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CULTURAL ETHICS AND FOOD SECURITY: AN ANALYSIS OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITIES AMONG THE TIV PEOPLE OF BENUE STATE

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Abstract

This paper explores the perceptions of the Tiv people regarding moral responsibilities in the context of food insecurity in Benue State, Nigeria. The Tiv, an agrarian community, are deeply connected to land and agricultural practices. In recent years however, Benue State has faced increasing challenges due to food insecurity which is occasioned by environmental degradation, conflict, socio-political and Economic instability. The paper examines how the Tiv people perceive their moral obligations concerning the production, preservation, distribution and sharing of food resources amidst scarcity, focusing on the ethical dimensions of communal living, generosity, and survival. It is discovered that the growing disconnects between traditional values of food production and preservations procedure, communal sharing and the survival tactics emerging due to widespread food shortages constitute among other things a major challenge to food insecurity as it affects 'Shagba U Tiv'. As food insecurity intensifies, there are concerns that moral responsibility towards one another may be compromised, leading to increased competition, hoarding, and breakdown of social unity within Tiv communities. A qualitative methodology was adopted, involving interviews with Tiv farmers, religious leaders, traditional rulers, and youth across several communities in Tivland of Benue State. It is revealed that while some Tiv people still uphold traditional values of communal living, traditional methods of food production and preservation, food insecurity has led to significant strain on these moral frameworks. The paper therefore recommends that both religious and traditional institutions, as well as other relevant stakeholders should play a more active role in reinforcing communal moral responsibilities. In addition, the government and non-governmental organizations should implement sustainable agricultural practices and equitable food preservation and distribution systems to alleviate food insecurity and strengthen community bonds among the Tiv people of Benue State.

Keywords: Tiv culture, food security, communal farming, cultural preservation, Nigeria.

Introduction

Food insecurity has become a pressing issue in Nigeria, particularly in Benue State, known as the "Food Basket of the Nation". Among the Tiv people of Benue State, food production and

agricultural practices, including food production and preservation, are deeply intertwined with their cultural identity and moral values. Traditionally, the Tiv people have upheld communal living, where the sharing of resources, including food, is seen as a moral obligation and a measure of social responsibility. That is why the philosophy or doctrine of *'ya na angbian'* (Communal sharing or "eat and let your brother eat") is mostly associated with the Tiv people in Nigeria. However, the increasing challenges of food insecurity, driven by factors such as climate change, conflicts, population growth, and poor agricultural policies and practices such; as food production, food preservation methods, and food distribution etc., have tested these long-standing moral bases.

The concept of moral responsibility within the Tiv community traditionally revolves around principles of sharing *"ya na angbian"*, mutual support *"mzough shima"* or*"ijoo ave"* and collective well-being *"mtem imiongo"*, etc. In the face of food scarcity, however, there is a growing tension between these values and the survival predispositions of individuals and families who are struggling to provide for themselves. In other words, the morality of food production, food preservation, food distribution, fairness, and community support are now under check as food insecurity worsens, leading to a re-evaluation of how moral responsibilities are perceived and ratified within the community.

This paper seeks to delve into the Cultural Ethics and Food Security by doing analysis or analyzing its Moral Responsibilities Among the Tiv People of Benue State, Nigeria**.** By examining how food scarcity impacts communal ethics and social obligations, the paper therefore aims to shed light on the evolving dynamics of moral behaviour in response to the current food crisis in Tivland of Benue State.

Conceptual Clarification

Cultural Ethics and **Food Security** are interconnected factors that shape societal values and responsibilities within many communities, including the Tiv people of Benue State, Nigeria. Cultural ethics, in the context of the Tiv, involves values, norms, and moral expectations that guide interpersonal relations, particularly around food production, sharing, and distribution (Alubo 56). This ethical basis emphasizes communal welfare, where the well-being of each individual is basically tied to that of the community.

Food Security: Food security in the other hand is defined as the constant access to adequate, nutritious and safe food which has significant cultural and ethical implications among the Tiv people. Food security is not merely a material necessity; it also aligns with the moral obligations to care for one's community and uphold hospitality, which is an important aspect of Tiv cultural identity (Ornguga and Terfa 89).

Perception: Perception refers to the way individuals or group of people interpret and make sense of their environment and experiences. In the perspective of this study, perception signifies how the Tiv people view and understand their moral obligations amidst the growing issue of food insecurity or scarcity. Perceptions as a concept are shaped by given cultural norms, religious teachings, and socio-economic factors. According to Asike, perceptions influence how individuals respond to communal crises, including food scarcity, and determine their behavior in communal contexts (32).

Moral Responsibilities: The concept of Moral Responsibility further highlights individual and collective duties within Tiv society to ensure that no one goes hungry, particularly in times of scarcity. The traditional practice of "Shagba U Tiv" according to Tersoo exemplifies this moral responsibility by fostering a culture of sharing food resources among neighbors and relatives, emphasizing ethical priorities over material wealth (102). Moral responsibility in other words refers to the duty individuals or groups have to uphold ethical principles, particularly in relation to the welfare of others. In the context of food insecurity, the concept extends to responsibilities such as sharing scarce resources, ensuring sustainability needs of the people within the community, providing for the vulnerable, and ensuring fairness in distribution. According to Onah moral responsibilities in agrarian societies are often guided by deeply held cultural and religious values, which shape community actions during times of crisis (112). However, challenges such as changing economic landscapes, environmental issues, and urbanization are disrupting traditional food systems, which in turn is creating ethical challenges where individuals and communities face difficulties in fulfilling these culturally-rooted obligations.

Food Insecurity: Food insecurity refers to the lack of consistent access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food for an active and healthy life (FAO). In Tivland of Benue State, food insecurity has been worsened by factors such as insecurity occasioned by Fulani herdsmen attack and community militias. Other factors are socio-religious and political instability, poor agricultural policies and practices, and climate change, etc. For the Tiv, food insecurity threatens not only physical survival but also the moral aspect of their community, as it challenges traditional expectations of sharing and mutual support (Iorliam 45).

Ihyumbe*:* This refers to a communal system of labour and resource sharing among the Tiv people. In the context of agriculture and food production, it represents a form of cooperative effort where members of the community come together and work together on each other's farms, often during peak farming seasons. This system allows for large-scale farming activities that individuals might not be able to handle on their own, thus helping to mitigate food insecurity. '*Ihyumbe"* fosters solidarity and ensures that even the most vulnerable members of the community can benefit from collective farming efforts (Shagbaor 135). In times of food shortage, *'ihyumbe'* also provides a safety net, as the produce from such communal efforts is shared among participants, ensuring no one goes hungry.

Sule lohon: '*Sule lohon'* is a concept that captures the act of responsibility and communal support within the Tiv community, particularly in relation to food production. It emphasizes the moral obligation where people are invited to assist on someone's farm to make farming activities easier, it can be done either for the purpose of strengthening relationship that exist between the farm owner and the people invited to assist on his farm, or for financial purposes. '*Sule lohon*' reinforces the ethical responsibility of individuals to provide assistance for their neighbours, as the Tiv believe that food should not be hoarded when others are suffering from hunger (Torkula 21). This practice plays a critical role in reducing the negative impact of food insecurity within Tivland, as it promotes mutual support among the people for the purpose of ensuring availability of food resources for member of the community.

Zendenya: *'Zendenya'* refers to the Tiv tradition of keeping and preserving food and agricultural products particularly livestock to ensure a sustainable food supply in all periods.

It involves techniques such as brooding and rearing of livestock or domestic animals, as well as production of all domestic animals both under free range and by regulating them in a ranch called *'igyar'*. This also to prevent wastage, and destruction of other farm crops. Keeping or rearing of *'Zendenya'* is a proactive response to food insecurity, ensuring that there is always a reserve of food to rely on during times of crisis (Akiga 19). This practice aligns with Tiv ethical values of prudence and foresight in managing scarce resources and mirrors an understanding of the periodic nature of agricultural production, particularly livestock.

Tiv Perceptions on Food Insecurity

The Tiv people, the predominant ethnic group in the Benue region, have unique perceptions and cultural practices that shape their responses to food insecurity. Understanding these perspectives is essential for developing effective interventions. Recent studies on this subject among the Tivland stress the complicated nature of food insecurity, which stems from economic, environmental, and social factors. According to Adamu, the decline in agricultural productivity and food distribution is due to climate change and conflicts over land resources which has aggravated food scarcity in Benue State, thereby directly impacting the livelihood of Tiv people negatively (23).

The Tiv people traditionally engage in subsistence agriculture, with a strong emphasis on communal practices, such as '*sule lohon'*, (invitation of friends and associates both within and outside one's community for farming purpose), *'ihyumbe'* (a traditional communal farming practice where members of a group consider it a responsibility or duty by assisting each other on their farms to make farming easier and timely). This cultural backdrop significantly influences their perceptions of responsibility related to food security. According to Ibrahim and Ojo, communal farming practices are deeply ingrained in Tiv culture, as farming is often seen as a shared duty rather than an individual endeavour (43). The study observed that "farming is the of Tiv people who worked together to ensure no one goes hungry. Ndam et al. assert that women are also part of agricultural production and distribution in Tivland as they are often responsible for food production, distribution via marketing and preparation, and their contributions are vital for household food security (18). Women's involvement extends beyond farming; they are essential in food preservation, food preparation, food processing and local market transactions, as well as reinforcing their responsibilities in managing food resources.

The perceptions of Tiv people on food insecurity are influenced by their historical experiences and cultural narratives. According to Okwoli, many Tiv community members view food insecurity not merely as a lack of food but as a failure of Cultural responsibility such as; Communal living, Communal sharing and communal support, etc. (210). These perspectives stress the importance of social unity and mutual assistance in times of hardship.

As Terkura Ayu noted,

> *When one person suffered from hunger in the past, the whole community would share in the sufferings or pains with him, this eventually move them to rise up and prove help to the person, "whenever we noticed that one is going through challenges in our community, especially in relation to shortage of food, people would come together while others would rise individually to ensure that the vulnerable have something to eat with his or her household and get satisfied"(Oral Interview).*

Moreover, traditional beliefs and practices shape how the Tiv perceive and respond to food shortages. Many community members rely on indigenous knowledge and practices, such as crop rotation and intercropping, to enhance food production sustainably. These practices are not only logical but are also seen as communal responsibilities that reinforce cultural identity. In response to food insecurity, the Tiv people employ various adaptive strategies that reflect their communal values. According to Ndam et al. (22), these strategies include the establishment of food banks (*atumbe*) and communal silos *(iuna)* and warehouses, etc. which serve as safety nets during periods of scarcity. The communal silo or warehouses *'iuna'* system allows families to store surplus food collectively during and after harvest, ensuring that resources are available for everyone in the community in need during lean seasons. Furthermore, collaborative efforts in farming activities, such as '*Ihyumbe'* (a traditional communal farming practice), all point out how the Tiv people are committed to collective responsibility. These practices not only enhance food security but also strengthen social ties within the community, fostering resilience against food insecurity (Ibrahim and Ojo 45).

Understanding the Tiv people's perceptions and responsibilities in the context of food insecurity has significant implications for policy and practice. According to Okwoli et al. (210), there are certain policies in Tivland that support communal agricultural practices and integrate traditional knowledge into modern agricultural systems if properly harnessed, they will go a long way in ensuring food security. Therefore, engaging the Tiv people in the development of food security programs by relevant stakeholders can lead to more effective and culturally relevant interventions. Moreover, initiatives aimed at empowering women and youth in agriculture and making it interesting and sustainable can enhance food security outcomes. Adamu suggests that providing women with access to resources, training, and credit can strengthen their roles in food production and improve overall household food security (35). As earlier stated, the perceptions of the Tiv people regarding their responsibilities in the context of food insecurity highlight the importance of communal cooperation, cultural practices, and adaptive strategies. Addressing food insecurity in Tivland of Benue State requires a nuanced understanding of these local perspectives as well as fostering cooperative efforts that would influence traditional practices while promoting sustainable agricultural development.

Role of Traditional Values in Addressing Food Scarcity

Sule lohon

In Tiv culture, the concept of *sule lohon* embodies a strong sense of community support and mutual aid in farming activities. The term itself refers to a traditional practice where families, friends and community members come to gather to help one another on the farm with the aim of combating food insecurity and poverty.

According to Ugondo Kakwagh;

> *This practice of 'Sule Lohon' is not only about coming to gather to help one individual who has called; it's a way to strengthen social bonds, promote unity, and uphold the moral responsibility to care for others. This act also symbolizes the shared prosperity. Those who receive help in turn support others when they are able, ensuring that the entire community benefits.*

During *sule lohon*, family, friends or community members are invited to gather, often bringing their tools, or other resources to assist the *or sule* (owner of the farm) which was normally a large farm. *Sule lohon* becomes especially important.

According to Mtomga Hembafan

> *In a world that often emphasizes individual success, sule lohon reminds us of the power of collective responsibility and the beauty of coming together to help someone. This picture serves as a powerful visual of the enduring values within Tiv culture, capturing the essence of community and support through the act of working together.*



Figure 1: Members of the community participating in sule lohon

Ihyumbe (Communal farming system)

The *Ihyumbe* system, rooted in Tiv cultural ethics, is a communal farming approach where members of a community come together to farm collectively, typically on a rotational basis. This practice fosters strong community ties, shared responsibility, and equitable food production and distribution, as everyone involved contributes labour and, in return, makes the harvest bountiful. *Ihyumbe* is particularly essential during challenging times, such as droughts or periods of food scarcity, reinforcing moral obligations around collective wellbeing.

In Tiv culture, the ethics surrounding *Ihyumbe* highlight values of cooperation, mutual aid, and reciprocity. Each member's contribution is recognized and valued, creating a moral responsibility to ensure everyone has access to food resources. This aligns with broader Tiv principles such as *sule lohon*. The communal aspect of *Ihyumbe* promotes inclusivity and reduces inequality, reinforcing the notion that food security is a shared responsibility, rather than an individual pursuit.

By fostering a collective effort in farming, *Ihyumbe* enhances food security at the community level, making it possible for households to access food even during scarce periods. This approach not only builds resilience but also reduces reliance on external aid or market fluctuations. Furthermore, the practice mitigates the risk of crop failure by pooling resources,

knowledge, and labour, ultimately boosting agricultural productivity and supporting community sustenance.

Amaihyundu (dry season farming)

Amaihyundu, or dry season farming, is a crucial practice in Tiv agriculture that involves preparing the land during the dry season by making hips or ridges, etc. These ridges serve as beds for crops that will be planted with the arrival of the first rains of the year. In addition, the first rice harvest in the year in the months of May and June are cultivated during dry season, in December and January. The preparation phase allows farmers to take advantage of the early rains, giving crops a strong start as soon as the wet season begins. This method not only maximizes the short growing period but also ensures that the crops can take root and thrive before competition for moisture intensifies.



Figure 2: San Sule (Amahyundu)

The ridges created during before the end of rainy season and the beginning of the next cropping season which in most times yams seeds are planted before the return of rain in the new year offer several benefits. First, they help retain soil moisture, which is vital for seed germination and early growth stages, especially in regions where water can be scarce. Additionally, the ridges elevate the planting area slightly above ground level, protecting the crops from potential flooding when the rains intensify. This early planting technique is a proactive measure in Tiv farming culture to curb food insecurity, as it allows communities to anticipate and counter the challenges posed by the shifting rainy season.

Tyokase Ihyaa stated that:

> *Through Amaihyundu, Tiv farmers display a deep understanding of their environment, adapting their farming calendar to nature's rhythms. He stressed that this practice also reflects a broader cultural ethic of foresight and preparedness, as communities work together to lay the foundation for a productive season long before the rains arrive.*

Storage

i. **Wuna:** This storage system resembles a hut built from local materials, such as mud or clay. It serves as a general storage room for grain, with shelves or raised platforms inside to protect the stored items from pests and dampness. The hut structure maintains a stable temperature, keeping the grains safe from external conditions.



Figure 3: Wuna (*iunna)*

ii. **Zaa:** A form of granary, the Zaa is used for storing grains and legumes such as maize, millet, and beans. This structure resambles *daa* as it is raised above ground level and installed on above the fire stand in the kitchen to prevent rodent access. Constructed from woven reeds or bamboo, the Zaa allows airflow to reduce moisture, preserving the grains for long-term storage.

iii. **Daa:** Known for its simplicity, the Daa is another type of grain storage designed to be durable and pest-resistant. The Daa typically comprises earthen materials and is also raised slightly to protect contents from water damage and insects.

iv. **Ihungwa:** Traditionally used for storing potatoes and other perishable items, the Ihungwa can be described as a smaller, carefully ventilated hole. It includes slatted walls or ventilated compartments, allowing air circulation that keeps vegetables dry and prevents mold.



Figure 4: Ihungwa

v. **Ityumbe:** Ityumbe is a round hut typically roofed with grasses. Ityumbe is used to store agricultural products like yam, rice, corn, etc.



Figure 5: Ityumbe

Ikyese:

Ikyese is a traditional woven basket the is made from palm branches. This basket is sometimes as tall as the height of a human. It is meant for the preservation of dried cassava flakes for future use.

The basket as earlier stated was made from local materials which is mainly a product of palm branches, neatly prepared by the weaver for the purpose of preservations among the Tiv people of Benue State.

Tiv Traditional Agricultural Practices and Their Role in Combating Food Insecurity in Benue State

Traditional Tiv agricultural practices, such as *sule lohon*, *ihyumbe*, and *amaihyundu*, as well as food preservation tools such as*; daa, zaa, shase, wuna, ihyungwa, ikyese,* etc. play a crucial role in addressing food insecurity in Benue State. These practices emphasize collective responsibility and mutual aid, ensuring that communities work together to combat food

shortages and ensure its availability via storage or preservation. *Sule lohon*, a communal farming tradition, encourages people to help one another during farming activities, strengthening social bonds while ensuring that no individual suffers alone. This spirit of cooperation extends to *ihyumbe*, the communal farming system, which fosters equitable food production by pooling resources, labour, and knowledge to maximize agricultural productivity. During times of drought or food scarcity, these communal systems provide a safety net for families, ensuring food security even in the face of challenging circumstances.

Moreover, the practice of *amaihyundu* (dry-season farming) is particularly vital in Benue State, where the unpredictability of the rainy season can threaten agricultural production. By preparing the land during the dry season, farmers can take advantage of the early rains, ensuring crops have a strong start before the main growing season. This proactive approach reduces the risks posed by irregular rainfall and allows communities to harvest early, thus mitigating food scarcity. The use of ridges to elevate crops helps retain moisture and protects against flooding, demonstrating the Tiv people's deep understanding of their environment and their ability to adapt their farming practices to local conditions.

In addition to these farming practices, Tiv communities have developed various traditional storage systems, such as *wuna*, *zaa*, *daa*, *ihungwa*, ikyese, and *ityumbe*, etc., to preserve their harvests and ensure a steady food supply throughout the year and minimize post- harvest losses. These storage structures are designed to protect grains and perishable items from pests, moisture, and environmental factors that could lead to spoilage. By storing food in these durable, ventilated containers, the Tiv are able to extend the shelf life of their produce, reducing the risk of post-harvest loss and ensuring that food remains available during lean seasons. These traditional practices highlight the Tiv people's resilience and resourcefulness in combating food insecurity in Benue State, relying on community cooperation, foresight, and innovation to secure their agricultural future.

Challenges to Traditional Practices

Traditional practices, like those in Tiv society such as *Ihyumbe* (communal farming), *Amaihyundu* (dry season farming), storage systems and *Shagba u Tiv* (prestige or nobility through community support) face a range of challenges today. These practices, which have historically been integral to community resilience and food security, are increasingly impacted by factors such as population growth, environmental degradation, urbanization, and shifts in social structures. As younger generations migrate to urban centers for education and employment, etc., rural communities are left with fewer hands to maintain communal farming systems and other cooperative efforts. Additionally, external influences and economic pressures are pushing individuals toward more individualistic approaches, weakening the communal ethos.

Climate change further complicates traditional practices. Unpredictable weather patterns, shorter rainy seasons, and prolonged dry spells disrupt the agricultural calendar, making it harder for communities to depend on practices like *Amaihyundu*. Limited resources and a lack of institutional support also restrict the viability of these traditional systems. Together, these challenges erode the sustainability of these practices, posing risks to the food security that these traditions once reliably provided.

Effects of Modernization on Traditional Food Security Practices

Modernization has introduced both opportunities and challenges to Tiv traditional food security practices. On one hand, it brings about advancements in technology, improved transportation, and access to modern agricultural methods which helps increase food production, preservation and distribution. However, these same developments often undermine traditional food systems, as younger generations become more attracted to modernism, often less communal ways of living. For example, with the influence of globalized food systems, people may start relying more on market-bought foods, which are often less sustainable and can be more costly.

Additionally, modernization emphasizes individual wealth accumulation over community welfare. This shift challenges practices like '*tomsule'* and '*Shagba u Tiv'*, where resources and prestige or nobility are traditionally shared with the community. The focus on individualism detracts from the moral responsibilities that once underscored these practices, leading to a decline in communal support systems. Over time, this has been affecting the availability, preservation, and distribution of food within the community, as traditional safety nets begin to weaken.

Conclusion

This paper, "Cultural Ethics and Food Security: An Analysis of Moral Responsibilities Among the Tiv People of Benue State, Nigeria" is an analysis of the significant role of cultural values and communal practices in shaping the Tiv people's responses to food insecurity. The findings reveal that the Tiv community perceives food insecurity not merely as an individual challenge but as a collective responsibility that necessitates collaboration and mutual support. The traditional agricultural practices of the Tiv people and social structures, particularly the vital role of women and youth in food production, preservation and resource management, underscore the community's resilience in the face of food scarcity. However, despite these strengths, the Tiv people face numerous challenges, including climate change, land conflicts/insecurity occasioned by incessant herders' invasion and attacks on farming communities, population growth, and limited access to resources, etc. In other to address these issues, a nuanced understanding of the Tiv cultural dynamics as well as an acknowledgment of their adaptive strategies is required. This can be achieved by integrating the perspectives and practices of the Tiv people into broader food security initiatives by this also stakeholders can develop more effective and sustainable solutions to combat food insecurity in Tivland of Benue State.

Recommendations

Stakeholders in Tivland of Benue State including the Benue State Government should work in collaboration with the Tiv people to create a more robust food system that honours their cultural heritage while effectively addressing the challenges of food insecurity in Tivland particular, and Benue State in general. Such approach would not only improve food security but also strengthens community ties and promotes sustainable development. The recommendations are presented thus;

i. Policymakers should prioritize the promotion and support of communal farming initiatives that align with the Tiv people's cultural practices. This can involve providing resources and training for collective farming efforts that enhance food production.

ii. All relevant stakeholders should acknowledge the crucial role women also play in food security, targeted programs should be established to empower women farmers through access to credit, training, and resources. This empowerment can enhance household food security and community resilience.
iii. Programs that focus on sustainable farming and food preservation techniques should be developed to help the Tiv people adapt to the impacts of climate change and food scarcity. These can include agroecological practices that increase soil fertility, improve crop yields, and conserve natural resources.
iv. Ongoing research is necessary to understand the evolving challenges and strategies related to food security in Benue State. Data collection on local agricultural practices, market access, and community needs will inform policy decisions and resource allocation.
v. It is significant for all relevant stakeholders to build partnerships between the Tiv community, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations to facilitate the sharing of resources, knowledge, and expertise. Collaborative efforts can lead to more comprehensive and impactful food security strategies.

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APPENDIX

LIST OF INFORMANTS

S/NO	NAME	LOCATION	DATE
1	Terkura Ayu	Kwande	11th September, 2024
2	Ugondo Kakwagh	Buruku	20th September, 2024
3	Mtomga Hembafan	Buruku	20th September, 2024
4	Tyokase Ihyaa	Tarkaa	20th September, 2024
5	Ityoakaa Gbondo	Makurdi	1st September, 2024