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### Signifying Systems in Traditional African Theatre Aesthetics: The *Girinya* Ritual Dance of the Tiv people of Nigeria

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#### Abstract

Several theatre traditions exist in Africa that are not even recognized and registered as theatres in the strict professional sense of the word. The electronic age has appropriated every thing, including research, to computerized evaluation, leaving issues of traditional complexion to wallow in the pity and mercy of their respective custodians. The implication therefore is that, serious and rich theatre traditions may soon go extinct if nothing is done in the form of research to try and patronize and thus preserve these traditions. This paper is of the view that there exist exciting theatre traditions in Africa that use a wide range of sign systems to communicate and also pass across the aspiration and cultural ethos of Africans to the world. The hope therefore is that scholars should devote some time and effort to the study of some of these performances, one of which is the *Girinya* ritual dance theatre of the Tiv people of Nigeria.

#### Introduction

Traditional theatre encapsulates the existence, progress, development and maximum utilization of social and cultural institutions of a group as it concerns artistic recreation and re-evaluation of moral and social ethos. This covers a wide range of activities relating to the life styles of the people – their mode of worship, marriage relationship, farming, hunting, social mobilization, healthcare, economic potentialities, as well as cosmic and mystic beliefs. These are expressed through community outlets such as dance, music, song, mime, pantomime, costume, proxemic systems and many more codes (non-verbal) of communication. The totality of all of these, add up to the unique and edificatory experience known as theatre and drama. In a preface to a book on traditional theatre semiosis, Gbilekaa (2006: ix) observed that:

African traditional theatre refers to indigenous performances of Africa, festivals, masque dramaturgy, storytelling performances, puppetry, dances and comedies that abound in traditional society's area in a globalised world. These are performances or cultural activities of the people that have resisted the onslaught of western civilization. It takes into cognizance, the progress and development of an entire society, its aspirations and fears, its belief systems and moral and social ethics.

Traditional African society (the focus of this study) offers a rich menu of potent theatre traditions which through the ages has flourished into a unique specimen of scholarly resource. The *Girinya* ritual dance theatre is one of such fascinating theatres practised by the Tiv people of the present Benue State in Nigeria. It must also be placed on record that other neighbours of the Tiv also practise their own version of this same dance with their own peculiar dialectics. The Tiv people who are the ethnic group under examination here, have varying accounts of origin ascribed to them by different scholars. However, this is not peculiar to them as a people, but as Bur (1993:1) observed:

The problem of studying the origin, character and development of ethnicity in Nigeria has been, and shall continue to be the vexatious task of historians, anthropologists, ethnographers, ethnomusicologists, theorists, administrators, academics and leaders.

He further adds that some of such accounts lack archaeological evidence and are shrouded in the plethora of oral versions, each making its claim of authenticity such that only students of history can settle the dispute through research. However, to Agber (1994:38):

What appears certain is that, the speakers of the language once lived within an ancestral homeland referred to as Swem in the group's traditions of origin.

Swem above is said to be very important in the historical evolution of the Tiv because it became "something like the core of a confederacy exercising a loose control over a vast area of people speaking variants of the same language" (Ballard, 1971:53). Thus, to Agber, coherent Tiv history and the emergence of Tiv identity began to emerge at Swem. Population explosion, as well as the desire for more and suitable lands for production of sufficient food to feed the population, may have been the primary reasons for migration from Swem. Through their pilgrimage to the present land occupied by the Tiv people, a lot of groups and subgroups were met, many wars were fought, and, by implication, certain habits were borrowed, including several aspects of artistic creativity, of which dance is one. The import of this analysis within the context of this work is rightly to put into perspective, the environment of the traditional setting, its cultural

antecedents and possible evolutionary trends in the development of its cultural resources and activities. Proceeding from this, we shall briefly examine the concept of the sign and its signifying systems.

### **The Sign**

Signs constitute a major element in the structure of human relationships. The import of the sign is derived from what Jakobson calls *signans* and *signatum*. The *signans* is that which is immediately perceptible and the *signatum* that which is inferable, apprehensible (Shittu, 2004:60). According to Thomas (1978:237) "a sign is something that suggests the presence or existence of a fact, condition, or quality immediately evident". This "something" may be anything used to convey meaning to the mind. It could be a picture, a gesture, word, an object or mark. This rightly suggests that every message or conversation is made possible by use largely of signs. This, however, also expresses in a nutshell the functionality of signs and the use to which signs in themselves could be put by society and by individuals who may wish to evolve some communicative parameters based on the basic principles of the sign system. Hawkes (1977:127-28) has summarized these principles thus:

These are the icon, something which functions as a sign by means of features of itself which resemble its objects; the index, something which functions as a sign by virtue of some sort of factual or causal connection with its object and the symbol, something which functions as a sign because of the rule of conventional or habitual association between itself and its object.

With this summary, Hawkes has identified three basic typologies of the sign - icon, index and symbol. However, these classifications are not absolute, pure and distinct as they appear; these signs usually interplay during performances producing diverse mixtures. Jakobson had in affirmation observed that we can have *symbolic icons* as well as *iconic symbols*. We can also have *indexical icons* or *iconic indexes* etcetera. The nature and context of usage often times enhance the quality, status and essence of the sign. The signifying systems in this performance are expressed through the process of dance, music, movement, costume, gestures and facial expressions. Let us therefore take a brief overview of the dance.

### **The Girinya Dance**

Girinya is a war dance found among the Tiv, South of the Benue-Ishangev-Ya and Gaav. These clans have common boundaries with the small ethnic groups on the north of Cross River State, and this information

is important because it is believed that this dance form was borrowed from these small groups that the Tiv collectively refer to as "Udam" (Peveer-Ge 1985:106).

To premise this discussion on Peveer-Ge's position as captured above gives the work some form of grounding in the sense that it establishes the nature of the *Girinya* dance as a war dance, its origin as a borrowed dance from Udam and an insight into the section of the Tiv people that perform the dance. "Udam" as a name is a Tiv coinage which refers to the upper Cross River (Obudu, Ogoja, Ugeb, Gakem). It is rather for convenience that the name is used in this work to refer to the above-mentioned communities. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy to add that the Kunav people in Vandeikya Local Government who share the closest of boundaries with the Cross River people are also very prominent in this ritual dance. The dance is symbolically a war dance, as virtually all elements or attributes of war are reflected in the different aspects that constitute the performance. Drawing inspiration from Bohannan's study of Tiv economy (1968:14), one could infer the origin and perhaps the reason for this dance. He contends that:

The whole of Tivland is expanding with every demand for more land. Towards the edges of the country, each small lineage not only expands but also has a specific direction of migration. Until this system collided with enforceable British ideas of fixed boundaries, the lineages on the outside were preceding four or five miles a generation against the Udam people in the south and more rapidly than that in the north east where little opposition confronted them (in Peveer-Ge (1985:106) .

Naturally, territorial expansion is synonymous with encroachment. As such, an atmosphere of hostility developed around this southward region, as the Tiv continued to acquire more land as against their "Udam" counterparts. It is noteworthy to mention at this point that the "Udam" clearly had this dance form which they refer to as '*Ogirinya!*' As a form of ritual dance, one had to provide a human head to become a member of the guild or to perform the burial ceremony of dead members. In line with this atmosphere of hostility already developed between the Udam of Cross River and the Tiv of Benue:

The Udam usually cross over to the side of the Tiv people, to kill them and cut off their heads, either for the burial of a member of the *Ogirinya* guild or in order to become a member of the guild (Peveer-Ge, 1985: 107).

The Tiv who could not sit and watch this continue, spied on the Udam and subsequently learnt the ritual and mode of performance of the enemy guild and today they perform an indigenous type of "*Ogirinya*" known as *Girinya*'. Thus it will not be an overstatement to contend that the *Girinya* dance emerged as a form of revenge against an enemy guild. The dire

need to stem the killing of the Tiv brothers by the Udam people necessitated the emergence of this dance guild. This perhaps agrees with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's position that "a people's culture is the carrier of their economic and political life". (1983:8)

### **Performance Aesthetics**

In trying to conceptualise African dances, Traore observed that:

It is difficult to classify African dances. Each is linked with a specific human activity. Some dances may be reserved for those who have accomplished acts of valour (1972:57).

The *Girinya* dance thus falls under the category that is 'reserved for those who have accomplished acts of valour'. The dance is performed at two different levels: social and ritual levels. At the social level, *Girinya* is performed to honour august visitors to the land. It could also be performed at National Day Celebration and Christmas. As a ritual dance, *Girinya* is performed to honour departed or fallen warriors. Social performances are not usually formal. The music is usually provided; individual warriors come out in specific costumes and dance to the familiar rhythm. Those who are not members but know the dance steps are free to join the dance in a social performance. This stage is known as "*Numun Girinya*". During the social performance,

The horn blower gives a scintillating sound summoning the heroes (dancers) to the arena of performance. The heroes (dancers), machete in hand, answer the call with animalistic blabber that is not understood by non-initiates. This is quickly followed by the music. In response, the heroes move onto the stage from different points to do a dance movement (Mude, 1987: 46).

This, perhaps, is the much that can be performed during a social performance. The ritual performance is richer and more vivid and theatrically all-encompassing. Its performance is usually at the burial ceremony of a member (warrior-hero). A warrior-hero in Tivland is one who has gone out in defence of his fatherland, or one who has been able to acquire traditional condiments for the funeral ceremony of a fallen hero. When a member of the guild dies, his death is not announced until arrangements for his burial rites have been completed. Once completed, a *Nomkor* (big horn) sounds a notification blast, summoning the titled men together. The sound of the horn actually marks the official announcement of the warrior's death and it is only then that mourners are allowed to cry or shed tears. It also marks the beginning of a chain of activities that may last some days. On the day of performance proper, a shrine is erected somewhere around the compound covered with palm leaves and *anger*

(traditional Tiv hand-woven cloth of black and white colours) around which a protocol of events seeking to cleanse both the dead member and living warriors from presumed stains is carried out. This shrine usually also houses the corpse of the dead warrior member. But for some health reasons, arising from modernization, only the accessories (cap, machete, beads, etc) of the dead member are kept under the shrine to represent the corpse (see Fig 1).



Fig. 1: An erected shrine housing the dead warrior's accessories

When this is constructed, all the *Anom-aior* (Tested Warriors) who had already undergone a cleansing ceremony to free them of the stains collected while prowling for funeral gadgets, now file out and walk stylishly round the shrine. For its structured performance, the *Girinya* dance, like any other traditional performance, is usually performed in an arena setting. Apart from the acrobatic nature of the dance which requires a wide space for its performance, the dance also calls for an intense interaction with the audience, something which can most effectively be achieved through the arena arrangement. In form, the *Girinya* dance ritual is in five connected sequences, what in literary terms can be known as 'scenes'. As mentioned earlier, Scene One, *Numum Girinya*, which serves as the opening glee or curtain raiser, involves the drummers who take up a position in the arena, with the dancers squatting at different positions round the arena behind the audience. The various horns dole out scintillating warlike sounds, accompanied by the drum and then the gong, with the clinging sound of the old tin filtering in to conclude the sound parade. The dancers (warriors) rush in from different directions and form a circle in front of the

lone drummer. It should be noted here that this lone drummer communicates with the dancers through rhythm - hence the talking drum (Fig. 2).

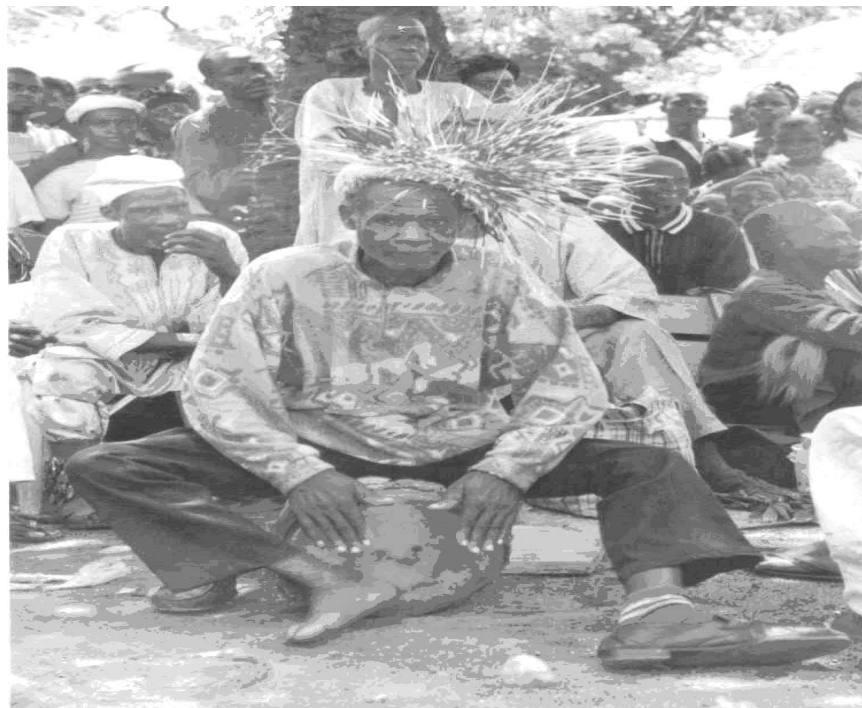


Fig. 2. A lone drummer with head gear

With gentle and light movement, they dance anti-clockwise round the arena first, but as the music gradually rises to a crescendo, the dancers also step up the vigour with which they dance. They move faster, but nevertheless maintain uniformity in steps, tapping the ground with their bare feet to produce a pleasant sound from the *bibi* tied round their ankles, which blends well with the music. Thus far, any member of the audience can join, since it is purported to warm the arena and mobilize the people for the real performance. Songs are rarely used in this performance; the only human voice heard is the incomprehensible animalistic sounds by the warrior-dancers as they jerk up and down with a fixed gaze of vigour, a replica of a wounded wild beast. After the opening glee, the remaining part of the performance is restricted to only member-warrior-heroes. The only contribution left to other lay people is the cheer and applause.

The second scene or stage is graced by distinguished warrior-heroes armed with sharp glittering machetes. The machete is held in the right-hand, while the left holds the sheaths. Naturally, a dangling sharp machete gives a feeling of horror and danger. One who dances with a machete must therefore be dreaded. They (warrior-heroes) appear pointing the machetes

to the east and then to the west to the rising and fading of the sun (Fig. 3). This performance is done with wild facial expressions of elaborated head nods, wide opened eyes, and violent jerking about the arena. Women who have also distinguished themselves in acts of valour can take part in this dance and be accorded burial ceremony similar to that accorded to men.

The third round or scene is essentially a solo performance, where a warrior – hero comes out to narrate the story of his valour, using the music and rhythm of the drum. Every warrior has a pet name that is coded between the warrior and the lead trumpeter (*Nomkor*). The trumpeter calls the warrior with such a coded name; he jumps in from amongst the audience with mild emotions and excitement. He prowls around the arena looking towards the east and west, with an eventual sharp step towards the drummer. He brandishes the machete as if threatening to cut off the drummer's head and finally settles for his dance. Movement at this time consists of elaborate and vigorous thrusting of the body and leg movement to the dictates of the drum. With an abrupt seizure of sound from the music stand, the dancer lies flat on the ground, and another member-hero appears almost immediately, places the flat blade across the neck of the prostrate figure, mimetic of the act of beheading a man. This episode continues until all the heroes appear on the stage.



Fig. 3 A warrior hero points the machete to the sun

The fourth stage is the *Gber girinya* stage where a goat is tied to a stake and a mandated member warrior cuts off the head of the goat with one

stroke. No other person apart from the authorized can attempt to carry out this exercise. The chosen member, because he has the mandate of the other members, can perform this task with ease. The audience and other members of the guild stand in admiration of this personal display of skill by the chosen one while they also pray for a neat cut, for failure means not only a loss to the individual but the entire clan from which he is chosen. The drum beat directs his movement and he moves elegantly around the arena taking occasional long strides towards the goat with bulging bloodshot eyes. This movement is repeated until he is fully satisfied, and ready for action. The music ceases, he looks up and down, throws the machete up and as he catches it mid-air, he then cuts neatly through the goat, amidst cheers from the audience and fellow members (Fig. 4).



Fig 4: A mandated warrior severing the head of the goat from the body.

It is pertinent to add at this point that if you are wrongly chosen, you can not as much as inflict a cut on the goat skin, no matter your strength and valour. In most cases, the mandated person cuts cleanly without any problem. On the other hand, if the person chosen fails to cut cleanly, his machete is seized and he is temporarily suspended from the membership of the warriors' circle until he pays a fine as may be decided by the priest. After payment he undergoes some purification rites before his final reinstatement.

The final stage of a *Girinya* performance is the eating of a meal. The warriors are fed by the priest. The food consists of slices of yam put in a pot with palm oil and some pepper. The mesh is put on a heath and

allowed to stay for a few seconds. The priest picks up the slices with the tip of a knife, holds it out for all to see while the warrior to be fed stands out, hands behind his back. He takes the piece of yam with his teeth. This process of feeding the warriors continues until every warrior physically present is fed. Once this is done, the deceased hero would be laid to rest.



Fig. 5: The chief priest feeding a warrior

In the past, *Girinya* costume usually consisted of a skirt made of raffia leaves and a hat made by putting together pieces of locally woven cloths sewn in accordance with the size of the wearer's head. The hat is stocked with pines of the porcupine to give it a fierce appearance and enable the warrior present the figure of a man to be dreaded. The costume also usually comprises *bibi* (shakers) tied round the ankles. Today, however, because *Girinya* is not only a sacred performance, the costuming has been modified to accommodate some liberal form of dress. The warriors wear pairs of shorts or trousers with wrappers tied into a knot on the backside. Semi-singlet is used for the chest while the lead dancer may wear a gown entirely covered by *bibi* seeds. This dress is also extended to cover the head of the warrior with holes bored to enhance his sight. The entire costume gives him an appearance of a wounded lion. All these constitute theatrical aesthetics with which to appreciate the *girinya* dance and thus explore in semiotic terms the measure of its cultural and social relevance as it relates

to the Tiv cultural world view.

### **Signifying Systems in *Girinya* Dance**

In semiotic terms, dance features prominently as a cultural signifier with a lot of social and religious messages which interpret the world view and cosmological values of the Tiv and other African peoples. Dance is a technical and essential aspect of theatre. Through dance, performers adapt intelligently their bodies to the rhythm of the musical instrument. Dance is the movement of the body to a sound in a rhythmic pattern. Through this serious concentration, meanings are conveyed to the audience. This is understood when the audience pays much attention to the dance expression, atmosphere or mood and movement on stage. Ogbonna (1991:45) posits that:

Dance as an aspect of human communication is more logical, technical and efficient when members of the chorus reduce their chants, songs and other verbal expressions or almost all their dialogue to mime. In mime verbal expression or all of the dialogue presented are reduced to conventions (or symbols) and body movements with the utilization of signs.

Worth mentioning is also the fact that music and dance are not just recreational activities in Tivland but as fundamental phenomena, they permeate all aspects of Tiv life. Hagher (1993:6) rightly observes that:

Music and dance do not only serve the purpose of social interaction as well as a school for intellectual stimulation, they also control normative behavior. Sometimes they serve as a medium for social protest and even sanction deviant behavior.

Most of the movements in this dance are significantly relevant and capable of generating codes which are shared and understood between the performers, audience and host community. The dance has peculiar steps which define it as a war dance. The movement is usually very aggressive, indexical of a war lord prowling around for revenge. The solo dance by the priest around the shrine is a sign of optimum respect and homage to the late hero (*or girinya*). Here, the priest carries a sharp machete in one hand and the sheath in the other. He does a solo and solemn dance round the shrine, picking and dropping short sticks from the top of the shrine to the ground. He does this movement five times and on the sixth round, he collects a chicken and as he rounds the shrine, he beheads the chicken and sprinkles the blood on the shrine (Fig 6).



Fig. 6 The chief priest doing a solo dance, round the shrine

Apart from serving as a mark of honour to the dead warrior, this scene also signifies transition, authority and dexterity; here the right of performance is shifted to a living son, brother or relation. As the priest beheads the chicken, possible successors, who are placed strategically around the arena (in most cases the warrior's children), struggle over the head and whoever picks it automatically succeeds the warrior. In the event that the head is picked by a member of the audience, the family members will pay a fine to retrieve it from such a person. Also, if picked by one who is not interested in the dance, he hands it over to a willing brother or relation for a token. It is also noteworthy to mention that some expertise is displayed by the priest, where a particular person is favoured to succeed the dead warrior. The hen is beheaded in such a way that the head falls closest to such a candidate.

Costume is also a sign code which facilitates aesthetic beauty and exudes meaning as well as interprets mood, situation and/or events. Tiv people use a variety of costumes at different times to express and enhance their identity. Though costumes do not speak, they communicate. Most of such costumes are culturally bound in such a way that, when wrongly used, contradict perception and meaning. For instance, "*Godo*" and "*Gbagir*" are traditional outfits which symbolize tragedy (most specifically, death). If, therefore, one decides to use these materials as fashionable wears, then a lot of confusion is to be expected by people of the community; the psychological and mental fitness of such a person is rendered suspect. This is because, ordinarily, these fabrics are used to bury the dead only, not to be worn as fashionable textiles around. Perhaps, in *Girinya* dance, as postulated by Pever-Ge (1985:106);

The costuming of the dance reflects mainly masculine qualities. The head-dress is usually made up of the feathers of a bird-‘Swande’, only for the men with strong hearts and rare to find, and the tiny-like structures of the porcupine (Iyugh) that are shot out for self defence, which lives mostly in the mountains and forest, and is quite difficult for hunters to kill. All these serve to enhance the masculine display that the dance calls for. The loin cloth that is usually tied has in recent times and on civil occasions usually given way to the Tiv traditional dress, ‘Gbev wagh’ (a dark cloth with white and black stripes) worn on the waist.

This description by Pever-Ge is the actual traditional outfit of the *Girinya* dance. But today, because of the secular infiltrations of the dance, no strict compliance is maintained in terms of what to wear. Performers these days use their personal clothes with a wrapper tied round the waist as earlier mentioned. However, it could be inferred from Pever-Ge’s submission that costume in this dance is a signifying code that helps to define the nature of the dance – masculinity as well as an armour of belligerence.

Sign language is a crucial aspect of the second stage of the performance, where individual warriors come out to do their dances. Here the whole story of the warriors’ escapades and track record of achievement is narrated using movement. The pointing of the machete east and west is a sign indicating the period of action (from sun rise to sun set) “I went out in defence of my fatherland”. He then holds out a number of fingers to both the drummer and the audience and goes into doing a dance. This, however, is a sign of self-revelation. The worth of his bravery depends on the number of fingers held together. The number of fingers represents the number of human heads he has to his credit. In relation to their (dancers’) status as warriors, the more number of fingers held, the more respect is accorded the dancer and the longer his music for a solo dance. Sign language, this research discovered, is very central and instrumental to the life of the Tiv man. This is because, in the course of their migration in search of fertile farmlands, they had to move from one point to another in search of fertile lands. During migration they encountered a lot of hostility. Wars were fought and in such battlefields, signs were evolved to regulate and contain battles. Sometimes it was agreed that, if you sight a man at a close range and you were not sure of him, you raise three fingers, if he did the same, then he is a comrade, but if he did not, then, he is an enemy and war justice must be done. This was so because, with rapid expansion, it was no longer possible to know every one who came in to help prosecute such wars, because different persons had gone their separate ways to settle and could only come together during crises times to help out. Such signs, however, promote cultural identity.

Another semiotic code which is a call for unity manifests itself at the instance of feeding the warriors. This meal consists of pieces of yam boiled

for just some seconds, by the priest. The posture, therefore, of standing straight with hands at the back to receive the piece of yam signifies respect and attention by the hero to the event which is of immense importance to the entire community. This meal, which is usually smeared with palm oil, signifies the binding of the body and soul to a firm commitment to the basic tenets and provisions of the dance. It also demonstrates an important aspect of Tiv traditional performances, whereby what begins as a ritual goes through an intricate dramatization and culminates in the eating of a meal by all present as a sign of unity amongst the people. The warriors eat the meal on behalf of the community. The meal is therefore seen as a binding force not only for the warrior heroes, but the entire community. This is why the priest usually implores individual warriors at the instance of this meal to remain resolute in their collective resolve and determination to defend and protect the community from external aggressions.

The piece of *anger* found on top of the shrine is also significant. Apart from functioning within the scope of a theatrical performance, sign codes identified in cultural performances have very great socio-cultural relevance amongst performing communities. For instance, in almost all Tiv traditional theatres, especially dance, performers are likely to be dressed in *anger*. 'Anger', because it is a Tiv traditional outfit, is capable of conveying to the audience the background of the performers. According to Pa Aaityough Ama, an elder in Mbaduku District of Vandeikya Local Government of Benue State, the Tiv believe in the dual existence of "*Tugh*" and "*Atetan*" (Night and Day). As such, the black colour on the 'Anger' represents "*Mbatsav*" who usually operate in the dark and usually in the night. White, perhaps, is purely for those with clean minds. This group is those who go about their normal businesses in the afternoon and rest through the night. Therefore, the white and black colours depict these two distinct periods respectively. Through oral interviews, it was discovered that the black and white colours also represent peace and fertility respectively. Therefore, costume does not only promote cultural identity but also projects the cultural world view of the people.

*Girinya* performances have both meaning and significance to the warriors who perform them and the entire Tiv community;

"Girinya exhibits an elegant imitation of aspects of human experiences through an effective combination of music, virtual mime and costumes. In fact, watching a particular performance, one will have the feeling of having gone through a satisfying dramatic experience" (Mude, 1987:9).

The horn, drum, metal gong, and empty tins are all blended to produce a harmonized musical sensation that creates some excitement in the audience. Songs are hardly rendered. The clinking noise of the empty tins is supported by the light throbbing of the drum. The elaborate facial expressions and rhythmic head nods of the dancer convey his inner

feelings: feelings that have been aroused by the music and the ongoing performance. *Girinya* is not merely a dance, it is a performance which enables the Tiv man to interact with the supernatural on one hand and entertain himself on the other. The series of ritual activities that are done to set right the spirit of the dead and thus cause such a spirit to rest in peace is in its spirituality a sacred communion with the supernatural. The dance aesthetics and social performance is quite entertaining and capable of drawing a wide audience anytime and anywhere it is performed.

### **Social Change and the Sign System in *Girinya* Ritual Dance**

Signs lend themselves to theatrical performances in Tiv society just like elsewhere, because they are an essential ensemble of economic means which make condensation and comprehension of messages possible. Theatrical performances are milestones of signification in Tiv society, and certain social beliefs form the basis on which these performances are structured and built. Indeed, the theatre mediates and reminds the Tiv people of the values of their society, being a medium of expression which, though it may not be seen to be consciously doing so by its audience, articulates their conceptual world view. Laying emphasis on the prevalence of this function in most African performances Etherton (1982:36) observes that;

It is very difficult for someone outside the specific culture to know what he or she is looking at and listening to during a particular performance. The very style of a performance is a short hand of actual meaning which has been established jointly by artists (composers and performers) and their audiences over a period of time.

Nevertheless, the changing face and complexion of the society today has necessitated a careful cross-examination and value reorientation with a view to reconciling certain aspects of the dance with prevailing social reality. This, however, has been responsible for the strategic loss of some aspects of the dance today, irrespective of the theatrical richness of some of these aspects. For instance, the cutting of the head of a human being from an enemy camp to bury a dead warrior (member of the dance guild) has been stopped. Not so much for the fact that this was just an exercise for the sake of it, but as we earlier mentioned, the dance celebrates valour and strength. As such, a man of valour like the warrior-heroes in this dance guild should not just be buried like any ordinary man but should be accompanied on his journey to eternity with the head of an enemy. This is perhaps the semiotic construct which makes a human head necessary.

The nuclear nature of the society today does not allow for any more of such practices, not so much for its barbarism, but for the fact that, communities that practice this dance will be in perpetual communal

clashes anytime somebody's head is cut for such ritual purposes. For instance, the Mbaduku and Obudu communities of Benue and Cross River States respectively are constantly engaged in communal clashes over land encroachment because of lack of clearly demarcated boundaries. If, therefore, any of such communities find the corpse of a beheaded brother, the number one and primary suspect will be the enemy community - hence, war. Also, from the perspective of a civilized society, chopping off a fellow man's head just to bury the dead is despicable and horrible. With this realization at the back of our minds, this aspect of the dance has now been shelved and rather, old skulls are used today to bury dead warrior heroes.

The changes which came with colonialism affected tremendously the quality of performance, redefining the values and cherished ideals of such performances. Its scope today includes essentially and especially the European world view or concept of civilization. In this guise the semiotic enterprise has also changed without necessarily phasing out archaic elements. For instance, the initial costume made into skirt with raffia leaves has in recent times, as earlier mentioned by Pever-Ge, given way to contemporary textile wrappers. This, no doubt, makes appearance more aesthetic and contemporary, but has eroded the traditionalism of local creativity and fabric. With the establishment and institutionalization of the church, such performances considered "pagan" practices are fast losing relevance and value. For instance, an average Christian Tiv man finds it difficult to accommodate or be part of the *Girinya* dance. As such he or she is not willing to allow for the ritual performance of this dance if he loses his father or relation who is a member of this dance guild. If this persists, what will become of the performance in the nearest future when they (performers) are no longer living? This certainly is a question that must be addressed with utmost dispatch if we are to avert the near extinct status of most traditional performances. Lamenting also the fate of most embattled cultures, Bodley (1982:103) submits that;

While these actions are in themselves certain to bring about profound 'acculturation', the almost total transformation of tribal cultures is assured when these actions are combined to eliminate all unique aspects of tribal culture and to bring about their full integration with civilization.

With the changing face in the process of signification, it is not unlikely that new performance forms, stemming from the changing world view, would emerge to replace old practices.

### **Socio-Cultural Relevance of the *Girinya* Ritual Dance**

As a socio-cultural practice, *Girinya* dance is a traditional exhibition of pride, honour, unity and a corporate demonstration of valour and con-

quest. Usually when warriors return victoriously from wars, they assemble themselves in performance and celebration to the victory. The community through her representatives shower encomiums and chants of blessings and reverence on such young, powerful and, determined youths who had made them proud. This dance thus serves as a defence unit of the community and because of the community ties, the entire community serve as custodians of this guild. As such, during performances, especially at the burial of fallen hero chiefs and local leaders, all grace such performances. To the warriors who may have lost their lives in action (at the war front) also, this performance significantly serves as a means for the community to appreciate their effort and cause them to rest in peace.

Just as we had mentioned earlier, *Girinya* as a performance serves to cleanse the land of guilt, stains and evil deeds. The blood of the beheaded goat symbolically serves to cleanse the community as the goat is taken to mean sacrifice for the ancestors and guardians of the land. This is why, after the goat has been slaughtered, the priest does a solo movement around the arena. While this movement is going on, members of the audience are not allowed to nod in appreciation, but stand rooted and erect in one place. The value here is not in appreciation of the quality of dance by the priest but a fixed posture of respect and homage to the ancestors while the priest through movement and music communicates with these ancestors. At the end of the dance, the priest sprinkles some water on all present to absolve and protect those who may have blundered unknowingly into nodding in appreciation. Culturally, therefore, cleansing the society is relevant in re-establishing closer ties with forces that provide, protect and preserve values necessary for growth and development.

The celebrative segment of the dance is an elegant exhibition of joy, strength and conquest. It is also a show of the defeat of the threat from surrounding enemies, as this aspect can only be performed when there is relative peace in the land. Victory from a just concluded war may spur this performance during celebrative moods of Christmas, Independence Day Celebrations and other National holidays/celebrations. On a general note, once this performance is done, it is understood that the land has gained absolute peace and stability.

*Girinya* dance through its modes of signification has also greatly helped project the Tiv nation and has not left in doubt the strength and valour of the Tiv man. The vigorous dance steps, the wild jerking around and the furrowing eyes all jointly combine to give value and interpretation to the war-like qualities of the performers. The brandishing of the machete around the arena of performance is also expressive of the consequences should one venture to dare such a person. Perhaps, to comprehend the signs and signifying systems in this performance one needs to study them as factors in social process which have significant relation with time and given circumstances. As such, signs and symbols having been crafted carefully from the quantum of experiences a people go through, it is perhaps

the entire story of the people that is told through these performances, and must be taken with a deeper sense of appreciation. From his discovery in this method of enquiry, Turner (1967:20) writes that;

The symbol becomes associated with human interests, purposes, ends, and means whether these are explicitly formulated or have to be inferred from the observed behavior.

Within the realms of the people's cherished values and ideals, the *Girinya* ritual dance presents a spectrum fascinating enough to appeal to the people both aesthetically and culturally; it is also expressive of social norms and values. It is equally noteworthy to mention that, *girinya* in performance for a dead warrior who had distinguished himself in war and had several heads to his credit is to placate his soul to rest in peace and not come out to commit atrocities for the living. It is a celebration of his belligerency and valour. Thus, in Tivland, dance or theatre performances in general perform a number of social, political, economic and religious functions that bear a direct relationship to the general character and life styles of the people, embodying in its many artistic folds, the aspiration, yearnings, norms, values and customs of the people.

### **Conclusion**

This work is thus a conscious attempt to dig up the hidden treasures of traditional theatre in Africa and present such treasures to a wider public and the theatre world in particular and on this premise hope that the work will lead to a rejuvenation of interest in traditional theatre and reawaken a consciousness towards this direction. African traditional theatre within the purview of this analysis was found to be rich as it adds up to a sumptuous theatre experience that requires further exploration for a fuller appreciation. The conclusion reached is that signs and signification are an integral aspect of African traditional performances that do not only enhance performance interpretation, but also offer an *entré* into the cultural values of the ordinary African.



Fig. 7: A prospective warrior picking up the head of the hen preparatory to succeeding his dead father



fig. 8: A cross section of traditional rulers in Mbaduka District of Vandeikya Local Government during the burial of a dead warrior - hero.

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