

The Symbolic Essence of *Ikyarem* Veneration among the Tiv of Benue State

Dr. Akolo Ajige

Federal University of Lafia

Department of Christian Religious Studies

Email: ajigeakolo@mail.com

Phone No: 08051004125

Abstract

Ikyarem veneration among the Tiv people of Benue State, Nigeria, represents a profound intersection of spirituality, cultural identity, and social cohesion. Rooted in the Tiv traditional religious worldview, the *Ikyarem*—ancestral or territorial spirits believed to mediate between the living and the divine- serve as custodians of morality, fertility, protection, and communal well-being. This paper examines the symbolic essence of *Ikyarem* veneration, exploring its role as a repository of Tiv cosmology, a channel for ancestral continuity, and a moral compass guiding both individual and collective behavior. Drawing on oral traditions, ethnographic accounts, and participant observations, the study highlights the multi-layered symbolism embedded in rituals, offerings, and sacred spaces associated with *Ikyarem* worship. Despite the centrality of *Ikyarem* in Tiv ritual life and social memory, its symbolic meanings, functions, and contemporary transformations remain poorly documented and often misunderstood. Much of the available knowledge is preserved orally among elders and ritual specialists; as these knowledge holders age and younger Tiv increasingly adopt Christianity, formal education, and urban lifestyles, nuanced understandings of *Ikyarem* are at risk of erosion or reduction to stereotypes. This study will adopt a qualitative ethnographic research design, which is most suitable for exploring the cultural, symbolic, and ritual aspects of *Ikyarem* veneration within the Tiv community. The approach will focus on understanding the meanings, beliefs, and practices from the perspective of the people themselves.

Keywords: Symbolic, *Ikyarem*, Veneration, Tiv.

Introduction

The Tiv people of Benue State, located in central Nigeria, have rich traditional beliefs that continue to influence their culture. Among these beliefs is the veneration of *Ikyarem*, a mystical green snake believed to be a spiritual being. The Tiv people have a rich cultural heritage, with a strong emphasis on ancestral and nature worship. Generally rugged relief. Elsewhere, gradients average less than 4°. The River Benue is the dominant geographical feature in the state. It is one of the few large rivers in Nigeria. The Katsina-Ala is the largest tributary, while the smaller rivers include Mkomion, Amile, Duru, Loko Konshisha, Kpa, Okpokwu, Mu, Be, Aya, Apa Ogede and Ombi. The flood plains which are characterized by extensive swamps and ponds are good for dry season irrigated farming. The *Ikyarem*, a species of green snake, is deeply embedded in Tiv mythology and is considered a sacred symbol. Among the many symbols embedded in African cosmologies, the serpent often occupies a paradoxical, feared but revered, and often spiritually significant. In Tiv culture, *Ikyarem* represents more than a reptile; it is seen as a sacred messenger, a divine manifestation, and a cultural guardian. The Tiv, a major ethnic group in Benue State, Nigeria, uphold a range of spiritual beliefs, many of which are closely tied to nature and ancestral veneration. *Ikyarem*, in particular, holds a place of prominence due to its spiritual purity, straightness in movement, and its mysterious ability to appear at significant moments in human affairs. They speak the Tiv language and are mainly farmers, known for cultivating crops like yams, maize, and cassava. Their traditional religion includes belief in *Aondo*, the sky god, and various ancestral spirits (Aernyi 17). Even with the rise of Christianity and Islam, many Tiv people still maintain their traditional beliefs.

For the Tiv, *Ikyarem* is not just an animal—it is considered a spiritual messenger, protector, or even an ancestral spirit (Awuapila 42). The appearance of *Ikyarem* in a home or community often has spiritual meaning, and the snake is treated with great respect. The purpose of paper is to explore how the Tiv people venerate *Ikyarem*, what the green snake symbolizes in their belief system, and how these

practices are affected by external influences such as religion and modernization. As indigenous belief systems face decline due to cultural shifts and the spread of Christianity, it has become increasingly important to document and analyse the meanings embedded in traditional spiritual practices. Understanding *Ikyarem*'s significance offers not only insight into Tiv cosmology but also a lens into the resilience and adaptability of African indigenous religions.

Historical and Cultural Background of Tiv People

The Tiv people, who inhabit the central region of Nigeria known as Benue State, are one of the largest ethnic groups in the Middle Belt. Their society is structured around kinship, clan systems, and communal living. Tiv cosmology is deeply rooted in the belief in *Aondo* (God), ancestral spirits, and various manifestations of natural and spiritual forces. Central to their worldview is the idea that spiritual beings and physical entities coexist, and that communication between these realms occurs through signs, omens, and sacred manifestations (Akiga 45). Among these manifestations is *Ikyarem*, a green snake traditionally associated with purity, ancestral presence, and divine order. Historically, Tiv elders and diviners interpreted the sudden appearance or crossing of *Ikyarem* as a spiritual message or sign. Unlike other snakes, *Ikyarem* is not killed or feared; instead, it is greeted with reverence and awe. In many clans, it is believed that when *Ikyarem* crosses a person's path, it signifies spiritual approval, divine protection, or a warning of moral misalignment (Makar 82).

The Tiv have no centralized kingship or religious authority; instead, religious and spiritual matters are handled by elders, diviners (orvanga), and community leaders who interpret signs and guide ritual practices. These leaders play an essential role in ceremonies involving *Ikyarem*, ensuring that the sacred animal is not harmed and that its presence is correctly understood within the social and spiritual context of the community. The Tiv religious beliefs comprise the traditional and spiritual beliefs of the Tiv people. In the 21st century, most Tiv people are Christians, but some traditional practices are observed by some Tiv people. The Tiv belief system has evolved a lot. There has been a lot of integration with other cultures due to migration. Some of the practices and beliefs are practices adopted from the Fulani and some Cross River Tribes. Such practices are mixed with *Tsav* and *Akombo*. (Makar, 8) For example, *Girinya*, *Atsuku*, *Ityough Ki Ayu*, *Imborivungu* etc.

Christianity and Western colonization has dramatically changed what was left of the religious practices they brought from central Africa and other adopted practices in their present location (Orvanga, 9) *Tsav* (witch) is a mystical cosmic potency that is internalized in an individual and forms be part of his personality. (Akiga,10). It can be a sign or a source of special kind of abilities. It is not present in all people. A group of people with *Tsav* is called *Mbatsav*. It can also be enhanced. Some writers call *Mbatsav* witches, while others don't totally agree because they state that the aim of *Tsav* is for the good of the community but some individuals use it for selfish motives. No one knows the details of any *Tsav* activity except the *Mbatsav* people and God. (Akiga,11). Examples of *Tsav* are; great musical and artistic ability, consistent political power, ability to live to an old age, the *Kwagh-Hir* (because it demonstrates ingenuity and special talent). (Makar,12). Highly skilled *Mbatsav* meet at night to regulate the use of cosmic and social forces for the benefit of the family, clan, tribe etc. They also meet at the end of every funeral to determine the cause of death of the in Culturally, the Tiv are renowned for their expressive oral traditions, including folktales (tar), proverbs (hemba), and praise songs, which serve as repositories of moral instruction and historical memory (Orkar, 91). Their indigenous religion centers on the worship of *Aondo* (the Supreme God) and veneration of ancestral spirits, mediated through ritual specialists who interpret signs, omens, and symbolic objects (Rubingh, 69). Festivals, such as the *Kwagh-hir* masquerade, and symbolic practices like *Ikyarem*, encode deep social, moral, and cosmological meanings, serving as tools for social control, identity preservation, and intergenerational teaching (Akiga, 39).

The Tiv *Akombo* is a ritual performed by *Mbatsav* (witch people). It exists as figurines, pots, amulets or plants and is sometimes associated with certain diseases. Every *Akombo* is different and requires a distinct ritual to pacify or activate it. *Akombo* can be manipulated by a highly skilled *Ormbtsav* (witch man or woman) to cause, sickness, diseases, luck and also death. (14) When any misfortune(like disease) befalls an individual, witchdoctors or diviners are consulted to determine the exact *Akombo* that

is in effect in order to neutralize it and also remove the malice(Ibo) that activated it before any medical treatment works. There are different types of *Akumbo* as listed below.

1. Small Akombo

Applicable to human health, life, property, wealth, personal gains/losses, and farm yield. These can be manipulated by one individual with Tsav (Ormbatsav). An example is the *imborivungu*.

2. Great Akombo

Applicable to groups and communities, and is manipulated by a group of people with TSAV (Mbatsav). An example is Swem Karagbe.

3. Swem Karagbe

The first TIV writer, Akiga Sai, stated that the Tiv people believe Swem is a great Akombo by which they swear, but Swem is rather a mountain located in Cameroon. Akigak visited the mountain with Mr La Grange and Mr Brinks. Karagbe is a Nongov man who brought a pot with shrubs to the TIV people during the reign of the second Tor Tiv, Zaki Gondo Aluor, and called it Swem.(Akiga,20). Thus the origin of Swem Karagbe which is used by less than 1percent of Tiv people (Akiga, 21).

Benue State is one of the North Central states in Nigeria with a population of about 4,253,641 in the 2006 census. The state was created in 1976 and was among the seven states created at that time. The state derives its name from the Benue River initially called BER-NOR, a compound word in Tiv language which means river or lake of hippopotamus (BER meaning river or lake, while NOR is the name for hippopotamus) the name BER-NOR was corrupted to BENUE by colonial masters, the river is the second largest river in Nigeria after the River Niger.

Here, the terrain is characterized by steep slopes, deep incised valleys, and Belief in *Ikyarem* and the Veneration Practices

The *Ikyarem* is revered for its role in Tiv migration history and is associated with protection, fertility, and community well-being. The snake's veneration has contributed to environmental conservation, as the Tiv people refrain from harming or killing it. The veneration of *Ikyarem* is a distinctly spiritual practice grounded in oral traditions passed down across generations. In Tiv cosmology, *Ikyarem* is seen as a spiritual envoy, a snake that is not just a reptile but a medium through which ancestral spirits and even *Aondo* communicate with (i.e. *Ikyarem*). It is believed that *Ikyarem* never bites members of the Tiv community; its straight and calm movement is interpreted as symbolic of truth, righteousness, and spiritual alignment (Ngutsav, 120). During communal rituals or personal spiritual crises, Tiv individuals may seek guidance from elders or diviners if *Ikyarem* has appeared. In such cases, rituals involving libations, offerings of food, and symbolic sweeping of pathways are performed to acknowledge and appease the spirit believed to inhabit or accompany the snake.

In some oral narratives, *Ikyarem* is described as a spirit protector of the land — appearing when a person is in danger or at a crossroads in life. When *Ikyarem* appears in someone's home, it is not killed. Instead, it may be fed with eggs or white kola nuts and respectfully allowed to leave (Adzande 105). Tiv people believe that this snake can signal different things: A blessing or spiritual protection, a warning from ancestors, the need to perform a ritual, or sacrifice. If someone dreams of a snake, it is often interpreted as a message from the ancestors (Torkula 56). The belief in *Ikyarem* is associated with strong taboos as follows: Never kill or injure the snake. If killed, the person may face misfortune or madness (Iorliam 28).

Families linked to *Ikyarem* must perform rituals or offerings when it appears. The snake is considered sacred and may live near family shrines or ancestral trees. These taboos are passed down orally from one generation to the next. Elders tell many stories of *Ikyarem* appearing before good or bad events. For instance, one popular tale speaks of a green snake that appeared in a family compound before the birth of a child, and the child later became a priest (Akiga 112). In another story, a man who killed an *Ikyarem* went mad until the community performed cleansing rituals. *Ikyarem* is believed to have a close connection with the spirit world, especially the ancestors. The Tiv believe their dead relatives continue to watch over them. *Ikyarem* is sometimes considered to be the physical manifestation of ancestors (Adzande 108). This belief strengthens family ties and encourages respect for the dead. Many Tiv elders still strongly believe in *Ikyarem*. Some younger people, especially in cities, now question or doubt the belief. However, many still fear and respect the snake due to stories and family traditions. In rural areas, it is common to hear of people who have seen *Ikyarem* or had dreams related to it (Awuapila 46).

Significantly, the green color of the snake is also interpreted spiritually. Green, in many African traditional belief systems, represents life, fertility, and growth — attributes closely associated with the earth and its sustaining power. The Tiv associate this color with purity and divine proximity, reinforcing the sacredness of *Ikyarem* as a life-affirming being (Udu 233). *Ikyarem* plays a deep cultural role by: Promoting respect for nature, teaching ancestral loyalty, serving as a spiritual symbol of identity, encouraging moral behavior and obedience. This belief contributes to the preservation of Tiv values and unity, especially in the face of modern changes.

Symbolism of *Ikyarem* in Tiv Cosmology

In Tiv metaphysical framework, symbolism is essential in understanding both human existence and the unseen spiritual world. *Ikyarem*, the green snake, embodies multiple layers of symbolism that intersect with themes of purity, guidance, balance, and ancestral presence. One of its most profound attributes is its straightness — a rare behavior among snakes, which are typically known for their coiling and unpredictable movement. For the Tiv, *Ikyarem*'s straight movement signifies moral uprightness, spiritual direction, and the clarity of divine will (Tseyao 56). In traditional Tiv narratives, *Ikyarem* is sometimes portrayed as a guardian of sacred spaces or ancestral lands. Its appearance is often interpreted as a sign that a person or community must align with traditional values or reconsider recent actions. When *Ikyarem* crosses someone's path, it is believed to represent an invitation to reflection, repentance, or caution — a symbolic "crossing" of one's spiritual path (Iorwuese 88). In this way, the snake becomes both a guide and a test.

Ikyarem also represents continuity and resilience. Unlike many Western portrayals that cast the serpent as a deceptive or evil figure, in Tiv cosmology, *Ikyarem* is neither good nor evil — it is sacred, neutral, and deeply wise. It symbolizes the cyclical nature of life, regeneration, and the unbroken relationship between the living and the dead. Its rare appearance is often commemorated and remembered by families as a spiritually significant moment path (Iorwuese 89). The green color of *Ikyarem*, as previously noted, also symbolizes fertility, peace, and the natural harmony between the people and their environment. This links the serpent not only to the spiritual but also to agricultural blessings and ecological balance. In agrarian communities like the Tiv, where farming is central to livelihood, the appearance of *Ikyarem* can also be interpreted as a spiritual nod to a fruitful harvest or environmental favor from the ancestors (Iorwuese 91).

The Decline of *Ikyarem* Worship

Traditional beliefs are experiencing a decline in contemporary society due to modernization, globalization, and the rise of secularism. While some communities maintain strong ties to their ancestral traditions, others find them increasingly irrelevant in the face of technological advancements and shifting social norms. However, traditional beliefs still hold significance in certain contexts, particularly in maintaining cultural identity and providing social cohesion, especially in rural areas.

In recent decades, the veneration of *Ikyarem* among the Tiv has experienced a significant decline. This shift is largely attributed to the spread of Christianity and Western education, which have introduced new worldviews and moral codes that often conflict with indigenous spiritual practices. Missionary efforts throughout the 20th century actively discouraged traditional beliefs, labeling practices such as the reverence for *Ikyarem* as "pagan" or "idolatrous" (Terhemba 144). As a result, many Tiv communities have abandoned or hidden these practices to align with Christian teachings. Additionally, the modernization of rural areas and the growth of urban life have contributed to a weakening of traditional communal bonds. As younger generations migrate to cities and adopt new cultural identities, knowledge of ancestral beliefs such as the significance of *Ikyarem* is no longer transmitted with the same intensity or reverence. In some cases, younger Tiv individuals are unaware of the cultural meanings embedded in the appearance or symbolism of the green snake.

However, there are still pockets of resistance and cultural resilience. In certain rural communities, especially those further removed from urban centers, elders and traditional leaders continue to teach and practice the veneration of *Ikyarem*. Cultural festivals, oral storytelling, and clan-based rites have preserved fragments of these traditions. Moreover, some modern Tiv scholars and cultural

preservationists have begun to document and revive interest in indigenous beliefs as part of broader efforts to reclaim African spiritual identity and challenge colonial narratives (Orkar 101).

Factors Contributing to the Decline

1. Modernization and Globalization: Exposure to new ideas, technologies, and global cultures can lead individuals to question or abandon traditional belief systems.
2. Secularization: The increasing emphasis on reason, science, and individual autonomy has contributed to a decline in religious affiliation and a rise in secular lifestyles, particularly in Western societies.
3. Lack of Relevance: Some perceive traditional beliefs as outdated or incompatible with the demands of modern life, including advancements in science and technology.
4. Urbanization: People living in urban areas often have less exposure to traditional practices and may find it difficult or unnecessary to maintain them amidst a more diverse environment.
5. Religious Influence: The spread of major world religions, like Christianity and Islam, can lead to a decline in the popularity of indigenous or local traditions.

Despite its decline, the cultural memory of *Ikyarem* remains. Even among Christians, it is not uncommon to find families who still hold a quiet reverence for the green snake as a symbol of ancestral wisdom and Tiv identity.

Conclusion

The veneration of *Ikyarem* among the Tiv people of Benue State reflects a profound connection between the living and the ancestral realm, rooted in spirituality, tradition, and communal identity. *Ikyarem* is not just a symbol of ancestral presence, but a sacred institution that reinforces social values, moral conduct, and collective memory within Tiv society. Through rituals, oral traditions, and spiritual observances, the Tiv people sustain a worldview where the past actively informs the present, and where spiritual forces are an integral part of daily life. Understanding the symbolic essence of *Ikyarem* veneration reveals the depth and resilience of indigenous religious systems in Africa. It also highlights the role of ancestral reverence in promoting harmony, continuity, and a sense of belonging in the cultural community. In a rapidly changing world, preserving such traditions offers valuable insight into the ways communities anchor themselves in their cultural and spiritual heritage.

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