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## **Enhancing the Quality of Dramatic Creations Using Traditional Resources: The Tiv Kwagh-Alôm Tales as Paradigm**

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### **Abstract**

The practice of dramatizing aspects of Nigerian traditional theatre has received very little attention by indigenous writers, especially those of Tiv origin. This article highlights the rich cultural resources and dramatic culture of the Tiv people and tries to reawaken the interest of the indigenous playwrights to explore this rich dramatic culture citing evidence from the Tiv *kwagh-alom* tales. The authors argue that instead of recycling foreign themes, these rich cultural resources will reasonably enhance the quality of plays and will also help the various ethnic nationalities to regain their values and cultural practices. The article, therefore, recommends that Tiv folktales should be preserved using Information and Communication Technology tools for future generations, as this will not only revive the dying folk art but will also open widows of economic opportunities for both youths and adults, at the same time facilitating the process of formal research into this area.

**Keywords:** folktales, dramatic creations, kwagh-alôm, kwagh-hir, traditional materials

## Introduction

Playwriting is a major component of the theatre. In the history of modern man, plays have been used to nourish the theatre. Plays are usually based on diverse subject matters and playwrights derive their inspiration to create from different sources. While some playwrights prefer to write on issues happening at a particular time in history, others choose to dramatize the historical and traditional materials of diverse ethnic nationalities with which they are conversant. But on the whole, what often determines the choice of literary theme is the writer's literary vision.

The art of dramatizing traditional materials in the theatre is not a new invention. Earlier many Greek and Elizabethan playwrights had used traditional materials such as myths and rituals in their dramatic creations. Such dramatizations have not only helped to enrich the theatre and brought variety to theatre and drama but also helped to preserve such myths. This article canvasses for the exploration of folktales by indigenous writers as a resource. This will help to preserve this art form for posterity.

For a very long time, interest in traditional performances among many people in Nigeria has been waning. It is therefore incumbent upon elites to make concerted efforts to rescue this art from dying. This fear has been expressed by many scholars in Nigeria. One of such is Gowon Ama Doki who laments that "History will not forgive us if as scholars we do not stand up to retrieve and also rescue this dying art from the clutches of death" (Doki, 2006, p.vii). Evidence from research suggests that in almost all parts of the globe the oral form of literature precedes written literature. O. G. Brockett (1995) attests that:

Performative elements (including dramatic and theatrical) are present in every society no matter how complex or how unsophisticated a society may be. These elements are evident in our political campaigns, holiday celebrations, sports events, religious ceremonies and children's make believe, just as they are in dances and rituals of primitive peoples. Nevertheless, most participants in these activities do not consider them to be primarily theatrical even when spectacle, dialogue and conflict play large roles. (p.1)

This description is similar to the Nigerian situation where many traditional theatrical performances have these theatrical attributes but the practitioners themselves are not aware that they are involved in theatrical activities.

Owing to the influence of western civilization including the activities of Christianity, many people (including the Tiv natives) tend to look down on some Tiv traditional performances which they think are unrefined or a form of idol worship, or generally an element of the primitive past. This negative attitude affects how people perceive the relevance of traditional dramatic creations.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

As used here, dramatic creations refers to “the art of representing for the pleasure of others events that happened or that we imagine happening” (Jacobus, 1997, p.1). Dramatic creation could mean the entire literary or creative process of scripting or composing plays for the pleasure and education of the audience and readers. The primary components of drama according to Jacobus are players, action and thought. Players refer to the characters who carry out an action in a dramatic performance while action stands for the gestures and movement carried out by the players. Thought is implied by dialogue, words and action including spectacle represented by scenery.

Traditional materials refer to the different resources from which playwrights derive inspiration to create. It also refers to those ideas and inspirations that are derived or rooted in the traditions and cultures of the various people. Potential traditional materials that could be explored

by dramatists include traditional dances, rituals, myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, sagas, riddles and jokes. Some of these have been used in creating many literary plays by many Nigerian playwrights.

**Oral literature:** From the historical origin of the word, literature is associated with the Latin word ‘literatura’ which also derives from another Latin word ‘litera’ meaning a letter of the alphabet. The term oral literature therefore amounts to a contradiction or rather a marriage of inconvenience for both words that make up the expression. According to Akporobaro (2005) “oral literature is a folk literature which refers to the heritage of imaginative verbal creations, stories, folk beliefs and songs of pre-literate societies which have been evolved and passed on through the spoken word from one generation to another” (p. 29). He further asserts that “literature needs not to be what is written only but all verbal creations written or spoken which are artistically projected....” (p. 31). This position is analogous with traditional theatrical practice since much of it is rendered orally. If we accept this position as a true reflection of what literature should look like, then all traditional performances whether by word of mouth or other means before an audience among the various Nigerian people could also be accepted as literature and theatre.

**Folktales:** Folktales have also been defined differently by different people. Akporobaro (2005) defines folktale as: “... an imaginative (story)... the story that constitutes a folktale may have a basis in real life but generally the story is an imaginative recreation of memorable experience that is intended essentially to entertain....” (p. 46). Folktales are generally imaginatively created and do not have known authors. In line with oral tradition, they are stories told from one generation to another. They are composed and told before an audience using animal characters with the aim of entertaining the audience and inculcating morals especially to the young ones.

**Kwagh-alôm:** *Kwagh-alôm* is a Tiv word for a short piece of fiction about the hare, the principal actor. *Kwagh-alôm* (tales about the hare) and *kwagh-hir* (Tiv puppetry theatre) are synonymous except that “the former is speculative while the latter is practical” (Udu and Udu, 2013, p.8). Both *kwagh-alôm* and *kwagh-hir* have the attributes of fables

because the stories do not only teach moral lessons but the animal characters are also given human attributes. Folktales are very important in the life of the Tiv people. Besides their main role as a medium of entertainment, “Folktales expose children to the richness of Tiv language, Tiv myths, songs, values and culture. They help children in both character and cognitive development by enabling them to learn good virtues such as tolerance, honesty, hard work, obedience to parents and the repercussions of being deviant” (Udu and Udu, 2013, p. 7).

### **Traditional Materials for Dramatic Creations in Nigeria**

Nigerian traditional settings provide rich socio-cultural practices and materials from where dramatists can take advantage to develop literary themes. Clark (1981) argues that:

If drama means the “ elegant imitation” of some action significant to a people, if this means the physical representation or the creation of one poetic image or a complex of such images if the vital elements to such presentation or creation are speech, music, ritual, song as well as dance and mime and if as the Japanese say of their Noh theatre, the aim is to “open the ear” of the mind of the spectator in a corporate audience and “ open his eyes” to the beauty of form then there is drama in plenty in Nigeria much of this is in cline, Japan and Europe. (p. 57)

In a similar opinion, Amankulor asserts that:

Among the Igbo of Nigeria there is a wealth of cultural heritage manifested in ceremonies connected with marriages, birth, farming, myriad of other social institutions. These cultural activities contain the genres of rich poetry and prose excellent music and lively drama... (p. 113)

The same can be said of other ethnic groups, especially the Tiv where all or many of the following are found: proverbs, riddles and jokes, ballads, folktales, folk stories, recitations, chants, myths, legends, festivals, epics and ritual performances. Playwrights could explore these elements for dramatic creations. Festivals like the Ekpe have a lot of

dramatic features which aid Nigerian playwrights in scripting plays. The Ekpe festival especially is an “...action packed festival full of song and dance, is one of such cultural events, a deeper investigation of which would reveal its great significance as religious ritual and potentialities as dance drama”(p. 113).

Many Nigerian playwrights have used some of these resources in creating plays as noticeable in J.P. Clark’s *Ozidi* (1966), Iyorwuese Hagher’s *Swem Karagbe* (1996), Emmy Idegus’s *The Legendary Inikpi* (1994), and Irene Salami’s *Emotan* (2001). All the above plays reflect the myths, legends, sagas and historical events of the localities in which they were set.

### **Kwagh-alôm Tales: An overview**

*Kwagh-alôm* tales seem to be perhaps the most popular form of tale telling among the Tiv. As the name implies these tales are dominated by the actions of the hare. These tales are told especially at night by older members of the society before an audience predominantly composed of children. The night is the suitable time for these tales since all members of the family return from the day’s activities and stay together to share in the fun. Ahura (2008) describes *Kwagh-alôm* tales in the following words: “...the Tiv folktales are an expression of the Tiv’s social, political, cultural and economic values. They also express communal hopes, aspirations, frustrations and general world view” (p. 123). When studied critically, one notices that *Kwagh-alôm* tales express the Tiv world view and enhance the communal living. To the Tiv, communal living is cherished as opposed to individualistic and capitalist existence cherished by other races. The Tiv live and work co-operatively with one another. Ahura (2008) contends that:

As an egalitarian group of people the inter-personal relationship that is cherished by the Tiv is the one based on co-operation rather than individualistic. It is everybody’s duty to see that no member of the society unduly towers above the others because to the Tiv to be unique is tantamount to being evil. Thus, the individual must remain one with the society and the universe. Everybody must be seen to be working in co-operation with one another for the good of the community. (p. 120)

*Kwagh-alôm* tales have experienced a lot of changes. Initially they were told in the homestead for children. Later, they moved out of the homestead and went to the market, family or village square where they became competitive ventures where lineages and communities could come to compete with one another. Ahura (2008) attests to this movement from the home to the village square as well as the rendition in the home for children when he states that:

The extension from the home to the village square did not however mean the end of tale telling to children in the home. It was just an extension of the practice to a higher and finer level of performance within the popular culture because for the Tiv, art has always been a popular event which should satisfy the aesthetic needs of the collective. (p. 123)

This position recognizes the role of arts in the Tiv society where it is expected to serve the people and not to be used by a few to suppress others. Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez submits that:

The destiny of art as popular collective creation is, therefore connected to the destiny of man as a creative being ... the restoration of the aesthetics or creative principle of human labour... creates favourable condition for the development of the creative capacity of the people in arts. (Vazquez, 1973, p. 279)

This means that art should be open to all and the society should create favourable conditions within which the creative capacity of both artists and audience members will expand so as to accommodate innovations. The Tiv *kwagh-alôm* folktales fit into this description. It is a popular creation by the people and for the people. It is open to all irrespective of sex and age.

Before the domination of Nigerian market with western technological inventions like computers, global system for mobile communication (GSM), satellite television, and video players, *kwagh-alôm* tales were a very popular medium of entertainment in homes and social gatherings. However, this popularity has now waned owing to the influence of western form of entertainment such as the Hollywood

films, satellite television and European league matches monitored on satellites. Another major hindrance to *kwagh-alôm* tales is the influence of western education and the activities associated with it such as reading, internet browsing and computer operations. Most parents now regulate how their children spend their leisure time by insisting that such children share this time among competing activities such as reading, television viewing and internet browsing. Children have now become used to the aforementioned activities to the extent that they not only look down on *kwagh-alôm* tales as primitive, they are not willing to be associated with them. Moreover, owing to competing schedules, most families no longer organize them for their children.

Some Christian extremists do not tolerate these moonlight tales. They feel they are meant for pagans since they discuss metaphysical issues. To them, they are meant to serve pagan gods; as such they do not want to associate with them. All the aforementioned factors have adversely affected the popularity and development of these tales.

### **Performance in Tiv *Kwagh-alôm* Tales**

*Kwagh-alôm* tales are principally stories about animals. Mude (1987) submits that:

The attention the Tiv give to the animals in their tales is deliberate. Being farmers, the Tiv come into contact with these animals in their daily chores... The elders therefore use the actions of the different animals to teach morals. (p. 10)

In the course of performance, numerous approaches are available to be used by the narrator. For the opening glee, the narrator could use any of the approaches below. He could start the entertainment session with the use of riddles. Riddles serve to test the intelligence of the audience and also prepare them mentally and psychologically to participate in the ensuing *kwagh-alôm* tales proper. A typical example of this opening is as follows:



Tiv	English
<p><b>Narrator:</b> Ki-kyaa?</p> <p><b>Audience:</b> Kilee</p> <p><b>Narrator:</b> Kpuugh me hide a we?</p> <p><b>Audience:</b> Ka Mtuhwen</p>	<p><b>Narrator:</b> Ki-kyaa?</p> <p><b>Audience:</b> Kilee</p> <p><b>Narrator:</b> If you cast me out I will follow you back.</p> <p><b>Audience:</b> It is ash.</p>

The literary value of riddles as both an entertainment and language resource has been highlighted in Udu and Udu (2013) that “songs and riddles are commonly used for entertainment and communicative purposes in social and secular functions. In fact, they belong largely to the literary genre of poetry although much of it is seen in drama and prose too” (p. 13). Riddles belong to the oral domain and constitute a good resource for fostering the skills of listening and speaking which themselves are important foundation blocks for modern literacy.

In some instances, the narrator could initiate dance steps and invite members of the audience to actively participate with him in the dance. One of the typical songs used in this approach is as follows:

Tiv	English
<p><b>Narrator:</b> <i>Kwagh- alôm wam nahan ga!</i></p> <p><b>Audience:</b> <i>Nahan ga nahan gao!</i></p>	<p><b>Narrator:</b> My tale about the hare does not go like that.</p> <p><b>Audience:</b> Does not go like that does not go like that o!</p>

Some narrators still employ the medium of jokes as a means of arresting the interest and attention of the audience in the narration. The narrator is at liberty to choose whichever approach he pleases.

The narrator in Tiv *Kwagh-alom* folktales is usually a versatile creative artist who creates mental pictures in the minds of his audience using his oratorical and creative ingenuity. Through this process too, he creates characters that are visualized by the audience. A particular tale

could have several settings. It could start in the animal kingdom and proceed to the world of spirits and still come back to the land of humans. The audience follows the narrator through all these locations. The narrator sometimes makes use of gestures, dance, facial expression and other body movements with a combination of all these in the course of the narration. He makes the audience remain hooked to the narration from the beginning to the end. Even at the end of the tale, the audience still yearns for more.

The oral narrator in Tiv *kwagh-alôm* is usually a master of all trades of the theatre. In this connection, Mude (1987) argues that: "... the oral story narrator is a playwright, a scenic designer and an actor all rolled into one" (p.12). He does the work of all these artists in the course of his narration. Even though no elaborate costumes, props and make-up are required, the narrator uses his voice, body and mind coupled with a creative imagination, for all these help to enrich his narration and as such holds his audience in suspense. In some situations, the Tiv oral narrator creates songs and dance steps which are used in the course of the narration. Before the actual tale, the narrator teaches his audience the songs as well as the dance steps.

### **Creating Plays out of Tiv *Kwagh-alôm* Tales**

It has been observed that many Tiv *kwagh-alôm* tales have not been dramatized whereas other traditional performances such as dances, proverbs, myths, legends and sagas have been dramatized by many other Nigerian playwrights. Sometimes these traditional performances provide titles, plot and storyline for such literary plays. Even though some of the aforementioned do not possess dramatic features as the folktales, playwrights can still create plays out of them.

The Tiv *kwagh-alôm* tales are a veritable source of inspiration for dramatic creations. Apart from being theatrical even in their natural state, they possess all the elemental components of drama such as character, plot, theme, music, song, and sound effects. Moreover, they are performed on the stage before an active and participatory audience. To script a play out of this oral theatrical performance will not therefore require too much skill and craftsmanship from the playwright. This is because the tales already have established settings, characters and well

developed plots. The playwright would only be required to replicate them and assign human attributes to these characters and give human names as well as settings that are recognizable in real life. The playwright in this situation will do what J.P. Clark has done in *Ozidi* (1966) where he has translated an Ijaw oral performance into a play script.

For the Tiv, art is not a reserve of a select few; it is what every ordinary citizen has in his home and is highly socialized. It is ever ready to serve in various social and sometimes religious functions. The *kwagh-alôm* and many similar art forms of the Tiv are perpetrated through most oral narrations and extemporization. Its form and content are not always rigidly fixed so as to bring its relevance up to date. The playwright can capitalize on this dynamism and create good plays out of these tales to suit his purpose and intention.

These *kwagh-alôm* tales can provide inspiration to create plays ranging from title to storyline and plot. The title and name of any of the tales could serve as the title for the scripted play. The incidents and situation could be altered to suit human perception and imagination. The playwright can therefore make use of the *kwagh-alôm* potentials and create plays that would be appealing and fulfilling. The playwright could adopt the plot in any of these tales or use it with a few modifications. The mental picture painted by the narrator could help in providing useful information in the stage lives which could even be useful for the scenic design of the play as well as settings. The sets used by the narrator could also be used as they appear in the tale or replaced with places and items that are common to him.

Through the various approaches enumerated above, a playwright could create many plays out of Tiv *kwagh-alôm* tales. In many instances the success and creativity of an artist is measured by his ability to establish a link between his art and the landscape out of which it has come. This link determines the form and quality of the art piece so created. This is to say that many good Tiv playwrights can create good plays out of Tiv *kwagh-alôm* tales and that such would reflect Tiv world view, culture and tradition. As has been stated severally, the

playwright's responsibility is to study and understand numerous Tiv folktales and from there choose the ones he would like to work with.

## Conclusion

Tiv *kwagh-alôm* folktales make a good source material for dramatic creations. Therefore, playwrights should explore them and create plays out of them. It is hoped this will generate interest in these tales and also help to preserve them on the one hand and showcase the richness of Tiv culture and cosmology on the other hand.

## Suggestions

Even though Tiv *kwagh-alôm* tales are capable of providing enough materials for dramatic productions at the present they are on the verge of extinction owing to the fact that they are underutilized. It is, however, hoped that the following suggestions will improve the situation.

Media houses such as radio and television stations should give airtime for traditional activities such as folktales on the private and state-owned radio and television stations. If radio and television in Tiv dominated states such as Benue, Taraba, and Nasarawa give room for these cultural activities, it will go a long way in bringing back public interest in this waning traditional art.

Schools, social organizations, and clubs can organize and stage Tiv traditional arts such as *kwagh-alôm*, *kwagh-hir* and cultural dances and stake prizes for children and youths to compete for. This will build lasting social relations among them, instill the love for their culture and promote harmonious social living.

Furthermore, language and literature in English teachers should make extensive use of folktales as language and literature activities especially as choral and oral performance to develop competence in verbal expression.

Tiv scholars must rekindle the interest of the younger ones in traditional Tiv performances generally and folktales especially by making them part of the curriculum of primary and post primary

education so that all Tiv children understand and actively participate in tale telling. Folktales should be translated and transcribed into English. In this way, the children will learn the tales via the native language and English as a second language.

The Departments of Tiv Language Studies, Theatre Arts, and English and Literary Studies in all Benue State-owned tertiary institutions should encourage students to write research projects in aspects of Tiv language, oral art and culture to increase the volume of research in these areas. This will not only increase students' interest in these aspects but will go a long way in preserving these art forms in written form for posterity.

Furthermore, the practice of night tales should be revived so that the contemporary Tiv child can participate in them. These plays will also help to expand their creative scope and generate creativity. Since children like watching movies, folktales should be videotaped and played on video. This will reawaken children's interest in folktales.

For their part, graduating students in the fields of English studies, Tiv language studies and Theatre Arts should be made to write their projects and dissertations on *kwagh-alôm* folktales so as to expand the scope of research on Tiv folktales and other aspects of Tiv tradition.

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