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Kell: Tiv Song

Reviews and Discussion

Charles Keil. *Tiv Song.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. xiii + 301 pp.

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It is often said that an ethnographer, like everybody else, is a prisoner of his own culture; still, the fact of doing ethnography is an active attempt to break out even when we know we can't succeed totally. It is less often noted, I think, that social scientists are prisoners of their teachers' culture and that it is even more difficult to break out of that mold. Yet, one has to supersede one's teachers if the discipline is to make any progress—and that means that one has to be superseded by the next generation. In the course of studying this book that truism was brought home to me, together with another: the climacteric of intellectual life comes when one realizes one must keep up with one's juniors rather than with one's peers and elders.

I am grateful that Charles Keil chose to do his field work among "my people," the Tiv of Nigeria, and that he has written this magnificent book about *Tiv Song*, aesthetics, and the many ways human life can be perceived. I have learned an immense amount about the Tiv from it, and even more about song and aesthetics. And perhaps still more about myself, the prison my culture shuts me in, the teachers I am still trying to come to terms with, and the things I missed because I am me, in the specific time and place where I was. This learning peaked in a simple statement, which is certainly not the high point of the book, although I think it is both true and significant: "Tiv dances are usually very well organized. In fact, as far as I can determine, dance groups represent the highest degree of organizational complexity to be found in Tiv society" (p. 247). Just so. I was struck at heart, as the Tiv would say, that I had never paid any attention (for all that it was going on all around me) to that organization. Because I had been taught what is true: that political and economic structures are what are significant. But I had not yet proceeded all the way beyond it: there are many other significant structures too. Indeed, I thought when I was in the field that seeing the organization of market cycles was daring. Being of the middle generation is an interesting experience: Janus was obviously middle-aged.

This book should be studied by every social scientist. I fear it may not be because its subject is ethnomusicology, which is unfortunately considered *outré* by most social scientists. Yet, the book contains more about the nature of living than most treatises on politics or economics could ever manage.

The book is organized around an introduction and five long chapters. Keil states his major problems in the first part of the Introduction: "The why questions... refuse to go away. Why do Tiv make songs? And why do they come out sounding so very Tiv?" (pp. 6-7). The second half of the Introduction is an apt summary of Tiv ethnography.

Keil's first chapter is "Tiv Music Terminology." There is no word in Tiv that corresponds to music in English (p. 27)—neither indeed is there such a word in other West African languages that the author checked: "It is easy to talk about song and dance, singers and drummers, blowing a flute, beating a bell, but the general terms 'music' and 'musician' require long and awkward circumlocutions" (p. 27). Translations, in short, become difficult: one does not go with an English framework to fit Tiv ideas into, but rather one has to learn the Tiv system and then describe it in English. And that is precisely what Keil has done. He runs a gloss on a number of words that emerge when Tiv discuss their music; he then examines the further meanings of those words in order to get at something that approaches Tiv ideas about the ways songs are composed and sung. Tiv do not, in fact, "compose" (that is, put together the component parts of a song); rather they "pull out" a song (p. 33). As Keil says, they "manifest it." They do not "sing" it; they "incise" it. There is no generic word for "rhythm" in Tiv, or "scale" or "mode" (p. 47). These are only a few examples of many. The scrupulousness with which his analysis proceeds should be studied carefully by anyone interested in translating subtle ideas from one culture to another.

It seems to me that there is something basic in Tiv culture that forces ethnographers to respond in this way. I spent long hours trying to explain in English the Tiv concepts of land, of law, of economic production and distribution. Keil has done the same sort of thing with song. This makes the ethnographic record of the Tiv unusual in that its ethnographers have been all but obsessed with translation. Yet, when one has expounded the Tiv view of their own ethnography, or as close to it as one can come, one is acutely aware that the comparative studies have not yet created categories (and even to think that possible may be wrongheaded) to bring the English categories and the Tiv categories into a single frame of reference. Thus, one is likely to be told (as I have been) that one's books on Tiv ethnography are "solipsistic," because they do not fit into the "main stream," and hence give trouble to conscientious comparativists. Well, Keil gives me the courage of my convictions—the Tiv do not fit into the "main stream," and to force them into it would be to lose the immense lessons we have to learn from them.

Keil notes (p. 38) that the two most common words for song are *icam*, a call and response song, and *imo*, which literally means "voice." He notes something that I find sad—that the *mliam* is no longer in common

usage. *Mliam* means "crying" but it also means "tears." When I worked among the Tiv in 1949-1952, it was still commonly found. Certain kinsmen of every deceased person were expected to do formal mourning over a corpse. Some of them made up dirges, or "crying tears." These songs were short, usually only no more than 8 or 10 notes. Invariably they started very high and fell downward, ending on a low note. Invariably they asked why the deceased had left his people. The most moving singing I have ever heard—anywhere—came during the funeral of Gesa, which I have described elsewhere (Bohannon 1957:196-203). The senior of his three widows created an *mliam* for him. The song itself was not unusual, as she repeated it over and over, but the voice was almost unbelievable. Her full, deep contralto had a timbre and security that ranked with Kathleen Ferrier, whose every concert within miles I attended during the years I lived in England. It was a totally startling experience to hear such a voice in these circumstances and to realize how Westerners would have talked of her "gift" and her "talent." One is used to Tiv being fine singers—but a concertgoer would have difficulty recognizing in an ordinary Tiv woman mourning her husband what in another culture might have been one of the great voices of an age.

Chapter 2 is called "Song in the Tiv Imagination." By analyzing the meanings in songs, and the social context in which they are presented, Keil makes some interesting observations—the Tiv "concern with fragmentation and dismemberment of the body" (p. 66), "no sex without song" (p. 81), and "song is used by one character to point out the guilt of or pin the blame on another" (p. 82).

This chapter also contains a good preliminary analysis of what are usually called "folk tales" but which among Tiv are the story frameworks of "theater pieces" containing songs with audience responses, and sometimes several actors. À la Vladimir Propp, he does a preliminary analysis of "deeper" ideas and categories reflected in the tales and songs. Tiv "song" is very complex because it contains so many aspects of theater and because it uses a complex oral literature as its base. It is, astonishingly, a *visual* art when it is raised to its highest peak. Tiv song, indeed, is the point at which—like Wagner's perception of opera—myth, music, painting, literature, and drama all meet. Also like Wagner, without the song the whole thing would be absurd (maybe Wagnerian opera is absurd even with the song, for all that it is magnificent music). Without the song, the whole ethos of the Tiv people cannot be summarized and encapsulated. The major difference, of course, is that the Tiv are simple and straightforward and carry none of the artistic overburden that Wagner foisted on himself and on whatever parts of the musical world would listen and take it seriously.

Keil reckons, in Chapter 3 dealing with Tiv composers, that there are at least 1000 composers among the 1 million Tiv. He estimates that 5 percent are women. He names over 450 Tiv composers and talked with many. His chapter focuses specifically on 8 of them.

Most composers claim that they compose indoors and that the best position in which to do it is lying flat on your back. He notes that what they see are the intricate "circles and angles" of the Tiv roof. All workers among the Tiv know that the inner roof epitomizes some sort of mystique. Like Keil, I too learned the word almost my first day of learning the language from them, as it is a special mark of "Tivness." I have lived in several Tiv huts for months on end; I have often lain flat on my back in them. But I slept covered by a mosquito net. That imported mosquito net may have protected my health (a moot point), but it certainly put a gauze curtain between me and the arch-symbol of the Tiv, as much as did my teachers' training about social structure or my own personality. Like all of us, I had imported my screens, my biases. Sometimes it is only years later, through someone else's eyes, that one sees what one might have seen without the blinders. Yet Keil's explanations about that symbol leave me a little uneasy. I do not doubt a word of it; at the same time Tiv cannot say it the way Keil does. It is the same difficulty I find with the anthropologist Keil refers to as "le grand Claude." I remain ambivalent about the interpretation at the same time that I find it "right."

I cannot go past this chapter without telling still another story on myself. After about 4 months of field work, I thought I was able to begin seriously to do research among the Tiv. My language was shaky, and some of the early material (of course) proved later to be wrong. But I nevertheless did get a lot of stuff right. There were, however, errors—indeed a couple of the boo-boos turned out to be hilarious. But none as hilarious as the one I wrote down about Tiv singing at the end of my second month. The Tiv, I wrote in





my notes, have trained voices, they take lessons. I knew that the singing was of extremely high quality, and that it was practiced, and that (for all the differences in style) it had what Keil calls a "Tiv sound." Only 10 months later did I discover how seriously I had misinterpreted what I had been told. A Tiv composer—I called him a songmaker in my book (Bohannan 1957:142 ff.)—who had been hired to compose scurrilous songs about the adversary of his patron set me right. What indeed happens is that the prospective singer-composer goes to a man who controls the medicine of the proper "fetish" (Tiv, *akombo*) and pays to be given the medicine for singing. According to my information (and Keil says the same on p. 164), the medicine is composed of the brain and the tongue of the *icharegh* (weaver-bird), whose song is admired, and of several well-known plants that have to do with masculinity and femininity and several virtues (I learn from Keil that *nomhur*, which I know only as a standard "masculine" herb, also clears the throat). Once one is fortified with the proper ritual and the right medicine, then one is able to compose better songs. Since I had been told that the neophyte composer goes to a master of singing (when they meant the *akombo* of singing), I in my ethnocentrism assumed that he went for voice lessons. Just so are ethnographic "errors" made.

Keil's detail about Tiv composers is absolutely delightful at the same time that it gives a clear view of the way music and composition fit into an African culture. Chapter 4 is called "Technique and Style." Songs accommodate the tones of the language: "Phonemic tone establishes an important and complex parameter for the construction of Tiv songs" (p. 172). "Every Tiv song has its foundation in a particular sense of motion.... Roughly 90 per cent of the songs in folk tales correspond with motion of some kind—dancing, beating a drum, love-making, hoeing, weaving, pounding grain, grinding, scooping water, traveling along the path" (p. 172).

"All composers work with a dance meter or meters in mind" (p. 172).

By now, he has also been able to get at some of the characteristics of Tiv songs that make them "sound so very Tiv": "wide range, wide intervals, angular phrases, repetitive monotones, open-ended responses, 'twin tonics,' minimum improvisation."

In Chapter 5, "Circles and Angles," Keil is eloquent and convincing about the culture-bound dimensions of most of the "theories" of art and aesthetics (his discussion could be applied except for details to anything else): "The very inapplicability of Tiv culture to most of their [the theorists'] hypotheses... seems instructive" (p. 187). Keil has it right—it is *not* the inapplicability of such hypotheses to Tiv culture, for to say it that way gives the hypotheses a sort of stability and honorable existence that they do not deserve in any ethnography, no matter what their usefulness in comparative studies.

Here is a good example of the way ethnographers learn about their own culture:

With our pressing need to rid ourselves of rulers, religion, myths and art, the Tiv have much to teach us. They have no rulers; the influence of elders rises and falls, depending on how wisely they exercise it, and prominent men today can be ostracized tomorrow. They have no religion; in its place is an abiding and profound awareness that the survival of some is predicated on the death of others. They have no mythology, but tales are acted out with great energy and with relevance to everyday life. They have no art, though there are more song makers and expert dancers per capita than in any society known to me. [p. 186]

Once in a while we are fortunate enough to have a first-class piece of ethnography, one that illuminates not only the people that it concerns, but one that throws gleaming shafts of illumination onto our own way of being human. *Tiv Song* is such a book.

Girnya

Keil notes (p. 130) that the war dance known as *girnya* is still occasionally performed as entertainment, but without the heads of slain enemies which was one of its traditional markers. They were hafted on poles and lifted high and shaken by the dancers. In 1949 I saw and photographed (Figures 1-6) a "new-style" *girnya* in MbaDuku in southern Tivland. The heads of enemies were replaced by the heads of sacrificed goats. (The goats' heads were indeed hoisted, but my photographs of the rest of this event were with many others in a box that was lost in my move from Northwestern to Santa Barbara.)

Figure 1 Kyagba, the eldest member and acknowledged leader of all MbaDuku and even of larger lineage areas, begins the dance. He carries a matchet to signify weapons; his beginning the dance means that everyone in the lineage is involved.



Figure 2 Individual combat is reenacted by older dancers.



Figure 3 Goats are staked in the middle of the ground. Kyagba and his eldest son, Chenge, tie and check the position of one of the four goats.



Figure 4 The music begins.

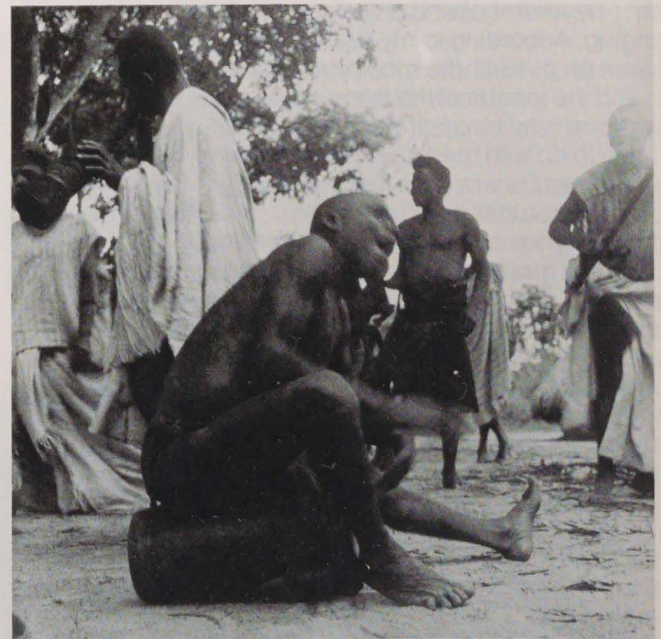


Figure 5 Dancers hold spears, on the end of which the goats' heads will be hoisted, representing the heads of enemies. The goats are then beheaded in the course of the dance.



Figure 6 Kyagba eats the first bit of cooked meat, from the tip of the war spear. After this, the general dancing and feasting goes on for the rest of the day.



Jurij Lotman. *Semiotics of the Cinema.* Mark E. Suino, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1976. \$3.00 (paper).

Review essay by Jerry L. Salvaggio
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While American scholars continue to attend primarily to the semiotic and structuralist writings emanating from Western Europe, an equally large body of semiotic work is simultaneously being produced in Eastern Europe. In addition to Vladimir Propp's (1968) structuralist study of folklore, V. V. Ivanov (1976) has written on cinema and the history of semiotics, and Boris Uspensky (1975, 1976) has written on visual iconography. Other significant semioticians currently writing in Eastern Europe include A. M. Pjatigorsky (1974) and Peter Bogatyrev (1976).¹

Jurij Mikhaylovich Lotman is perhaps the most prolific representative of the Moscow-Tartu semiotic group.² As a professor of Russian Literature at Tartu State University, Lotman has already written well over one hundred articles, most of which have not been translated into English.³

If Christian Metz's goal in *Film Language* (1974) was to develop a structural-semiotic methodology for textual analysis of the narrative film, Lotman's objective is to advance a theory of how film functions as a language. Unfortunately, the same rigorous analysis and use of cybernetics and information theory which characterized Lotman's *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (1977) is not found in *Semiotics of the Cinema*. Rather than developing a theory of cinema comparable to his complex study of poetry and literature, Lotman has simply elevated Eisenstein's ideas into a semiotic system which does little to explain the process of film communication.

Lotman's failure to clarify the major problems of film-communication casts an unwarranted doubt on semiotic methodology in general. This is unfortunate, since semioticians were the first to seriously raise fundamental questions concerning film syntax and semantics. Though Lotman has covered many of these questions in this small monograph, I shall limit this review to an examination of his shortcomings in four areas: In what sense is film a language? What is the relationship between film and reality? Does film have a syntax? And finally, how does film achieve meaning?