

IKYEV RUAM IWAREN OR NGI SHIMI (THERE IS STILL A SUCCOUR MORSEL IN THE PLATE): THE TIV RESPONSE TO HUNGER

ANDREW, PHILIPS ADEGA PhD
Department of Religion and Cultural Studies
Benue State University
Makurdi – Nigeria

Abstract

Hunger is a universal phenomenon which affects humans and animals. Closely related to this is the issue of thirst which also affects man, plants and animals. The paper discusses the phenomenon of hunger among the Tiv and how they responded to the threat of hunger affecting their kith and kin as well as neighbours. The study is motivated by the threat of hunger in the world today and unwillingness of the Tiv to be their brother's keepers as was the case in the not too distant past. Both the primary and secondary source of data collection was employed. The paper established that the Tiv hate hunger with a passion and in response engage in large scale farming to alleviate hunger. In addition, there were other practices like twar that ensured that farmers cultivated their farms and left remnants for the less privileged to sustain themselves. Above all, the Tiv ate in the ate and in doing so invited passersby to join them in a meal. This greatly reduced the threat of hunger and minimized social vices like petty theft. The paper calls on the Tiv to return to the status quo by observing the hungwaja karen nyigh ga phenomenon which emphasised that the cricket no matter how small it might be will be bitten by a tooth demonstrating the need to share no matter how small a thing may be; in this case food.

Introduction

“Hunger is the most destructive fruit of poverty... It is the painful, natural and involuntary response to the lack of food” – Etonu (2007/2008:16).

As rightly noted by Etonu, of all the deprivations that a human being would experience, hunger is perhaps the most destructive hence, it has the prospect of killing a person as well as leading him/her to involve in unwholesome acts such as stealing in order to survive. The unpleasant threat of the poverty of hunger has assumed a global dimension as millions of people now sleep on empty stomachs daily worldwide (16).

The above scenario of the devastating effects of hunger can be seen in sub-Saharan countries like Somalia, Ethiopia, Chad, Niger Republic, Mauritania etc where drought and famine have caused widespread hunger, disease and death of man and animals. The present economic down turn particularly in the America and the Euro-Zone has led to the distribution of food hand outs by Non-governmental organizations in order Eeto save lives. In sub-Saharan Africa, the World Food Programme (WFP) and organizations such as OXFAM, DFID and USAID have spearheaded food relief efforts.

Hunger is a natural phenomenon and therefore man and animals experience its threat be they in Europe, America, Asia or Africa. The Tiv as humans are no exception to the threat of hunger. As a result of this they take great care to avoid its pangs by cultivating a great deal of land upon which they plant several crops such as yams, potatoes, beans, pepper, garden-eggs, cassava, millet, groundnuts, maize, guinea-corn and rice etc (Adega 2009: 34). With these rich variety of food stuff accruing to them from their hard work on the farm, hunger was/is kept at bay by the Tiv; who could be said to hate hunger with a passion. Therefore, East (1965:13) could not have been very far from the truth when he observed that: one of the major preoccupations of the Tiv was to fill their yam stores and granaries with food. This was to counter the devastating effects of hunger.

The paper therefore examines the Tiv preparedness and response to the threat of hunger as it affects them, their friends, relations, neighbours and humanity in general. The paper is for the sake of convenience and comprehensibility divided into several sub-themes which revolve around hunger after which suggestions are made and a conclusion drawn.

The Phenomenon of Hunger

Hunger is a universal phenomenon which like death knows no race, ethnicity and social status as it affects virtually all humans and animals who when affected need food for nourishment. Hunger is therefore, characterized by the want of food occasioned by exhaustion. Hunger and thirst are two related phenomena as we shall see in due course.

According to Bolander et al (1995:473), hunger is a desire or craving for food. It is a condition of physical weakness and distress suffered as a result of a long period of undernourishment. To Hornby (2006:731), hunger connotes the state of not having enough food to eat especially when this causes illness or death. It is the feeling caused by a need to eat. The common string running through the two definitions above is that of the want of food and need to eat as remedy to hunger. In a scientific and systematic manner Freedman (1998:310) maintained that Hunger and thirst are: "Sensations arising from diffuse internal stimuli that occur when the body needs food or water. They are among the homeostatic mechanisms that maintain constancy in the internal environment".

It is also worthy to note at this juncture that hunger sensation coincides with strong peristaltic contractions of the stomach. Despite the above statement hunger is more than a stomach sensation; this is because even if the stomach were removed from humans and animals or the severance of sensory nerves supplying it will not abolish other signs of hunger such as:

- Increased bodily movements
- Weakness
- Fatigue
- Headache and
- Irritability (Freedman 1998:310).

The fact is that an animal soon learns that these symptoms are relieved by the ingestion of food. However, after this is learned, a more complex conditioned behaviour called appetite develops; that is a desire for food that is not necessarily associated with true hunger. Thus, in contrast to hunger, appetite can be stimulated by the smell, sight or even the thought of food when apparently an individual or animal may not be necessary hungry (Freedman 1998:310).

As a result, the ingestion of food and the expenditure of energy normally derived from it are balanced, so that body weight remains fairly constant. This regulation as pointed out by Freedman involves the Hypothalamus region of the brain (VMH), or the satiety centre, which results in excessive eating (Hypergia) and obesity on the other hand, destruction of the lateral hypothalamus (LH), or the hunger or feeding centre causes complete anorexic which is the loss of appetite (Freedman 1998:310).

The other phenomenon related to hunger is thirst. On its part, the sensation of thirst is experienced mainly in the mouth as a dry feeling. This is due largely to a reduction in the secretion of saliva. Therefore, when there is severe water depletion via sweat, diarrhoea, excessive urination or haemorrhage, the secretion of saliva may even cease. The dryness of the mouth gives rise to the impulse to drink, so that the discomfort can be relieved. Despite this, it is to be noted that the human body has a regulatory system that monitors the amount of water ingested so that an animal will not drink more than is needed to supply the body needs (Freedman 1998:310).

Furthermore, the *hypothalamus* also, plays a role in the regulation of the body's water content. Certain hypothalamic cells, called *osmoreceptors* are sensitive to *osmotic* changes in the blood. When the water content of the blood is diminishing either through the water deprivation or through excessive water loss, these specialised cells are stimulated to release *antidiuretic hormone*, which conserves body water by reducing the production of urine. When thirst has been satisfied and the water content of the blood has been restored to normal levels, the hypothalamic cells reduce their production of *antidiuretic hormone* (Freedman 1998:311).

The Tiv and the Scourge of Hunger

It is worthy to note that *abinitio* the Tiv recognised the fact that all individuals in society were not equal, neither were they all rich and wealthy. As a result, they made adequate provision for the less privileged amongst them. This was particularly noticeable with the issue of hunger; hence the Tiv would not like to see their neighbour or kith and kin face the threat of hunger and starvation. Msue (2006:11-12) seems to bite this bait, hook and sinker when he wrote that:

The ancient Tiv nation did not encourage laziness, idleness or (alms) begging as a profession or way of life. However, the culture recognized that the needy, calamity stricken, and the poor will always be in the society and will need to be helped. Everyone was thus, expected to have their farms, and to abundantly provide for themselves, their families and have extra with which to help the needy, the poor and the calamity stricken.

Towards this regard, Adega (2009:38) pointed out that one of the measures taken by the Tiv to fight the poverty and threat of hunger was through the agricultural method known as *twar* (remnants). The method ensured that a farmer in harvesting produce from his/her farm such as oranges, mangoes, cereals and ground-nuts etc deliberately and consciously left some of the produce for the less privileged of the society to come and *yar twar* (collect the remnants) for their sustenance.

Owners of such farms, their wives, children and close relation never went back to *yar twar* on these farms by themselves. This was culturally frowned at and seen as a sign of miserliness on the part of such people who had more than enough to take care of themselves. The process of *twar* ensured that hunger was kept at bay from threatening any Tiv person. *Twar* when properly collected could fetch enough for a person to eat and even spare some for sale in order to get money.

Similarly, the less privileged members of the community could converge on the farm of a privileged person to assist in the harvesting of crops such as yams, rice, groundnuts, cassava and potatoes. At the close of work the owner of the farm gave some of the produce to the assistants for their food. Such generosity sustained such poor persons of the community and ensured in keeping body and soul together. This also, greatly reduced the prospects of petty theft in the society.

Furthermore, the communal and egalitarian nature of the Tiv systematically fought the threat of hunger. This is because the system ensured that no one Tiv lacked anything in totality as they enjoyed the goodwill of each other. To this end, Adega (2009: 36) succinctly noted that:

A Tiv man in transit could when hungry walk into a nearby farm and harvest some groundnuts or tubers of cassava to roast and eat. This practice was upheld by the Tiv provided the amount taken was to satisfy one's hunger and that the person used his/her fists in collecting the said item and did not use a sack or bowl.

Also, members of one family could come together in *hyumbe* (communal labour) to work on the farm of a member until they had all exhausted work on their various pieces of farm lands and no one was left lagging behind to face the threat of hunger due to laziness or ill-health. Reflecting on the communal nature of the Tiv, Bur (1993:20) rightly observed that: "The communal outlook on life among the Tiv creates a feeling that every Tiv person owes his/her brother/sister help as if by right. Refusal to do so attracts all sorts of criticism and even slight".

However, viewed from whatever perspective as to whether such help or assistance is a help or privilege, the fact remains that with such help and assistance every Tiv person never lacked completely but had the minimum required to keep body and soul together, thus, curbing the threat of hunger and perpetual dependence on the goodwill of others.

Ikyev Ruam Iwaren Or Ngi Shimi (There is still a succor morsel in the plate): The Tiv Response to Hunger

The Tiv hate hunger. Thus, they always work very hard to earn their food in the most legitimate ways possible. One of these most legitimate ways of earning a living is through farming which the Tiv enjoyed doing with all pleasures. It is therefore not surprising when the Tiv insinuate that those who hate farm work are not true sons of Tiv. People who harbour such thoughts may not be wrong in themselves hence the true sons of Tiv are not lazy in themselves as they feed themselves through their hard work on the farms.

Thus, it is not an uncommon occurrence to over hear a Tiv man tell another *mye hen awe mtse ga* meaning, I do not depend on you for sustenance.

This phrase particularly comes in handy when a person exhibits miserly tendencies toward a fellow Tiv. The Tiv therefore, hate miserliness and greed and would always share whatever they have with their kith and kin, friends and neighbours alike. It is therefore, a very common occurrence to see the Tiv ‘forcibly’ invite a person to join them in a meal no matter how small it might be. Most Tiv therefore, pick offence when a person turns down the offer of joining them to eat food claiming that *ruam doon u yan tswen ga* – that food is not tasty/enjoyable when a person eats alone. The Tiv would also say that *ruam ka iwen I mbatsav* – food is the witches stone. This can be understood in its ability to ‘kill’ hunger.

This trait of sharing according to East (1965:93) is not a new phenomenon among the Tiv as it was noticeable amongst them from the onset of the development and growth of the ethnic group. He maintained that the tendency to share among the Tiv was first noticeable when a person caught a cricket and having been prepared it was divided among the members of a household who ate food together no matter how small the cricket was. The sharing was done in the spirit of *hungwaja Karen nyigh ga*- though not a big piece, but one’s tooth was sure to bite on it.

As far as East was concerned the Tiv first learnt the habit of sharing with their fellows through the *hungwaja* (cricket). This tendency and ability to share an item no matter how small it might be gives credence to the *ya na angbian* (eat and give to your brother) socio-political philosophy of the Tiv which has gained acceptance in Nigeria with such nomenclatures as zoning system, federal character and quota system etc aimed at addressing the multi-dimensional nature of the country.

The tendency and spirit of the Tiv to share was also reflected in their riddles and myths. Thus, in myths which focused on hunger and the need to share, such opening statements as *yange ijen gba korsha Aondo, kor shin nya, or nan dugh hough ken ihinga nan ya nan shi nan na angbian* – meaning once upon a time, there was famine on the earth and in heaven and a person could remove a dried scalp of mucus in his/her nose and eat and give some to a brother/sister. One begins to imagine how big a dry scalp of mucus could be to be shared by two persons. However, the underlining lesson was that no matter how small a thing might be, there was joy in sharing it with other people than having it all alone to one’s self.

The Tiv have idiomatic expressions such as *vesega ye iyol naga* meaning a little thing does not eat itself and *ka abeen a ura a hingir zege ura ye* – the rain drops eventually turns into a shower of rains. These all point to the fact that things must be shared, particularly food. Suffice it to state the obvious fact that this tendency greatly reduced the menace, threat and scourge of hunger among the Tiv to the barest minimum.

Thus, if East (1965) had asserted that one of the greatest pre occupations of the Tiv was to fill his yam stores and granaries with food he was not speaking out of tune. Tseayo (1975:29) interprets the motive of the Tiv filling their yam stores and granaries with food in order to entertain their kith and kin, friends and well wishers liberally. He maintained that: A man who regularly gave plenty of food to his guests will always be a man of influence and prestige and might be called *Tor ruam* (the leader in food).

Such personalities in Tivland never lacked despite lavishing their food liberally in entertaining guests, visitors and kiths alike. This has credence in the phrase “Givers never lack” (GNL). Through their generosity such a person received blessings and ecomium from their benefactors. A generous barren couple could receive a fruit of the womb as a result of prayers from their benefactors. Some because of their liberal entertainments were made chiefs and community leaders; more so as wealth was measured by one’s number of wives, children, food and livestock and the ability to entertain guests liberally. Thus stingy people were known to have met with severe calamity with no one to share in their grief.

Above all, to demonstrate their desire to eliminate the scourge and menace of hunger, the Tiv ate their meals in the *Ate* (reception hut). Enumerating the importance and functions of the *Ate*, Adega (2010:8) noted that:

The Tiv were originally a people who loved to share their food with neighbours, friends and relations; hence the Tiv are not stingy, misers or greedy by nature. The *Ate* therefore provides the avenue where food is eaten in the open and every person who passes by is sincerely asked to join in the meal no matter how small it might be.

The eating of food in the *ate* by the Tiv was an open invitation to passersby, friends, neighbours, kith and kin, and visitors alike to the meal and by implication ‘an open declaration of war’ on hunger employed by the Tiv which was a very effective strategy.

This is because a miser who does not want to share his/her food would find refuge inside the hut or room and not the *ate* which is an open air facility, that offers an open ticket to a meal. Thus, sitting strategically in the *ate*, the *orya* (head of compound) could see all those passing by his compound when eating and invite same to the meal with such phrases as *kwagh yan doon tswen ga* (food is never tasty when eaten alone) and *Ikyev ruam I waren or ngi shimi* (there is still a succor morsel in the plate).

In most cases tired and exhausted passersby ate such food no matter how small and drank water and were revived. No wonder then that in the absence of food, a hungry passerby could be given roasted yam or cassava, an exhausted passerby could be given groundnuts or gingers to chew and drink water in order to replenish lost energy hence hunger and thirst are inseparable companions. Also, for some who were smokers they could be given *ityu* (smoking pipe) filled with tobacco to smoke and garner strength in order to reach their destinations. Forfeit it to state the fact that such generosity endeared the host to the benefactor and ensured a long lasting friendship. Some grateful benefactors of this show of hospitality even had course to give out the hand of their daughters in marriage to such hosts.

Some other ways through which the Tiv ensured that they tackled the menace of hunger was by deliberately making roads to pass in compounds so that passersby could be seen and invited to share in the meal being enjoyed by the family to regain lost energy. Also, women could cook food and reserve same for would be visitors. As such, any time a visitor or someone in need came by; food was readily available. The food was always steam hot because it was preserved in a calabash and kept in a large clay pot by the fire place. Similarly, the Tiv who had farms by the road sides ensured that there was something readily available to eat for persons working on the farm and any would be exhausted passerby or traveler (s). Such food items included roasted yams, ground nuts, maize, cassava and potatoes.

The famous *igyungu i wan Wade* (daughter of Wade hill) in the Iwarev area of Konshisha local government area of Benue state is named after wan Wade a female farmer who always had something to eat for persons who were exhausted after climbing that hill. With time passersby began to associate the hill with her benevolence and called it after her name wan Wade (daughter of Wade) in appreciation of her benevolent deeds and kindness.

These were some of the ways through which the Tiv fought the menace and threat of hunger affecting members of their community and to ensured that even though some people are less privileged, they do not completely lack or starve because such less privileged members of the community depended on the good will of the most fortunate or privileged ones to survive the poverty of hunger.

It is however regrettable that in contemporary Tiv society there is a change in the behaviour of the Tiv such that well to do individuals in Tiv society lack the virtue of brother's keeper and are thus unwilling to share with the less privileged members of the society. The reason for this change in behaviour is not farfetched and it can roundly be attributed individualism, civilization, western education, use of machines for farming, change of settlement patterns without the *ate*.

The Way Forward

The paper has explored the various ways by which the Tiv strived to fight the menace of hunger and thirst. However, due to western individualistic tendencies the Tiv have copied as a result of their socialisation and interaction with other individualistic ethnic groups these tendencies of sharing with a person no matter how small are fast diminishing. It therefore means that the phrase *Ichan woo orga* (poverty does not kill a person) is not applicable in the modern Tiv society because no one is ready to share what he/she has even if in abundance.

The paper therefore offer the following suggestions as a way of restoring the communal system of the Tiv which made it possible for privileged members to share with the less privilege to keep the menace of hunger in check:

1. The Tiv should return to the status quo by observing the *hungwaja karen nyigh ga* phenomenon which emphasised that the cricket no matter how small it might be will be bitten by a tooth. Nowadays even those who have enough do not share while many starve and sleep on empty stomachs their dustbins are rich and their dogs feed better.

2. The Tiv must also learn to eat in the *ate* in their compounds in order to provide an open ticket to the meals they eat as this could be of help particularly to passersby who might be exhausted and need such generosity to survive. Those who do not have the *ate* in their compounds can eat under the shade of trees in their houses or any make shift arena to accommodate passersby. Presently the Tiv build high walls fully electrified to kill any nuisance and hang the notice 'Beware of dogs boldly written at the gate to discourage people seeking help of whatever kind. In this 'idol of the cave' they do not know what transpires outside. The Tiv can come out of the 'idol of the cave' by leaving the gates of their fenced houses open for would be needy visitors.
3. It would not be a bad idea if the Tiv re-invent the issue of harvesting and leaving some remnants of their crops for less privileged members of the community to gather in *twar*. A situation where people harvest and leave nothing behind not even chaffs is not encouraging. Having said the above, one is not unaware that in contemporary agricultural practice harvesters are used in gathering crops. In this respect, a portion of the crops can be left un-harvested for the purposes of *twar* by the needy.
4. Also, the practice of *hyumbe* (communal labour) can be strengthened so that members of the community who demonstrate the zeal to be hard working but who lack the strength and skills to actualize this would be assisted in order to stay aboard and keep hunger in check.
5. In contemporary Tiv society, other strategies meant to surmount the threat of hunger and poverty include financial schemes such as *bam* and *adashi* in which contributions are made and given to members in turns on monthly, weekly or bi weekly basis. This helps in no small measure in alleviating poverty and enhancing the financial base of such contributing members.

Conclusion

The paper has examined the methods through which the Tiv fought the menace and scourge of hunger. It is worthy to note that being generous to the less privileged is a good trait that pays hence; givers never lack and the Tiv must re-invent their spirit of generosity and should be able to share with others what they have no matter how small to attract blessings from God. However, having said that, we encourage all Tiv sons and daughters to imbibe the spirit of hard work rather than depend on the generosity or goodwill of others for survival. Handwork is the only tendency that will loosen the shackles of the poverty of hunger from any society not just the Tiv alone. After all, the dignity of man is through labour and therefore people should be proud to work for their food as this is more honourable than total dependence on others for survival. Perpetual dependence belittles a person and casts aspersions on him/her. Thus, those who exhibit the tendency to work hard and feed themselves should be assisted through this regard because as the Chinese proverb says: It is better to teach an individual how to fish in order to sustain himself rather than always giving the person fish to make him/her perpetually dependent.

References

- Adega, A. P. (2010). "Ate (Living Room) As the Centre of Unity in Tiv Compounds" in S. D.Shishima (Ed). *Ate: Journal of African Religion and Culture Vol. 1*. Enugu: Hosanna Books.
- _____ (2009)."Poverty Alleviation Programmes in Nigeria: Re-Inventing the Tiv Models for National Security and Development". In A. M. Adejo (Ed). *Benue Valley Journal of Humanities* Vol. 8 No. 12 Makurdi: Aboki Publishers.
- Bolander, D. O. etal (Eds) (1995). *The New Webster's Dictionary of English Language (Int'l ed)*. NY: Lexicon.
- Bur, A. (1993). "Who are the Tiv?:" A Socio-Cultural Inquiry Into Tiv Dynamics" In P.T. Ahire (Ed) (1993). *The Tiv in Contemporary Nigeria*. Zaria: The Writers Organization.
- East, R. N. (Trans) (1965). *Akiga's Story*. London: OUP.
- Etonu, S. E. (2007/2008). "The Church a Toothless Bulldog in the Face of Agonizing Poverty?: A Case of Social Justice". *The Gleaner Magazine* Vol. 1 No.10. A Publication of St. Thomas Aquinas Major Seminary (STAMS), Makurdi.
- Freedman, A. D. (1998). "Hunger and Thirst". In *Grolier International Encyclopedia: Deluxe Home Edition Vol. 10*. Danbury-Connecticut: Grolier Inc.
- Hornby, A. S. (2006). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (7th Ed)*. Oxford: OUP.
- Msue, M. (2006). *The Kpan-Boi Misapplied Philosophy in the Tiv Nation Needs to be Corrected Now*. Makurdi: Midag.
- Tseayo, J. I. (1975). *Conflict and Incorporation in Nigeria: The Integration of the Tiv*. Zaria: Gaskiya Corporation.