



Environment & Society Portal



The White Horse Press

Full citation:

Harper, Peggy. "The Kwagh-hir of the People of Tiv: A Note on Dramatised History Telling and Constructions of Nature among the Tiv of Southern Nigeria." *Environment and History* 3, no. 3 (October 1997): 371–76.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/2949>.

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 1997. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publishers. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk>.

The Kwagh-hir of the People of Tiv: a Note on Dramatised History Telling and Constructions of Nature among the Tiv of Southern Nigeria

PEGGY HARPER

*African Studies Centre
University of Cambridge*

Four million Tiv people form the major culture of the Benue state of southern Nigeria. They are popularly known as the greatest democrats in Africa as their society is based on fraternal cooperation between age mates rather than on authoritative chieftaincy. Men of an age work together on communal farming and house building and celebrate their achievements with feasts famed for the excellence of their music and dance. Their women create amongst the greatest dances in Nigeria within their extended family compounds. Each year, during the dry season, when there is little farm work, the leaders of the dance teams compose songs to record recent experiences and new features in their lives which they express in the rhythms and gestures of their dance. This flare for continuous invention reached great heights of creativity in the Tiv story-telling drama known as the Kwagh-hir.

It was in 1966, at the height of the Civil War, that the people in the rural villages of Southern Tiv country first made this extraordinary creative statement. They combined their visual, musical and kinetic arts to expand the words of a story teller into a form of whole theatre. The Kwagh-hir emerged from the Kwagh-Alom, the story telling which for generations had taken place round the night fires in village squares. A skilled narrator unfolded tales of the cunning hare, Alom, who tricked other animals in order to befriend man and bring him skills from the land of the spirits. In the Kwagh-hir the words of the narrator are taken up by an orchestra of drums and a singing choir of girls as dancers 'warm the earth' for the appearance of elaborate puppet theatre. These alternate with dancing masquerade figures of colourful magnificence to act out the themes of the stories, and give full range to the Tiv delight in the extraordinary.

A Kwagh-hir performance in a village starts as the sun goes down and a horn player wails a welcome across the fields to neighbouring villagers: inviting them to join the audience smoking their pipes round a central fire. They await a series of dramatised stories, some of which recall their beliefs in the world of the spirits whilst others satirise recent social and political events or relate the highlights of the past year with wit and humour. The stories follow each other in a continuous succession of surprising innovation until the morning sun breaks their spell.

The doll-like puppet figures on top of moving raffia-covered platforms remind the audience of their belief in the 'little people' who live in the bush and control the rainfall on which the crops depend. These spirits must be placated with gifts of food by those whose eyes have been opened to the spirit world through ritual cleansing. The raffia-covered masquerades represent spirit animals which have been drawn from the nocturnal rites of the elders who control the use of spiritual power within the community. The misuse of these powers by ambitious individuals results in the magic of witchcraft which 'destroys the land'. The Kwagh-hir is performed to stand against such powers by 'mending the land' and bringing well-being and prosperity to all who participate.

The dramatised narratives and dance of the Tiv are especially interesting and unusual insofar as they frequently enact and symbolise the interactions between the Tiv and the natural environment, both in terms of particular species and whole parts of the environment, such as lakes or forests. The dance narratives are, in a sense, choreographed environmental history.

The enactment of the sacred and the natural as part of a linked spiritual whole is a vital part of Tiv culture. Few attempts have been made to understand the Kwagh-hir performance to date. Most of my observations of the dance rituals were made in 1968 and during the early 1970s. However, it is only now that the full historical significance of the dances has occurred to me, not least because dance forms in the last twenty years have been radically altered. In April 1968 I was driving towards the southern Tiv town of Aliade when a group of men crossed the road carrying brightly painted masks and carved figures. As I had found no mention of elaborate carvings or masquerades in the studies written on Tiv culture, I followed them to the central square of a small farming village in the midst of the savannah a few miles off the road. In the centre of a circle of round thatched houses a great fire was being built and a musician played his horn (Kologh) to invite neighbours to the performance. Over the next hour people arrived in great numbers and settled down in a wide circle and I was made welcome to what proved to be an all-night spectacle of amazing artistry and extraordinary organisation. The fire makers held live coals to the pipes of the men in the audience while the Orpasenkwagh (interpreter), as Master of Ceremonies, dashed about ensuring that performers were in place.

The Orpasenkwagh then walked round the fire calling on the 'great Spirit' to dispel wizards from the compound that men might drink their millet beer in peace. He accelerated into running and leaping as he enlarged on the excellence of the beer, much to the delight of the audience. The piercing tones of an Algaita trumpet led women dancers, moving individually or in couples, into the arena to perform the sustained undulations of the Tsough dance, 'warming the earth' for the entrance of a procession of twenty masquerades accompanied by musicians and singers. The straw-covered figures surmounted by a variety of face and cap masks paraded formally around the fire until a man started to push a heavy wooden object through the entrance. Immediately a masquerader rushed to take

THE KWAGH-HIR AND THE PEOPLE OF TIV

it from him and a tussle ensued ending in all the masquerades disappearing with the Ndyer, a sacred object that had been taken out of its appropriate setting by wizards of ill will in order to upset the performance.

I suggest that the masquerades represented the Nbaahiliv, or men with superhuman powers to change into mystical animals or beings. The Tiv view their world in terms of human and quasi-human beings who wield the mystical power of Tsav, which they may use to benefit or harm the community. The shape-changers are men with inherited power associated with the bush, rivers and a sacred mountain. Thus in Tiv religion it appears to be the living rather than the dead who are in spiritual control of events. In the subsequent stories acted out in the Kwagh-hir, I sensed that the artists creating the impressive masquerade figures and intricate puppet theatres were projecting images of these superhuman beings. The masquerades were described by my interpreter as superhuman animals and spirits. The latter were represented by figures with stylised human faces. The chief character in many stories was Alom the hare, the trickster figure central to traditional Tiv story telling and described as a friend to man as he brings skills from the world of the spirits for human use.

The evils having been expelled, the master of ceremonies was free to introduce the theme of the first story by signalling twenty five young men sitting astride Gbande drums and a choir of young women to introduce the actors. The twenty singers knelt in a row dancing rhythmically from the waist and accenting their flowing arm movements with a rattle held in the hand, as they sang; 'Gregov has called us out to dance and no one will sleep in Unande's compound until daybreak'. Upon which a line of young men in raffia skirts ran around the fire and took up positions for the Tobi dance which is characterised by sustained kinetic rhythms. Their slow-moving figures were silhouetted against the light of the fire until they danced to the entrance to call on a spectacular animal masquerade with a straw covered body of brilliant colours and a deer-like head carrying elaborate antlers. The girls' song introduced him as 'Adagilima' and related to the way in which the hyena had wanted to fight the hare who cunningly called this powerful spirit animal from the forest to defend him. On seeing him the hyena fled and the mystical animal searched for him in vain. This was demonstrated by the masquerade moving swiftly and stopping abruptly to swing his head, roll his eye and snap his jaw in anger. During the performance the master of ceremonies warned him of the danger of coming too close to the animal, and after the performance claimed proudly that no one had been hurt due to his vigilance.

Another story again centred on the hare and was preceded by songs and dances. Two masquerades represented the characters but once more Alom himself was not visible. The tale dealt with an argument about the ownership of a sacred vessel in which the hare managed to outwit the village chief. Another song and its accompanying dance announced the entry of 'a lake with the man who owns it sitting at the bottom and sending many wonderful creatures out of



FIGURE 1. The Nbaahiliv of the Tiv are believed to possess superhuman powers to acquire the forms of different mythical animals. This particular beast is supposed to devour unruly children.



FIGURE 2. Young men with hares.

THE KWAGH-HIR AND THE PEOPLE OF TIV

the lake to greet us'. A rectangular straw-covered figure moved into the arena surmounted by a platform carrying a forest of wires. From this emerged puppet figures of a dancing snake, two birds pecking rapidly at the ground or at each other, a large tortoise, and finally a mami-water figure holding two snakes and turning and bobbing in a dance. Each figure was accompanied by appropriate music and song. The owner was apparently the artist who had created the puppets and manipulated them while hidden under the straw covering. The puppet theatre gave these performances at different points of the arena.

Then came a dance of a chorus of young boys described as the sons of witches, followed by the entrance of a small boy who called to the witches in a high pitched voice. The choir then sang of the witch who lived in the nearby forest. She made strange noises, they recounted, and strongly resented those who made comments about her; one boy was rash enough to irritate her and she searched until she caught and carried him to the forest to devour him. This was a clearly moral tale acted out by a masquerade with a large grotesque witch-like mask and a dark straw body who stumbled in, blindly feeling her way. The scene was acted in silence, broken only by the eerie call of the witch and the echoing call of the boy, together creating a tense scene in the light of the fire. The boy poked his stick at her and she hunted him down with growing intensity until she finally caught him and carried him off into the dark of the night, and the forest, drawing excited reactions from the audience. Today I am, in fact, uncertain as to whether the masquerade represented a female witch or a male wizard. But the counter-positioning of village and forest were only too clear.

Fifteen stories were presented without an interval throughout the night. The themes of the puppet theatres ranged from traditional legends to comments on recent happenings and political events. Puppet dancers and drummers were popular and acclaimed, as were salacious jokes upon sexual relations and disfigurements, and satirical comments about political figures. The most elaborate represented dramas about the civil war, which was then being fought. Two puppet theatres represented the conflicting armies whose guns effectively spouted fire works, and an aeroplane moved along a wire overhead to drop a firework bomb which assured victory. Simultaneously, Alom the hare actually appeared as a figure playing a drum on another puppet theatre.

In the Tiv performances I studied at intervals over the next ten years the majority of masquerades were highly decorative animal forms, some of which reared up to dramatic heights during their dances, while others crawled along the ground. Of the latter a frequent theme consisted in the acting-out of the eating of children who had truanted from their work in the fields. One of the most skilful masquerades consisted in a quasi-human figure with head, torso and arms growing out of a tube of cloth that allowed it to escalate to great heights or concertina into the earth; the most common of these was Ngojov, the mother-spirit who presides over all Kwagh-hir performances. Over the years, the puppet theatre became simplified, while the masquerade figures became more spectacu-

lar, as particular animal figures appeared more useful for the purposes of the Tiv cosmology.

The Kwagh-hir was first brought out as a public performance in about 1965. It appeared to be a combination of traditional stories about Alom the hare and sacred masquerades which, informants told me, had previously only been used at secret nocturnal meetings of the Mbatsav, or elders with the power of 'Tsav'. In this new manifestation the masquerades appeared to be an innovation expressing the character of ancestral 'shape-changers', probably influenced by the tensions of nearby political events, political crises and ecological change in neighbouring cultures and in the Nigerian state. However, it seems likely that the Tiv have always changed and developed their naturalistic art forms to meet new needs and fears and have absorbed elements from other cultures which they integrate into their own performance. The Kwagh-hir has certainly changed considerably over the last twenty years. The companies are now reduced in size to a series of puppet theatres and masquerades with a few supporting musicians and singers. The disciplined and largely male dance teams are now replaced by the women who accompany the masquerades, together with a smaller number of male dancers. But it has been the women who have constantly adjusted the themes and dynamics of the dances to reflect the social events which have made an impression upon them, and which they may interpret through naturalistic dance forms and patterns. The Kwagh-hir has, since its active emergence in the mid-1960s in the context of social upheaval, served as a constantly changing mode of instruction for the Tiv youth. The beliefs, customs and mores of Tiv society are constantly restated as rural traditions change, largely through the medium of dramatised natural, animal and landscape symbols. Perhaps this is not surprising in a rural context in which the living components of nature remain so visually and spiritually prominent. It remains to be seen how far, in the face of modern pressures, the Tiv will be able to continue to portray themselves and narrate their history through the use of naturalistic symbols and stories in dance form.

REFERENCES

- Bohannon, L. and P. 1953. *The Tiv of Central Nigeria*. London: International African Institute.
- Edwards, Adrian 1977. 'Skills, values and images in the definition of culture', Paper read at the Symposium on Arts and Ritual, Ibadan.
- Harper, P. 1975. 'Tsough; a Tiv dance', *African Notes*, 6: 52-59.
- Harper, P. 1972. 'The role of dance in the Gelede ceremonies of the village of Ijio', *Odu* no. 4.
- Sonnernberg, S. 1977. 'Dancing in Ibibio masquerade societies', Paper read at symposium on Dance in Africa, University of California, Los Angeles.