

On the Non-existence of an Ancestor Cult Among the Tiv

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Introduction

Any explanation of why the Tiv or any other people do something may be easily open to criticism. If I attempt to explain why the Tiv (or any other people) do not have a particular institution, my argument will be more difficult to prove, and also (since after all we are dealing with non-existent entities) more difficult to disprove. In discussing why the Tiv do not have an ancestor cult, I have both to explain how it is that the institution of patrilineal¹ descent among the Tiv does not receive ritual reflection in an ancestor cult, and also what other institutions can take the place of an ancestor cult in Tiv religion. Ultimately, I am forced, in order to attempt to answer my original problem, to discuss several aspects of Tiv cosmology and ritual.

The British administrative officers who were in charge of Tiv country from the beginning of effective occupation in 1907 till the movement known as the *Namakaa* or *Haakaa* in 1929-1930,

relied on interpreters for such information on Tiv ethnography as they gathered. They were rather hazily aware of the major Tiv *akombo*, which they interpreted as being deities with specific roles,² rather than as material signs of the mystical power of the living.

The *Haakaa*³ upheaval, which was essentially a witchhunt, in which those suspected of witchcraft were obliged to yield up the paraphernalia of mystical ill-doing, had been to some extent a reaction against the strains associated with colonial rule, although it was also a continuation of earlier movements against⁴ *tsav* (witchcraft), and had received a certain degree of backing from the District Officers, who thought they were on the track of a band of dangerous cannibals. Its political consequence was a reorganization of the administration, which included the encouragement of officials to become "Tiv specialists," and its ethnographic consequence was the publication of the main body of material on Tiv custom before the work of the Bohannans, that is Downes' *The Tiv Tribe*, Abraham's *The Tiv People*, and Akiga Sai's *Akiga's Story*.

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¹ "Patrilineal" means tracing descent through males, as does "agnatic." "Matrilineal" means tracing descent through females, so that an individual man inherits from his mother's brother, not his own father.

² See the account of the Tiv (Munshi) in C.L. and O. Temple 1922.

³ *Haakaa* means "Throw things away," *Namakaa* means "Give me things." There is a vivid account of it in Akiga's *Story* (East 1965: 275-289); see also Paul Bohannan 1958: 1-12.

⁴ E. g., the *Ijôv* movement of 1912. - It would seem that there were recurrent periods of tension between young men and elders in Tiv society, which culminated in widespread accusations of malicious use of *tsav* against the elders. While previous actions of the colonial administration (such as the suppression of exchange marriage) and ignorance of Tiv culture and language among administrative staff may have done much to intensify the crisis in Tiv society, I do not believe that the *Haakaa* movement was simply a response to colonial rule. Tiv society, even under colonial rule, had its own dynamic.