

Tiv Origins of Nationhood and Migration into the Benue Valley, c. 1500-1900.

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of the subject of Tiv origins, development of nationhood and the process of their migration into the Benue valley and Nigeria from c.1500-1900. The paper considers the debate on the classification of the Tiv as belonging to the Bantu group and concludes that the Tiv belong to the Bantu language family. It however, notes that on the question of a pure tribe origin, the Tiv nation was more likely formed by incorporation of several groups into what became the Tiv nation. The paper concludes with a portrayal of the migration process from the Bantu homeland in the vicinity of Cameroon by the Tiv from c.1500 into the Benue valley and the process of their settlement in present-day Nigeria.

Key Terms: Tiv Origins, Benue Valley, and Bantu Language.

Introduction

The Tiv nation had always considered itself as descending from one ancestor, the putative father Tiv, who himself descended from Takuruku Anyamazenga. In his analysis of Tiv origins and in his critical evaluation of the concept of a nation, Iyo had attempted to show that there might not be anything like a pure ethnic group at all (Iyo 1994). Iyo's view is that it is ambiguous to ascribe a unique national identity or stamp to a group of people beyond the fact of the geographical area that they occupy (Iyo 1994:55). This ambiguity among others arises from the conception of scholars such as Barker who posits that "a nation is not the physical fact of one blood, but the mental fact of one tradition" (Iyo *ibid*). Before Iyo, J.N. Orkar had also found problems with the monolithic presentation of Tiv origins, to him it is only scholars who presume a static African society that will allude to a group such as the Tiv maintaining pure blood over the centuries (Orkar, 1979). The question is therefore one of seeking to understand the process of Tiv origins and migrations into the Benue valley and Nigeria c. 1500-1900.

Tiv Origins and the Bantu Debate

Nationhood origin refers more to the consciousness of the people as being one and holding certain beliefs and experiences that are felt to be commonly shared through a prolonged historical process. This classification finds validity in Lieber's assertion that a nation refers to a population that is homogenous with a defined location, and which has a name of its own with inhabitants who speak a common language with their own culture and common institutions that are distinguishable from those of others. The actions of people who constitute a nation are also meant to predispose them to a common destiny (Iyo 1994:56).

Against this background it is therefore pertinent for us to objectively assess the question of who the Tiv are. The question is one which started appearing in literature with W.B. Baikie in 1854 when the Tiv first made contact with the British as a result of the Baikie's exploratory expedition on the Benue River (Iyo *ibid*). The accounts of these early European precursors and their agents that were to afterwards become a feature of Anglo-Tiv relations, on Tiv history, were wide off the mark, as their negative reports were more reflective of the opposition they faced in penetrating the area than anything else (Iyo: 40).

From the second decade of the twentieth century, however, more substantial studies on the Tiv were underway by British colonial agents, administrators, political officers and anthropologists who in addition to their normal administrative duties were also engaged in researching and writing the history of Tiv, as that of other groups in Nigeria, and Africa where they were posted. Indeed, the desire to do this by the colonial administrators sometimes got in the way of the performance of their normal duties that Lord Frederick Lugard, Nigeria's governor-general had to reprimand the resident in Sokoto, Major J.A. Burdon, to pay greater attention to his work rather than concentrating more on writing the history of the caliphate (Usman 2003: 118). In Tivland, the works of Capt. R.M. Downes and Capt. R.C. Abraham in the 1930s (Iyo, 1940) recorded for the first time, accounts of the Tiv in book length for the reading public. These were followed in 1939 by *Akiga's Story*. The works of the Bohannan's from the 1950s were shortly followed by indigenous Tiv historians and writers from the 1960s and greatly opened up the field of historical studies on the Tiv. In attempting to reconstruct the history of the origins of the people, therefore, the pioneering works of both the British writers and Tiv historians all contributed to the process of historical reconstruction, particularly the accounts of Tesemchi Makar, D.C. Dorward, J.N. Orkar and J.A. Iyo which had been most helpful in this process.

A common trend running through these works is the identification of the Tiv people as a Bantu or semi-Bantu group. Due to the paucity of written accounts in the pre-colonial era especially for groups below the Niger and the Benue when writing was yet to be introduced, and records were not kept, the agency of language has been the critical factor that has been used in classifying ethnicities in Nigeria and through that attempting to determine the source of their origin. Iyo notes that the language factor has advantages as advances in lexico-statistics and glotto-chronology have made it possible for linguistic to meaningfully determine time-depth in the study of language groups (Iyo 1994: 42). Using, the agency of language, therefore, A. Boyd in 1907 and A.S. Judd in 1916 classified the Tiv as Bantu (Boyd and Judd 1994: 42-44). Judd, however, noted that the Tiv language while resembling classical Bantu had forms that were unlike it. He therefore concludes that the probability is that the Tiv were likely part of the proto-Bantu group, but had in the course of evolution and migration adopted other groups who then

impacted upon the language spoken today by the Tiv (Iyo 1994: 43). This viewpoint corroborates our earlier thesis where we had attempted to disprove the pure tribe origin for the Tiv.

Though there are many questions that ethnolinguistics and ethnoarchaeology are yet to answer satisfactorily regarding Tiv origins, however, based on language studies in Africa following Greenberg's initial classification, which was further modified by Kay Williamson and Hansford *et al*, the Tiv fall into the Bantoid group. The Bantoid group is classified into Non-Bantu and Bantu. The Tiv, giving what others have called their semi-Bantu status, according to Yina, are classified as non-Bantu (Yina 2007). Greenberg and Iyo are however of the view that the Tiv are full Bantu and not semi-Bantu (Iyo 1994: 44). Greenberg argues that "there is no more justification for the term semi-English to describe German, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian and Icelandic" (Iyo *ibid*).

However, settling the debate about linguistic identity is in no way a clear pointer to source of origin and geographical migration. This is because as noted by Iyo a group can actually lose their language as a result of migration and pick up another in the process of mingling with others (Iyo 1994: 62). In such circumstances a language can obscure historical origins and become a "façade in determining ethnic origins of any people" (Iyo 1994). The agency of language therefore shows that no ethnic group can be described as biologically pure. It can therefore be hypothetically expressed that the Tiv language expanded when they left the Cameroon-Obudu complex after c. 1500 by absorbing into it other groups as tonal variants in Tiv language prove (Iyo *ibid*). Essentially, Iyo's main thesis is to disapprove the myth of unitary origins for the Tiv nation carried along by Abraham and Downes in the 1930s. Furthermore, Tiv genealogy examined by the Bohannans show some of its limitations in buttressing a pure tribe origin thesis as it is subject to manipulation to suit present political exigencies rather than a factual representation of the past (Iyo *ibid*). As a chronological measure, Iyo however finds some merit in it as they aid the dating process if margins are allowed for errors (Iyo *ibid*), his critique of Tiv genealogy is its failure to show how the Tiv are related to other groups. This however, is a problem that many other African groups such as the Yoruba face (in the Yoruba case, they descended from the sky).

Iyo's contention, is that the Tiv legend of a putative ancestor could actually mark the beginning of a constitutional period when the Tiv, having assimilated other groups, began to consciously identify themselves as a unique group and nation with a defined territory that could expand as well as contract given the nature of contact and changes in their relations with their neighbours. This constitutional phase could likely be traced to the last decades of the fifteenth century when they still inhabited the Cameroonian mountain ranges (Iyo *ibid*).

Agreeing with B.W. Andah, we note that, the search for Tiv origins should not be done in a 'puristic sense'. This is because a people's origins can

be approached from a variety of perspectives, incorporating the biological, linguistic and cultural awareness, which can be independent of each other and also yield different results (Andah 1983:1). Thus, he notes that:

Who a people are could mean and has often been used in the case of Bantu studies, by scholars, to mean what they are today, biologically, linguistically or in terms of material cultural representation and how the patterns discerned came to be what they are today (Andah 1983: 2).

This finds further collaboration in Sutton's words that:

A tribe is a tribe because it feels it is one. It must possess a common culture, and particularly a common language. It is not necessarily a highly organized political unit. Tribes, moreover, are fluid groups, some members are lost, others absorbed, through the continual process of migration and interaction with neighbours. There is no such thing as a 'pure' tribe, derived from a single founding ancestor (Orkar 1968: 158).

Andah views the Bantu phenomenon as the most problematic in African cultural history. For it is quite difficult to settle the question of origins as to whether the West African tropical forest was the area of first dispersal or whether it was the areas around East Africa from where the Bantu launched out towards the south, central and then northwards towards West Africa. The term Bantu itself was coined in the 1850s by Wilhelm Bleek, and the Bantu languages are dated to about three thousand years ago (Andah 1983). Also, Heine and Henrie's genetic classification and modified lexicostatistical list postulated centres of Bantu languages spread out as follows:

- (i) Cameroons – from where some people spread north and south for short distances and some spread further east as far as northeastern Zaire.
- (ii) North of the lower Zaire producing seven groups encompassing what is usually labeled Western Bantu.
- (iii) In Kasai – producing all the Eastern Bantu languages (Andah 1983).

With this classification we can reasonably argue that the Tiv were part of the Cameroons group who moved into the Benue valley and since the area was not empty and was composed of people who fostered inter-group relations, these invariably affected the original linguistic and cultural structure of the Tiv people (Andah 1983: 17).

Tiv Arrival into the Benue Valley and Nigeria

The point of Tiv later dispersal has attracted a lot of attention from scholars of Tiv history. In this, Swem, has always featured as a putative homeland, the last launching pad, from which the Tiv moved into the Benue valley from the sixteenth century and came to occupy their present abodes in what is today Benue, Nasarawa and Taraba states of Nigeria.

Swem, as a point of migration and outflow is however itself contentious. D.C. Dorward see it as a "mythical mountain homeland of the Tiv" (Dorward

1971: 35). Bohannan however locates Swem in the Ngol Kedju hill in the Bamenda highlands in Cameroon (Andah 1983:30). To Downes, the Tiv came to the area of the Sonkwalla hills from Cross River (Dorward 1971: 2). Akiga identifies Swem to be located in Ikurav-Ya in southeastern Tivland and that Swem is in Nyiev-Mbashaya, which is a mile away from the Cameroonian border (Makar 1994: 4). Gbor's assertion is that the Tiv came from the general direction of Cameroon (Gbor 1978: 9). Considering all these, and the nature of Tiv dispersal into the Benue valley, Andah concedes that the best that can be said for the Tiv as to their point of dispersal into the area they now occupy is the Bamenda Plateau in Cameroon (Andah 1983: 31).

Iyo dates the period of dispersal as between c.1500-1600 (Iyo 1994: 55). Thus from the seventeenth century the Tiv were to stream into the Benue valley. Corroborating J.N. Orkar, Iyo notes that a coherent era in Tiv history actually started with the conception of Swem. This place "was probably founded by a core group called Tiv as a traditional religious bastion of defence against other ethnic groups in the past" (Orkar 1975: 85). Iyo contends that Tiv settlements from which the people might have descended into the valley could have ranged from the Cameroonian highlands, Sonkwalla hills and the Obudu hills – that the Tiv occupied the Cameroon-Obudu complex as part of a multi-ethnic society complex where they lived southeast of the modern homeland (Iyo 1994: 126). As the migration got underway, Iyo contends that the name Tiv, could have been adopted at this time; and it was probably, the name of "a famous migration leader who rose to prominence when the Swem homeland was breaking up after 1500" (Iyo 1994: 127).

Beginning from c.1500, and over the next two centuries, the Tiv moved gradually and slowly to inhabit the Benue valley that was already inhabited by other people who made up the Apa confederacy. The migration, as noted by Dorward, was fraught with several dangers and they were constantly harassed by bush 'tribes' or *atoatiev*. The supposed exception to this was the Fulani who as accounts have it helped the Tiv and subsequently established a joking relationship with them. Together they battled the original owners of the land (Dorward 1971). Orkar, citing J.B. Webster writes that the period of the descent coincided with the beginning of the disintegration of the Kwararafa kingdom at about 1600 A.D. This fact aided the Tiv movement as a weakened Kwararafa presented fewer obstacles for the Tiv to surmount (Orkar 1971). It was however, when they broke with the Fulani that the Tiv moved into the area of the Katsina-Ala River and hills south of Kashimbila where they met and intermarried with the Iyon, Utange, Ugbo, Ndir and Ukwese further continuing with the process of cross-cultural assimilation (Dorward *ibid*).

This period is regarded by Akiga as a peaceful one in which the Tiv people had learnt to live with the "Bush Tribes" and understood their ways:

They watched what they did, and tried to learn from them. They even came to call them their brothers, and were not afraid to intermarry with

them... they came to cutting the mark down the bridge of the nose (East 1939: 50).

This process can be referred to as a civilizing era in which the Tiv underwent a transformation by transiting from a hunting and gathering group to an agrarian society (Dorward 1971:10).

Conclusion

In the Tiv migration into the Benue valley, Ipusu and Ichongo, the acclaimed two sons of Tiv, were probably migration leaders in the second phase of movement from the period 1535-1595 (Iyo 1994: 137). The first was the one that probably had the putative ancestor Tiv as the leader. In the second phase the Tiv, who were believed to have clustered around the Ibinda hills, had to moved further down into the valley as a result of quarrels over fishing rights with the Ugenyi and frequent attacks from the Utange and Ugee (Iyo 1994: 144). Furthermore, the Chamba or Ugenyi inhabiting the Kwararafa kingdom were by the sixteenth century raiding the Tiv for slaves and were therefore a major threat to the Tiv as an arriving group, forcing them to move westwards instead of northeast (Iyo 1994: 145). In later phases of the movements the Tiv moved fully into the Benue valley and most groups had settled in their respective territories by the late eighteenth century. Given the above scenario, therefore, it is plausible to aver that Tiv origin and migration history are explainable, not in one swoop movement, but in number of phases. Collaborative inputs from archaeology, linguistic, history and anthropology will help to make the nature and character of such movements clearer.

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