Feminizing the Supernatural in (Tiv) Folklore: Contemporary Relevance

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Introduction
The Tiv people of Central Nigeria are well known for their storytelling art. The world of Tiv folklore is populated by a mixture of spirits, humans and animals. These three categories interact freely with varying results under varying circumstances. Curiously existing in this world of fantasy is a spirit figure characterized by (conceived in) feminine features known as 'Ngô-iôv' (or her caricature 'angô-jôv'). She is a central figure in (märchens) stories that feature rites-of-passage or quest journeys. She is the embodiment of the Chinese 'yin-yang', the concept of evil and good. Curiously however, in recent folk-performance modes of the Tiv, she has evolved into an all-knowledgeable figure dispensing knowledge and innovation for development purposes.

This paper seeks to examine the concept of 'Ngô-iôv' (interpreted as Mother Spirit) in Tiv folklore vis-à-vis the enduring conception of this character as an embodiment of knowledge, wisdom and innovation. This examination will also offer a platform for interrogating prevailing social attitudes to womanhood.

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Tiv folklore is a dynamic performance art that keeps evolving. Generically known as Kwagh-hir, it is a popular folk performance of the Tiv people of Central Nigeria. Although it is indigenous to this ethnic group, its popularity has gone beyond the boundaries of Tivland, and even Nigeria.

Kwagh-hir (as it is known today) is total theatre so its performance is a veritable festival of arts. It is hallmarked by spectacle and the sheer volume of costume and props underscores this spectacle. There is so much on display, so much 'celebration' and yet so much competition; for Kwagh-hir is always staged as a contest between groups.

There are two known genres of Kwagh-hir – the pantomic narrative (Nyager, 1989), and the much acclaimed 'puppet' theatre. Both feature the feminization of the supernatural - the focus of our study.

The evolutionary and dynamic nature of Kwagh-hir demonstrates its evolutionary tendency. From the oral narrative tradition, (the story telling)
form. *Kwagh-hir* evolved into the elaborate masquerade/puppet form which is still growing in all its dimensions: the masks, the costumes, the themes, the music, the miseen scene etc. Along with this evolution in *Kwagh-hir* narrative and performance is also the transformation/evolution of the spirit being ‘*Ngô-iôv*’ – the feminized spirit entity that is the subject of our study.

**Aspects of Tiv World-view and Cosmogony**

To understand better our arguments in this paper, we must contextualize our discussion by looking at aspects of Tiv world-view and cosmogony. The Tiv believe that there is a spirit world which is invisible to human eyes but is parallel to human society and human activity. Humans can ‘stumble’ upon these activities of spirits through chance encounters. However, since there are two kinds of spirit beings: the white and the red (one standing for good and the other for bad), any encounter may result into good or bad fortune. This belief is reflected in Tiv art/performance including, Tiv folklore. This is demonstrated in the ‘*Ngô-iôv*’ concept.

In Tiv folklore, the ‘*Ngô-iôv*’ figure is definitely conceived in feminine connotations even by virtue of its name. ‘*Ngô*’ means mother and so this supernatural being is a ‘mother’ figure. The interesting thing about her is the dual-faced nature of her character. In her is found both good and evil. Thus, she is the embodiment of the ‘*yin*’ and the ‘*yang*’ – the *yin-yang* (Nyang, 1989).

Again in Tiv folklore, *Ngô-iôv* features in tales involving/representing rites-of-passage in which a girl must go on a quest (journey), encounter this supernatural figure and come back either triumphant or defeated; depending on how she conducted herself before the ‘*Ngô-iôv*’. To the well-behaved, she proves to be an ally; but to the ill-behaved she becomes a source of ill-fortune. An encounter with the ‘*Ngô-iôv*’ is a necessary stage as part of the rites of passage for these questers (s). During the encounter, an interaction based on issued instructions from *Ngô-iôv* is a kind of attitude test for the questers. The way they respond to her and to her instructions determines the final outcome of their journey. One may return from her quest triumphant with rewards while the other returns in ignominy, shame and even destruction ultimately.

But to help us understand better the role and personality of this *Ngô-iôv*, we must further consider, albeit briefly, the Tiv world-view with particular reference to the world of spirits.

**The Tiv World-view of Spirits and their World-view of Existential Duality**

Spirits are perceived among the Tiv as repositories of wisdom, good intellect and talents, among other things. As supernatural beings, they have controlling influence over humans. They therefore dispense of these 'attributes' to humans by choice and whim. For this reason, there is a saying among the Tiv to express this attitude/belief to capture this view. When an individual is gifted, talented or highly skilled in a particular endeavor, it could be said of that individual, ‘*i gyô na a na*’. This simply means ‘it has been given by a spirit’. There is therefore, an existential duality between human society and the unseen spirit world.

Thus, Rubingh (1969), commenting on the Tiv world-view had the following to say,

The first characteristic of the Tiv world-view is its comprehensiveness.

By this he means,

...a fundamental human urge for the unification of knowledge and activity within a related whole... The world-view that resulted from this basic drive (was complex and effective for it) encompassed the individual, the tribe, the land and the far reaches of the universe in one majestic totality (Rubingh, 1969, p. 84).

Rubingh goes on to connect this world-view to Dr. Hendrix Kraemer's stereotyping of the primitive world-view which he describes as totalitarian 'thinking' in the following words,

By “totalitarian” thinking its meant that in an unreflective, spontaneous way, it starts from the conception of totality and of unbroken primeval unity, which comprises and dominates the whole range of reality in nature and human life...natural phenomena and social institutions, the sexes and social classes, animals and plants, water and land, mountains and plains and so many things more, have their place and rank and defined inter-relation in the whole cosmic-human order (Rubingh, 1969, p. 84).

Elsewhere, Nyager (1989) in her M. A. Dissertation argued that this world-view may be considered primitive but it has universal tendencies as it is not only found among other African cultures like the Yoruba (consider the cosmogony of Soyinka’s *Death and the King's Horseman*); but can be traced also among the Chinese (in the concept of the *yin-yang*), and even in the Judeo-Christian concept of the Edenic fall of man found in Genesis chapter three of the Bible and further commented upon in Romans chapter eight of the same book.

According to these concepts/accounts, when man fell into sin/disobedience in the garden of Eden, all of creation was plunged into a cosmic...
disorder that must be corrected by the manifestation of God's sons (Romans 8: 19-22). Thus, by this cosmic conception, when something was amiss in the realm of nature outside of man, the situation was indicative of disharmony (sin), in the human realm with which it was essentially continuous (Rubinig, 1969, p. 85).

Also central to Tiv belief system is this issue of "adzov" (or "itiwv"), which are controlling spirits outside of man. The Tiv believe that "adzov" or spirits exist side by side with humans and indeed influence human life and activity. "adzov", thus, live in the same environment with humans but are invisible. Their invisible but real world seems to complement the physical world of humans. This goes to emphasize the concept of duality in Tiv world-view which is both idealistic and totalitarian. Even humans have their counterparts in "adzov".

who inhabit the same earth as the humans and whose actions duplicate all of man's actions... The duality of "Tsian" (witchcraft)... represents good and evil, the physical and the spiritual, the seen and the unseen worlds, often in juxtaposition (Haghe, 1984, p. 112).

It is this same duality that is embodied in the being that is being discussed in this work: the 'Ngó-ìjó'. Ngó-ìjó embodies both good and evil. So Ngó-ìjó is a spirit entity that seems to sit at the cross-roads of life in the stories that feature her.

The Concept of 'Ngó-ìjó'

Ngó-ìjó is a spirit and she is feminine. In the stories that feature her, she is found in the forest, a setting that must be crossed by the quest seekers. She thus sits at the cross-roads of their journeys dispensing knowledge, wisdom and ultimately wealth if she is engaged with favourably. The question is why is this 'spirit-being' conceived of in feminine connotations? Why 'Ngó-ìjó' (Mother spirit), and not 'Nom-ìjó' (male spirit)? Again, if Tiv cosmogony and world-view accepts that the world of spirits, though invisible is parallel to the human world, one would expect that a patriarchal dominance of the human world would have its equivalence in the spirit world. That would require that a spirit entity possessing wisdom, knowledge and ultimately determining the destiny of quest seekers would be conceived of as a 'male' spirit. In Tiv folklore however, Ngó-ìjó is female and is a 'constant' figure, whereas, one can hardly recall any mention of a dominant male spirit. There has never been a case of 'Nom-ìjó' (male spirit) featured in Tiv folklore. The reason for this seeming oddity may not be un-related to the socializing role of women in human society. Women, particularly in traditional (African) societies occupy a socializing role especially, for the girl-child. Story-telling activities were/are the very instruments used for this socialization process. One particular story is a good illustration of our discourse. In brief it goes something like this.

Two siblings live together with their parents. One is well-behaved, teachable, etc. The other isn't. One day the good girl decides to go on a long journey to another 'country'. She must cross forests, rivers to get to her destination. On her way she meets 'Ngó-ìjó'. Since she is lost; indeed since she does not know the way to where she is going; she must be directed by someone. Meeting 'Ngó-ìjó' whose identity as a spirit is unknown to her, she politely asks for direction. Ngó-ìjó obliges, giving her details of the journey ahead, including details of the obstacles she will encounter and instructing her on how to overcome those obstacles. There are codes to follow and songs to sing at definite points on the journey. The girl politely thanks 'Ngó-ìjó' and goes on her way, following closely the instructions given by 'Ngó-ìjó'. Of course she succeeds on this quest journey, coming back with wealth and glory.

A few days later, her rude and cariaccature sister decides to take a similar journey. She follows the same route, meets 'Ngó-ìjó', is rude to her, refuses to follow her instructions and comes back covered with toads. She is too ashamed to be seen, so she goes discreetly into her mother's kitchen where she hides on the wooden platform built over the fire-place. The next morning, as her mother is making fire, a toad drops from the wooden platform into the fire causing it to go out. The mother tries again to make the fire and another toad drops. After a third attempt with the same result, the mother peers over the platform and sees this monster (her girl whom she does not recognize), which she kills with a spear.

In the above story, the image of 'Ngó-ìjó': found at the cross-roads of the girls' journey is very apt. Thus the rites-of-passage suggested is the quest journeys were equivalent to the cross-roads of the girls' lives. Henceforth they would not remain the same. Thus, the central position denied women in (traditional) human society, the lack of recognition, becomes highlighted as the antithesis of what obtains, in the world of folklore and the world of spirits. In Tiv folklore moreover, 'Ikoso' (forest/bush), represents the wild, the animal world, but more generally, the other-world, the world of spirits. Therefore in most Tiv folklore, we find the 'Ngó-ìjó' dwelling in the forest environment. As a constant recurrent figure in the stories, she represents the world of the spirits which is identical to the animal world. Thus it is this wild, this forest
environment that is the setting for most Tiv folklore. It is also in this setting that 'Ngó-ijóv' operates.

Again, sitting at the crossroads of the adventure routes of quest travellers, she knows the road ahead and puts to the test these adventurers, giving them instructions to follow. Depending on how these instructions are followed, good or evil may result. Ngó-ijóv is not partial to any particular adventurer but her interaction with each reveals their moral character, whether teachable, docile or rude. She is therefore a neutral force against which character and destiny are determined.

This means that the 'Ngó-ijóv' figure is very important and central to the social environment of the Folkloric-world of the Tiv. Carried over into the parallel world of human society as captured in modern Kwagh-hir performances, she is still central and important and thus holds the potential for directing human development as demonstrated in some of the Kwagh-hir episodes. Here below are a few.

1. 'Madam 2000' is a giant female puppet that was created/sculpted to capture the mood of the new millennium. Appropriately therefore, she is portrayed as a modern, sophisticated but modest 'lady'. When she is 'ushered' onto the arena (stage), she is introduced as the 'Spirit' (ijóv) that has come to demonstrate to humans the modest but fashionable way to dress.

2. Contrasting 'Madam 2000' is a puppet (spirit) known as 'Ankweregh Idu'. She is portrayed by a young sophisticated but careless lady in a short denim skirt and brief bra-like top. Her dressing carries artefacts of cultural globalization. For example, her belt carries the insignia '50 Cent' as the buckle, and the figure '2006' as part of patchwork on her skirt. When she is introduced on stage, the obvious message her image carries is that of disapproval of this mode of dressing. Her image is an indictment on young women who dress 'carelessly' in the name of new fashion trends.

3. A third example is the sculpture of a heavily pregnant woman who is carrying a baby on her back. This sculpture was created to support the campaign for child-spacing. Now, child-spacing is a current development issue in Africa and Nigeria in particular. The 'woman' (spirit), here is being used as an indictment on women who do not 'spare' their children adequately.

4. Contrasting number 3 sculpture/image is the sculpture of a trendy modern woman who has obviously 'spaced' her children. She is carrying her baby in the modern way of using a holster to hold her baby by straps in front of her while she 'baby-feeds' him. She is ushered in on stage with the announcement that she has 'appeared' to teach humans the proper way to 'breast-feed'. The message to be deduced by this image/sculpture is that, even if you are sophisticated, you can and should still be a breast-feeding mother. This is in support of the development issue of breast-feeding for third world mothers.

It is important to underscore the fact that all these feminine images appearing on stage with various development messages are called 'spirits'. We therefore see that the 'Ngó-ijóv' figure in the narratives of Tiv folklore has evolved through the masquerade/puppet performances as the female puppet (called spirit), manifesting in different roles as 'Ngó-ijóv' in demonstrating one form of knowledge or another. These puppets are appropriately introduced as spirits when they step onto the performance arena.

Curiously, it should also be noted that the concept of other-worldly setting in folklore is still implicit in Kwagh-hir theatre performance today. The arena stage or village square setting of Kwagh-hir performance is very significant. Tiv settlements come in what is known as home-steads. The spatial arrangement of the home-stead gives ample room for the performances to capture the idea of 'other-worldly' activity of the folklore. The home-stead comprises of a cluster of huts owned by households within the extended family. The arrangement of huts leaves much court-yard space in the middle of these usually large compounds where the performances take place. It is on this space that legitimate (and worthwhile) activity usually takes place. On the other hand, behind the huts which are known as 'kungur' or 'akongur'; other activities take place, including spirit activity. It is in the 'kungur' that represents the spirit world in Kwagh-hir performance and back-stage in theatrical parlance. Therefore, in the night, when the performances take place, the space beyond the arrangement of huts marks 'figuratively' the beginning of the spirit world or bush/forest, from where both animals (the masquerades), and spirits (the human-sized puppets), emerge to perform or interface on the 'human' liminal stage (the arena), (Turnbull in Schechner & Appel, 1990, p. 50). Thus Tiv art/performance express and re-enforce the totalitarian world-view that both Rubingh and Hendrix describe above.

The 'Ngó-ijóv' Concept as Paradigm for Modern Societies

Modern society today is grappling with the women issue. Gender equality has become a necessary challenge to the development of modern society. For this reason the push for gender equality has gained currency in many countries around the world. In spite of this, the marginalisation and non-recognition of women as important contributors to society's development is still a global challenge. For this reason, the concept of 'Ngó-ijóv' in Tiv folklore can serve as an important paradigm for modern societies.

As seen in the discussion above, in the world of Tiv folklore, the feminization of the supernatural placed the responsibility of directing the
lives of quest seekers on the feminized spirit called 'Ngo-jiwon'. We see her as occupying a central place in the lives of young persons undertaking the rites of passage that would qualify them for adult life. She is the holder of wisdom, knowledge and skills which she imparts to those willing to be taught.

It has been our proposition in this paper that, if the world of folklore (which is created by humans), could elevate a feminized being (spirit), to such an important role in 'society', then human society could also borrow a leaf from this and also bring women into positions of influence. This speaks of gender roles and responsibilities working for gender equality.

We know that gender is a social institution- it is a social construct. It refers to the roles men and women play in society. It is also a cultural construct. It is central to the way society is organized. Indeed it affects the roles men and women play in society (Riley, 1997, p. 4). However in no society do men and women perform equal roles and hold equal positions of power. This underscores gender inequality in all societies. Yet, this inequality can be deconstructed since it was socially and culturally constructed.

The cultural societies that created folklore as a platform for (socially), educating/inducing youngsters into traditional (human) societies, can by the same token deconstruct gender inequality. This is very important as, James Argrey (1969), has rightly observed, "no race or people can rise half slave, half free. The surest way to keep a people down is to educate the men and neglect the women. If you educate a man you simply educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family", i.e., no race can rise without carrying its women along.

Therefore, the feminization of the supernatural in (Tiv) folklore, is an important paradigm for the deconstruction of gender inequality in modern society. For we saw that the Tiv believe the world of folklore is also the world of spirits. This spirit world is also perceived by the Tiv belief system as existing side by side with the human world, which stands for human society. Human society therefore, can learn and indeed be taught and informed by the spirit-world as also demonstrated by the Tiv Kgwh-hir theatre (an advanced form of Tiv folklore also called Kgwh-hir). As society constructs gender, so can it also deconstruct gender. It is therefore, time for human society to rise up to the challenge of deconstructing gender inequality in all its ramifications.

Conclusion

Now, Tiv folklore is known by the name Kgwh-hir which as we have already shown is a very dynamic form. This dynamism is demonstrated in its evolutionary tendencies which show that early Kgwh-hir which used to be purely a narrative form later evolved into a pantomime form, and later still into a puppet等形式. It now features a combination of dance, music, puppetry, pantomime, narrative and masquerades, etc. Indeed, Kgwh-hir is not only total theatre, but it is also a theatre of totality. By this we mean that, not only is Kgwh-hir a multi-disciplinary/multi-media, it also carries along with its performance, a liminality that ensures its dynamism and popularity with rural communities where it is based (Schechner & Appel, 1990). It is therefore, at this grassroots base that development and transformation must begin through deconstructing wrong/negative attitudes to womanhood and women's contributions to human society's development.

It is both in the narrative and the current puppet/masquerade forms that the 'Ngo-jiwon' phenomenon is captured. The 'Ngo-jiwon' in the narrative form did evolve into the human-sized puppets that appear in stage and are called spirits. Again, there may be male puppets (as spirits) appearing on stage but, it is the female puppets (spirits), that are used to carry the development messages that Kgwh-hir, as development communication, is known for (Nyager, 2008).

So then, if in Tiv folklore and performance arts, the feminine is so recognized and elevated, what stops the same recognition and elevation of the feminizing in our societies, beginning with the Tiv society? Through the platforms of the arts of folklore and popular theatre, gender inequality could be deconstructed and women's contributions to the development of society recognized.

References


