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Nuptial poetry among the Tiv of Nigeria

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This essay first introduces briefly ethnological data of the Tiv, focusing particularly on their marriage forms. The important place of the marriage dance in their marriage ceremony is identified. Also identified is the involvement of poetry in the dance. Three kinds of poetic performances are highlighted. These are the solicited poems from professional poets, the solos performed individually by elderly women during the dances, and the dominant antiphonies that are of general participation. The antiphonies are divided into those that welcome the bride, those that abuse bad wives, those that praise smart grooms, those that demonstrate men's courting manipulations and those that celebrate sexuality. Each of these divisions is exemplified with poetic illustrations. In conclusion, the artistry and functionality of Tiv nuptial poems are re-emphasised. **Key words:** Benue State (Nigeria); Nigeria oral tradition; nuptial poetry; Tiv ethnology.

Background: The Tiv of Nigeria

The geographical position of the Tiv, according to Laura and Paul Bohannan (1969: 9) and Rubingh (1969: 58), is between 6° 30' and 8° 10' north latitude and 8° and 10° east longitude. The Tiv shares borders with the Chamba and Jukun of Taraba State in the northeast; with the Igede (Benue), Iyala, Gakem and Obudu of Cross River State in the southeast; and the Idoma of Benue State to the south. There is also an international boundary between the Tiv and the Republic of Cameroon at a southeastern angle of the ethnic group's location. They are among the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. Numbering about 2.5 million individuals, according to the 1991 Nigerian population census, they occupy the Middle Belt States of Benue, Taraba, Nasarawa, and Plateau.¹ A few Tiv are also found in Cross River and Adamawa States.

There are numerous submissions about the origin of Tiv people. We are, however, in agreement with Torkula (2006: 1) that: "Although different views are held about the Tiv origin, the version that commands popularity and currency is that which traces their origin to the Bantu people who once inhabited the Central African continent, in the Shaba area of the present Democratic Republic of Congo." The popularity and currency of this version is due to the assorted pieces of evidence supporting it. One such piece of evidence is linguistic. R. C. Abraham (1934: 6–7), for instance, compiled a list of 67 Tiv words and juxtaposed them with the words of Bantu Nyaza showing a

striking similarity in both phonetics and semantics. Based on that, Abraham (1934: 5) concluded that the Tiv were "real Bantu" and subsequently that they came from the Congo. Another linguistic piece of evidence has to do with the present writer's family name of Tsenôngu which is Tiv and which when ended with an "o" (as done by many Tivs without any semantic harm) is the name of a town of 300 000 people in the present Democratic Republic of Congo. Such pieces of linguistic evidence testify to the fact that the Tiv actually migrated from the Congo; from there they passed through several places before settling in the Benue Valley, their present location.

The main occupation of the Tiv is subsistence farming. They regard yam farming as their birthright and commit themselves to its work with religious dedication. Their farming productivity is what has earned Benue, the state where they are the most populous ethnic group, the official appellation of being the "Food basket of the nation."

As for their social organisation, traditional Tiv society was completely egalitarian. There was no central authority. They had no king so every man was ruler of his own house. They lived in compounds administered by the oldest man. Many compounds formed clans and districts that were variously divided and sub-divided. The elders of the various clans (*upyaven*) and districts (*ityar*) met and discussed issues at those levels and arrived at democratic decisions that bound their sections. If an issue involved the whole ethnic group, the elders of the various sections and districts met and took a decision. This situation obtained until 1946 when the colonialists established a Tiv central authority by creating the office of a paramount ruler. The paramount ruler (Tor Tiv) lives and administers the people in Gboko, their headquarter town which was built in 1932. Ascendancy to the Tor Tiv throne is not hereditary.

It is not possible, within our limited space, to touch on every aspect of Tiv life. For instance, we shall not discuss in this essay their religion, traditional economy or detailed social organisation.² But mention must be made of the artistry of members of this ethnic group. Leo Frobenius, the German traveller, for example, declared them the "best storytellers in Africa" (Keil 1979: 20). Laura Bohannan too has, under the pseudonym of Elenore Smith Bowen, often been referred deservedly to for her admiring description of a Tiv tale-telling session in her autobiographical novel, *Return to Laughter*. Commenting on Bohannan's book, Frances Harding (1992: 156) has said that: "So important does Bohannan consider storytelling in Tiv life that not only is its performance the occasion of the laughter which gives the novel its title, but it is recognized as a healing, binding force in the community."

Indeed Keil (1979: 57) was right in his submission that "qualitatively, all visitors to Tivland agree that storytelling can be a very dramatic event." But it is not just in storytelling that members of the ethnic group have made their artistic mark; they are known for their dance craft, poetic creativity and general aesthetic profundity. To provide just one example relating to their dance repertoire, in 1973 the ethnic group

alone accounted for fifty-four of the one hundred and eighty-eight dances performed at the “Festival of 200 Dances of the Benue-Plateau State” held in Jos, Nigeria. The then Benue-Plateau State comprised more than thirty ethnic nationalities. This is statistical testimony to the dancing skills in Tivland. Indeed, the ethnic group is generally artistically active. And one of the avenues where this artistic activity exhibits itself is in nuptial poetry. But before we focus on this sub-genre, it is good to discuss briefly marriage in Tivland.

Tiv marriage forms can be seen through four basic phases. The earliest was *yamshe*, marriage by exchange: a man who needed a wife located another man who had the same need. They then exchanged their sisters or daughters as wives. Next, there was the *kwase-ngohol / tsuen / kôrun*, marriage by capture. This was divided into two. There was, first, the forceful snatching of a wife from her husband that in Akiga’s words (1939: 38) was usually done by some “scoundrel[s]” who could fall on a travelling couple and take the wife and sometimes, even harass her husband. This form of marriage, by which the Tiv themselves lost many of their women during their migration, caused many “inter *tar* [that is inter-clan] wars” in Tivland (Makar 1994: 141, see also Akiga 1939: 137). It therefore became necessary to have the second form of this type of marriage. Akiga (1939: 141) has referred to this form as the “honorable marriage by capture: the *Iye*.” Wegh (1998: 55) correctly describes it, though inexhaustibly, thus:

Iye began with a young man accompanied by his friends going into another country [district] to find a wife. The target in this case was no longer married women, but the unmarried girls. There the young men stayed with a man whose mother was from their own country [district]. They then sent out friends, or relatives, as go-betweens, who scouted for girls of marriageable ages, and selected one for the young man. Once the young man had received all necessary information, he made the initial contact with the girl. [Now he visited the girl’s house,] then the wooing of the girl began. This could go on for months.

Ierve (s.d.: 25) too has added to our insight of *Iye* by noting that usually the young men that formed this group and went to another district were, often, each looking for a wife. They also always went with dances. The girls who came to watch the performances often indicated their interest in some of the young men by choosing to dance with them. Ierve goes on to note that if an *Iye* outing was successful, sometimes one man came back with many wives. But most of the times, the girls did not elope with their fiancés immediately. Whenever they finally eloped, however, the father or brother of the girl was usually compensated later with a girl. Thus, the *iye* marriage type was eventually like the *yamshe* exchange marriage.

The third phase and form of Tiv marriage was what Rupert East (in Akiga 1939: 159) said the Tiv used to call *kwase u sha uikya*, marriage by purchase. Akiga (1939: 159)

explained this further: a woman was “bought as a slave and then married. Women of this kind were mostly purchased from the Utyusha, from the Dam, and from more distant clans.” Finally, the Tiv married by *kwase-kemen*, that is, marriage by bride price. This came about in 1927 when the colonial administration abolished all other forms of marriage and insisted that marriage should strictly be by the payment of bride price. Thus, a man, on choosing a girl, would demonstrate his marital intentions to her and her people by taking gifts to them and providing other needful services to them as well. This went on till the girl’s family, satisfied with the suitor’s cumulative goodwill, asked him to come and pay the bride price. Today, this form of marriage has developed into quite a number of processes unnecessary of enumeration here. Whatever the processes in any district, the marriage contract is based on bride price. It needs to be added that in many cases, especially now, the suitor often elopes with his fiancée. The bride price and other things are usually done afterwards.

The Tiv traditional marriage dance

Whatever type of marriage was done, there was always an artistic celebration of the matrimony. There were two types of marriage dances. The first was the one that took place immediately a bride was brought to the groom’s place. This was usually called *kwasekuhan* or *kwasegeren* (literally, celebrating the bride or ululating for the bride respectively). This can still be found, though in a less zealous form, in some Tiv villages. But the second type of the marriage dance is, in my estimation, 99% extinct. This was the dance that took place much later when a man decided that he should demonstrate his wealth by hosting the *Ivom* or *Dam* ceremony. This was a nuptial dance done only by men who were wealthy. Even then it was not every wife that attracted this dance. Unless a woman came from a particularly long geographical or cultural distance from her husband’s, this dance was not organised in her honour. The *Ivom* or *Dam* marriage dance was therefore not for every woman. And definitely, not every man had the wherewithal to marry from a geographical or cultural distance long enough to host the dance; besides, the hosting cost for the occasion was rather forbidding.

Our focus here is not on the *Ivom* or *Dam* marriage dance. We are concerned only with *kwasekuhan*, the marriage dance performed immediately a bride was brought to the house of the groom’s age mate or the groom’s house.³ This dance was the most common and the most important. Whoever married and did not host it was usually disregarded in his community. Besides, the dance was also an honour to the bride. It was an artistic way of welcoming her to her new home and getting her acquainted with the environment. Thus, failure to host a marriage dance for a bride was a shameful thing for her. It disabled her from holding her head high among her fellow women. This dance was therefore a necessary tradition. Indeed, it was impossible to think of marriage without it.

The dance usually took place at two settings. First, it was done in the house of an age mate or distant relation of the groom to whose house the groom took his wife for that purpose. The bride passed the night there but hardly slept at night because singing and dancing were on until dawn. There was more singing, drumming and dancing when the bride was, in the evening of the following day, taken to the groom's house. Brides were customarily brought home at evening, when people had taken their dinners and were relaxing outside to while away time before going indoors to sleep. This was when the *angwe* proclamation was heard at the top of the announcer's singsong voice.

The *angwe*, having fixed wordings with only the names of the persons mentioned in it changing to suit different marriage situations, was nuptial news stating who had married. It was the Tiv traditional system of mass communication specifically for marriage. So the *angwe* [tidings] announcer always went slightly ahead of the party coming with the bride. The following were the words of the *angwe*:

Tidings *gbee* ... tidings!

Chief! Tidings *ooo* ... Tidings!

Whose tidings is it?

It is the tidings of Tako Gbor Ndor Kunya!

It is the tidings of Achulu Gbor Ndor Kunya!

Whose tidings is it?

It is the tidings of Iornenge Akpa!

Tidings walk about *gbee* ... *gbee* ... *gbee* ...

(Ululations).⁴

The ululations concluding the announcement were usually done by the group (made up mostly of women and girls) escorting the wife, a bit in front of whom the tidings-announcer was going. This group started performing some nuptial poems right there on the way. People from surrounding compounds now rushed to the road where the *angwe* was heard and joined the party. Others went to the house of the groom and waited there, singing and dancing. They knew the groom by the names in the *angwe*. For example, lines 4, 6, and 8 above contain the names of elders whose son has married. It would therefore not be difficult to trace the groom's house. In some places, there were no musical instruments at all but in others, the following made up the nuptial musical ensemble: the *indyer* or *ilyu* (jumbo or medium-size) slit-log drums, the open-ended *gbande* drum, the double-ended *genga* drum, the *kwen* metal gong, the *gida* woodwind, the *tsough* rattles etc. These instruments notwithstanding, singing, and not musical instrumentation, was the most important aspect of the Tiv marriage dance.

Tiv nuptial poems

The Tiv are not like the Yoruba where a girl about to be married performs the *ekun iyawo* nuptial poetry as Faniyi Dajo (1975: 677–99) has demonstrated. In Tiv society, it is the groom's family that performs nuptial poems – except during *yamshe* marriage when the bride's people were also involved in the music-making. They perform the dance for a night or two. For our convenience, we have divided Tiv nuptial poems into three. First, there are the commissioned nuptial poems performed by known professional poets for a particular couple. Then, there are the solo-poems performed in turns by elderly women as interludes in the rendition of the third category, the antiphonal lyrics which are of general participation.

Commissioned nuptial poems

If the groom or his father was a man of property who was patron to a poet, he invited that poet to come and *kuha* his *kwase*, that is, celebrate his bride. The poet then composed songs especially for that occasion and went for it. In such a case, the event did not necessarily take place at night, though it went on typically until night time. Again, this type of performance was just a show of *ishagba* (wealth) by the groom because it was usually an addition to the *kwasekuhan* that his family earlier performed for his marriage. Regarding this kind of performance, Akiga has maintained correctly that when a minstrel was paid to compose songs and perform for the event, "If they [the songs] were very good [they] were passed down from one generation to the next, to be sung always at the celebration for the marriage of any one in the group" (Akiga 1939: 151–52).

And Gbilekaa (1993: 43) rather nostalgically, concurs that:

In those good old days, when 'the white man had not yet spoilt the land' a man wishing to marry honorably was expected to commission a dance in honor of his bride. This dance was given at the instance of his father who had to hire a minstrel to compose songs in honor of his son and his bride including very important members of his clan. This was an honorable and important occasion which the people respected and looked forward to.

For the sake of space, we shall provide only an instance of this type of poetry in Tivland. It is from Iortimbir Ajabu, the renowned oral poet from Ukan district who was invited by his patron Jime Akaaka to perform in honor of the marriage of the patron's son. Ajabu's poems are so long (but pleasurable so) that the illustration here will be rendered only in part:

No 1

People have wedded all along
Yet, I know that the wedding
Of Gema Jime would necessarily differ.

Gema Jime has married the daughter of Jôgô;
[Even] the heavens rumbled [in appreciation].
What I know is that
God has blessed Jôgô, it's no lie.
Your father named you correctly, Mimi;
This husband that God has given you
Truly it is God Himself that kept him for you.
Listen, people, I will begin to call
Noble men now [who are in attendance]: I call
Tyôver Atile Gura,
The millionaire has arrived, let noise-making be stopped.
Time to start the event has reached so
My great matri-kinsman Ayua Yeke
Has now emerged, MbaYegh
My wife, it is time to rise,
To rise and greet Ayua Yeke.
Let the sitting arrangement be adjusted
For the people of Vandeikya are coming...⁵

The artistic skill at work in lines 8–10 is difficult to translate into English. The name of the bride is Mimi which means “truth” or “truly” and the artist has been playing on the name as early as line 7. He is using the word for dual purposes: first, as the name of the bride used in addressing her (line 8); and second, as a word to use for adverbial purposes (line 10). This is an example of Iortimbir Ajabu’s poems at Gema Jime’s wedding. And it is a good illustration of solicited nuptial poetry in Tiv society. Other poets who perform(ed) some of its most memorable pieces are Anande Amende, Ayôô Angwe, Philip Iwar and a number of others.

Nuptial solos

Ruth Finnegan’s comment that “weddings [...] are popular occasions for comment in song – *by no means always involving praise of the newly wed pair [...]*” (1970: 242; emphasis added) is most appropriate for the present type of marriage poems among the Tiv. The songs under this category are never necessarily about marriage. They could be about anything concerning life. They are usually performed as interludes in antiphonal lyrics (the category to be discussed next) which, as a rule, are the dominant songs that are performed in the Tiv marriage dance of our interest. As said earlier, the performance of the solos is not general; it is usually the old women that render them individually and in turns.

One very interesting fact about these songs is that some Tiv oral artists who are composers in the marriage song forms author most of them. Song forms among the

Tiv are variously divided. Some of the forms are: *ibiamegh, genyi, ange, gbanyi, kwasekuhan* and so on. Those who compose in the *kwasekuhan*, that is marriage mould, are not so named because they focus on brides and grooms and matrimonial issues in their songs. They are so named because of their tune, *ikyenge*, which Keil (1979: 169) has appropriately defined as a "standard melodic model". This is very important to the Tiv and often decides which song type an artist is performing. Thus, Tiv composers like Ada Adi and Emmanuel Wade do not belong to the marriage song type because of thematic parameters but on account of stylistic features. And since their stylistic renderings were of the *kwasekuhan* nuptial model, their poems were often given solo performances in marriage dance ceremonies. Here is one example from Ada Adi:

No 2

Send a message to Mbawar;

Someone go tell Akpagher:

My roof is off;

I am exposed in the open *o*.

I keep crying that they should open

For me to go in *ô*,

But they open not –

Ucôhô Agba, you people should help me to go inside.

Let me be in the shade

And enjoy some refreshment *o!*

How the sun has tormented me *ooo....*⁶

In this poem, Ada was, as usual with him, lamenting his plight in the hands of unfavourable circumstances. Even though no reference was made to marriage specifically, this song was usually given solo performance in marriage dances especially in Mbatierev district where Ada came from. Our point is that nuptial solos do not necessarily dwell on the topic of marriage. Any song (of course dirges and elegies excluded) can be rendered solo by any elderly woman at a marriage dance.

Tiv nuptial antiphonies

These are by far the most dominant form of Tiv nuptial poetry. They are more popular and more pan-Tiv. The two forms discussed above are often limited to particular geographical districts, but the nuptial antiphonies are found all over Tivland. And they are known by people of all ages.⁷ The overall intention of the songs is to exert social control on the bride and the society generally but the songs can be divided into more theme-specific segments. We have, thus, divided them into the following: Songs that welcome the bride and dwell on the virtues of wifehood; songs that indulgently

abuse bad wives (with hope that the bride would take warning); songs that dwell on the groom's smartness as demonstrated in his snatching a wife for himself; songs that demonstrate how men court women; and songs that celebrate sexuality. The nature of the songs as indicated in these divisions apparently indicates some bias towards the womenfolk but that is not our focus at present. We shall therefore proceed to look at each of these divisions briefly.

Songs welcoming the bride

No 3

She should come in marriage
That we may eat a goat;
The girl should come in marriage
That we may eat a goat *ee*⁸

The antiphonal pattern of this song is such that the cantor sings it to the end and the chorus sings after him. He keeps singing and they keep repeating after him until he introduces another song. The song, in child-like fashion, demonstrates the persona's eagerness for the bride to come so that he/she could eat "a goat." Traditional Tiv people hardly slaughtered any animal except when there was an occasion like celebrating a bride. Makar (1994: 15) has explained that: "A person who slaughtered a domestic animal for normal family meat would be said to have foreseen his death. Consequently his people refused to partake of the meat cooked for him. They regarded such meat as a trap to get them into trouble [through witchcraft]."

The child-like persona of the poem should therefore be understood as celebrating the coming of the bride as an occasion to eat scarce goat meat. Another song too has a similar child-like disposition.

No 4

Cantor: There she comes *oo!*
Daughter of Mbaior has begun coming [as bride] *oo!*
Chorus: [Give me a] present *oo!*
Cantor: She has arrived *oo.*
Chorus: [Give us a] present *oo!*⁹

It is not unusual in traditional Tiv society for a child to welcome a relation, a visitor, in fact, to welcome anybody generally with great expectations of a present. Indeed, most of the times, they even shout it out: "*Mama hide ve oo, keekee oo*" (Mother is back *oo*; I will have a present *oo*). And most of these presents are usually edible ones.

But the extra virtue of the two songs examined above is the fact that the personas of the poems are children. The wisdom here is in the secret message that if the new comer, the bride, hopes to make herself comfortable in her new home, she should

befriend the children there. This is a common Tiv belief. One song demonstrates it even better:

No. 5

I have come to marry in old age
So I am scared that
If I am hard on any child,
I won't be loved
So excreta should just be
Discharged at the eaves of my hut;
I will just be stupid;
I will just be foolish.¹⁰

Our point is that the extra value of the last three songs considered above, apart from welcoming the bride, is that they give her good advice, albeit indirectly. The female-persona of the last poem has confessed to marrying in her mature years. So, to win her way into the hearts of her husband's household, she needs, at least for the time being, to exercise a lot of patience especially with regard to the offensive children in that household. She has therefore decided to overlook matters and feign foolishness. It is implied that this is the best attitude for every newly married woman. These songs therefore do not just welcome the bride; they secretly inform her on how to survive in her new home.

Songs that abuse bad wives

No 6

Cantor: Daughter of Akpetyo pulls yam tendrils with her feet
Chorus: Disorderly disorderly
Cantor: She pounded sweet potatoes but ate them alone.
Chorus: *Hooo yio oo ooo!*
Akpetyo pulled yam tendrils disorderly disorderly
Cantor: *Wuu Akpetyo!*
Chorus: *Akpetyo!*
Cantor: *Wu!*
Chorus: *Akpetyo!*¹¹

The exclamatory rendering of Akpetyo's name at the end of the song is the main body of the poem. The cantor continues to shout exclamations like *wu!*, *aye!*, *wi!* and so on while the chorus goes on to respond by calling Akpetyo's name. This goes on with music and dancing for as long as the cantor chooses. The point of the poem is that, the bride, Akpetyo's daughter, does not know how to work on the farm (lines 1 and 2). Rather than weed neatly, she, typical of a lazy woman, instead pulls off the yam

tendrils from the yams in the ground with her feet. To the Tiv who are predominantly Yam farmers, this is obvious evidence that the woman does not know how to work on the farm. And this is one of the most stigmatising inabilities a woman could be accused of in Tiv society. But in addition to that, Akpetyo's daughter is also selfish (line 3). She pounded some food – which probably when asked, she said it was only sweet potatoes – and ate it all alone. In Tiv traditional life, she is expected to bring the food to her husband and his household wherever they are sitting, no matter how little the food is. But WanAkpetyo did not do this; she ate it all by herself. Such behaviour is abhorrent in Tiv society (as in most other societies). Thus, Akpetyo's daughter is poor on the farm as well as at home. The song is therefore a report sheet on how poorly she is performing as a wife. And so acute is the shame on any Tiv traditional woman portrayed in this light that the portrayal alone is enough punishment.

But there is something more in the song: the parents of a wife are blamed when she is as incapable as the addressee in this song; and when a wife is well-behaved and hard-working, the praise also goes to her parents. For, it is understood that they are the ones who trained her so (Ierve s. d.: 19–20). Since the present wife is poor on all sides, it is her parent's name that is ridiculed in music and made fun of as seen in the body of that song. It is even possible that the name Akpetyo (meaning diagonal head) is not the parent's actual name; it is just a term of abuse used because of the parent's poor training skills as manifested in the bride.

The subject of bridal laziness is further pursued in another poem:

No 7

Cantor: Give me [the] lady *oo*;

I say give me the lady *aa*.

Chorus: *Hee aa eee!*

Cantor: When it is time to relax quietly:

Chorus: The wife is strong and healthy.

Cantor: When it is time to eat food *oo...*

Chorus: The wife is strong and healthy.

Cantor: When it is time to go to farm:

Chorus: "Aye! My dear husband *oo*!

Aye! My dear husband *oo o!*

My head is aching!"¹²

The first two lines of this poem represent the man demanding to marry the lady. Her parents do not hesitate. Line 3 represents the music for the marriage dance. From line 4 to the end, the poem demonstrates how, in her husband's house, the bride is usually strong and healthy at any time but that of farm work. The last three lines are actually her groans of sickness as indicated by the exclamation "aye!" That exclamation is usually rendered in a manner that tells the speaker's pretended agony.

Looking at the last two songs, one may be tempted to think that the Tiv mostly value strong women skilful in farm work. But we submit that capability on the farm alone does not make a good Tiv wife. Whatever her farming skills, the Tiv believe that a woman needs also to be of good behaviour as song 6 (where WanAkpetyo's selfishness is drawn attention to) above indicates. Thus, a woman with no substance of character is also usually abused as illustrated below:

No. 8

Cantor: Here I celebrated [her] coming *oo o*;
Let me celebrate once and for all ô!
Chorus: *Ee... E!*
Ee...E!
Tomorrow as she comes outside
She may pick on me *Kpe! Kpe! Kpee!*¹³

No. 9

Cantor: Head-ache *oo*
My head-ache *aa!*
Chorus: [She] aches the head *oo*
[She] aches the head really
Cantor: Akile has gone and picked this head-ache
Chorus: [She] aches the head really!
[She] aches the head really!¹⁴

Song 8 above is the position of each woman participating in celebrating the bride. The song anticipates that after the initial *imuan* (coyness), that is usual with brides the new wife may finally come out of her initial shyness and perhaps even become insolent to the very people celebrating her coming at present (see Akiga 1939: 148–49; Ierve s. d.: 27). Thus the poet speaker envisages that her celebrations may well be brief as she too may soon have to bear the brunt of the pride's insolence. The poet's deepest hope in the song is that the expression of his apprehensions may actually forestall the realization of his fears as the bride is expected to recognize the song as a moral guide.

Song 9 is an indulgent complaint about the headiness of wives generally and what headache they are to their husbands and in-laws. It needs repeating that all the songs abusing bad wives in Tiv nuptial poetry are aimed at indirectly persuading the bride to behave differently.

Songs that demonstrate men's courtship antics

In Tiv traditional culture, men view marriage as a show of their smartness especially when the brides elope with them. In such a situation, it is usually understood that the groom's handsomeness and manliness became irresistible to the girl.

It is this quality that men boast about when they talk with their mates (Akiga 1939: 153–54). In actual fact, in earlier times especially, girls eloped with their suitors for several reasons. Most of these reasons were concocted stories that the suitors told them. There were several other strategies that men used to lure girls into eloping with them. Some suitors even composed songs for their fiancées as shown in Suemo Chia (2001: 60–61). Apart from songs, a fiancé could get a woman to elope with him by telling her fantastic lies.¹⁵

At other times, a man, to convince his fiancée to elope with him, according to Ierve (s. d.: 24), staged an ill omen for her. Ierve tells us that the suitor on going to his fiancée's house would catch a *kutamen* insect that he contrived to hide in her cam wood container. On asking her for some cam wood to rub on his body, the terrified attention of the girl and her entire household was then drawn to the presence of the insect of bad omen. The suitor returned soon after claiming that a famous soothsayer whom he had consulted about the *kutamen* incident revealed that it was the fiancée's father's other wife that had been planning evil against her because she was more beautiful than that other woman's daughter. The girl usually had no option than to run away from her father's house by eloping with her fiancé. Indeed, men had various ways of getting girls to elope with them. One more way is exhibited in the following very popular poem:

No. 10

Come in marriage else they would kill you.
Girl, if you don't come in marriage
They would kill you for the *imborvyungu*
That is on the road.
You will come to be *zelôô*;
Girl, when you wake from your sleep *ee*,
We must go!¹⁶

Imborvyungu, according to Tiv tradition, is a witchcraft emblem with powers to enrich whoever owns it. Witches and wizards therefore always fight over its possession. But this property requires a lot of human blood to function. Whoever owns it therefore has to keep killing people through witchcraft from time to time to nourish it. The *imborvyungu* is, thus, a most dreaded property in Tivland. In the above poem, the girl is told that there is one *imborvyungu* on the road. That is to say wizards need blood to pour libation to it and bring it home. This girl is told that it is her blood that has been agreed to for the sacrifice. She should therefore run from her father's house to the protective hands of a husband – the present suitor. The protective position of a husband in Tiv society is common knowledge (Chia 2001: 66). This song therefore shows us one other kind of lie that suitors used to get their fiancées to elope with them.

Another song projects a suitor who tells her fiancée that should the girl reject him, she will bring misfortune to herself: no fiancé would ever come her way again. The song goes thus:

No. 11

Come in marriage to me *oo*.
My dear Mbaior *oo o*
Come in marriage to me *oo*.
[Else] tomorrow you may start saying
That no suitor came for you.¹⁷

Courting strategies such as these led to men who married by elopement regarding themselves as truly manly and being equally highly respected by others. Thus, some nuptial poems are dedicated to the celebration of the manliness of the groom.

Songs celebrating the groom's manliness

No. 12

Hoo a hoo ayooo!
Orkar Gbakyo has come *o*!
Orkar Gbakyo came quickly quickly,
Came quickly quickly
Snatched the girl,
Snatched her neatly.
Hoo a hoo ayoo!
Orkar Gbakyo has come indeed.¹⁸

The praise in the poem is most emphatic in the use of the word “snatch” to denote Orkar Gbakyo’s marriage of the girl by elopement. The word demonstrates the addressee’s astuteness. The same alertness is praised in the next poem where the persona’s taking away of the girl through elopement is compared to snatching an eaglet from the eagle’s nest. The eagle is the girl’s parents, particularly her mother whose responsibility was to protect her daughters while her husband looked after the boys. But a mother’s shame and embarrassment over an incapable daughter was, curiously, usually more than a father’s over an equally bad son. So the mother of a girl watched over her daughter with eagle’s vigilance. Thus, the groom’s ability to elope with the girl under such security was no mean accomplishment. In this next poem, the suitor has done it with such martial agility that it seems as if it is a kite’s nest that he has invaded. The rest of the poem’s stylistic virtues are self-evident:

No. 13

The kite's child has been taken from her nest *oo oo!*
People, be on the watch *oo!*
The eagle's child has been taken from her nest *oo;*
People, adjust yourselves [in case trouble comes].¹⁹

And now, finally, there are:

Songs that celebrate sexuality

No. 14

Cantor: She-that-walks-and -rolls
My wife, how you sleep!
Chorus: She-that -walks-and -rolls
My wife how you sleep
With pubic hair in your bottom
Chôhôôn ngbeghar
Pubic hair in the bottom
*Ngigh!*²⁰

The background of the above poem is very probably a husband's first night's experience with his bride. We suggest the first night because otherwise the object of description might not have made such deep impact on the speaker of the poem. It appears the husband is up in the night when his bride is still asleep. Without her clothes on, she is also most probably sleeping face downwards. The groom now admires her buttocks that "roll" when she walks. But he sees beyond these: her groin with a generous supply of pubic hair. Pubic hair on a woman, in traditional Tiv society, is very much admired. *Chôhôôn* in line 6 is an ideophone denoting not only the generous amount of hair but also the persona's elation. The same functions are performed by the other ideophones in lines 6 and 8. Moreover, *ngbeghar* also helps in balancing the rhythm of the line. The one-word last line additionally suggests that the transfixed husband lost control of himself. The line is actually an exclamation indicative that the overwhelmed groom woke his *Ikumatyô* to seek entrance into that wonderful world whose beautiful gate he beholds here. Indeed many Tiv nuptial poems celebrate sexuality by focusing on the pubic hair, the symbolic final barrier at the portal of mysteries. Here is another:

No 15

Cantor: *Yaryaryar* as if it's her pubic hair!
Chorus: It raises *yaryaryar* as
If it is Wantor's pubic hair.
Ahee ee ee her pubic hair
Ahee ee ee the pubic hair of Wantor.²¹

In this poem too, the abundance of pubic hair is suggested by the use of an ideophone, *yaryaryar*. This particular ideophone suggests that the hair is so full that it flies about in the wind. But it is not all celebrations of sexuality in Tiv nuptial poetry that focus on the pubic hair. An instance is the poem below:

No. 16

Cantor: I am not yet mature *oo*;
I am just a little girl,
I am not yet mature to be slept with.

Chorus: *Hoo oo oo*
Ahoo ooo o!
I am not yet mature;
If anyone sleeps with me I will die!²²

In traditional Tiv society, the apparent vulgarity of the above song was not intended to offend. The song aimed at ridiculing the expected sexual fear of a bride in those days that brides were always virgins. The persona is a girl, a bride, giving excuses as to why her husband should leave her alone. Indeed, many girls, understandably, were said to give their husbands a lot of trouble during the first nights of their marriage. The performance of this song thus aimed at ridiculing a bride's bed-fright and preparing her for the groom.

Conclusion

Tiv nuptial poems perform various functions. Apart from their general intention of social control, they welcome the bride, massage the ego of the groom, celebrate sexuality, and advise the newly married on how they can maintain a happy home. There are numerous songs that could be cited to exemplify these various functions. But space forbids the multiplication of illustrations. These instances should sufficiently demonstrate the point at issue.

Notes

1. The 1991 Nigeria census was flawed since it was reported that many Nigerians were not counted. Many Tiv therefore reject the figure given as their population count. *Wantaregh Paul Unongu* estimated in a paper delivered during the 2008 Tiv Day celebrations in Gboko that the Tiv numbers about 10 million.
2. For those interested in these matters, *Akiga's Story* has focused extensively on the significant details of Tiv life (see Akiga 1939).
3. In traditional Tiv society, when a man married, he first took his wife to one of his age mates who hosted them for at least a day before the couple goes to the groom's house.
4. The translation here and elsewhere in this essay is mine; the English renditions are meant to retain and reflect the linguistic authenticity of the Tiv language. *Angwe gbee...angwe! / Angwe Zaki ooo...angwe! / Ka angwe u an a? / Ka angwe u Tako Gbor Ndor Kunya! / Ka angwe u an a? / Ka angwe u Achulu Gbor Ndor Kunya! / Ka angwe u an a? / Ka angwe u Iornenge Akpa! / Angwe zende gbee...gbee...gbee / (Awer a haan).*

5. Ior zua ivese cii / Je kpa M fa mer ivese / I Gema Jime i a lu kposu keng. / Gema Jime ngohol wan u Jôgô / Aôndu kume. / Kwagh u M fe yô / Aôndu ver Jôgô ka ie ga. / Terugh yau iti ne, Mimi; / Nom u Aôndu A neu ne kpa / Mimi ka Aôndu A verugh ye. / Ungwa nen M hii yilan / Asagbajor higen M yila / Tyôver Atile Gura, / Millionia nyôr i huan ayôôsu. / Kuma ape a hii kwagh yô / Zege igbyam Ayua Yeke / Va due ve MbaYegh / Kwase wam yô i mou, / I mou i sugh Ayua Yeke. / I sôr i tema ior / Mba sha Vandeikya gba van ve...
6. Tindi loho sha Mbawar; / Or a da kaa Akpagher: / Iyou Yam bughu; / M ngu ke' won o. // Mase vaan mliam mer i bugh // Mo nyôr ô, / Kpa mba bughun ze / Ucôhô Agba wasem nen M nyôr. // M lu ke' mule / I kundum iyol o! / Eoo kumbul a mo ooo....
7. In a collection by one of my students who went to the field in 2001, a boy of about ten years old was the cantor of the songs at the marriage dance he recorded. This proves the general popularity of the antiphonies.
8. A va ivaa / Se ya ivo; / Kwase a va ivaa / Se ya ivo ee
9. Mtee: Gba van ve oo! / WanMbaior gba van ve oo! / Mrumun: Keekee oo! / Mtee: A nyôr ve oo. / Mrumun: Keekee oo!
10. M za ivaa tamen / Yô M ngu cian mer / A lu me tswam wanye / Me doo ishima ga / I gba gbeden mo / Ambi he' kungul tsô; / Me lu yieer; / Me lu yianaan.
11. Mtee: WanAkpetyo tule iyovv angahar / Mrumun: Tule Tule / Mtee: Kume atsaka kpa ya zwa na. / Mrumun: Hooo yio oo oo! / Akpetyo tule iyovv tule tule / Mtee: Wuu Akpetyo! / Mrumun: Akpetyo! / Mtee: Wu! / Mrumun: Akpetyo!
12. Mtee: Nam kwase oo; / Mer i nam kwase aa. / Mrumun: Hee aa eel! / Mtee: A temu lu viing; / Mrumun: Kwase a lu gbangbang aa. / Mtee: A yaan ruam oo... / Mrumun: Kwase a lu gbangbang aa. / Mtee: A kuman u yaren yô: / Mrumun: "Aye! Orya wam oo! / Aye! Orya wam oo o! / Ityou ki nanden mo!"
13. Mtee: Kuhu Yam ne oo o; / M kuha ikyoho imiôm ô! / Mrumun: Ee... E! / Ee... E! / Akper un a za duen ke' won o / Dugh sha mo Kpe! Kpe! Kpee!
14. Mtee: Nande-ityo oo / Nande-ityo wam aa! / Mrumun: Nande ityo oo / Nande ityo kpekpe! / Mtee: Akile za tôô nande ityou ne ve / Mrumun: Nande ityou kpekpe! / Nande ityou kpekpe!
15. In this writer's village, there is an old man whose nickname is "Headmaster" because he deceived a girl in those days when primary school headmasters were semi-gods in Tivland. The girl eloped with him and discovered the truth too late.
16. Va ivaa ga mbau wuan a. / Wan kwase u va ivaa ga / Mbau wuan sha imborvyungu / I i lu sha gbenda la. / U va hingir zelôô; / Wankwase u yav u nder ee, / Se yem keng!
17. Va ivaa sha mo oo. / Mbaior wam oo o / Va ivaa sha mo oo / Akper yô u va gba kaan / We iye sôôr we ga ve.
18. Hoo a hoo ayooo! / Orkar Gbakyô va ve o! / Orkar Gbakyô va faafaa, / Va faafaa / Tsue wankwase / Tsue tsembelee. / Hoo a hoo ayoo! / Orkar Gbakyô va ve o.
19. Tôô azembe wan sha aya oo o! / Ior nengen oo! / Igyuve wan sha aya oo; / Ior sôr ayol.
20. Mtee: Aviligh zende / Kwase wam o u yav a! / Mrumun: Aviligh zende / Kwase wam o u yav / A ikyuma ityô / Chôhôôn ngbeghar / Ikyuma ityô / Ngigh!
21. Mtee: Yaryaryar er ka ikyuma na! / Mrumun: Er Yaryaryar er / Ka ikyuma i Wantor. / Ahee ee ee ikyuma na / Ahee ee ee ikyuma i Wantor.
22. Mtee: M ngu a hia ze oo; / Mo M ngu wanyekwase, / M ngu a kuma u kpaan ga. / Mrumun: Hoo oo oo / Ahoo ooo o! / Mo M ngu a hia ga, / Or a kpaam mo kpe!

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