

# Swem: The Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Tiv of Central Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

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The Tiv are a major ethnic group in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria. Scholarly writings about the Tiv usually make mention of Swem as either the 'ancestral home' of the Tiv, or an 'Oath of justice' sworn by the Tiv people to prove innocence and cleanse the land to avert calamities. To this end, 'Swem' stands as a tangible and intangible heritage of the Tiv. This paper examines the nexus between the Tiv and the Swem, and its impact on the culture and traditions of the Tiv people. Data for this research was elicited from primary sources such as oral traditions, and ethnographic survey. Secondary sources such as published books, journals, and monographs were also used in this study. Today, though the Swem tradition is significant in the cultural history of the Tiv people, it is fast going into extinction. Thus, this paper becomes timely and most appropriate for the documentation of the Swem tradition, being part of the cultural heritage of the Tiv people. This documentation will enable a scholarly preservation of the tradition for posterity.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

For us to meaningfully discuss the Swem subject as a cultural phenomenon among the Tiv of Central Nigeria, it is paramount that we first understand the meaning of the terms Tiv and the Swem, and how they relate to each other in Tiv culture and traditions. This is very important because, it is rare to go through any writing about the Tiv without having to come across the word 'Swem'. Beginning from the early part of the 20th century, scholars started engaging the Tiv subject more seriously. Scholarly discourse on the Tiv cover areas like origin, migration, settlement, occupation, craftsmanship and cultural development inter alia (see Akiga, 1933; Gbor, 1974, 1978; Makar, 1975, 1994; Andah, 1983; Agber, 1989; Ogundele, 1990, 1993; Folorunsho, 1993; Gundu, 1999; Torkula, 2001; Ndera, 2009).

These scholars explain that the Tiv as a people, are a major ethnic group in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria. Tiv is said to be the progenitor of the entire Tiv people. Most of the Tiv

live in the modern Benue State, but also live in large numbers, and are indigenous in Nasarawa, Plateau, Taraba, Cross River States, and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja. A good number of Tiv people also live in the Republic of Cameroon (Torkula, 2001; Nomishan, 2020).

However, unlike the Tiv subject, there is general lack of research on the subject of Swem. Though it is usually mentioned in scholarly writings about the Tiv and their history, there is no intensive research so far conducted on the Swem subject. Therefore, this research is focused on the Swem cultural phenomenon among the Tiv people.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

As expressed above, there is a general lack of scholarly work on the subject of Swem which makes it highly misconstrued by many people. Even some educated Tiv sons and daughters have problematic understanding of the Swem which make them talk ill about it. Further, the Swem tradition is fast disappearing in Tiv society as a result of the spread of Christianity, Westernization and Modernization. Therefore, this research becomes most timely for the documentation of the Swem tradition for future generations. The research also made efforts towards the clarification of some of the misconceptions as mentioned above, and also educates the people about what constitute this culture and its association with the Tiv people.

Thus, to achieve this aim, the research adopted the semi-structured interview methods in eliciting field data. This was necessary for the fact that, apart from making use of the interview protocol to guide the researcher through the interview process, the method also provided the researcher with the ability to probe further for additional information from the informants. Therefore, the flexibility of this method enabled a dynamic gathering of field data, while also keeping focus on the intended data for the research work. The data were collected between the months of January and March 2019. Consequently, the sample size for this research comprised 20 informants cutting across elders, village heads and other cultural custodians who were selected based on their knowledge of the Swem and its impact on the culture and traditions of the Tiv people. Further, descriptive analysis was also utilized for data presentation and analysis in the research.

As stated earlier, writings about the Tiv as a subject matter abound in literatures. However, there is lack of research about Swem. Thus, it is sacrosanct to explain the subject of Swem.

### 2.1. The Swem

*Swem* is known to have two meanings among the Tiv. On one hand *Swem* is known as a place where the entire Tiv people originated, and on the other hand, it is a great fetish which is itself anti-*tsav*, and also kills *mbatsav* (Bohannan, 1958). It is an oath with magical forces for the settlement of disputes and provision of justice on issues brought about by the evil activities of *mbatsav* group.

Tsav generally means witchcraft, while *mbatsav* means a cult of men and women who possess spirit forces, used to manipulate the physical and spiritual worlds. They are people described as wizards, witches, and sorcerers (Akinsipe, 2015). The Tiv believe that good and bad are natural factors of human existence, which is supernaturally controlled, and that “mere possession of supernatural knowledge does not automatically make an individual evil” (Kyoon-Achan, 2013, p. 117). They also believe that good and bad (evil) are naturally possessed and under the control and manipulation of *mbatsav*. Thus, there are the bad and the good *mbatsav*.

In this understanding therefore, the good *mbatsav* operate on behalf of their communities/societies, holding these communities or societies in check and in harmony (Tsaaior, 2015). The bad *mbatsav* on the other hand are “malevolent, selfish and destructive” set of people, who “disrupt the social fabric of the community” (Tsaaior, 2015, p. 605). Bad *mbatsav* are usually people thought to always harbour evil intentions and work to harm others. They do this through the manipulation and application of supernatural powers. Thus, it is the evil intention and wickedness of this group of *mbatsav*, and other people with love for crime in Tivland that brought about the *Swem* oath for the purpose of justice and peace-making.

## 2.2. The Swem as Ancestral Home of the Tiv

Early research on the history of the Tiv has noted that *Swem* is a place that is generally regarded as the ancestral home of the Tiv people. According to Orkar (1979, p. 130), “the Tiv believe that they all originated from *Swem*, and that they are distinct and unique people marked off by a common culture which originated from *Swem*.” By this, the Tiv understand that their common language, experience, history, institutions, and descent make them one. In essence, *Swem* tradition provides ideological foundation for their sense of ‘oneness.’

However, there has been a scholarly tussle regarding the exact location of *Swem*. Akiga (1939) narrated that *Swem* is a hill in the Lyon area in Ikyurav-Ya, south-eastern Tivland. He stressed that he made a visit to the *Swem* in 1934. Report by Bohannan and Bohannan (1954) show that *Swem* is the Ngol-Kedju hill located in the Bamenda highlands. Makar (1975) on the other hand “concluded from the oral traditions he collected among the Tiv that, *Swem* is located in Nyiev-Ya in the present Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State. Makar noted that *Swem* is a hill that is about 36 miles southwest of the compound of the District Head of Nyiev-ya, Mr Yaro Gusa. Research by Gbor (1978) and Orkar (1979) indicated that the *Swem* is a hill located on the Nigeria-Cameroon border, south-east of the present Tivland.

According to Dzurgba (2007, p. 26) “*Swem* is located at the source of the Katsina-Ala River in the Akwaya Subdivision or Local Government Area, North-western Cameroon. It is in a range of hills in the area which stands taller among all the others”. The hill is also referred to as *Swem* by the Akwaya people who include the Lyon, Ugbe, and Utange among others. These Cameroonian groups also claim to be Tiv and their kith and kins reside in Nigeria in Moon District, Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State (see Akiga, 1939; Gbor, 1974; Makar, 1975, 1994; Gundu, 1999; Aboh, 2005; Dzurgba, 2007; Ndera, 2013; Nomishan, 2020).

The subsequent migration of the Tiv away from *Swem* is said to have followed several reasons like, persistent attacks from tribes like *Bafum* who were already occupying the *Swem* area before the arrival of the Tiv people, population explosion and the need for wider/suitable land for the production of sufficient food to keep the growing population. Because of this, the Tiv decided to migrate into the Middle Benue Valley of Nigeria where research have established that they have been living beyond 500 to 600 years ago (Abraham 1933; Bohannan 1952; Orkar, 1979; Cartwright, 2019; Nomishan, 2020, p. 29, 2021). The chronometric dates of the Tiv presence in the valley points to dates that cluster around 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century (Tubosun, 1981, 1995; Andah, 1983; Tubosun and Andah, 1983; Ogundele, 1983; Orijemie, 2018).

### 2.3. The Swem as an Oath of Justice among the Tiv

As noted earlier, the *Swem* is also regarded as the great oath of justice, faithfulness and truth between the supreme God and the Tiv ancestors (Ndera, 2013). According to Iorundu and Jiki (2019), *Swem* was first made and used by a man called Karagbe, who was from Nongov Super-Clan of the Tiv. The informants stressed that Karagbe ate a human flesh from a line of age group belonging to his father. Consequently, his kinsmen kept demanding that he pay-off the debt (the human flesh he ate) by giving his family members to be killed. Karagbe agreed but after giving his entire family lineage in payment of the debt, his kinsmen insisted on killing him as well. This made Karagbe to run away to a strange land called Utyusha. After some time, his kinsmen noticed his absence and sent two men known as Kpamberakpa and Anyamgere to find Karagbe and bring him back to Nongov to be killed.

Therefore, Kpamberakpa and Anyamgere traced Karagbe carefully until they finally reached Utyusha. Thus, at the arrival of the two men in Utyusha, Karagbe noticed trouble and immediately opted to submit himself to his kinsmen so as to avert a consequent conflict between the Nongov and the Utyusha. Therefore, Kpamberakpa and Anyamgere took Karagbe and began to return to Nongov. When they approached Nongov land, Karagbe requested that they stop at a forest, where he went in and put some ashes in a small pot which he took from Utyusha, he added pieces of *gbaaye* (*Prosopis Africana*) wood, Ayandegh plant (*Marantocha flexuosa*), *ikyula-nomsu* (*Lophira lanceolata*), *ikyula-kase* (*Sarcocapholus latiolius*) and a thunderbolt (*Ijembe-aôndo*) into the pot. After this, Karagbe asked Kpamberakpa and Anyamgere to take him to his kinsmen in Nongov. When they arrived, all his kinsmen gathered and were sing a welcome song that goes as follows:

“Kpamberakpa kange or va nam a!  
Hee-e-e!  
Anyamgere kange or va nam a!  
Hee-e-e!”

The English translation goes:  
“Kpamberakpa has caught a man for me!  
Hee-e-e!  
Anyamgere has caught a man for me!  
Hee-e-e!”

Consequently, Karagbe seeing that he was going to be killed declared that, if his kinsmen believed it was a justified act to kill him after they have already killed his entire family lineage, they should go ahead.

Therefore, Karagbe was beheaded to settle his debt (Iorundu and Jiki, 2019). However, some days after the death of Karagbe, Kpamberakpa and Anyamgere became very sick and their legs were swollen. They died few days after alongside all their kinsmen who unjustly ordered the beheading of Karagbe. The *Swem* killed them because, inasmuch as Karagbe was guilty of eating the elders' meat, they also treated him unjustly by killing him and his entire family lineage using the same matter. This became the first justice delivered by the *Swem* oath in Tivland (Iorundu and Jiki, 2019).

Thus, it was believed that the supreme God of the Tiv accepted Karagbe's plea and embodied the entire Tiv powers into the *Swem* pot made by Karagbe. This forms the basis for referring to the *Swem* as *Swem- u-Karagbe* (Karagbe's *Swem*). Therefore, the *Swem* became an oath of justice among all the Tiv people. The oath ensured that every Tiv person got the justice they deserved. This understanding kept the whole Tiv in unity, having one voice, love, courage, and hope. This also ensured the Tiv of their triumph over any opposing group of people who intended to prevent their settlement in the Middle Benue Valley (Iorundu and Jiki, 2019). This led to the formation of a motivational slogan - "*aya tutu ka uno?*" (who eats it hot?), responded as "*ka se,*" (it is us), which is said and understood by all the Tiv people.

As noted earlier, the *Swem* oath did not only serve in the area of uniting the Tiv, it also served the purpose of correcting wrongs in the Tiv society. This is because some crimes were considered evil (*Kwagh-bo*) and included such crimes as murder, adultery, incest or suicide, and also invited calamities in the land if appeasements were not made urgently. Other crimes were considered social disturbances (*kwagh-dzaniyol*) and included acts such as rape, theft and arson. In these various cases, depending upon the degree of the crime committed, varying approaches were employed in adjudicating cases, for the purpose of granting appropriate justice. Elders were therefore, allowed to deliberate on the cases to determine guilts. Therefore, depending upon the result of the deliberation, they then decided on the adequate type of chastisement applicable. These may include ordeals, fines or banishment" (Kyoon-Achan, 2013). The role of the elders in adjudication was necessary to avoid the swearing of *Swem* oath which brought justice through stiffer penalty.

More so, "divination was sometimes used to establish guilt or predict future events surrounding issues of suspicious nature such as when a person suspected another to have the intention of harming them or their family members but had no other way to confirm the suspicion." Diviners also helped to decipher omens or the causes of sickness, misfortune or untimely death (Kyoon-Achan, 2013, p. 123). To this end, the *Swem* Oath became very essential means of deciding matters in Tiv society. The parties involved in the conflicts took oaths together with their witnesses. The oath which was sworn on the *Swem* decided matters within short periods. Oral traditions of the Tiv claim that the Tiv people hates lies and so, the *Swem* was quick at bringing liars to justice (Iorundu and Jiki, 2019). Whenever the accused person or persons refused to confess to the crimes they committed,

they were made to take the *Swem* oath. And if such persons were guilty of the accusation, the *Swem* divination pot caused their legs and abdomen to swell up, leading to their death.

The *Swem* oath was also used to cleanse the land of much evil. Evil acts in Tiv society are generally perpetrated by the *mbatsav*, as well as people who commit crimes that are considered capable of bringing curses or calamities in the land. In this case, it was necessary to cleanse wrongdoers of their wrongs before they could continue functioning in a normal way in the community. For instance, incest and adultery perpetrators had to be cleansed of the curses emanating from those acts before they could resume normal functions in the community (Bohannan, 1968).

Further, as stressed above, the *Swem* pot was highly powerful and therefore, not prepared by everyone. There were few people in the entire Tivland with the supernatural powers to prepare the *Swem* pot. And whoever carried the *Swem* pot was not expected to make use of any other means of transporting himself back to his community rather than trekking by foot.



Picture 1: A typical *Swem* pot. Source: Author (2021).

In situations where the people were generally angry about the incidence that demanded for the justice of *Swem* (such as a sudden death of a young man), at the arrival of the messenger who went to receive the *Swem* pot on behalf of the community, all the adults came out to welcome the messenger with the earlier mentioned *Swem* song. Thereafter, all the accused persons were called out to swear on the *Swem* pot using the following statement:

This *swem* listen! If I know anything about witches, or I have donated my child to be killed by witches, let this *swem* cause my stomach to swell up so that I shall die! But if I do not know anything about his death, but it is by force that my child has been bewitched and made to die, I shall be safe, while all who are involved in the plot shall die (Aboh, 2005).

The Tiv people continued with this tradition in the Middle Benue Valley until the 1990s when the Pentecostal churches began massive crusades against the *Swem* oath and other cultural heritage (CH) objects in Tivland as was also done elsewhere in Nigeria (Nomishan *et al.*, 2021). The *Swem* pot and these other CHs were regarded by the pastors and their followers as barbaric, fetish, ungodly and uncivilized objects, thereby continuously calling for their abandonment (Eyo, 1994; Fasuyi, 1973). Therefore, the popularity of the *Swem* oath as a means of solving certain problems among the Tiv began to reduce drastically. Today, the general application of *Swem* oath as a way of granting justice to the people or punishing evil-doers in Tivland is left for few people and communities. This has explained the impact of the presence of Christianity, Westernization and Globalization on the Tivland.

### 3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has given us an understanding into the phenomenon of *Swem* and how it impacted the past Tiv societies. The *Swem* oath stands as a symbol of peace, love, unity, courage and hope to the Tiv people. Beginning shortly after their departure from the *Swem* hill, it was instrumental in the settlement of the Tiv in the Middle Benue Valley. The Tiv believe that the powers of the *Swem* pot highly contributed to their unity and courage which made it possible for them to take over their present location.

However, the location of *Swem* hill as the ancestral home of the Tiv people has been a long time debate as stated earlier. The inability of researchers to specifically point to the location of *Swem* hill has given it the status of an intangible heritage of the Tiv people. However, it is meant to be a physical feature with evidence of ancestral association with the Tiv people if scientifically identified. Further, the *Swem* pot which is used as an oath of justice among the Tiv people is both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. It involves a physical pot, which uses supernatural powers in granting justice. Thus, the dynamic ways in which the *Swem* oath has impacted the Tiv society is worth documenting, protecting and preserving for posterity. This is because of the seeming important position it has occupied in the history, culture and traditions of the Tiv people.

Further, the advent of Christianity, Westernization and Modernization has brought a drastic decline to the belief and allegiance to the powers of the *Swem* pot. The whole idea brought by the Westerners such as Missionaries was only to brainwash the Tiv people (just like other Africans) to disregard their culture, traditions, religion, norms and values among others, and to also convince them towards adopting the European ways of life. Thus, because of the way they disregarded the *Swem* oath, many people feel that the *Swem* oath which is used in the contemporary Tiv society is not original and therefore has no powers as compared to the ancient one. This has made a lot of Tiv people to doubt the genuineness of the intervention of *Swem* oath in matters of great importance. Others such as religious preachers have gone ahead to criticise the use of the *Swem* oath and continue to call for a total stoppage of the culture and tradition.

However, other members of the Tiv nation believe that, the calamities that have been visiting Tivland in recent times could be as a result of the gradual abandonment of the



culture and traditions that were helping to keep the Tivland secured. For this reason, the *Swem* oath is still used in some communities for justice and fairness. For instance, in 2019 Tiv elders in Ushongo Town, Ushongo Local Government Area, led by their traditional head – HRH Chief Nathaniel Hoyo, took the *Swem* oath to prove their none-involvement in criminal activities that were going-on in the town. They also requested the *Swem* pot to deal with anyone involved in it, and asked for the cleansing of the land (see pictures 2 and 3). This was also done by elders in Katsina- Ala Local Government Area in 2020, when they could no longer bear the excesses of criminality and banditry in their communities. Thus, the *Swem* oath led to the death of many guilty people in the affected communities. Others who had charms to protect themselves from being arrested by security men, got arrested after the *Swem* oath made their charms powerless.



Picture 2: HRH, Chief Nathaniel Hoyo swears by the Swem pot to prove his innocence. Source: Author (2021).





Picture 3: A Tiv elder takes the Swem oath to prove his innocence. Source: Author (2021)

There is also a general believe that the lack of morality and good values among contemporary African people, is as a result of the abandonment of real African cultures and traditions which were responsible for united, peaceful and morally conscious African societies in the past (Itanyi and Nwankwo, 2019; Nomishan *et al.*, 2021; Gubam and Nomishan, 2021).

Therefore, as part of the heritage of the Tiv people, there is need to work towards its preservation and continuity in Tivland. All the relevant stakeholders, particularly the cultural custodians like the Tor Tiv and other traditional heads should work towards reawakening all members of the Tiv nation about the preservation of the *Swem* oath through cultural heritage education. Also, all the institutions in Tivland should be made to prioritize teaching of Tiv culture and traditions to all level of students.

There should be motivation to scientifically study the *Swem* subject to establish a standing historical account on it. Researchers such as the Archaeologists, Anthropologists, Historians and other CH Experts in Tivland and beyond should be encouraged to direct their enquiries towards discovering the exact location of the *Swem* as the Tiv ancestral home, and to also acquire more knowledge about how it began as an oath of justice among the Tiv people. The scientific discovery of the *Swem* hill, and the preservation and protection of the *Swem* pot as an oath of justice of the Tiv people, can pave the way for cultural tourism in the South-eastern Tivland.

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