



Changing gender practices among the Tiv of Central Nigeria from pre-colonial to post-colonial period

Member Evelyn NYAJOH¹
Terhile Jude AHOO²
Member Josephine ORAGBAI³
Tartor Titus KETE⁴

Abstract

This study investigates the transformation of gender practices among the Tiv of Central Nigeria from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period. It arose from the contradiction between the Tiv's historic gender complementarity and the deepening patriarchal control of modern times. The objectives were to examine pre-colonial gender balance, analyse the colonial disruption of traditional relations, explore post-colonial socio-moral transformations that re-inscribed patriarchy, and assess emerging forms of female agency shaping Tiv society's gendered future. The Feminist Theory of Intersectionality provided the analytical framework, offering a lens to examine how gender, culture, economy, and religion intersect to shape women's positions and experiences in Tiv over time. A qualitative historical-descriptive design was employed, drawing data from ethnographic records, colonial archives, oral traditions, and contemporary scholarship. Information was thematically analysed to identify continuities and changes in gender roles, power relations, and social organization. Findings reveal that pre-colonial Tiv society emphasised gender complementarity and communal welfare through institutions like Yamshe (Exchange Marriage). Colonial intrusion abolished these stabilising systems, introducing Kem (cash-based bride price), commodifying marriage and labour, and intensifying male dominance. Post-colonial developments, marked by moral regulation, religious influence, and economic inequality further entrenched patriarchy, especially in matters of sexuality and reproduction. Yet, Tiv women exhibit "bounded agency," seen in cultural performance, education, and subtle defiance of restrictive norms. The study concludes that Tiv society remains in transition, balancing patriarchal continuity with emergent gender change. Culturally informed education and reform are recommended to promote a more inclusive gender order.

Keywords: Tiv society, gender relations, patriarchy, colonialism, intersectionality, female agency, social change.

Member Evelyn Nyajoh, Terhile Jude Ahoo, and Member Josephine Oragbai are lecturers in the Department of Sociology at Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi. Tartor Titus Kete is a PhD researcher at the Federal University of Lafia.

Introduction

The social and cultural landscape of the Tiv people of Central Nigeria has undergone profound transformations since the imposition of colonial rule, creating a complex and often contradictory environment where deeply embedded traditional gender roles clash with the dynamic forces of modernity and globalisation (Anloho, 2024). Traditionally characterised by a dual-sex system, Tiv society conceptually positioned women, or *Kwase Tiv*, as the "epicenter of the house holder" (*kwase kaishima I orya*), assigning them complementary and supplementary roles that were meant to advance the "anatomy of their female power" and maintain communal stability. This pre-colonial gender order was underpinned by institutions such as the *Yamshe* (Exchange) system of marriage, which, despite restricting individual choice, served as a crucial mechanism for social cohesion, marital security, and the preservation of reproductive value within the community (Fyanka, 2018; Ihuah, 2021; Torkula, 2004 as cited in Fyanka, 2018).

The advent of colonialism and the subsequent post-colonial era shattered this delicate equilibrium, propelling Tiv society into a period of acute social disintegration and gender contestation (Fyanka, 2018; Tushima, 2020). The shift began conspicuously with the abolition of the *Yamshe* system in 1927 by the British administration, catalyzed by emerging young, economically independent Tiv elite and missionary pressure, leading to its replacement by the cash-based bride price (*Kem*) (Fyanka, 2018). This legislative and economic upheaval commoditised marriage, weakened the extended family and age-grade systems, and led to the commercialisation of labour, redefining relations of production along monetary lines rather than egalitarian ones (Anloho, 2024).

These structural shifts have manifested most acutely in the subjugation of female agency and sexuality. Despite their traditional importance, women and girls remain tightly bound by patriarchal values and oppressive traditions that restrict their public roles and rigidly control their sexual expression, viewing female adolescent sexuality negatively and punitively (Azende, 2018). Sexual double standards persist, demanding virginity and chastity from women while granting men sexual privilege. However, the post-colonial period has simultaneously seen women actively engaging in cultural negotiation and resistance: challenging traditional gender roles through the feminisation of once male-dominated cultural performances like *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances, and utilising "bounded agency" to navigate repressive sexual boundaries through emerging youth subcultures (Angya, 2025; Azende, 2018).

The central problem of this study lies in the continuing tension between traditional Tiv gender roles and the evolving social realities of the post-colonial era. While pre-colonial Tiv society maintained a complementary gender system that valued both male and female contributions, colonial and post-colonial transformations disrupted this balance. The introduction of cash-based marriage transactions, wage labour, and new religious and educational values weakened women's traditional positions and intensified male dominance in both family and public life. In contemporary times, Tiv women continue to negotiate these changes by adapting to new social, cultural, and economic realities. However, the persistence of patriarchal norms still limits their agency and participation in community decision-making. The problem, therefore, is how these shifts from pre-colonial to post-colonial times have

redefined gender relations: transforming, yet also constraining, the roles and status of Tiv women within their society.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Theory of Intersectionality

The Feminist Theory of Intersectionality offers a powerful lens through which to examine the complex tapestry of gender relations among the Tiv of Central Nigeria. Emerging from the seminal work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality insists that social experiences cannot be understood by looking at categories such as gender, race, class, or sexuality in isolation. Rather, these categories intersect and interact to produce layered realities of privilege and oppression that are historically and culturally specific (Azende, 2018). This perspective rejects the notion of a singular “female experience,” arguing instead that womanhood is experienced differently depending on how it is shaped by other structures of power and inequality. Within this frame, gender becomes a site of convergence, a space where cultural, economic, political, and moral forces collide to define who women are and what they can become.

The theory shades light into how pre-colonial gender relations (once defined by complementarity and cooperation) gradually gave way to asymmetrical power relations under colonial and post-colonial transformations. Tiv women, traditionally regarded as the “epicenter of the household” (kwase ka ishima i orya), occupied important social, economic, and spiritual roles. However, the intrusion of colonial administration, Christian morality, and monetised economic systems restructured these relations, redefining women’s worth and identity within a capitalist and patriarchal logic. Intersectionality allows us to trace these shifts not as linear or uniform processes, but as step-by-step negotiations where gender interacts with changing class positions, religious expectations, and generational hierarchies to produce both subordination and resistance (Azende, 2018; Anloho, 2024).

This theoretical approach is particularly useful for uncovering how Tiv women’s lives are shaped by what may be called *the converging fields of power*: the enduring authority of patriarchy, the economic disruptions of colonialism, the moral regulation of religion, and the cultural weight of tradition. These forces do not act independently but weave together to structure both the constraints and the possibilities available to Tiv women. For example, the colonial abolition of the Yamshe marriage system in 1927 did not simply change marital customs but redefined the economic and moral basis of womanhood, linking female value to cash-based exchange and religious respectability. Equally important, the theory provides an interpretive bridge for understanding how Tiv women exercise what feminist scholars call *bounded agency*, a form of constrained freedom enacted within structural limits (Azende, 2018). Through this lens, women’s participation in modern cultural performances like the Mammy Wata and Tsue Tsere dances, or their strategic negotiations within marriage and kinship, are not simply acts of compliance but subtle performances of defiance, adaptation, and self-definition. Intersectionality thus enables a reading of Tiv gender change not merely as a movement from tradition to modernity, but as a process of continuous negotiation between subjection and empowerment, between conformity and creativity. Moreover, intersectionality draws attention to the paradoxical role of women who, while positioned as moral custodians, may simultaneously reinforce patriarchal norms. A Tiv mother or elder woman, for instance, may wield cultural authority by enforcing chastity or domestic

discipline thereby sustaining the very structures that constrain younger women. This ambivalence illustrates that gender power among the Tiv is not a simple binary of domination and submission but a dynamic network of intersecting influences where even those subordinated can act as agents of continuity and change (Azende, 2018). In essence, the Feminist Theory of Intersectionality provides both the moral and analytical compass for this research and is therefore adopted.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative historical-descriptive design to examine the changing patterns of gender practices among the Tiv of Central Nigeria from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period. The approach was chosen for its strength in interpreting socio-cultural transformations and uncovering the meanings attached to gender roles within their historical contexts. Data were drawn primarily from secondary sources, including ethnographic accounts, colonial records, missionary reports, oral traditions, and contemporary scholarly works. These materials provided insights into the evolution of Tiv social structures, gender relations, and moral systems across different periods. Information was analyzed thematically to identify continuities and shifts in gender norms, power relations, and female agency. The analysis was guided by the Feminist Theory of Intersectionality, which provided a framework for understanding how gender interacts with other dimensions of identity such as culture, religion, and economy to shape the experiences of Tiv women. Ethical consideration was maintained through cultural sensitivity and respect for indigenous perspectives.

Literature review

This review is thematically structured to clearly showcase the key debates and arguments that underpin this study such as the complementarity of gender in the pre-colonial period, the dislocation of gender balance under colonial rule, the moral regulation and economic redefinition of womanhood in the post-colonial era, and the contemporary negotiation of female agency within enduring patriarchy among the Tiv.

Gender Complementarity and Social Balance in Pre-Colonial Tiv Society

Research on pre-colonial Tiv society reveals that the traditional social structure was governed by a philosophy of gender complementarity and communal egalitarianism, both of which functioned as core mechanisms for social stability and cultural continuity (Fyanka, 2018; Ihuah, 2021; Tushima, 2020). Contrary to generalised Western critiques that portray African societies as uniformly patriarchal and oppressive, the Tiv social system recognised women as vital contributors to community life and accorded them dignified status within the household and the wider society (Fardon, 1984; Ihuah, 2021). The Tiv woman (*Kwase Tiv*) was conceptually described as the “heart-beat of the household” (*kwase kaishima i orya*) and the “epicenter of the community,” reflecting her indispensable role in maintaining family and societal cohesion (Fyanka, 2018). Women’s responsibilities in managing the kitchen, the womb, and the cradle were not expressions of subordination but rather extensions of their creative power, ensuring social stability by supplementing and complementing male roles (Ihuah, 2021; Tushima, 2020).

Although gender differentiation existed, it was tempered by a form of what scholars describe as “benevolent sexism,” which valued women as life-givers and thus excluded them from hazardous activities such as warfare (Fyanka, 2018; Ihuah, 2021). Proverbs, praise names, and moral codes further underscored the high regard for womanhood. Titles such as *Torkwase* (“Queen Mother”) and *Hembadoon* (“Female is the best child”) reflected the esteem with which femininity was held in Tiv cultural imagination (Ihuah, 2021). These cultural ideals reinforced the argument that pre-colonial Tiv gender relations were not characterised by domination but by complementarity, a relational balance that emphasised mutual respect and cooperation between men and women.

The egalitarian principles defining pre-colonial Tiv life extended into the economic sphere, further supporting the argument that the society was fundamentally cooperative and anti-exploitative (Anloho, 2024; Varvar, 2007, as cited in Anloho, 2024). Economic relations were grounded in kinship and reciprocity rather than individual accumulation. Labour was communally organized and not commodified; it was neither sold nor bought in a market system but shared through family and kindred cooperation (Anloho, 2024). This arrangement reflected a moral economy designed to minimize poverty and prevent the emergence of exploitative hierarchies. While men typically undertook tasks such as land clearing, women were central to agricultural production through weeding, harvesting, food processing, storage, and marketing of surplus produce (Anloho, 2024; Bohannan & Bohannan, 1956, as cited in Ihuah, 2021). Importantly, men had no legal or moral right to appropriate women’s labor or produce, indicating a balanced distribution of productive roles. Even though elders and compound heads held authority over communal resources, this control was achieved through merit and stewardship, not ownership, ensuring that all members had access to land and the means of subsistence (Anloho, 2024).

A key institution that preserved this social and gender equilibrium was the *Yamshe* (Exchange) marriage system, which served as a vital socio-cultural mechanism for maintaining marital stability and communal cohesion (Fyanka, 2018). The *Yamshe* system was based on the principle of value equalisation: a man’s marriage to a woman was reciprocated by his female relative’s marriage into another lineage. This reciprocal exchange of brides fostered inter-family trust and equality between households, thereby minimizing conflicts over dowry, inheritance, or infidelity (Fyanka, 2018). Rather than commodifying women, *Yamshe* symbolized social reciprocity and alliance-building, functioning as a “control mechanism” and “recipe for governing behaviour” within Tiv society (Fyanka, 2018). The system promoted both marital harmony and collective responsibility for moral order by embedding marriage within a network of kinship obligations. Spiritual and moral institutions further reinforced this gendered equilibrium. The Tiv moral universe operated through the twin systems of *Tsav* (supernatural authority) and *Akombo* (ritual cults), which provided moral surveillance and ensured adherence to communal values (Fardon, 1984; Tushima, 2020). Female morality, particularly virginity, was socially protected through the cult of the single spirit (*Akombo à Igbanjôv*), symbolized by the *Ikyôôr* (snail shell), which sanctioned premarital sexual activity with the threat of sterility or impotence (Tushima, 2020; Fyanka, 2018). These ritual and moral codes operated as instruments of social regulation that safeguarded reproductive integrity, disciplined sexual conduct, and preserved communal harmony.

The central argument advanced by this study is that the pre-colonial Tiv gender system was neither oppressive nor patriarchally rigid but relationally complementary and communally structured. Women's power derived from their reproductive, economic, and moral significance, which together sustained the unity and continuity of the Tiv ethnic group. This foundational equilibrium, however, would later be disrupted under colonialism, marking the beginning of structural gender asymmetry and the gradual erosion of the cooperative gender model that defined Tiv society before foreign intervention.

Colonial Disruption and the Commodification of Gender Relations

Colonial intervention in Tivland profoundly altered the foundations of the pre-colonial social order by dismantling communal cohesion and transforming previously egalitarian relationships into individualized, monetized interactions that ultimately marginalized women. Colonialism did not merely impose a new administrative system; it reconfigured the moral, cultural, and economic bases of Tiv society, replacing its communal and reciprocal ethos with one rooted in cash economy and patriarchal exploitation. Scholars such as Fyanka (2018) and Anloho (2024) argue that the colonial state and missionary activities disrupted Tiv social equilibrium by fracturing the collective consciousness that had sustained traditional institutions. The abolition of the *Yamshe* (Exchange) marriage system in 1927 by the British administration exemplified this cultural fracture. The system, which had previously functioned as a moral and social institution ensuring reciprocity and mutual accountability between families, was replaced with the cash-based *Kem* (bride price) system (Fyanka, 2018; Nyityo, 2011, as cited in Anloho, 2024). This transformation marked a fundamental shift in gender relations, as women's value became tied to fixed monetary worth—initially £4 or £5 (Fyanka, 2018; East, 1939, as cited in Fyanka, 2018). While this change was celebrated by younger Tiv men as a sign of liberation from traditional restrictions, it ultimately undermined family stability, eroded communal ethics, and increased the rate of divorce and domestic disputes (Fyanka, 2018; Ihuah, 2021).

Colonial economic policies further dismantled the Tiv's cooperative, welfare-oriented economy and introduced capitalist principles that commodified labor and human relations (Anloho, 2024). The introduction of legal tender and taxation forced Tiv households into cash-based production, thereby weakening communal labor practices that had once been rooted in reciprocity and collective responsibility (Fyanka, 2018). The emergence of hired labor as a market commodity symbolized the intrusion of capitalist values into a society that had previously measured worth through cooperation rather than accumulation (Anloho, 2024; Idyourough, 2015, as cited in Anloho, 2024). Population pressure, new land policies, and urban expansion fragmented large family compounds into smaller, autonomous households, decentralizing authority and weakening the kinship system (Anloho, 2024). The weakening of the age-grade system and the gradual decline of polygyny, which had traditionally enhanced collective productivity, further disorganized the social structure. As individualism replaced collective responsibility, material inequalities deepened, and livelihood insecurity increased, marking a complete departure from the pre-colonial ideal of mutual welfare (Anloho, 2024).

Rather than liberating women, these colonial transformations intensified their vulnerability and deepened patriarchal control over marriage and fertility (Fyanka, 2018;

Kwaghga et al., 2023). The monetization of marriage through *Kem* allowed families and in-laws to exploit bride-price obligations for material gain, transforming the institution of marriage into an avenue for economic enrichment (Fyanka, 2018). In this way, women's reproductive capacity became commodified, as the value of a woman was increasingly tied to her fertility and the number of children she could bear. Instead of modernizing gender relations, this process entrenched economic and social inequalities that placed women at a disadvantage. With the rise of the cash economy, men consolidated control over household resources, decision-making, and inheritance, while women became more economically dependent and socially constrained (Fyanka, 2018). The persistence of polygyny and the cultural preference for male offspring further reinforced patriarchal dominance and contributed to high fertility rates, limiting women's autonomy and opportunities (Anloho, 2024; Kwaghga et al., 2023).

The destabilization of traditional marriage institutions also led to new forms of exploitation and violence. The collapse of *Yamshe* and the rising cost of bride price gave rise to exploitative practices such as "consensual kidnapping," in which young women were married off under economic pressure or social coercion (Obby-Odimegwu, 2001, as cited in Fyanka, 2018). Deprived of the communal safeguards that once protected them, many women endured domestic violence and marital abuse in silence, lacking the collective support structures that had characterized pre-colonial society (Fyanka, 2018). This marked a moral and social decline in Tiv gender relations, as economic interests replaced kinship ethics and female agency was constrained by both custom and capitalism.

Colonialism in Tivland therefore initiated a process of cultural disintegration, economic commodification, and gender subordination. The abolition of *Yamshe* and the introduction of *Kem* redefined womanhood within a monetary framework, eroding the spiritual and communal foundations of gender complementarity that once sustained Tiv society. The intrusion of capitalist values into the social fabric not only fractured the cooperative basis of Tiv production but also institutionalized female economic dependency and male dominance. The colonial legacy, therefore, lies not merely in political domination but in the enduring transformation of social relations into monetized hierarchies which is an inheritance that continues to shape gender inequality and social instability in contemporary Tiv society (Fyanka, 2018; Anloho, 2024; Kwaghga et al., 2023).

Post-Colonial Moral Order and the Re-inscription of Patriarchy

The post-colonial moral order in Tiv society represents not liberation from colonial disruption but the consolidation and reinforcement of patriarchal power through the control of female sexuality and the economic marginalization of women. The collapse of traditional moral systems and the incomplete internalization of Western moral codes created a vacuum that became fertile ground for the reorganization of male dominance (Rubingh, 1962, as cited in Tushima, 2020). In the pre-colonial era, institutions such as *Tsav* and *Akombo* provided spiritual and social checks that regulated behavior and preserved moral balance, particularly in matters of sexual conduct (Fyanka, 2018; Tushima, 2020). However, colonial and missionary interventions, which condemned these indigenous systems as "pagan," dismantled them without offering a culturally grounded moral replacement. The result was not moral renewal but moral confusion, as the society was stripped of its traditional control mechanisms

and left with an incomplete assimilation of Christian ethics (Tushima, 2020). Within this vacuum, male dominance reasserted itself with greater force, and patriarchal control extended into both public and private domains, giving men greater authority in sexual, political, and social spheres (Azende, 2018). As observed in broader Northern Nigeria, the ideology of male superiority and female subordination became naturalized through socialization processes beginning at the household level and extending into wider political and religious institutions (Igbelina-Igbokwe, 2013, as cited in Azende, 2018).

The re-inscription of patriarchy in the post-colonial Tiv context is most evident in the rigid regulation of female sexuality and the moral double standards that define gender relations. Female sexuality has been constructed as a moral and social problem that must be controlled, while male sexuality is normalized as an entitlement (Azende, 2018). Girls are socialized to view their bodies as potential sources of shame, and sexual purity is elevated as the highest form of virtue, not for their autonomy but for the preservation of patriarchal honor (Azende, 2018; Rasmussen, 2015, as cited in Azende, 2018). Virginity is thus framed not as the property of the girl but as belonging to her family and, by extension, the wider community (Carpenter, 2001, as cited in Azende, 2018). Any deviation from this moral expectation is interpreted as moral corruption that dishonors the family. This social logic perpetuates a culture in which men enjoy sexual license while women bear the burden of moral representation, reinforcing gender inequality through the normalization of sexual double standards (Bell & Aggleton, 2013, as cited in Azende, 2018).

Complicating this re-inscription is the fact that women themselves are often co-opted into perpetuating the very system that oppresses them. Patriarchal control in post-colonial Tiv society operates not merely through coercion but through the internalization of gender norms that position women as moral guardians of society. Mothers, for instance, play a critical role in enforcing sexual discipline among daughters, deploying fear-based narratives, corporal punishment, and moral warnings to deter sexual activity (Azende, 2018). This process reveals a “division of labor” in which fathers establish the rules while mothers act as the primary enforcers, effectively turning women into instruments of patriarchal reproduction (Azende, 2018; Izugbara, 2008, as cited in Azende, 2018). Within polygynous households, mothers face heightened pressure to raise daughters who are sexually reserved and submissive, as their daughters’ behavior reflects on their social standing among co-wives (Azende, 2018). Through these mechanisms, the post-colonial moral order reproduces patriarchal control by embedding it within the emotional and moral labor of women themselves. This structure also extends to reproductive behavior, where men retain the authority to make fertility decisions, often favoring large families and multiple wives as markers of prestige (Kwaghga et al., 2023). Consequently, women’s reproductive capacities remain sites of control, and the persistence of polygyny continues to hinder fertility transition in the region (Azende, 2018; Kwaghga et al., 2023).

Yet, despite this systemic reinforcement of patriarchy, post-colonial Tiv society is not entirely devoid of female resistance. The post-colonial moral order has also become a site of negotiation and contestation where women exercise what Azende (2018) describes as “bounded agency.” This form of agency acknowledges the constrained but strategic ways women assert control within oppressive social systems. Contemporary cultural shifts, such as the feminization of traditional performance spaces like *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances,

demonstrate women's efforts to reassert visibility and challenge the gendered exclusions of public culture (Angya, 2025). Similarly, young women navigate restrictive sexual norms through subtle acts of defiance—engaging in covert relationships, forming peer information networks, or using the “money-gifts script” to negotiate affection and material security (Azende, 2018). These acts, though constrained, represent a form of everyday resistance to the moral regulation of female sexuality. However, such agency is precarious; women who defy the moral code risk social stigma, gossip, or the derogatory label of “man-woman,” reinforcing the continuing dominance of patriarchal moral logic (Ringrose et al., 2013, as cited in Azende, 2018).

Thus, the post-colonial moral order in Tivland represents both continuity and transformation. While colonialism eroded the traditional moral systems that once maintained social equilibrium, the structures that replaced them have largely deepened patriarchal control rather than dismantled it. Through the moralization of sexuality, the internalization of gender norms, and the manipulation of women's reproductive and moral roles, patriarchy has reinvented itself in the post-colonial era as both cultural and moral authority. Yet, within this restrictive moral universe, women continue to carve out spaces of resistance, small but significant acts that redefine femininity, sexuality, and social participation. The post-colonial Tiv woman thus occupies a paradoxical position: simultaneously constrained by patriarchy and creatively negotiating the limits of her oppression.

Continuity, Change, and the Gendered Future in Tiv Society

Tiv society has been engaged in an ongoing struggle between the persistence of traditional structures and the emergence of new forces that challenge them. While deep-seated patriarchal norms and cultural ideologies continue to dictate gender relations and reproductive choices, new forms of female agency, cultural expression, and socioeconomic transformation are gradually unsettling the old order. This dynamic interplay produces a complex social reality: one of continuity and change where tradition and modernity coexist in uneasy tension, shaping a gendered future that is fluid, contested, and still in transition.

Despite the disruptions brought by colonialism, modernization, and global social change, Tiv society remains deeply rooted in patriarchal systems that preserve male dominance and constrain women's autonomy (Azende, 2018; Kwaghga et al., 2023). This continuity manifests most visibly in reproductive control and moral regulation. Cultural practices such as polygyny and the high social valuation of children as economic and social security continue to reinforce male authority over fertility decisions, impeding demographic transitions that might otherwise result from education and urbanization (Kwaghga et al., 2023). The enduring moral codes surrounding female sexuality also illustrate how patriarchal values adapt rather than disappear; female adolescents are socialized under a regime of silence, fear, and moral policing that sustains male privilege while disguising gender discrimination as moral protection (Azende, 2018; Ihuah, 2021). In this way, Tiv society reproduces gender hierarchy under the guise of tradition, perpetuating continuity that obstructs social evolution.

Yet, within this persistence of patriarchal continuity lies unmistakable evidence of change. Urbanization, economic diversification, and cultural redefinition have created spaces for women to assert themselves in ways previously unthinkable (Angya, 2025; Anloho,

2024). Women are increasingly visible in the cultural and artistic domain, particularly through the feminisation of performance forms like *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances, once reserved for men. These transformations represent not only artistic shifts but also symbolic acts of defiance against restrictive gender roles, signaling an ongoing renegotiation of social space and power (Angya, 2025). Similarly, young Tiv women demonstrate agency through everyday acts of resistance—strategically navigating the repressive sexual expectations of their parents and communities by creating peer knowledge networks, leveraging new media, and quietly challenging the moral scripts imposed on their bodies (Azende, 2018). The commercialization of labor and the decline of communal subsistence production further expose women to capitalist dynamics that both liberate and exploit them, forcing adaptive strategies and transforming their economic identities (Anloho, 2024).

The gendered future that emerges from these tensions is neither linear nor predictable. It is a terrain of contestation where traditional values, religious beliefs, and modern aspirations intersect. Generational conflicts reveal this vividly: while conservative parents uphold abstinence and moral rigidity, younger women increasingly recognize the impracticality of such ideals and advocate for comprehensive sexuality education and informed choice (Azende, 2018). This ideological rift signals a gradual but profound cultural realignment. At the same time, the moral void left by colonial disruption and the partial internalization of Christian ethics continues to haunt Tiv society, calling for renewed spiritual and moral frameworks rooted in indigenous logic and contemporary realities (Tushima, 2020;). Sustainable transformation, therefore, demands systemic reform—expanded education for girls, mechanized agriculture to reduce dependency, and the mobilization of local institutions to foster gender equity and reproductive autonomy (Kwaghga et al., 2023).

Ultimately, the Tiv woman stands at the crossroads of continuity and change. Her sexuality, labor, and social identity remain deeply contested terrains, shaped by historical legacies yet reimagined through emerging forms of agency and resilience. Though her freedom is still constrained within patriarchal boundaries, the subtle transformations occurring in performance, sexuality, and economic life hint at a future in which gender relations may gradually evolve toward greater balance. This unfolding gendered future which is rooted in resistance, negotiation, and cultural adaptation embodies both the endurance of the past and the promise of transformation within Tiv society.

Conclusion

The comprehensive examination of Tiv gender dynamics reveals a society standing at a critical and tension-filled crossroads, where the once-stable system of gender complementarity has collapsed under the sustained impact of colonial disruption, capitalist transformation, and incomplete spiritual renewal. What emerges is a complex social landscape characterized by the re-inscription of patriarchal power and the determined, though constrained, assertion of female agency. The transition from a communally grounded society to one driven by individualism has not produced gender equality; instead, it has deepened structural inequalities, demanding deliberate systemic reform to guide the Tiv toward a more balanced and inclusive social future. The colonial incursion, symbolized by the abolition of stabilizing institutions such as the Yamshe marriage system, fractured the cultural foundations of relational security and substituted them with the commodification of both

labor and marriage. This rupture was worsened by the partial success of missionary intervention, which failed to transform the core indigenous worldview, leaving a spiritual and moral vacuum that eroded traditional mechanisms of social control. Into this void, patriarchal authority was reasserted and expanded, finding new expression in both private and public life, while the collapse of communal welfare systems heightened economic vulnerability and individual competition.

The legacy of this disrupted order continues to shape Tiv demographic and gender relations. Persistent high fertility, sustained by cultural practices such as polygyny and religious adherence, reflects the continued male dominance in reproductive decision-making and the stalling of demographic transition. Young women remain caught in a moral regime of silence and surveillance, where sexuality is framed as a potential threat to family honor rather than an aspect of personal identity. The resulting double standard normalizes male sexual freedom while demanding female chastity, reinforcing a system that equates virtue with submission and purity with social worth. Yet, amidst this continuity of patriarchal dominance, new currents of transformation are visible. Tiv women—particularly the younger generation—are redefining the boundaries of gender and cultural participation. Through subtle but strategic acts of “bounded agency,” they negotiate power within restrictive norms, exploring peer learning, self-expression, and economic assertion as tools of quiet resistance. The feminisation of previously male-dominated cultural performances such as *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances signals both aesthetic innovation and ideological contestation, as women reclaim visibility and challenge the symbolic architecture of patriarchy.

What unfolds, therefore, is not a simple story of decline or emancipation, but one of struggle and transition. Tiv women’s current autonomy exists in a luminal space—partly constrained, yet pregnant with transformative potential. This transitional agency may become the seedbed for a new moral and social order, one that reconciles cultural identity with modern gender values. Achieving this future requires more than policy adjustments; it demands a deep cultural and ethical reorientation that integrates education, community mobilization, and inclusive reproductive health practices within the Tiv moral framework. Only by transforming the inherited structures of inequality into pathways of equity can Tiv society move beyond its historical paradox and create a genuinely inclusive gender order rooted in mutual respect and shared human dignity.

References

Abraham, R. C. (1933). *The Tiv people*. Lagos Government Printer.

Adikwu. (2016). *The influence of increasing population on environment in Ogbadibo LGA, Benue State* [Unpublished undergraduate project]. Department of Sociology, Benue State University, Makurdi.

Ake, C. (1981). *A political economy of Africa*. Longman Group Limited.

Angya, C. A. (2025). Feminisation of Tiv dance: A study of changing gender dynamics in Mammy Wata and Tsue Tsere dances. *Arts & Humanities Open Access Journal*, 7(1), 45–51.

Anloho, A. T. (2024). Changing relations of production in the Tiv region of Central Nigeria since the colonial period. *Humanus Discourse*, 4(2).

Awuese, A. T. (2012). Women in Tiv dance performance: A case study of the Ingyough masquerade. *Niger Theatre J*, 15(2), 115–123.

Azende, P. M. (2018). *Sexuality and sexual agency among female adolescents in North Central Nigeria: A grounded theory approach* [Doctoral thesis, University of Huddersfield]. University of Huddersfield Repository.

Barnes, A. E. (1998). Catholic evangelizing in one colonial mission: The institutional evolution of Jos prefecture, Nigeria, 1907-1954. *The Catholic Historical Review*, 84(2), 240–262.

Baumeister, R. F., & Twenge, J. M. (2002). Cultural suppression of female sexuality. *Review of General Psychology*, 6(2), 166–203.

Binka, F. (1995). The Navrongo Community Health and Family Planning Project. *Studies in Family Planning*, 26(3), 121–139.

Bohannan, P. (1954). *Tiv farm and settlement*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Bohannan, P., & Bohannan, L. (1956). *The Tiv tribe*. Gaskiya Publishers.

Bohannan, P., & Bohannan, L. (1968). *Tiv economy*. Longmans.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). Harvard University Press.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Caldwell, J. C., & Caldwell, P. (1987). The cultural context of high fertility in sub-Saharan Africa. *Population and Development Review*, 13(3).

Cohen, B. (1993). Fertility levels, differentials and trends. In K. A. Foote, K. H. Hill, & L. G. Martin (Eds.), *Demographic change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (pp. 8–67). National Academic Press.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.

Davis, K. (2008). Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful. *Feminist Theory*, 9(1), 67–85.

East, R. M. (1939). *Akiga's story: The Tiv tribe as seen by one of its members*. International Institute for African Languages and Culture (IIALC).

Ezeh, A. C. (1997). Polygyny and reproductive behaviour in sub-Saharan Africa: A contextual analysis. *Demography*, 34(2), 209–243.

Fardon, R. (1984). Sisters, wives, wards and daughters: A transformational analysis of the political organization of the Tiv and their neighbors. Part one: The Tiv. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 54(4), 2–21.

Fine, M. (1988). Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(1), 29–53.

Fyanka, B. B. (2018). The evolution of marital practices among the Tiv: A critical appraisal. *RUN Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2.

Geertz, C. (1965). The impact of the concept of culture on the concept of man. In J. R. Piatt (Ed.), *New views on the nature of man* (pp. 93–118). University of Chicago Press.

Idyourough, A. E. (2015). *Sociological analysis of social change in contemporary Africa*. Aboki Publishers. (as cited in Anloho, 2024).

Igbelina-Igbokwe, N. (2013). Contextualizing gender based violence within patriarchy in Nigeria [opinion]. *AllAfrica.com*.

Ihuah, S. A. (2021). Womanhood in Tiv orature: A deconstructive analysis of gender roles in Africa. *Philosophy and Praxis*, 11(2).

Iorliam, C. T. (2015). *Educated young people as inculcation agents of worship in Tiv culture: A practical theological investigation of cultural symbols* [Unpublished dissertation]. St. Thomas University, Miami Gardens, FL.

Izugbara, C. O. (2008). Home-based sexuality education: Nigerian parents discussing sex with their children. *Youth & Society*, 39(4), 575–600.

Jewkes, R., & Morrell, R. (2012). Sexuality and the limits of agency among South African teenage women: Theorising femininities and their connections to HIV risk practices. *Social Science & Medicine*, 74(11), 1729–1737.

Jones, A. (2009). Social marginalization and children's rights: HIV-affected children in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. *Health & Social Work*, 34(4), 293–300.

Kwaghga, A. L. (2018b). *Culture and fertility*. Kency Printing Press.

Kwaghga, A. L., & Gberave, M. (2019). The effects of cultural practices on fertility transition in Guma Local Government Area, Benue State. *African Journal of Management, Social Sciences & Humanities*, 8(1), 150–169.

Kwaghga, A. L., Dewua, R., Akpoghl, C., Iornyagh, T. B., Oragbai, M. J., & Amaakaven, E. T. (2023). Polygyny, religion and fertility behaviour among the Tiv in Benue State. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Reviews*, 13(1), 149–158.

Kwaghga, A. L., Shimakaa, I. A., & Chinta, T. (2018). Demand for children and fertility transition in Guma Local Government area, Benue State. *Benue Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(1), 284–300.

Longmore, M. A. (1998). Symbolic interactionism and the study of sexuality. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 35(1), 44–57.

Makar, T. (1994). *The history of political change among the Tiv in the 19th and 20th centuries*. Fourth Dimension Publishers.

Maticka-Tyndale, E., Gallant, M., Brouillard-Coyle, C., Holland, D., Metcalfe, K., Wildish, J., & Gichuru, M. (2005). The sexual scripts of Kenyan young people and HIV prevention. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 7(1), 27–41.

Muinde, J. N., & Mukras, M. S. (1979). *Some aspects of determinants of fertility in Kenya*. Population Studies and Research Institute and Economics Department, University of Nairobi.

Nyityo, S. G. (2011). *Political centralization in Nigeria: Nature and transformation of Tiv society, 1900-1965*. Book Builders.

O’Neil, K., quoted in Ozah, M. (2008). *Égwú Àmàlā: Women in traditional performing arts in Ogbaruland* [PhD Dissertation]. University of Pittsburgh.

Obby-Odimegwu, C. (2001, July 16–21). *Couple formation and domestic violence among the Tiv of Benue State Nigeria*. International Colloquium Gender, Population and Development in Africa Abidjan.

Ochefu, Y. A. (2007). Men work harder, but women work longer; An analysis of gender relations, labour and production in Idoma and Tiv societies. In O. O. Okpeh & D. P. Sha (Eds.), *Gender, power and politics in Nigeria* (p. 64). Aboki Publishers.

Rubingh, E. (1962). The fall of a world-view. *The Reformed Journal*, 12(2), 3–5. (as cited in Tushima, 2020).

Rubingh, E. (1962). The fall of a world-view. *The Reformed Journal*, 12(2), 3–5.

Rubingh, E. (1969). *Sons of Tiv*. Baker Book House Company.

Simon, W., & Gagnon, J. H. (1986). Sexual scripts: Permanence and change. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 15(2), 97–120.

Simon, W., & Gagnon, J. H. (2003). Sexual scripts: Origins, influence and changes. *Qualitative Sociology*, 26(4), 491–497.

Torkula, A. A. (2001). *A survey of marriage and burial institutions amongst the Tiv of central Nigeria* [PhD dissertation]. St. Clements University, Turks and Caicos.

Torkula, A. A. (2004). *Cultural institutions of marriage and family stability among the Tiv people of Central Nigeria*. Ehindero Press Ltd. (as cited in Fyanka, 2018).

Tushima, C. T. A. (2020). The ramifications of missionary proselytisation on Tiv culture: Lessons for contemporary critical biblical contextualisation. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 41(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v41i1.2061>

Varvar, T. A. (2007). Pre-Colonial Social and Political Structure in Tivland. In Y. A. Ochefu, J. Iyo, & T. A. Varvar (Eds.), *A history of the peoples of Benue State* (pp. 152–155). Aboki Publishers.

Vavrus, F. (2000). *The relationship between schooling and fertility in Tanzania*. Harvard School of Public Health.

Weeks, J. (2003). *Sexuality* (2nd ed.). Routledge.