

Feminisation of Tiv dance: a study of changing gender dynamics in *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances

Abstract

This paper explores the evolving dynamics of gender roles in Tiv cultural performances, focusing on the feminization of the *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances. Traditionally dominated by male performers, these dance forms have seen an increasing presence and leadership of women since the late 20th century but the 21st century has seen an increase in women participation. Drawing on historical accounts, performance analysis, oral testimonies, and relevant scholarly literature, the study examines how women have navigated cultural boundaries to assert agency within social and communal spaces. The research highlights how changes in religious practices, urbanization, and cultural hybridity have reshaped performance aesthetics and gendered participation in Tivland. While *Mammy Wata* dance reflects a syncretic social performance rooted in southern Nigerian cosmology, *Tsue Tsere*—a local caricature on the cat and its perceived mystical attributes—illustrates the ambivalent representation of cultural dynamics in Tiv worldview. Women's increasing visibility in these performances not only challenges patriarchal constraints but also signals broader shifts in cultural identity and social values. The study contributes to discourses on gender, performance, and cultural transformation in Nigeria, suggesting new directions for research into women's roles in indigenous performance traditions across the country.

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Introduction

In examining the evolving role of women as they contend for space to express their performance within traditional male defined dance aesthetics, David Kerr's seminal work on African Popular Theatre¹ offers a backdrop against which to explore a comprehensive historical and political analysis of popular theatre across Africa. In tracing the evolution from indigenous performance traditions to the role of theatre in contemporary political and social commentary, the study gives us a glance at changing traditions in African theatre, as theatre in this situation becomes a tool for community engagement, resistance, and cultural expression. The understanding that performance negotiates identity, class, and gender, especially under the influences of colonialism and post-independence movements helps in situating the changing dynamics of dance across African cultures.

Traditional dance has always been a vital expression of communal life for the Tiv people of Central Nigeria. Renowned for their rich cultural heritage, the Tiv are celebrated for traditional dances that embody their spirituality and social identity. Notable among these are the *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere*, which profoundly reflect the Tiv cosmology and perception of nature.

Marie Ozah² refers to versions of Mammy Wata as understood across various cultures beyond the African continent. She makes reference to the work of Kathleen Wicker which sees the infusion of mammy Wata from different earlier cultures including the Indian component "the Mami Water métissage before elaborating on the cult's arrival and practice on the continent of Africa". She further states that "Wicker's article illustrates the varied constructions of this divinity within traditional, Hindu, Christian, and Islamic communities while showing the creative reinterpretations of these cultural strands in the course of its absorption, assemblage, and adaptation".¹

The *Mammy Wata* dance is traditionally associated with the belief

in water spirits, mirroring Tiv cosmology. This dance showcases the rich cultural heritage of the Tiv people, vividly portraying their visual depictions and concepts of these creatures. The term *wata* is a derived pronunciation of "water," representing the habitat of these entities. The celebratory dance encapsulates the connection between participants, nature, and the metaphysical, bringing to life the Tiv understanding of the spiritual realm and its operations.

Conversely, *Tsue Tsere* is predominantly a solo dance performed during significant rituals, festivals, and celebrations, and it mimics the dexterous movements of a cat. The accompanying songs, costumes, and movements highlight the attributes of the feline. Historically, men have dominated these performances while women have played supportive roles, reflecting broader societal gender norms. However, recent years have witnessed a transformation in both dances, with increasing female participation. Women now lead, choreograph, and perform, challenging traditional gender stereotypes and reshaping the aesthetic boundaries of these cultural expressions.

Research problem

Men have historically dominated certain Tiv dances, reflecting patriarchal structures, while women were relegated to passive roles. Female roles in Tiv dances are evolving, challenging traditional stereotypes and sexism. Research highlights the need to promote balanced and respectful representations of women in Tiv song theatre.

In looking at women's role in cultural performances the empowerment through performance becomes an issue to be examined. Dances like *Swange* and *Tembe Duen* showcase the importance of female participation, highlighting their role in promoting social cohesion and cultural identity.

The emerging trend of women leading traditional male dances points to a re-evaluating of traditional roles in Tiv performance aesthetics. Studies suggest that traditional roles assigned to women in Tiv culture are meant to advance their power and stability, rather than perpetuate subjugation.

¹Kathleen O'Neil quoted in Marie Ozah (2008) ÉGWÚ ÀMÀLÀ: WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL PERFORMING ARTS IN OGBARULAND PhD Dissertation submitted to the University of Pittsburgh

This study addresses the issue of promoting gender balance as an essential foundation for the emergence of the female lone dancer, who reveals her identity at the end of the performance, thereby creating a climax. It highlights the increasing acknowledgment of the necessity for equitable representation of women in Tiv performances, which mirrors their significant contributions to society.

These developments indicate a shift towards more inclusive representations of women in Tiv dances, reflecting changes in the cultural landscape. There is also a trend seen in the feminisation of Mammy Wata and Tsue Tsere dances, traditionally considered male dances, indicating a cultural shift challenging gendered roles. This change raises questions about how increased female involvement may be transforming both the form and content of Tiv dances, and how these dynamics are being perceived by the community. The research aims to investigate the implications of this feminisation, both as an artistic phenomenon and in relation to shifting gender practices within Tiv society.

Research questions/objectives

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- i In what ways has the participation of women in Mammy Wata and Tsue Tsere dances influenced the aesthetic and thematic elements of these performances?
- ii What factors have contributed to the feminisation of these dances, and how does it reflect broader social changes in Tiv society?
- iii How is the community responding to the increased visibility and agency of women in these traditionally male-dominated dance forms?

Significance of the study

Understanding the feminisation of *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances is critical to understanding recent developments in Tiv society and comprehending the broader gender dynamics within the Tiv dance aesthetics. On a broader level the changes being witnessed reflect women's contention for space within the Nigerian and African socio- cultural context and the breaking of stereotypes even in the traditional spheres. This study sheds light on how cultural practices adapt to reflect changing social realities, offering insights into the intersections of tradition, modernity, and gender. It also contributes to discussions on gender equality, highlighting how women's increasing involvement in cultural expressions can reshape not only the art form but also societal values and norms. Additionally, the study provides valuable perspectives on how communities navigate resistance and acceptance to shifts in gender roles.

Literature review

The literature review examines three areas: theoretical framework, previous studies on Tiv dances, and gender dynamics in dance and other cultural practices.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on theories of gender performativity³ and the sociology of culture.⁴ Gender performativity theory suggests that gender roles are socially constructed and enacted through repeated actions, such as dance performances. Given that the dichotomy of male/ female dances exists in Tiv culture the performance becomes the site of contestation for power relations in gender dynamics.

Through this lens, dance becomes a site for contesting and re-enacting gender identities. The sociology of culture offers insights into how cultural practices both shape and are shaped by power dynamics and social hierarchies.⁵ The dances reflect the social hierarchies showing softer female dances and more aggressive posture of the male dances. These frameworks are crucial in understanding how Tiv dances serve as both a reflection and a tool for negotiating gender roles within the community.

Previous studies on Tiv dances

Existing scholarship on Nigerian traditional dances have predominantly focused on their religious, spiritual, and communal significance.

Tsav⁶ explores the evolving gender dynamics within Tiv masquerade performances, traditionally dominated by men. He critically examines how sociopolitical shifts, feminist discourse, and increasing female interest in cultural expressions have led to the gradual inclusion of women in roles once deemed taboo. Using ethnographic data and performance analysis, the study interrogates how gendered spaces are negotiated, resisted, and redefined through dance and masquerade. Tsav's work is significant for understanding the intersection of tradition, gender politics, and cultural performance in contemporary Tiv society.

Previous research has elaborated on how the Mammy Wata dance in other regions connects performers to ancestral spirits and water deities, with men traditionally leading these dances. In Tiv land, the Mammy Wata dance can be performed solo or as a pair, but it is not typically a group dance. Similarly, Tsue Tsere, a solo dance, has been documented as a celebration of unity, involving rhythmic drumming, chanting, and coordinated movements that symbolise social cohesion. However, there has been limited research exploring the gender dynamics within these dances, particularly regarding women's emerging roles as leaders and choreographers. This study aims to address this gap by examining the aesthetic and societal implications of women's increased participation and emergence into the world of Tiv male dances.

Gender dynamics in dance and other cultural practices

Dance in African culture reinforces social hierarchies like gender roles. However, women's increasing participation is challenging these norms. Studies show that dance reflects and drives social change, giving women a platform in male-dominated spaces. This section will explore similar transformations, highlighting the evolving role of women in Tiv dance.

Dance in Nigeria, as in many African societies, transcends mere performance; it is a deeply embedded cultural practice that communicates identity, power, spirituality, and social structure. Gender plays a central role in shaping who performs, how they perform, and the meanings attached to performance. A few scholars have interrogated how Nigerian dance reflects, reinforces, or contests gender roles in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

Kariamuwelsh-Asante⁷ provides a foundational framework for understanding African dance as a holistic art form, deeply rooted in the community's philosophy, spirituality, and aesthetics. Though her work is pan-African, her insights into the gendering of movement, rhythm, and performance space are directly applicable to the Nigerian context, where gender codes are often embedded in choreography and ritual.

In examining Nigerian indigenous practices, Meki Nzewi⁸ explores how dance is integrated into music and ritual, particularly among the Igbo. He notes that gender distinctions are often encoded in the types of dances performed, with male and female movements symbolizing broader social values. Nzewi argues that these traditional roles reflect the cosmological order of the community, but they are also sites where hierarchy is maintained.

Bolaji Bateye⁹ focuses on Yoruba religious dance and highlights women's active roles in cultural expression. She argues that, although Yoruba women may be excluded from certain male-dominated spiritual roles, they use dance as a platform to assert their spiritual agency and social influence. Similarly, Julie B. Taylor¹⁰ reveals how women, despite being restricted from masquerade participation in Yoruba religion, engage in other expressive dance forms that subtly challenge patriarchal exclusions.

This trend is echoed in the work of Afolayan Adedayo,¹¹ who examines the participation of Yoruba women in masquerade performances. He observes a "paradigm shift" where women now choreograph, direct, and even perform in dances traditionally limited to men. Adedayo¹¹ argues that this shift is enabled by the secularization of cultural practices in urban areas and the rise of carnival-style reinterpretations of tradition.

Ebun Clark¹² also discusses women's growing engagement with traditionally male roles in Nigerian theatre and dance. In modern productions and cultural festivals, women often embody male characters or adopt masculine dance styles, challenging the conventional division of roles in performance.¹³ Nwoko¹⁴ introduces the concept of "female masculinities" to describe how women in festivals and theatre adopt male regalia, stances, and movements to express agency and resist subordination. These performances, while not always overtly political, act as subtle critiques of gender hierarchy.

In contemporary Nigerian dance theatre, cross-gender performance is becoming increasingly common. Olushola Adesanya¹⁵ documents female dancers performing vigorous and traditionally masculine styles like Bata and Egungun in Lagos and Abuja. These performances, according to Adesanya, serve not only artistic purposes but also function as statements of gender inclusivity and experimentation with gender identity.

Ngozi Eze¹⁶ through her fieldwork on Igbo traditional dances such as Atilogwu and Egwu Amala, emphasizes how gendered styles of dance often mirror societal expectations. Male dancers are typically associated with physical intensity and athleticism, while female dancers embody grace and fluidity. However, Eze notes that in contemporary performance spaces, women are beginning to blur these boundaries, taking on more dynamic and vigorous roles traditionally performed by men.

Austine D. Nwaeze¹⁷ explores how gender and identity are performed in Nigerian festivals like the Ofala and New Yam festivals. He observes that while male dancers occupy prominent ritual positions, women's roles, often relegated to the margins, are nonetheless powerful and symbolic. Nwaeze's analysis suggests that performance spaces offer opportunities for women to reassert their cultural relevance, even when their roles appear secondary.

Beyond the southern and central regions, cultural norms in northern Nigeria impose stricter gender codes on performance. Zainab Alkali et al.¹⁸ highlight how Hausa-Fulani traditions discourage public female dancing due to religious constraints. However, women continue to perform in secluded and female-only settings, using dance to reinforce community bonds and express social messages in ways that remain culturally appropriate.

Finally, Obu Udeozo¹⁹ situates dance within the broader aesthetic traditions of Nigerian culture, emphasizing how bodily movement, costume, and rhythm are used to reinforce gender identities. He argues that male and female bodies are choreographed differently from a young age, reflecting the community's moral expectations and philosophical values about gender, propriety, and beauty.

Nkiru Nzegwu's²⁰ broader work on visual and performative art adds that the female body in performance is often subject to societal control and ideological projection. Yet, when women enter male spaces—such as masquerades or male-styled dances—they are not merely imitating men but are actively redefining gender performance in culturally significant ways.

Dance is a cultural practice that reflects the entire gamut of beliefs and practices of a people. Gender stereotypes and biases can play a big role in reflecting the way of life of a people. While the studies mentioned changing dynamics in gender roles in performance, the cultural shift to women assuming these roles has been somewhat subtle. The dynamic shift of gender roles in Tiv performance on the other hand, has been deliberate and perceived as a demand for women using the performance space to transform existing gender patterns in dance.

Research methodology

The methodology examined research design, data collection methods, study area and population and data analysis.

Research design

This study uses a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine Tiv dancers, choreographers, and cultural leaders' experiences. The researcher attended and observed Mammy Wata and Tsue Tsere performances. Semi-structured interviews with female dancers, choreographers, and cultural elders provided insights into changing gender roles in these dances.

Data collection methods

Data was collected through:

- i Participant Observation: Attending live performances of *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances in the Tiv communities, focusing on the roles played by men and women.
- ii Interviews: Conducting interviews with dancers, choreographers, and cultural leaders to gather personal accounts of the changing gender dynamics in these dances.
- iii Video Analysis: Reviewing recorded performances to analyse shifts in choreography, performance style, and thematic content over time.

Study area and population

The study examines the Tiv communities in Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria, where Mammy Wata and Tsue Tsere dances are common during cultural events. Outside these contexts, the impact of the dances is lessened for audiences unfamiliar with the cultural codes. Key participants interviewed included dancers, choreographers, cultural elders, and community members.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring themes related to gender roles, performance styles, and community perceptions of the feminisation of these dances. The data has been coded and organized into key themes, such as women's leadership, community reception, and changes in dance aesthetics.

The traditional role of women in Tiv dances

This section provides a historical analysis of women's roles in the *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances. Traditionally, women were involved primarily as supporters or background performers. The study also explores the cultural and social importance of these dances within Tiv spirituality and communal life, highlighting how traditional beliefs influenced women's participation historically.

Historical overview of Mammy Wata

The figure of Mammy Wata, though not originally part of indigenous Tiv cosmology, emerged in Tiv performance traditions around the mid-20th century, shaped by cross-cultural influences from southern Nigeria and broader African popular culture. This period marked increased urban migration among the Tiv, exposure to coastal cultural forms, and the rise of Christian evangelical narratives, all of which contributed to the incorporation of Mammy Wata into performance and oral traditions. While southern Nigerian societies had long embraced the marine spirit within religious and theatrical contexts, Tiv performance began to depict Mammy Wata as a hybrid character—both a seductive and dangerous spirit and a symbol of moral and spiritual conflict. In dance-drama, masquerade adaptations, and storytelling, she often served as a cautionary figure, warning against sexual promiscuity, greed, and spiritual waywardness. The character's inclusion reflected shifting gender dynamics, with Mammy Wata representing a powerful and autonomous female force, thus inviting both fear and fascination. Scholars such as Iyorwuese Hagher have alluded to these themes in their dramatic works, while researchers like Azuonye²¹ and Ozah² document the broader diffusion of Mammy Wata imagery across Nigeria's cultural landscapes, including among the Tiv, where traditional beliefs and modern spiritual perspectives intersect. Figure 1, Figure 2



Figure 1 Female dancing Tsue Tsere.



Figure 2 Picture showing a woman performing Mammy Wata.

Historically, women in many traditional dances held secondary roles, providing musical accompaniment while men led. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, cultural exchange, Pentecostal Christianity, and popular performance shifts saw women emerging as lead dancers. The Mammy Wata motif, introduced through southern Nigerian influences, symbolized spiritual ambiguity. Over time, women took on leading roles in church revivals, public festivals, and school competitions. By the 1980s, female-led dance groups were actively promoted by the Benue State Arts Council and local troupes. This change signified women's empowerment in Tiv performance and the localization of Mammy Wata into Tiv culture.

Historical background of Tsue Tsere

In Tiv cosmology, the Tsue Tsere performance features a dancer mimicking a cat's movements and praising its qualities. However, this act is not about genuine reverence; instead, it uses exaggerated praise to critique what the Tiv associate with witchcraft and danger. The hyperbolic singing, often humorous, helps diffuse the fear the cat symbolizes. This controlled ambiguity allows discussion of taboo subjects like witchcraft through mimicry and laughter. Historically rooted in pre-colonial traditions, Tsue Tsere serves as a social critique tool, addressing anti-social behavior and providing moral education.²²⁻²⁴ Figure 3



Figure 3 The unmasked female performer of Mammy Wata.

The emergence of *Tsue Tsere* as a performative trope aligns with Tiv society's oral tradition, where stories and performances were used to instill values, regulate conduct, and mock deviance in a humorous but didactic manner. During festivals and communal gatherings—such as *Kwagh-Hir* performances or Akombo purification²⁵ rituals—the *Tsue Tsere* character became a liminal figure, straddling the sacred and the profane, the comic and the tragic, thereby embodying the contradictions within human behavior. His inclusion in Tiv performances also reflects the society's embrace of layered symbolism, where humour conceals deeper spiritual and social meanings. With time, especially in colonial and post-colonial contexts, the character evolved, taking on new dimensions in travelling theatre, church dramas, and school performances, often to address contemporary issues like madness, corruption, or spiritual confusion.²⁶

Cultural and spiritual significance

Both dances have spiritual significance in Tiv society. Mammy Wata is associated with the imitation of water spirits performed during celebrations, while Tsue Tsere functions as a social and cultural celebration. This section will examine how the traditional roles of women in these dances were influenced by cultural and social conditioning, and how these roles have changed over time.

Cultural and social significance of Tiv dances and women's participation

In Tiv culture, dance is deeply intertwined with cultural practices, social structure, and communal identity. Traditional dances, especially those associated with masquerades, rites of passage, and rituals, serve not only as forms of artistic expression but also as conduits for connecting the physical and spiritual realms. These performances are woven into the fabric of Tiv cosmology, where the distinction between the sacred and the profane is often fluid, and rituals are a means of negotiating this boundary. Through dance, the Tiv people convey spiritual messages, admonish bad character, and celebrate life.²³

Historically, the role of women in Tiv dance performances has evolved within this rich social and cultural context. While traditional beliefs regarding gender roles often restricted women's participation in certain dances, women have always held significant roles in performances, especially during celebrations, and community events. In other traditional performances, dances such as the *Bwa* dance (of Burkina Faso and parts of Mali²⁷ traditionally performed by women during festivals and communal celebrations, are symbolic of life-giving powers, embodying the rhythms of the earth and the cycles of nature.²⁷ Women's dances, characterized by graceful, circular movements, often symbolize the nurturing aspects of Tiv culture—particularly the connection between the earth and productivity.

However, the participation of women in more masculine dances—such as those associated with the *Tsue Tsere* (cat) dance, or the *Kwagh-Hir* theatre, a form of folk theatre and storytelling—has been more complex. Kwaghga²⁸ analyzes character roles, puppetry, costuming, and thematic content to reveal how the theatre both reflects and contests traditional gender roles. These dances, often dominated by men and featuring warrior or animal-like movements, carry spiritual weight in terms of their role in protecting the community or warding off evil spirits. Initially, women's engagement in these performances was limited, as it was culturally believed that such dances required masculine energy to embody the warrior spirit or animal symbolism.

Yet, over time, women's participation in these ritualistic dances has become more pronounced and significant, particularly with the advent of modernity and the changing social fabric in Tivland. While the Tiv traditional worldview continues to influence gendered roles in dance, women have increasingly found avenues to engage in these dances, not only as participants but also as leaders in some instances. This shift has been driven by changing perceptions of gender equality within communities and the assertion of women's agency in cultural practices. Women's involvement in traditionally male dances, such as the cat dance (*Tsue Tsere*), is emblematic of the larger trend of gender fluidity in performance that reflects both cultural transformation and the empowerment of women within their communities.

Women are now actively participating in dances that reflect the power dynamics of Tiv cosmology, which is shaped by cultural connection rather than gender. Their involvement helps protect community values and restore harmony. Through these dances, women assert their cultural and social roles, challenging historical gender divisions.

Tiv dance serves two main functions: social cohesion and cultural expression. The participation of women in these dances illustrates a move towards greater inclusivity and a reinterpretation of traditional gender roles. Women's involvement enhances the diversity of these performances and represents a societal acknowledgement of their spiritual authority and their role in the development of Tiv cultural practices.

The feminisation of Mammy wata and Tsue Tsere dances

The section deals with changes in performance styles, women's agency in dance leadership, community reception and implications for gender roles and cultural identity.

Changes in performance style

The feminisation of Mammy Wata and Tsue Tsere dances represents a notable change in Tiv performance practices and indicates evolving gender dynamics within the community. Historically, Mammy Wata performances were associated with Christmas celebrations and were predominantly male-dominated, as the figure of Mammy Wata was portrayed as a mystical female entity, but its stage embodiment was typically performed by men. However, as women's social and cultural roles have expanded, their involvement in these dances has altered both the aesthetic and spiritual aspects of the performances.

The rise of female dancers taking on the role of *Mammy Wata* creature has introduced new interpretations and meanings to the dance. Women, particularly in modern iterations of *Mammy Wata* performances, not only embody the character of *Mammy Wata* but also shape the narrative surrounding her power, agency, and influence. In performing these roles, women contribute to the reclamation of the spiritual authority historically associated with masculine mysticism, thereby challenging traditional gendered boundaries within Tiv cosmology. Similarly, *Tsue Tsere*, once viewed as a predominantly male-associated dance, has witnessed increased female participation, as women now embody the catlike movements and agile, erratic gestures that characterize this masquerade. The feminisation of these dances highlights the changing gendered expectations within Tiv performance practices, where women have moved from supporting roles to leadership positions in both dance and ritual performances.

Performance styles

In exploring performance styles, J. B. Taylor's article *Playing with identities: Gender, performance, and African masquerade* (1992) provides a critical examination of gender as a performative construct within African masquerade traditions. She analyses how masquerade allows for the fluid expression of identity, where men often perform female roles and vice versa, challenging fixed notions of gender. Drawing on performance theory and fieldwork observations, Taylor demonstrates how masquerades serve as complex sites of identity negotiation, social commentary, and cultural resistance. This work is especially valuable for scholars interested in gender performativity, indigenous African aesthetics, and the transformative power of ritual performance.

The changes in performance styles in a number of these dances can be traced to the increased presence of women in traditionally male-dominated dances. Both the *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances have adapted over time to incorporate female expression and interpretation. Whereas male dancers once dominated these performances with rigid, masculine movements, women have introduced a more fluid, graceful style that contrasts with and complements the traditional aesthetics. For instance, in the *Mammy Wata* performance, female dancers have used their fluid movements to express the character's mystical and powerful qualities, invoking both the beauty and danger of water through graceful yet commanding gestures. Similarly, in *Tsue Tsere*, the traditionally erratic and wild movements of the cat are now enhanced by female dancers' portrayal of agility and slyness, reinterpreting the character in a more elusive and captivating way.

The evolution of performance styles has expanded the aesthetic scope of Tiv dances and underscored the gender-integrative nature of traditional performances. Although these dances still embody their original symbolic meanings, such as invoking protection, fertility, and community welfare, the emerging performance styles now incorporate gender dynamics that reassess and redefine the roles of men and women within Tiv society. The blending of male and female movements in these dances has fostered a more inclusive performance environment, enabling women to actively participate and assume leadership roles in cultural rituals previously restricted to them.

Women's agency in dance leadership

The increasing leadership of women in *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances is a direct manifestation of the growing agency that women now hold in Tiv cultural life. This shift reflects a broader transformation in societal norms and values,²⁹ where women are no longer merely supporting figures in performances, but are now seen as key agents of cultural expression and leadership. Women's leadership in these performances not only challenges the patriarchal structures that have historically excluded them from full participation in cultural rites but also positions them as cultural custodians—entrusted with preserving and interpreting the dances that form the core of Tiv identity.

Awuese, A. T.³⁰ explores the role and participation of women in Tiv dance traditions, with a particular focus on the Ingyough masquerade. Awuese challenges the conventional belief that masquerade performance in Tiv culture is exclusively a male domain. The study documents the evolving gender dynamics and increasing involvement of women in masquerade activities, reflecting broader socio-cultural transformations. Through ethnographic fieldwork, Awuese reveals how women assert cultural agency and negotiate traditional boundaries in performance spaces. This work is critical for understanding gender shifts in Tiv performance culture and offers insights into how tradition can accommodate contemporary gender roles.

Through their participation and leadership in these dances, women engage in cultural negotiation, expressing their unique perspectives and experiences within Tiv spirituality and communal life. This can be seen in the reimagining of *Mammy Wata* as a figure of empowerment rather than just a symbol of subjugation or otherness. Women's agency in *Tsue Tsere* performances also reflects the redefinition of power—from masculine authority embodied in the traditional "catlike" traits of aggression and independence to a more nuanced and complex portrayal that includes grace, slyness, and assertiveness.

Community reception and implications for gender roles and cultural identity

The community reception of women's increasing roles in *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances has been complex and multifaceted. On the one hand, these performances have been celebrated for breaking traditional gender boundaries and highlighting the evolving role of women in Tiv society. Community members, particularly younger generations, are more likely to view these changes as a sign of progress and inclusivity, acknowledging that the roles and performances in Tiv culture are not fixed but rather adaptable to changing social realities. However, according to some respondents, there is also resistance among more conservative elements of the community, where some may view women's involvement in such dances as challenging the spiritual hierarchy or as a deviation from traditional roles. The gendered implications of this shift are profound, as they not only question the stereotypical roles of men and women in dance but

also impact cultural identity itself. By redefining who can embody traditional roles, these performances are contributing to a dynamic cultural identity that is responsive to contemporary gender norms.

In terms of cultural identity, the feminisation of these dances signals a reconfiguration of Tiv spirituality and communal life, where both men and women can engage with sacred traditions on equal footing, and the boundary between masculine and feminine expressions becomes increasingly fluid. This redefinition allows the Tiv people to maintain their cultural practices while also adapting to modern sensibilities surrounding gender and empowerment. In all *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances I have watched in Tiv communities in Makurdi, the unmasking of the female performer comes towards the end of the dance when she removes the mask and the audience sees a female lead rather than the expected male lead. What follows is a collective gasp revealing not only an ostentation of the female performer but a collective acknowledgment of the breaking of performance gendered codes. That singular moment in the performance redefines the perception of the performance and rewrites the cultural perspective and aesthetics from which the performance is viewed.

Conclusion

Summary of findings

This study has examined the evolving role of women in *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances within Tiv cultural performance, emphasizing how female participation has reshaped traditional gender boundaries in performance and spirituality. Historically dominated by male performers, these dances have progressively incorporated increased female involvement, particularly in leadership and central roles. The *Mammy Wata* dance, originally a mystical performance invoking aquatic female spirits, has allowed women to embody these roles with greater authority and authenticity, transforming the performance into a space for female empowerment and agency. Similarly, the *Tsue Tsere* dance, characterized by cat-like agility and symbolic references to ambivalence and subversion, has seen female performers redefining its meanings through nuanced physical expression and performative innovation. These shifts indicate a broader feminization of performance spaces in Tivland and highlight the dynamic nature of cultural practices, particularly in their responses to contemporary issues of identity, gender roles, and power.

The feminisation of *Mammy Wata* and *Tsue Tsere* dances represents an important shift in Tiv cultural performance, reflecting broader societal changes regarding gender roles and women's agency. These performances are not just about aesthetic transformation; they embody a deeper cultural negotiation where women's leadership in ritual and dance challenges long-held beliefs about power, authority, and gender. As women take on more prominent roles in dance leadership, they contribute to the evolution of Tiv cultural identity, where gender roles are fluid and reflective of the community's dynamic spiritual and social landscape.

Implications for future research

The implications of these findings extend beyond the dances themselves to invite broader inquiries into gender, performance, and cultural negotiation in Tiv and Nigerian societies. Future research could examine other Tiv performances—such as *Kwagh-hir*, *Ingyough*, and *Swange*—to assess whether similar gendered transitions are occurring. Comparative studies with other Nigerian ethnic groups, such as the Yoruba *Egungun*, the Igbo *Mmanwu*, or the Efik *Ekpe* masquerade, may reveal patterns of feminisation,

resistance, or transformation in cultural performances across Nigeria. In addition, exploring the role of women as choreographers, costume designers, spiritual intermediaries,³⁰ or ritual custodians could further enrich understanding of the complex intersections between gender and performance. Ethnographic and longitudinal studies that track the trajectories of female performers over time will also offer valuable insights into how cultural agency and spiritual authority evolve in tandem with societal change.

Cultural and social impact

The feminisation of Mammy Wata and Tsue Tsere dances in Tiv society softens gender binaries, fostering inclusivity in communal performance spaces. Women are transforming these performances and redefining Tiv cosmological narratives, increasing their visibility in cultural heritage and opening leadership roles. This evolution encourages expansive views on gender participation and influences broader cultural expressions and relations, promoting equity and cultural dynamism.

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None.

Conflicts of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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