**EXPLORING RELIGIO-TRADITIONAL ETHOS TOWARDS SEXUAL IMMORALITY AMONG THE TIV OF CENTRAL NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

The Tiv people of Central Nigeria have a profound cultural legacy characterised by a framework of traditional principles that regulate all facets of life, including sexual conduct. This dissertation examines the religious and customary attitudes against sexual immorality among the Tiv people. It analyses the conventional and cultural standards, principles, and practices that influence their perspectives and conduct around sexuality. This paper examines the intricacies of Tiv religio-traditional beliefs regarding sexual conduct, the repercussions of violating these norms, and the transformation of these norms due to modernisation and external influences, utilising a utilitarian theoretical framework and cultural studies. The study revealed that sexual deviances in Tiv land result in consequences like as social stigma, reputational damage, and slander, which in severe instances may culminate in divorce, injury, or even death. Research indicates that the Tiv people employed conventional mechanisms to regulate sexual behaviour, which were deeply embedded in cultural norms and religious practices aimed at maintaining moral purity and social order. The study indicates that contemporary factors, including media, education, urbanisation, and globalisation, are transforming attitudes towards sexual morality among the Tiv people of Central Nigeria.

**Keywords**: Traditional Ethics, Sexual immorality, Cultural norms

**Introduction**

Traditional African cultures exhibit a variety of rituals, beliefs, and ethical principles that govern the conduct of individuals and groups. The notion of immorality, characterised by actions that diverge from established ethical norms, is profoundly ingrained in the social and cultural framework of African nations. Omoregbe asserts that “in African traditional societies, the matter of moral behaviour is linked to the awareness of proper conduct, which determines what is accepted or rejected based on its impact on individuals, families, communities, and indeed, all people” (5). Moral behaviour is evaluated based on its detrimental impact on people and society at large. Consequently, sexual misconduct is regarded as a violation of conventional values, and society disapproves of it. Nonetheless, social behaviours such as honesty, commitment, loyalty, and prudence are unequivocally valued. The Tiv traditional perspective on sexual immorality, the central theme of this paper, is a significant cultural and religious matter warranting academic scrutiny.

The Tiv people, primarily agricultural and residing in Benue State, Central Nigeria, are distinguished for their profound cultural legacy and robust communal beliefs. Traditional rules that govern social interactions, economic activity, and sexual conduct are important to their cultural ethos. The Tiv people possess a distinct set of traditional and cultural principles that meticulously regulate sexual activity within their lively cultural framework. Nevertheless, these conventional norms of sexual conduct are not documented in writing format. Prior to the introduction of Christianity in Tiv land, the ethnic group adhered to established traditional and cultural norms on sexual conduct. Hanior pertinently asserts that “the lack of a written code on sexual behaviour among individuals does not equate to the absence of standard sexual practices within that society” (3). Consequently, the Tiv society has an established norm for sexual conduct. Nonetheless, the modern Tiv society has experienced corruption in its moral fabric, resulting in a significant deterioration of morals and traditional values. The proliferation of immorality, pornography, incest, lesbianism, homosexuality, nudity, and lewdness is becoming detrimental to societal peace and reputation. These elements are alien to Tiv traditional culture and impact Tiv society. Trust and responsibility have been supplanted by a burgeoning culture of disloyalty and disrespect. This paper examines the traditional ethos concerning sexual immorality among the Tiv people, elucidating the cultural norms, values, and practices that shape their views and actions related to sexuality.

**Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework used for analysis in this paper is Utilitarianism. It is an ethical theory which holds that the morality of an act consists essentially of its utility as a means for attainment of the happiness of man. According to Eboh “Happiness in most cases is considered as temporal. In fact, if you wish to know whether an action is good or bad morally, find out whether it is useful or not. If it is useful, it is good, if it is harmful, it is bad” (45). Some ethicists view utilitarianism as a consequential theory because it generally tends to emphasize the consequences of actions.

Within this school of thought the consequences of an act determine its moral value; if it is beneficial to many, then it is good, but if it causes harm to the larger number, then it is bad. J. Bentham tends to equate happiness to pleasure, claiming that pleasure is that good which is desired by all men while pain is that evil which all men seek to avoid. He therefore argues that one state of affairs is to be considered better then another only if it involves a greater balance of pleasure over pain. For him, good does not concern that which each person pursues and believes to be his own happiness. He suggests that legislators should see it as their duty to strike a harmony between private interest and public interest. Thus Bentham identifies his utilitarian principles with the political affairs of the society (qtd. in Chukwujekwu 56). Chukwujekwu alludes to J. S. Mill’s version of utilitarianism, which is said to represent the social and altruistic aspect of utilitarianism. Mill maintains that the first principle of utilitarianism is the utility or greatest happiness which holds that actions are right in proportion to the happiness they promote, and are wrong as in the degree to which they tend to promote (qtd. in Chukwujeku 57).

**Tiv Traditional Context of Sexual Behaviour**

The Tiv people have a complex system of social organization centered on lineage, clan, and village. This social structure influences their perceptions of morality and social conduct, including sexual behaviour. Within Tiv society, sexual behaviour is deeply intertwined with notions of honor, respect, and communal well-being. Adherence to established sexual norms is considered crucial for maintaining social cohesion and preserving the integrity of the community. Tiv cultural norms regarding sexual conduct are guided by a set of social principles rooted in tradition and custom. Central to these principles is the concept of chastity, particularly for unmarried individuals. Premarital sex is generally frowned upon and may be met with social sanctions, or communal reprimand. Marriage is regarded as the proper context for sexual relations, and fidelity within marriage is highly valued. Major sexual misconducts in contemporary Tiv land are *ijimba* (lust, indecent dressing and pornography), *idya* (fornication and adultery), *kpilaukase* (polygamy), *uyavenaangbian* (incest) among others. However, this study only focuses on *idya* (fornication and adultery) for the purpose of particularity.

***Idya* (Fornication and Adultery)**

A sexual intercourse between a man and a woman who are not married to each other is refers to as *idya* in Tiv language. Akpenpuun Dzurgba defines adultery as “a sexual intercourse between someone who is married and another person who is not his wife or her husband. Since ancient times, adultery (*idya)* has been a serious crime in Tiv society” (127). Dzurgba’s definition of adultery (*idya)* is correct. However, there is need to add that the Tiv people refer to both adultery and fornication as *idya.* The critic’s limitation of adultery (*idya)* to married people is understandable because the Tiv consider sex as a sacred activity which must take place only in marriage between husband and wife. This is why the Tiv society frowns at it and consider it as a crime once it is outside of marriage. Gbenda submits in the same direction that:

In Tiv society sex was considered as sacred. Sex issues were not habitually discussed openly or publically. The discussion about the subject was held in hallowed tones outside the learning of the children. It was meant for adults and within the framework of marriage. In this regard, sex serves the purpose of procreation for the continuation of community, pleasure, personal interaction and religion…it is generally agreed that sex should only be practiced by adults who can make sound decision. (125)

The above assertion is helpful as it underscores the place of sex in marriage among the Tiv of Central Nigeria. So many men caught in adultery (*idya)* have very been injured or even killed by jealous husbands. Traditionally, some jealous husbands; especially elderly men have often hurt men that slept with their wives through witchcraft or poison. Dzurgba further submits in this direction that:

The criminal nature of adultery has remained unchanged until today. The offenders in the crime of adultery were brought to the council of elders for a trial. Having ascertained the breach of the customary law (unwritten), the man was given a penalty of a live goat, a he-goat (*nomivo*) or a she-goat (ngoivo). The goat was slaughtered and shared by members of the council of elders. In addition, the man had to give to elders a beautiful cloth which they would give to the woman with whom he had sex. (128)

The above tradition and oral history captured by Dzurgba is helpful in understanding the Tiv worldview about sexual immorality and social consequence. It also strongly shows that *idya*(adultery) is not acceptable in Tiv land and it is regarded as a crime that is handled with all seriousness. In fact, many divorce cases in Tiv land are a direct result of adultery. Therefore, the ill-minded propagated story that adultery is not a crime in Tiv land is not true. Hanior avers pointedly that “This ignorance exists about the position of sexual behaviour among the Tiv of Benue State. You could hear some people blindly argue that: *Tindingushakwagh u idya hen tar Tivga* (There is no law against sexual immorality among the Tiv). This is shear ignorance” (3). The fact is, Tiv traditional norms and values are strong enough to be a society’s guidelines for social behaviour. Therefore, the absence of a written code on sexual behaviour among Tiv people does not mean the absence of principles for standard sexual practices in Tivland. The Tiv people traditionally had a number of measures to check sexual behaviour in the society. Such measures include *Ikyôôr* cult, *idyu* ritual and *mtene* among others. Due to limitation of space, it is only these three measures are discussed here.

**Consequences of Sexual Deviance in Tiv land**

Deviation from established sexual norms within Tiv society can have profound consequences for individuals and their families. Those found guilty of sexual immorality may face social stigma, loss of reputation, and slander. In extreme cases, it leads to divorce, injury or even death. Some partners’ uncontrollable anger and jealousy may resort to traditional rituals or witchcraft and sacrifices to cleanse the community of perceived moral transgressions.

**Social Stigma and Slander**

Social stigma refers to the strong disapproval and disgrace attached to individuals who engage in behaviors considered morally or socially unacceptable. In Tiv land, sexual deviance such as adultery, premarital sex, or other forms of sexual impropriety is met with intense stigma. Sexual deviance in Tiv land often results in severe social stigma. The Tiv community is closely-knit, and maintaining one's reputation is crucial. Individuals who engage in sexually deviant behaviour may be subjected to gossip, ridicule, and slander. The reputation of those involved in sexual deviance suffers significantly. In the Tiv society where personal and family honor is highly valued, any tarnishing of one’s reputation can have far-reaching consequences. It can affect social standing, marriage prospects, and opportunities for community participation and leadership. Families may also suffer collective shame, bearing the burden of their relative’s perceived misdeeds. Slander not only harms the individual but also their family. The malicious spread of false information can tarnish a family’s name, affecting their social and economic standing. Children and other relatives may face discrimination and prejudice based on the perceived sins of their kin. This social consequence often extends to their families, who might also bear the brunt of the community's stigma and gossips. It also bring about prolong acrimonies between affected families.

**Familial Repercussions**

In Tiv land, the repercussions of sexual deviance extend beyond the individual to affect entire families. The strong emphasis on family honor and communal values means that any deviation from accepted sexual norms by a family member can lead to significant familial consequences. These repercussions can strain family relationships, tarnish reputations, and impact the social and economic well-being of the entire family unit. The family unit is highly valued in Tiv culture, and sexual deviance can bring dishonor to one's family. In cases of adultery or premarital sex, the family of the deviant individual may face shame and embarrassment. This dishonor can lead to strained family relationships and, in extreme cases, divorce. For women, in particular, sexual deviance can severely impact their marriage prospects, as virginity and sexual purity are highly prized in Tiv society. Sometimes, children from such families are stigmatized. For instance, when an individual engages in sexual deviance, such as adultery, it can lead to severe marital discord. Trust, a foundational element of marriage, is often shattered, leading to conflicts, emotional distress, and in many cases, separation or divorce. This discord can have cascading effects, disrupting the stability and cohesion of the family unit.

**Traditional Legal Sanctions**

In Tiv land, traditional legal sanctions serve as a crucial mechanism for maintaining social order and moral integrity within the community. These sanctions, rooted in customary law and enforced by community elders and traditional leaders, address various forms of sexual deviance such as adultery, premarital sex, incest, and other behaviors deemed unacceptable by Tiv cultural norms. The consequences are designed to punish the offenders, restore community harmony, and deter others from engaging in similar acts. While traditional Tiv society largely governs itself through customary laws, these laws often include provisions for dealing with sexual deviance. Adultery, for instance, may be punishable by fines or other forms of restitution to the aggrieved party. In some cases, local council of elders may adjudicate these matters, with elderly men and chiefs playing a significant role in dispensing justice. The penalties can range from monetary compensation to more severe forms of punishment, depending on the nature and severity of the deviance.

**Spiritual Ramifications**

The Tiv people have a rich spiritual life, with strong beliefs in ancestors and traditional deities. Sexual deviance is often seen as an affront not just to societal norms but also to spiritual order. Individuals who engage in such behavior may be believed to have incurred the wrath of the deities, barrenness, impotence, leading to misfortune, illness, or even death. Ritual cleansing or appeasement ceremonies might be required to restore spiritual balance and to seek forgiveness from the offended spirits. For instance, incest: a sexual intercourse between two close blood relations is considered sexual pervasion in Tiv land that requires ritual cleansing. Dzurgba submits that “The guilt of the sin of incest is cleansed by the two coming to the shrine of *ityumbemku* and offering a burnt sacrifice by the roadside. Thus, it is believed that incest has been burnt up and the dignity of their sexual status is restored lawfully and morally” (127). Sexual deviance in Tiv land is met with significant consequences that impact individuals and their families on multiple levels. These consequences reflect the deep-seated values and norms of Tiv society, which prioritize social cohesion, family honor, and spiritual harmony.

**Traditional Measures for Checking Sexual Behaviour in Tiv land**

In Tiv land, traditional measures for checking sexual behavior are deeply rooted in cultural norms and community practices designed to uphold moral integrity and social order. These measures encompass a variety of mechanisms, including rituals, community oversight, education, and the roles of elders and traditional leaders. By reinforcing acceptable behavior and deterring deviance, these traditional practices aim to maintain the community's cohesion and moral standards. The Tiv people appreciated sexual sanctity and traditionally had measures for checking sexual immorality in the society. There are so many traditional measures, but because of limitation of space this study and for the purpose of particularity in scholarship, only three of these measures are discussed here. These include *Ikyôôr* cult, *idyu* ritual and *mtene*.

***Ikyôôr* Cult Tradition**

*Ikyôôr* cult was a ritual initiation undertaken by an *Igbianjov* priestess who was usually an old elderly woman. It was actually a traditional measure to guard female virginity and to check on sexual behaviour. Any young woman who was initiated had a small snail shell hung around her neck. This was a public indication that such a girl was a virgin. According Hanior “only an elderly woman who had reached the age of menopause was permitted to initiate virgins into this rite (11). This check put in place sanctity and respect for sexual behaviour. Boh avers concerning *ikyoor cult* that:

*Ikyôôr* tradition was a wonderful custom engineered and ordained by the *ingbianjôv* priestess to preserve the purity of the female child. The female child in every family once she became of age was taken to *Ingbianjôv* priestess where a snail (shell). *Ikyôôr* would be tied around her neck to serve as a reminder and warning to her and the strong he-goats eager to deflower her innocence. Once sanctified, the girl was to stay pure and free from any carnal knowledge of a man until she got married, when the snail was untied from her neck by the priestess. That way, a girl’s purity was preserved and her marriage honoured, (3-4).

The *Ikyôôr* cult in Tiv was a traditional measure used to preserve and prevent pre-marital sex especially among the youth. Violation of this rite was an offence punishable by the *akombo* visitation until appropriate propitiation was effected. Both the man and the girl involved in the illicit sexual relationship were severely punished such that the man was rendered impotent and the girl infertile until after appropriate appeasement. Torkula corroborates this ethical fact among the Tiv that:

… violators of man’s right of sexuality over his wife (adultery) constituted an offence punishable by the *akombo* visitation until appropriate propitiation was affected. Hence unmarried girl among the Tiv was tied *Ikyôôr*(snail shell) on her neck by her parents in order to keep men from having unauthorised affair with her and whoever went to bed with her was rendered impotent and the girl infertile until both of then underwent appropriate appeasement (*The Tiv Cultural Institutionof Marriage…*4).

Furthermore, the man was also made to pay damages to the parents of the girl whom he slept with even when he was not going to marry her. Some of the items were *ivoakôôr* (a young female goat) and a good quality wrapper which were given to the mother of the girl who was defiled. Drinks and money were also given to elders who will share among them. Such were the traditional consequences for sexual deviance in Tivland. Hanior further points that “At the point when a man came to marry a virgin initiated in *akombo a igbianjov,*  it was customary for the man to *saaakoor* (untie the shell of snail from the neck woman) with a young she-goat, which was not yet mature to give birth” (12). It was therefore, only after when the snail shell was properly untied that the man has the right to sleep with her with problems. This *ikyoor* cult tradition made young people to observe sanctity in their sexual behaviour and sexual immorality was checked in Tiv land.

***Idyu* (Test of Innocence)**

*Idyu*is a test administered to women under suspicion to prove their innocence in order to prevent adultery. When a married woman was suspected of extra-marital affairs, she was diected to feed a horse with *akase* (millet chaffs). If she was innocent, the horse would eat the *akase* from her hand and she would be exonerated. However, if the horse refused to eat the *akase* from her hand or even bite her, then she was guilty of adultery. This made women to observe sexual sanctity in the society. The consequences of sexual deviance are often gendered, with women bearing a disproportionate share of the repercussions. While men may face some level of social and familial disapproval, women typically experience harsher sanctions. This gender disparity reflects broader patriarchal structures within Tiv society, where women's sexuality is more strictly regulated and controlled.

***Megh* (Poison)**

The communal nature of Tiv land made them to forbid men from sleeping with the same woman. It was metaphorically called *megh* (poison). If two men have had intercourse with same woman and one of them is injured whether by accident during hunting or in a war; the one must not touch the one who is injured, else he will he will not survive the injury. This explains why Tiv people strongly forbid having intercourse with a brother’s wife or the wife of any close relation or even a friend. With *megh*(poison) in place, men observed sexual sanctity in the society.

**Modern Influences and Challenges**

Modern influences are significantly impacting the concept of sexual sanctity in Tiv land, a region where traditional values have historically governed sexual behavior. These influences, arising from globalization, urbanization and digital media challenge the traditional norms and create a complex landscape where the old and new coexist and often clash. This transformation brings both opportunities and challenges as Tiv society navigates the evolving perspectives on sexual behavior, morality, and rights.

**Globalization and Cultural Exchange**

Globalization introduces new cultural norms and values, including more liberal attitudes towards sex and relationships. Exposure to global media, literature, and social movements promotes ideas such as sexual freedom, gender equality, and individual rights. These ideas can conflict with the traditional Tiv emphasis on sexual purity, marital fidelity, and communal oversight of personal behavior. As a result, younger generations in Tiv land may adopt more liberal views on sex, leading to tensions with the older generation that upholds traditional values.

**Urbanization and Migration**

Urbanization and migration are transformative forces in Tiv land, influencing various aspects of life, including sexual norms and behaviors. As more Tiv people move to urban areas and engage with diverse cultures and lifestyles, the traditional values that govern sexual morality are challenged and often weakened. This shift can lead to behaviors that traditional Tiv society may deem as sexual immorality. Here’s a closer look at how urbanization and migration promote these changes. In urban areas, individuals encounter diverse cultures and lifestyles that differ from the conservative norms of rural Tiv land. According to Gbor, “the highly cherished cultural values no longer have a dominant position in governing Tiv behaviour, other considerations such as position and wealth have taken the central position in determining human actions in Tiv society” (34). The anonymity and independence offered by city life reduce the communal scrutiny that traditionally enforces sexual norms. This shift can lead to more liberal sexual behaviour, but it also presents challenges such as increased risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancies, and the erosion of traditional support systems. Urban areas are melting pots of different cultures, lifestyles, and attitudes towards sexuality. As Tiv people migrate to cities, they are exposed to more liberal and permissive attitudes towards sex, relationships, and personal freedom. These urban influences often contrast sharply with the conservative sexual norms of rural Tiv land, where sexual purity, marital fidelity, and community oversight are emphasized. The exposure to diverse norms can lead to the adoption of more liberal sexual behaviors, which traditionalists may view as immoral.

**Digital Media and Communication**

The proliferation of digital media and communication technologies profoundly impacts sexual norms and ethics in Tiv land. Social media platforms, online dating apps, and instant messaging facilitate greater freedom in exploring relationships and sexual expression. Hanior corroborates that “The media actually prompt the inquisitiveness and interest of young people to try out certain immoral acts. Sometimes they wonder what sex looks or feel like especially the way it is being practiced in the movies and pornographic books” (21). Social media has become a pervasive force in Tiv land, influencing various aspects of daily life, including perceptions of morality and immorality. While social media offers numerous benefits, such as enhanced communication, access to information, and social connectivity, it also poses significant challenges, particularly regarding the perception and practice of sexual morality. The rapid dissemination of content, the anonymity of online interactions, and the exposure to diverse cultural norms can contribute to behaviors and attitudes that traditional Tiv society might deem immoral. Adega decries that:

Morality which is the hub of traditional education is no longer en-vogue; as a result, boys and girls do whatever appeals to them. Pre-marital sex is no longer a crime and girls break their virginity without an iota of regret, all in the name of trying to meet up peer expectations. Tiv youth nowadays observe a destructive cliché *kaweatsorhyande u zendenaveker*(when you choose a field for cultivation in the next cropping season, you start weeding it immediately) (52)

They also provide avenues for sexual education and awareness, empowering individuals to make informed choices. However, these technologies can also contribute to the spread of misinformation, cyber bullying, and exploitation, posing new challenges to maintaining sexual sanctity and safety.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the traditional ethical ethos towards sexual immorality among the Tiv people of Central Nigeria is deeply rooted in cultural norms, values, and practices. Adherence to these norms is considered essential for maintaining social harmony and communal well-being. Modern influences such as media, education, urbanization, and globalization are reshaping attitudes towards sexual morality among the Tiv people of Central Nigeria. While these influences offer new perspectives and opportunities for empowerment, they also pose challenges to traditional values and social norms. Tiv society faces the task of reconciling the tensions between tradition and modernity, ensuring that cultural integrity is preserved while embracing the opportunities of the contemporary world.

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