

# THOSE DAYS AND THESE DAYS: AKIGA'S NARRATIVIZATION OF THE TIV NATION IN *HISTORY OF THE TIV*

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## INTRODUCTION

Only a few books occupy a central place and actively participate in the construction of a people's national history and culture in ways that are authoritative, compelling and definitive. Such books are truly exceptional and exemplary in their articulation of the people's world view and vision of life. They execute a comprehensive mapping of the people's lived experiences and existential realities in the continuum of history and boldly announce them to the world. Akiga Sai's *History of the Tiv* enjoys the company of such books and sits comfortably in their midst. Perhaps other books of similar epistemological significance among African cultures are Samuel Johnson's *The History of the Yorubas* (1921), Jacob Egharevba's *A Short History of Benin* (1934) and Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938).

It is therefore not extravagant to assert that Akiga Sai's *History of the Tiv* is a canonical text. It provided the first detailed and comprehensive account of Tiv history, philosophy, religion, language, ecology, cultural traditions and grammar of values. It has continued to inspire pride and a deep and abiding sense of cultural identity in generations of Tiv people since its partial publication in 1939. It was widely read by early scholars of Tiv studies, including Rupert East, Eugene Rubingh, Justin Tseyayo, Tesemchi Makar, Tyu Abeghe and John Gbor.

Since then, generations of scholars have continued to use it, especially for advanced research. The book remains a constant and valuable reference point on Tiv social and political history as well as for ethnic and cultural studies, and it is found in school and university libraries in Nigeria and elsewhere. My earliest encounter with the book was at high school and later at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, where I used it for my doctoral research in Tiv folklore. This was Rupert East's translation and annotation of portions of the original from Tiv to English, which was the only version available at the time. The book has continued to be relevant; even now, any scholar or researcher negotiating Tiv studies who fails to refer to it, even if inadvertently, stands a real risk of being considered superficial and their work suffering a fundamental lack and impoverishment.

The book, therefore, constitutes a foundational social and cultural treatise on the Tiv as an ethnic and social category. Unfortunately, its readership has been

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restricted to academic and intellectual circles, not only because literacy is limited in the rest of the population but also because the Tiv version was never readily available. However, this restricted reach outside academia does not compromise or diminish the book's iconic status.

Considering the canonicity of Akiga's text, and owing to the non-availability of the Tiv original, it seems likely that certain extracts of the book were published in pamphlets and used for instruction, perhaps in vernacular courses and adult education classes. Indeed, discussions with people of Akiga's generation and the one immediately succeeding it who underwent formal educational instruction indicate some familiarity with Akiga's text. They have confirmed that an original Tiv version actually existed before it went out of print and that there were also extracts of the book that served as instructional material. Akiga also worked for Gaskiya Corporation, a publishing outfit in Kaduna owned by the government of Northern Nigeria, as well as for *Mwanger u Tiv*, a Tiv newsletter, as editor. Future research may be able to confirm local people's impression that portions of the book were serialized in periodicals and newspaper publications at the time.

The book also acquired interesting travelling habits as it became a reference point in legal arguments and the adjudication of cases. In my discussions with local people familiar with the text, some sources have revealed that the settlement of marriage cases and land disputes benefited from Akiga's book as a guide. There is the circumstantial evidence of a court case that was instituted in Gboko Magistrates' Court in the late 1980s, during which the judge announced that adultery was not a crime in Tivland. There was uproar in court and public condemnations of the pronouncement as an error of judgement when the news circulated in the local media. I was in Gboko then and was aware of the reactions.

Akiga's book became a source of reference to invalidate the judgement, at least in the public imagination. The then Tor Tiv (paramount ruler), Orcvirigh Dr Akperan Orshi, intervened in the debate to affirm Tiv scrupulousness in matters of sexuality. The public consensus was that adultery was condemned by Tiv culture and that not punishing it did not mean that it was acceptable. In a recent conversation with me, a Tiv elder in Gboko actually made reference to Akiga in relation to Tiv customary practices, especially in the adjudication of court cases. When asked specifically about the marriage case, the elder affirmed that Akiga's book would have been significant in arriving at a fair judgement if it had been consulted by the court.

But it is not only Akiga's text that has assumed this rarefied status. Akiga himself has acquired an enduring and widespread reputation. He is a household name, not only among his Shitile kith and kin, but also among Tiv and world scholars and researchers in the sociology and anthropology of African indigenous peoples. His individual talent has contributed a textual body that is remarkable and exists in a continuous, never-ending dialogue with Tiv history, tradition and culture.

Akiga's bold and courageous effort represents a lasting legacy to Tiv studies in both present and future history. Generations later, it is difficult to encounter other Tiv writers who can match Akiga's originality, stylistic virtuosity and power of vision, as the genre he created is distinctive and stands apart. For instance, the writing is eclectic, hybridizing variegated aspects of Tiv history and culture into a harmonious whole. The language, even in translation, is resonant and possesses

a certain oral poetic quality peculiarly Tiv, which can be described as *Englitivish* for want of better terminology.

In addition, the genre combines, in equal measure and with significant agreement, aspects of Tiv indigenous religious practices and Christianity. It is also highly imagistic and allusive in a biblical sense, as the author sometimes feeds on biblical narrative protocols and imagery, as in the case of the old Tiv patriarchs conversing with God (p. 268) in a manner reminiscent of Abraham, Moses, Elijah and Elisha, the Old Testament prophets. Indeed, the book is a powerful testament and reads like a journey, a pilgrimage of sorts in the tradition of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, describing a culture in transition.

Akiga does not conceal the fact that he is a Tiv writer but also a Christian convert. Indeed, one fascinating facet of Akiga's character is that he manages to combine the perspective of a Christian convert with that of the non-convert. This is possible with his deep understanding of traditional Tiv society. It is also this understanding of both world views that enables him to be simultaneously sympathetic to and critical of both Christian values and Tiv culture.

Since the book's publication, the corpus of Tiv literature has grown, but nothing can readily compare with Akiga's achievement. For instance, there is Tesemchi Makar's *A History of Political Change among the Tiv in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, John Gbor's *Mdue u Tiv man Mnyer ve Ke Benue* (Tiv Origins and Migrations to Benue), Sefan Gyanggyang's *Dikishenali i Tiv* (Tiv Dictionary), Suemo Chia's novel *Adan Wade Kohol Ga* (Adan Wade was Late), James Bature's *Anza Ase* (Our Proverbs) and Joseph Damkor's many translations of Catholic books into Tiv, as well as a comprehensive Tiv dictionary and thesaurus. Many of these books have benefited from ideas in Akiga's book. With departments of Tiv studies being created in tertiary institutions such as the College of Education, Katsina Ala, and Benue State University, Makurdi, the fortunes of Akiga's book as a relevant resource and recommended text and its prominent place in the curriculum are further enhanced.

Even though stories are always 'told from *somebody's position*, stories that can be rewritten' (Threadgold 1997: 1), Akiga did not write to interrogate European (per)versions of Tiv history. He therefore did not participate in the cultural politics of 'writing back' (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989: 1). This is because his original intention was not to revise any misrepresentations of his culture or society. His book was meant to present Tiv history and culture to his Tiv audience so that their cultural traditions would not be lost – and to the world so that people would better understand the Tiv. He achieved this objective not with a romantic and idealized vision of the culture but with an uncommon broadmindedness that foregrounds the strengths and imperfections of the society.

### THE MAKING OF *HISTORY OF THE TIV*

Akiga belonged to a generation at a forked road: a generation suffering the pangs of change as it was confronted by the powerful currents of transition. In its march through the marshes of history, society at this time had arrived at a crossroads, what the Tiv call *akahar agbenda*. It was a crucial moment that required critical choices and decisive actions. Akiga himself was something of a bridgehead, a

veritable witness to a dying, disappearing age in parturition, waiting for the birth of another age. Perhaps the metaphor of the cricket, which lays its eggs and dies expecting its offspring to carry on its legacy, best illustrates the expectations Akiga's disappearing generation nursed at this time of transition.

Akiga refused to merely contemplate the turbulent currents of transformation from the safety of the shore. He courageously elected to plunge into them. He therefore imposed upon himself the burden of recording for posterity this defining watershed moment in the life of his society. He chose to commit to writing the signs of social engineering of the time. He benefited greatly from oral history and indigenous knowledge networks collected from Tiv chiefs and elders to construct the textual universe of *History of the Tiv*. This was a time when written texts in Tiv were limited to the Bible, which Akiga himself helped to translate, and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, published in translation in 1933 by the Religious Tract Society and the Dutch Reformed Church Mission.

Coming from such a background meant that there were no available written accounts that Akiga could leverage to navigate his way through the dense physical and metaphysical world of the Tiv or that would help deepen his thoughts and strengthen his arguments. His insights were dominated and governed by his keen sense of the natural and supra-natural environment, fraught with ambiguities and complexities, which he processed for the material of the book. It also meant that Akiga was not tainted by sophisticated forms of knowledge and their convoluted logic, hence the purity of his thoughts, which come across as natural, unaffected and unobtrusive. Akiga knew and had his audience in mind. He wrote in a simple, lucid but stirring style as a man intent on conveying meaning to other men.

It is against this significant backdrop that the book becomes an eloquent testimony to his creativity, originality, stylistic competence and power of vision, all codified in a unique language without undue ornamentation or incongruities of meaning. There is also a sense of drama in Akiga's style as he describes traditional ways of life; magical rituals such as divination; the purging of an infected person; life cycles from birth through circumcision and marriage to death; agricultural activities including cultivation and harvests; the treatment of pathological, diseased conditions; as well as the gaiety and fanfare that attend festive occasions.

Akiga is always vivid, picturesque and dramatic. His style is like an arrow in flight: it travels straight from the quiver of his imagination to hit the target and penetrate the mind. A few examples of this style will be illustrative:

The old mushroom rots, another springs up in its place. (p. 5)

*Swem* is the great *akombo* for oath-taking among the Tiv. All Tiv know about this ... *Swem* is a very beautiful mountain. It surpasses in beauty all the mountains in Tivland and even the mountains in the foreign land where it is located. (p. 88)

If not for the need to maintain a family name, most Tiv people would not marry. They would just have sex or flirt with women. (p. 196)

If a python enters a house, it is a sign of evil; the owner of the house would break the house down and go in exile to his mother's relatives, for the *mbatsav* want to kill him. (p. 301)

Although these vivid and imagistic statements may be universally comprehensible, many Tiv people will readily identify with them as expressive of their culture.

Akiga wrote his book in his native Tiv, a (semi-)Bantoid language reputed for its monolithism (Abraham 1933: 11; Isichei 1983: 9; Makar 1986: 4; Denga 1988: 8; Imoigene 1990: 12). Tiv language has no dialectal differences or linguistic incompatibilities. The language is now a cultural heirloom for its current speakers – over 6 million people. Their exact demographic strength remains contentious and unresolved in the absence of reliable national census figures (Moti 1984: 89; Wegh 1998: 23). The Tiv population is spread over the five states of Benue, Taraba, Nasarawa, Plateau and Cross River, much of which falls in Central Nigeria.

The original Tiv version of the book was first translated into English with annotations by Rupert Moultrie East with the title *Akiga's Story: the Tiv tribe as seen by one of its members*. This title is at once culturally specific and explanatory but also patronizing in parts. For instance, East reproduces or regurgitates the familiar charge of a primitive Africa in the wilderness of pre-history, very much unknown to civilization.

East contends that Akiga's book is not history, and, by implication, that the Tiv have no history. He asserts rather recklessly: 'Akiga set out to write a history of the Tiv. He has not succeeded in this, because the Tiv, like most African tribes, have no history in our sense of the word' (East 1939: 6). The question that logically follows is this: What then is history? Must all human history be European or Western history? Indeed, who has the right to determine which history is valid and which is not? East here plays the card of colonialist intellection, which negates everything everywhere unless it conforms to European standards and is seen through what Mary Louise Pratt calls 'imperial eyes' (1992: 2).

East's title also creates an impression that is somewhat misleading. He refers to the accounts in the book as Akiga's story. By settling for an eponymous title, he puts forward the thesis that the book is autobiographical. This is not exactly correct. It is incontrovertible that Akiga is the one doing the storytelling in his unique format and that frequently he inserts himself into the texture of the narrative, but this does not translate to self-writing. Akiga merely speaks on behalf of his ethnic nationality, not himself or his personhood. To achieve this, he occasionally deploys the prophetic perspective, a communal voice that he calls into service on behalf of the group. It is, therefore, not quite right when East espouses essentialist cultural politics thus: 'Indeed the whole book is concerned with persons rather than with things. This is to be expected, for no normal African could, or would wish to, write an impersonal review of contemporary events such as may be demanded from a European historian' (East 1939: 7).

East's position on the absence of 'impersonal' narrativization of history by Akiga – and, by extension, African historians – flies off at a tangent. Akiga has the daunting task of picking his way through the density of oral sources and resources before him, and constructing an objective and compelling narrative from them. The seeming lack of an 'impersonal' manner of narration does not compromise the credibility of the story but rather enriches it. Indeed, contrary to East's argument, much of the book is about *things* and not persons. But since things cannot function optimally on their own without human agency, Akiga necessarily has to implicate human beings. Much of East's commentary is coloured with the peculiar complexion of prejudice typical of European imperial knowledge of marginal others.

East's effort left out certain important parts of the original text. This was probably due not only to the sheer scale of the manuscript but also to the specific interests that were dear to him. He clearly had a European audience in mind. In his own words, he chose materials from the original 'not so much for their intrinsic merit as for their general interest to Europeans' (East 1939: 7). There are resonances of imperial Eurocentric interests here. This species of European intellection promotes the stylized and formulaic representation of subaltern cultures, such as that of the Tiv, as being rich in superstition and exotica as a strategy to pander to the tastes of European publics or audiences. It appears that East was adopting this form of colonialist logic in determining what to screen out and what to retain from the original.

The present translation by a group of translators coordinated by Harold Bergsma, seven decades after the original publication, is a salutary effort and unique achievement in many ways. It is insightfully entitled *History of the Tiv*, a title that erases the eponymous, autobiographical character present in East's title. This translation represents a significant improvement on East's work. The present translation involves the entire original text, including parts that East left out. These omissions include details of Tiv botanical names and agricultural species; clan histories and dispersions; the pacification of the Tiv by the British authorities; and other episodes in the early colonial history of the region, which provide additional valuable information on the Tiv.

Bergsma has also brought to bear on the translation his rich fund of knowledge of the Tiv language, culture and history, as well as his lived experiences among the Tiv. His effort is a culmination of long years of resilient and painstaking collaborative work with some of Akiga's descendants and other Tiv scholars who have a deep anchorage in Tiv cultural studies. The result is not just a literal but a cultural translation faithful to the Tiv original. Impressive also is the level of cultural knowledge and literacy demonstrated by Bergsma and his editorial collective through their thorough understanding of the original script in a language such as Tiv, with its rich tonal variations. Every language, when reduced to translation, loses some of its nuances and gravity of meaning. However, this denudation is minimized when the translation remains close to the original. This is precisely what this team has achieved in this translation of Akiga's *History of the Tiv*.

### BETWEEN THOSE DAYS AND THESE DAYS

The penetration of Tiv country by missionaries was a project intended to rescue a people still lost in the eaves of pre-history before they finally hurled themselves into the yawning chasm of ungodliness, primitivism and non-being. But, as Akiga sufficiently demonstrates, Tiv society, through its social habits and cultural practices, has always nourished the idea of a divine essence, *Aôndo*, at once immense and inscrutable, never to be limited in spatio-temporal terms (Atel 2004: 26). However, the Tiv believed that his natural habitat was in the clouds, the vault of heaven. This belief in the immanence of God by the patriarchs such as Gbayange, Abaverijuwa, Ityevajir and Ikeratar (Akiga 2015: 268–9), which meant that they could command rains to fall or stop, is what the present generation lacks and cannot fully understand.

The counter-narrative temperament of Akiga's book here congeals in the fact that the Tiv traditional world view had always acknowledged that there was an irreducible, unseen God who owns everything, everywhere, for all time (Moti and Wegh 2001: 20–1). Missionary proselytization only helped deepen that understanding and appreciation of God's divinity. What is fascinating here is that the Tiv do not have a pantheon of divinities, unlike the Yoruba and other indigenous African societies (Niemark 1993). Accepting the theology of a theocratic godhead was, therefore, not too notoriously difficult a task for them to accomplish.

This is the religious background through which we have to circumnavigate Akiga's textual world. But in contradistinction to the belief in God is the fear of the *Mbatsav*, a cult of men and women with spirit forces that they use to manipulate the physical and spiritual worlds. To be exact, there are constitutional and unconstitutional *Mbatsav* with branches in all parts of Tivland (Tsaaior 2005: 165; Nyityô 2011). The former *Mbatsav* operate on behalf of society, holding society in check and in harmony; the latter are malevolent, selfish and destructive and they disrupt the social fabric of the community. Akiga himself sought to be initiated into this hermetic world before Christianity conspired to deny him that heritage.

It was the dread of the *Mbatsav* that led to the *Budeli*, *Ijov*, *Ivase* and *Haakaa* (*Namakaa*). These were social and political movements that interrogated and undermined the power of the malevolent *Mbatsav*. The *Mbatsav* are still a constant presence in Tiv social and cultural life as they are believed to continue to function in the mundane and cosmogonic frontiers. Even with the firm implantation of Christianity and its increased entrenchment with Pentecostal new religion in present-day Tivland, the fear of the *Mbatsav* is the beginning of wisdom even among the elite.

It is also true that the Tiv were the only group that stood in the way of the Fulani jihadists who were bent on overrunning present-day Nigeria and extending the reach of the Qur'an to the Atlantic Ocean (Ahire 1993: 4; Atuu 1993: 87; Iyo 1993: 98). This is important because much of Akiga's story narrates the relationships, some of them adversarial and conflictual, with the British and the Hausa-Fulani, and it is historically proper to set the record straight. The Tiv have since been labelled as a people with a warrior tradition, nursing imperial, expansionist ambitions (Bur 1993: 20). Many see them as a belligerent, rebellious, aggressive, vindictive and truculent people.

These stereotypical representations have been retailed and recycled by their enemies (Avav 1993: 34; Uji 1993: 52). But those who know the Tiv understand that they abhor injustice and inequity and do 'not hesitate to wage war against forces or individuals perceived as antagonizing these values' (Ahire 1993: 3). However, these are common perceptions that feed on prejudices and stereotypes and so do not have any scientific corroboration.

The pacification of the Tiv by the British colonial authorities culminated in the crumbling of the people's social structures, cultural practices and political institutions. One such practice was the much prized exchange marriage, otherwise called *Yam Ishe*. This unique marriage system functioned much like trade by barter when the Tiv were operating an informal economy. A man in need of a wife would take his daughter, sister or female ward and exchange her with another man who was also in need of a wife in a mutually agreed transaction (Dzurgba 2011: 62). They preferred this system because it brought the two families in close union as the exchange was not just between the couples.

With the introduction of a cash economy by the British, this revered marriage system was abrogated and in its place was installed marriage by bride price. As a result, there was a general outcry by Tiv elders that the white man had spoiled the land and emboldened the youth to desecrate tradition. Today, marriage among the Tiv is basically through bride price and many young people do not know of other marriage types such as *Kem*, which is marriage by capture, or marriage by purchase; in fact, they look strange to them. However, with bride price, many families have become so greedy that the process has been reduced to an opportunity for money-grabbing, and prospective grooms and their families have to pay exorbitant or extortionate sums – so much so that the couple sometimes finds it difficult to survive meaningfully after the marriage has been contracted. The situation became so vexed at one point that the Tiv Traditional Council had to intervene. Paradoxically, as the bride price has become higher, so too has the divorce rate.

Akiga is meticulous in his accounts in naming and describing things ranging from physical body scarifications (pp. 8–9), housing types, patterns and interior decorations (pp. 22–30), to diseases, plants and their medical or therapeutic properties (pp. 123–32), as well as agricultural systems, foods and crops (pp. 30–50). However, many of the names, especially of plants and crops, will be strange and virtually unknown to many Tiv people today. With particular reference to crops such as yams, some types have totally disappeared and so it is difficult to talk about their names. Many animals are also extinct in the wild, as the Tiv, who are legendary hunters with an insatiable appetite for game, have killed most of them for food. While growing up in the 1970s, it was common to see antelopes, deer, buffalo and so on, but they are a rare sight now. They have been driven away through farming activities, construction, indiscriminate bush burning, deforestation and other harmful ecological practices that have depleted and devastated Tiv biodiversity and rendered the ecosystem vulnerable.

Tiv society has been in rapid transition. Since the time Akiga was writing, when the missionaries and the colonialists penetrated the heart of Tiv country and established their presence and foothold, there have been a number of continuities but also a plethora of mutabilities. Practices associated with rites of passage still endure but have undergone severe revisions, which sometimes rob them of cultural elaborations. For instance, circumcision, which, as Akiga records, the Tiv patriarch procured from a stranger, does not follow the same traditional procedures. Indeed, male children are circumcised using modern surgical operations in their infancy rather than the process being carried out during early adolescence. The age-grade system and its associated coming-of-age ceremonies have altogether disappeared from the Tiv cultural calendar except in a few Tiv clans.

Land ranked significantly in the Tiv hierarchy of interests because of its symbolic and real value. It was communally owned and tilled for subsistence. Its fertility and yield were also of great consequence, and so elaborate rites were performed for its productivity and for that of humans and livestock, including the larger *Akombo*; the latter are rituals with magical force to repair the land, such as *Ibiamagh*, *Poor*, *Swem* and *Imborivungu* (pp. 74–75, 75–78, 88–92, 103–6). Today, land is still very much valued among the people but it has also become a commodity that people can sell for monetary gains and that can lead to the spilling of human blood. Akiga observes that, in the past, it was matters relating to women that constituted the greatest source of litigation in Tivland. In present-day Tiv



society, land disputes can be added to the list. With the ‘Go Back to the Land’ policy of the Muhammadu Buhari military regime, land-grabbing has become the pastime of many Tiv people who were laid off or retired from their jobs. Although still seen as communal property, there has been increased individuation in terms of title-ship to land in a manner that runs counter to the Tiv traditional ethos.

It is my considered opinion that there has been a steep rise in the mortality rate in Tivland since the time when Akiga was writing. In those days, early death was a rare occurrence and people lived to an old age. These days, it is common to see fresh palm fronds on the roads and streets, signifying symbolically that someone has died. Many of the deceased are very young. This has resulted from dwindling fortunes in a deregulated economy, harmful consumption patterns, the prevalence of strange terminal diseases such as HIV/AIDS, and, in the opinion of many people, the preponderance of the unconstitutional *Mbatsav*. Because death has become common, mourning the dead has also been turned into a celebration. Many in today’s generation do not know about the *Nyagba*, which was tied by elders around their waists while mourning the dead.

Today, the youth accuse the elders of killing people, especially when the deceased is a young person, in order to satisfy their insatiable greed for meat. In many situations, the sharing of meat among elders during funerals results in serious altercations, which sometimes cause human fatalities. The practice of the sasswood ordeal (p. 308), which was an inquisition process to ascertain the cause of death, has also disappeared as many consider it antithetical to the tenets of Christianity. In the present schema, there is a reconfiguration of culpability as the youths accuse the elders of ‘spoiling’ the land. Quite often, elders are physically assaulted by young people in communities, especially when the death of a young person occurs and the elders are believed to be involved.

Akiga wrote his book in the Tiv language and enjoined his compatriots to learn and teach the language to their progeny. He did so because of his nationalistic passion and cultural commitment, together with the knowledge that language is the true vehicle for the transmission of culture and the entrenchment of its lexis of values. As he put it:

This book accomplishes the vision of the Tiv forefathers who cared about Tiv history. Therefore you, my Tiv brothers of this new generation that can read, read this history, and tell it to others who cannot; of the things of our ancestors so that whether they are literate or not, at least they will be able to know something about our forbears who have gone on before us. Further, do you, however great your knowledge may be, remember you are a Tiv. Remain a Tiv! Know the things of the Tiv, for therein lies your pride. Let us lift ourselves up. As the old mushroom rots, another springs up in its place that is why the mushroom lives on. (Akiga Sai 2015: 5)

This impassioned injunction springs from a heart deeply aware of the dangers of abandoning a people’s cultural traditions and the language that bears the burdens of history, its lived experiences and pedagogical realities. In a certain prescient way, Akiga has proved to be a prophet who saw clearly into the fog of the future and spoke to a culture that was in the throes of transition. No doubt, every moment in history is transitory, as preceding moments give way to succeeding moments in the insistent kinesis of history. It seems that the Tiv have not

listened to Akiga's paternal advice. Today, the Tiv language is under severe threat and is undergoing a slow but sure 'genocide'.

This threat of extinction is real in situations in which children born to parents of Tiv ethnicity and in the heart of Tivland cannot learn to speak their own language. Parents have abdicated their primary responsibilities to their children and their culture. The result is a precipitous descent into gross linguistic poverty, cultural illiteracy and lack of intelligence in indigenous ways. Today, it is normal for parents to tell others that their children cannot speak Tiv but that they are fluent in English. However, their competence in the English language is also questionable, as evidenced by the poor performance in public examinations today. Such is the linguistic conundrum many Tiv families face today.

At the time Akiga was writing, the Sudan United Mission, Dutch Reformed Church Mission and Roman Catholic Church were in the vanguard of the evangelizing mission in Tivland, to whiten the darkened souls and spirits of the people. Today, there is a riotous rainbow of churches and a chaotic babel of voices competing to be heard in their missionizing zeal in the Pentecostal tradition of new religion. However, in my opinion, the paradox remains that the more religious the society has become, the more daringly diabolical and morally derelict the people. Ritual killings, occultism, debauchery, greed, ungodliness and moral corruption, like stubborn tares, have taken over Tiv society. The sacredness and quality of human life have also depreciated. The cult of individualism has displaced the communal existence for which the Tiv were renowned.

One point of vulnerability in this book is the author's incapacity to bear witness to falsehood. Akiga's truthfulness sometimes borders on crudeness and unguardedness as he volunteers information that appears to compromise the integrity of the culture. For instance: 'It is this sexual pleasure that makes death a sorrowful thing to a Tiv man. They also hate imprisonment because it interferes with their chance to have sex with women'. He describes the Tiv as a people who are copycats, unstable and unpredictable in their appreciation of foreign fashions, tastes and cultures. They are quick to emulate such alien practices and discard their own, only to relinquish those things soon afterwards. To a historian who was interested in merely deifying his people and idealizing their culture, this would result in an anti-climax and a disservice. But this is not so for Akiga. For he is a man imbued with unalloyed fidelity and loyalty to Tiv culture but who is also courageous enough to point out its foibles and fallibilities. Akiga's book constitutes a textual event through which a culture holds an honest and healthy dialogue with itself – but sometimes also a brutal one. The book, therefore, builds on the corpus of historiography and literature on the Tiv, beginning with R. M. Downes' *The Tiv Tribe* (1933), and R. C. Abraham's *The Tiv People* (1933) and *The Principles of Tiv* (1940). Akiga wrote in 1935 to a Tiv audience using Tiv language, but since the translation and publication of the book in 1939, many other books have consolidated his achievement in Tiv studies. They include Paul and Laura Bohannan's *The Tiv of Central Nigeria* (1953) and Eugene Rubingh's *Sons of Tiv* (1969).

Indigenous Tiv scholars have also drawn insights in varying degrees from Akiga's book. They are too numerous to list them all here, but they include Justin Tseayo, Tesemchi Makar, John Gbor, Iyorwuese Hagher, Shagbaor Wegh and Akpenpuun Dzurgba, not to mention the many more theses and dissertations on the Tiv scattered throughout the world. In all this, Akiga's *History of the Tiv*

stands apart from the others in originality, style, substance and power of execution. It remains an inexhaustible fountain of historical and cultural knowledge from which generations of scholars and ordinary people have drawn and will continue to draw in the future.

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## ABSTRACT

This article pays tribute to Akiga Sai (1898–1959) and his iconic status as the first great Tiv writer who recorded Tiv history, customs, beliefs and experiences during the turbulence unleashed by colonization and missionary intervention in the early twentieth century. It offers an appreciation of Akiga's vivid writing style and his achievements as both a historian and a recorder of his people's way of life, which was fast changing. The article presents the perspective of a younger Tiv generation who encountered Akiga Sai's work in the course of their education. Akiga, from this viewpoint, is not only an individual pioneer and creative genius, but also the representative of a better era, after which moral decay and a decline in communal health and well-being set in.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article rend hommage au statut iconique d'Akiga Sai en tant que premier grand auteur tiv à avoir relaté l'histoire, les coutumes, les croyances et les expériences du peuple Tiv durant la période d'agitation provoquée par la colonisation et l'intervention missionnaire au début du vingtième siècle. Il offre une appréciation du style vivant de l'écriture d'Akiga et de ses accomplissements en tant qu'historien et rapporteur du mode de vie en évolution rapide de son peuple. L'article présente le point de vue de jeunes Tiv qui ont découvert l'œuvre d'Akiga Sai pendant leurs études. À cet égard, Akiga est non seulement un pionnier singulier et un créateur de génie, mais également le représentant d'une ère meilleure qui a fait place à un déclin moral et à une détérioration de la santé et du bien-être communautaires.