akoodo, in a similar way to that of Botwev; featuring different animals. The book also provides six hundred Tiv proverbs. Although unpublished, the book promises to be both educational and entertaining. These are works that should be encouraged, especially among the youth, who prefer the sophistication that the English language offers. A knowledge and embrace of these short stories and proverbs will provide hope for the future of Tivland, not only in their literature, but sustainability of their cultural norms and heritage.

Conclusion

Tiv literature, like other literatures around the world, has so much prominence in the lives of the people; it is a gateway to the understanding of the culture and tradition of the people. No literature is written for just writing's sake: the author always aims to promote, reflect or refract an issue bothering a particular society. Some seek to correct an anomaly or erroneous notion of stereotype held by people about a certain people; at least for people who would read. Tiv written literature is, therefore, not

an exception. It will suffice to posit here that we all are watching this debacle happen, and if we cannot work to revitalise the culture of theatre, music or poetry and creative storytelling in our local dialects now, we all will be indicted for the complete loss of the importance of our cultural heritage and creativity. For if we team up together on the preservation of our cultural craft, it will not be insurmountable for us to reclaim its worth.

So, for the preservation of culture to be feasible, parents must learn to teach and educate their children on how to speak, read and write in their indigenous languages. If the parents themselves have no good idea of the language, they should employ the services of those who have. They should be conscious of this and make a great deal out of it. The study of and manipulation of these indigenous languages, in theatre, music or poetry and creative storytelling, should seriously be emphasised in all spheres of learning, and punitive measures drawn out by schools to victimise those speaking their dialects during school hours should be lifted, so that students will mentally stabilise themselves to freely formulate and birth ideas. Youths, as future custodians of our cultural heritage, should cease glorifying in their abilities to speak superfluous words in that alien language called English, but should learn to develop their abilities to manipulate creatively in their indigenous languages.

It is disheartening, however, that with many renowned writers of drama, poetry and prose, Tiv literature is scarcely found on the internet. This is the 21st century, and literature has gone beyond paperbacks that are circulated just within a particular sphere. Just as literature is timeless and limitless, ours too should go digital and compete with the other literatures of the world. Encouragement and prominence should not only be ascribed to sciences alone, as it is often the norm, to develop our budding writers, who are not only out to entertain, educate, but to propagate our culture and serve as a repository of history to the wider world. Tiv written literature is a thesaurus of wonderful experiences that the world needs to know of, beyond our immediate environment.

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