

Tiv Origin and Migrations: Myth Versus Reality

Richard Terungwa Chia

*Department of Archaeology,
Ahmadu Bello University,
Zaria, Nigeria.*

Abstract

The Tiv people of central Nigeria today inhabit a substantial part of the Middle Benue Valley of Nigeria. Their history of origin and migrations has not been very clear due to the lack of sufficient empirical evidence to check the various versions of traditions of their origin and migrations often available to scholars of Tiv history. This paper attempts to elucidate Tiv origin and migratory history using a variety of sources which include oral traditions, linguistics, ethnography, and archaeology. The paper also demonstrates the advantages of multiple sources in the search for Tiv origin and migrations, and calls for a more elaborate and collaborative research on Tiv history.

Key Terms: Tiv, migratory history, Middle Benue Valley, collaborative research, and Oral Traditions.

Introduction

The Tiv of central Nigeria inhabit an area spanning the present states of Benue, Taraba, Cross River, Plateau, and Nasarawa. Over three million of the about five million Tiv people live in Benue State of Nigeria while the others live in parts of the other states mentioned above. The Tiv believe they all descended from one man known as Tiv and they all also speak Tiv language. It is however not clear who Tiv's father was, three names often come up in oral traditions and these include, Takuruku, Shon, and Awange but this remains obscured till today. Tivland is characterized in most parts by low hills and Island Mountains such as, Mkar, Ushongo, Ikwe, Binda, Dikpo, Indyer-Mbakuv, Gbanger hills, and mount Ikyuen among others. These hills and mountains seem to have been very important to the Tiv during the early phases of their settlement in the Benue Valley. The soils in Tivland are fertile and suitable for the cultivation of a variety of crops such as yams, potatoes, cassava, millet, guinea corn, maize, rice, soyabeans, bananas, pawpaw, coconuts, ground nuts, tomatoes, beans, and economic trees like oranges, mangoes, and cashews among others. The fertility of the soils increases as one moves to the valleys of the Benue and Katsina-Ala rivers, the two major rivers in Tivland. There are many tributaries including Amire-kiriki, and Amire-vesen.

Tivland is characterized by two major vegetation belts, the rain forest in the southern parts especially along river banks, and the savannah region in the north. However, bush burning, lumbering, continuous and extensive agricultural activities have changed the natural vegetation in the area substantially. The annual mean temperature in the area is about 36°C

Tiv Origin and Migrations

Information on the origin and migration history of the Tiv come mainly from the following sources: Oral traditions, Linguistics, Ethnography, and Archaeology.

Oral traditions collected by diverse scholars over the years since about the early nineteen hundred on Tiv origins and migrations have been helpful in the search for the original homeland of the Tiv. Generally the Tiv believe they came from the eastern part of their present homeland from a place they refer to as 'Swem' (Akiga 1939). To many Tiv people, Swem represents their original homeland. However, the exact location of Swem has been a matter of controversy among scholars. Akiga (1939) claimed that Swem is a hill in the Lyon area of Ikyurav-Ya in southeastern Tivland and he claimed he had visited Swem in 1934. Bohannan (1953) also claimed swem is actually the Ngol Kedju hill located in the Bamenda highlands, northwestern Cameroon. Makar (1975) concluded from the oral traditions he collected amongs the Tiv that, Swem is located in Nyiev-Ya in the present Kwande Local Government of Benue State. He noted that Swem is a mountain which is about 36 miles southwest of the compound of the district head of Nyiev-Ya known as Mr Yaro Gusa. Gbor (1978) and Orkar (1979) were not specific in their location of Swem; but saw Swem as a hill located on the Nigeria-Cameroon border, southeast of the present Tivland. For Dzurgba (2007:26) Swem is located at the source of Katsina-Ala River in south-Western Cameroon". He says Swem is located in the Akwaya subdivision or local government area and that there is a range of mountains in this area with one of them standing taller than all others. He says this tallest mountain is 'Swem', the ancestral home of the Tiv pointing out that even the present people of Akwaya also refer to it as Swem.

It is however clear that all the traditions collected have identified Swem as a hill or mountain somewhere to the southeast of the present Tivland. Given this perspective therefore, the Nigeria-Cameroon border becomes a promising place to look out for the Swem hill. But one major problem envisaged in the idea of locating Swem is how one could clearly distinguish the Swem hill from the other hills in the landscape in question. It is the controversies surrounding the exact location of Swem that made Dorward (1971) to liken Swem to the Biblical Garden of Eden. If one goes out today to collect oral traditions on Tiv origins and migrations amongst the Tiv, one is likely going to come across a version of traditions that claims that the Tiv originated from Congo in central Africa and migrated through the Nigeria-Cameroon border into the Benue Valley of Nigeria. This version was popularized by Gbor (1978) who hinged his argument on linguistic and cultural evidence observed by scholars such as Talbot and Johnston in 1926

(Igirgi 2007) who claimed the Tiv are Bantu language speakers that share linguistic and other cultural similarities with the other Bantu speakers in the Congo, central Africa. This central African origin theory is discussed fully under the linguistic source. Wherever the location of the original home of the Tiv is, there is a consensus that, they had settled at Swem from where

they moved into the Benue Valley of Nigeria. Makar (1975) described the movement of the Tiv from Swem in clans and the areas they had settled before finally spreading into the Benue Valley today with such details as giving the names of the hills they inhabited as they moved from Swem. He claims the Tiv moved from Swem to a hill called 'Nwange' which is about 16km south of the present Ikurav-Ya. The hill stretches from east to west and is approximately 16km in length and 6km in width. From this hill, Makar claims different clans of the Tiv moved to different hilltops. The Kparev and Ukum clans moved north-west of the Nwange hill and settled on the Ngokugh hill which is about 40km from the Nwange hill. The Ngokugh hill is located in the present Shangev-Ya in Kwande Local Government of Benue State. The Tongov, Ikyurav, Nongov and Turan clans moved from Nwange hill northwards, about 56km and settled on the Barakuv hill which is today in tar Nyiev, and Nanev in Kwande Local Government of Benue State. The Masev, Iharev, Ugondo and Shitire clans also moved directly to the north of Nwange about 40km and settled on the Binda hill which is located in the present Ikyurav-Ya in Kwande Local Government of the state. No one seems to know exactly what caused the Tiv to move from Swem into the Benue Valley of Nigeria. Tiv traditions claim it was inadequate land for agriculture and persistent conflict with other tribes that caused them to move away from, and some of those enemies, it is claimed had pursued the Tiv into their present locations.

It is said that, the decisive war with one of the tribes, the Ugenyi people was fought on the Ushongo hill, a hill in the present Village of Ushongo in the Mbayegh district of Ushongo Local government of Benue State. This is where it is claimed a heavy defeat was inflicted on the Ugenyi people. Some scholars such as Abraham (1933), Bohannan and Laura (1953), and Rubingh (1969) believed the Ugenyi were slave raiders. The menace posed by the Ugenyi people and other tribes is said to have forced the Tiv to move up and settle on the hills scattered in different parts of Tivland. These hills in the words of Makar (1975), "served as natural defense and as means of surveying distant lands".

The present author during a field session in 2013 in the southwestern part of the republic of Cameroon collected oral traditions of the Lyon-i-purugh people who are one of the major ethnic groups in the Akwaya division/Local Government Area. According to the traditions, the Tiv and Lyon are one family who once lived together around a hill called Swem (by the Tiv and Lyon) which is located about 10km northeast of Anyimayeke hamlet in southwestern Cameroon (figure.1). Other groups within the vicinity of the Swem hill call it by different names such as *Kibetene* by the Assaka people, but it is not known whether any of these groups visits the hill to perform any ritual rites. According to the traditions, the Swem hill was not inhabited in terms of setting up settlements on it, but was regarded as sacred and used for the performance of some ritual rites. The Swem hill remains a sacred place where the Tiv and Lyon people go to connect with their

ancestors for blessings. The traditions also claim there are still surviving evidence of those settlements around the Swem hill, particularly remains of huts foundations in form of circular stone structures, and graves which they claimed were dug by the Tiv in form of round holes. However, these traditions do not say specifically where the Tiv and Lyon migrated from to the Swem area. The Lyon-i-purugh people speak Tiv language very fluently and also bear Tiv names (In fact one of our informants' name was 'lorlunmun' which is a Tiv name). The Lyon-i-purugh do not only speak Tiv language, but also share almost all other cultural traits including marriages, dances, cults, rituals such as Atsuku, Igbe, Verkombo among others, musical instruments, traditional clothing, and architecture among many other things. There is a group of people, according to the traditions, who inhabit the plains on the eastern part of the Swem hill today known as *Mbagongo* whose language can be substantially understood by the Tiv when spoken and Lyon traditions claim Mbagongo may have been a part of the Tiv left behind around the Swem hill. It is believed the Tiv moved from around the Swem hill into the Benue Valley leaving behind Lyon people in search of more farmlands following the paucity of land occasioned by population growth.



Figure 1: The outline of Swem hill as taken from the hamlet of Anyimayeke, Akwaya Division.

It must be understood that, there are Lyon people in Nigeria and Cameroon. Those in Nigeria are in Ishangev-Ya in Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State and are Tiv, while those in Cameroon are in the Akwaya division in southwestern Cameroon. Those in Nigeria are called Lyon-Azembe while those in the Cameroon are called Lyon-i-purugh: They not only speak Tiv language, but also bear Tiv names, nevertheless they speak another dialect called Ugare. The Lyon people today seemingly do not know how they came to acquire the Ugare dialect but claimed they must

have acquired that from their interactions with other groups in the Cameroon. Geographically, the only thing that separates Tivland in Nigeria from Lyon-i-purugh land in Cameroon is river Muan. It is surprising when one speaks with the Lyon-i-purugh people and notices how most times they deem it not necessary to distinguish between Tiv and Lyon. As a matter of fact, they expressed their desire to become part of the traditional Tiv day celebration held annually in Gboko, Benue State of Nigeria. They claim to have descended from Ikyôr, the ancestral father of other Tiv groups such as Ishangev, Ukan, and Gaav. Dzurgba (2007) claims groups in the Cameroon such as the Ugbe, Lyon, and Utange are Tiv and if this is considered to be true, the only way one could reconcile Dzurgba's position with Makar's claim (Makar 1975) that, the Tiv left Swem because of wars with some of these same groups will be to look at the conflicts as intra rather than inter-ethnic.

Linguistics evidence have also been used to trace the origin of the Tiv and their migrations. Scholars such as Abraham (1933), Greenberg (1959, 1981), Guthrie (1962), and Gbor (1978) have argued that the Tiv are Bantu language speakers. Igirgi (2007) stated that, the idea of Tiv language being Bantoid was first introduced by Talbot .M. and Johnston F.H. in 1926. Abraham (1933) demonstrated the Bantoidness of Tiv language by compiling a sixty-seven word list which he claimed has clearly proven that, there are similarities between Tiv language and that of the Bantu Nyanza who live in Malawi today. Now, Bantu scholars, particularly the linguists believe that all Bantu language speakers originated from a common cultural landscape. However, the exact location of this cultural landscape is not known as this has been a matter of debate among scholars. Guthrie (1962:274) for example claimed that "the raw material for any comparative study of languages is the existence of a group of cognates from language to language characterized by what are known as sound-shifts" and based on this over 2300 of such cognates were constructed using items from at least 200 Bantu languages. This gave rise to what he called 'roots' which were classified into types, and if most of the 'reflexes of a given root' are found in an area, that area is regarded as the 'geographical spread of the root itself'. Thus, based on the 'general group' of Bantu roots observed in all languages in the Bantu language family, Guthrie concluded that, the Bantu languages originated from the upper Congo drainage. Earlier on, Johnston had located the ancestral Bantu language in the Lake Victoria region, while Greenberg placed it near the Nigeria- Cameroon border (Guthrie 1962). Greenberg (1981) argues that the Nigeria-Cameroon border is the origin because it is home to the highest number of diverse Bantu languages today. His argument is hinged on the idea that, an area which is home to the highest number of diverse but closely related languages is the likeliest place of origin of the ancestral language.

Oliver (1974) and Dalby (1981) have both posited that, the areas considered by Guthrie and Greenberg as the cultural landscape from where

the Bantu languages originated simply represent the primary and secondary centers respectively. That, those areas represent successive chronological phases in Bantu language history. In general, Greenberg's position remains the most common in Bantu studies in spite of some observed shortcomings associated with it.

Ethnographic works carried out by some scholars such as Bohannan (1965), and the present writer in 2013, have been very insightful in illuminating Tiv origin and history of migration. Bohannan claimed that his works in the Congo area revealed similarities between the Tiv and some Congolese groups such as the Suku. He observed these similarities in their musical instruments, architecture, belief systems, among other cultural traits. The present writer during his field session in 2013 at Ballin in southwestern part of the republic of Cameroon made very striking observations in the material culture of the Lyon-i-purugh people. The writer noticed that, the Tiv and Lyon have the same musical instruments, architectural styles for their houses and graves, traditional clothing, and some facial marks (figures 2, 3, 4 and 5). The two groups also share same dances, some rituals and songs among others.



Figure 2: Tradition Tiv and Lyon chair from Ballin, Cameroon.



Figure 3: A Traditional Iyon Compound, the Architectural Style and Patterning Same with the Tiv.



Figure 4: The Indyer (Musical Instrument) from Ballin Same as the Indyer in Tivland.



Figure 5: The Famous Tiv Traditional Cloth (*Anger*) Worn by the Chief of Ballin.

Archaeological researches conducted on abandoned settlement sites in Tivland particularly the hilltop settlement sites have also been useful in the search for Tiv origin and migrations. These researches seem to support the assertion by Tiv oral traditions that, the Tiv inhabited the hilltops as they migrated from Swem into the Benue Valley of Nigeria. The migration from Swem according to oral traditions was sparked in part, by conflict with other tribes (Akiga 1939, Makar 1975, Gbor 1978) and the hilltops provided the needed protection from their enemies as they were pursued into the Benue Valley. Archaeological and ethno archaeological works conducted by scholars such as Andah 1983, Folorunso 1989, Ogundele 1993, Gundu 1999, Ndera 2009, and Chia 2014 have associated the hilltop settlements in Tivland today with the Tiv. Common archaeological materials on all these hilltop sites include remains of circular stone structures representing foundations of former huts and granaries, grindstones, clay pots and potsherds, remains of collapsed dry stone walling system often enclosing the settlements, pieces or parts of broken clay smoking pipes, and rock shelters and caves with potsherd scatters (figures 6, 7, 8 and 9). Andah (1983) and Folorunso (1998, 2005) obtained a radiocarbon date of 15th Century AD for Tiv settlements on Indyer-Mbakuv (Tse-Dura), and the Ushongo hills. However, Folorunso suggests that, dates so far obtained from hilltop sites in Tivland seem to show that, the 15thC AD date for the occupation of the hills by the Tiv may have represented the slave raid phase of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and not necessarily the earliest Tiv settlement in the Benue Valley. The archaeological data also seem to show that, the claim by oral traditions that, the Tiv fought the decisive war with the Ugenyi people on the Ushongo hill may not be completely correct. It couldn't have been the whole Tiv clans that inhabited the Ushongo hill but just a clan or two during the Ugenyi war.

It must be noted that archaeological investigations of abandoned settlements in Tivland have so far covered just a few sites and most of these sites have been hilltop sites in the interior of Tivland. The date of 15th Century AD obtained for the Tiv settlement in the Benue Valley may not necessarily be true for the earliest Tiv settlement since all the sites that were dated in this instance had come from one locality, the Ushongo area (Andah 1983a and b, Folorunso 1993, 1998). So far no sites in plains have been properly investigated and dated to compare the dates with the 15th C AD dates obtained for the hilltop settlements. Perhaps, the reason for this is not unconnected with the nature of preservation of sites in the plains. Sites hardly survive to a level one could easily recognize them as sites via the naked eyes until other scientific means of identifying them can be employed. This is in part because of intensive and extensive agricultural activities on almost every piece of land in Tivland. The situation is even more intense today as people have started moving up the hills in some parts of Tivland for farming activities.



Figure 6: A partially Buried pot on Gbanger Hilltop abandoned Settlement, Ikov District, Ushongo Local Government Area, Benue State.



Figure 7: A Grindstone on Gbanger hilltop Abandoned Settlement.



Figure 8: Part of a Dry Stone Wall on Gbanger Hilltop Abandoned Settlement.



Figure 9: One of the Remains of huts Foundations on Gbanger Hill

Conclusion

Having examined the evidence available for Tiv origin and migrations from different sources, it seems the notion of a Tiv migration from somewhere around the Nigeria- Cameroon border into the Benue Valley of Nigeria is not in doubt again. However, what is still unclear is the exact place from where they moved into the Benue Valley, and the approximate time this migration took place. In fact oral traditions recorded by Makar (1975) aver that the migrations were not all at once, but in phases by different clans in different directions. The above viewpoint has a lot of implications for archaeological research. Therefore, Archaeologists studying the Benue Valley of Nigeria may have to investigate more carefully and focus attention on settlement sites in the plains because they may predate those on hilltops. It does appear that the hilltop settlements were a response to a particular event (slave raids) in the history of Tiv people in the Benue Valley rather than the first or earliest habitation sites by the Tiv. Archaeological investigations comprising the use of collaborative and multi-disciplinary approaches need to be carried out in parts of southwestern of Cameroon where traditions have claimed the Swem hill is located and look out for more data on this question of Tiv origin and migrations.

Also more and careful linguistic studies on the question of the Bantu language family, its origin and how it relates to the Tiv and their origin need to be carried out. This will in collaboration with other sources help to illuminate the possible cradle of the Tiv

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