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KWAGH-HIR AS AN INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: A PERSPECTIVE ON THE QUESTION OF RELEVANCE IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

Solomon Idyo
Film and Photography,
School of Arts, Communication & Design,
University of Malawi, Zomba
sidyo@unima.edu
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9048-1561

Abstract
Despite its inscription on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (ICH), Kwagh-hir has been rapidly going into oblivion due to a number of factors. This paper thus discusses the enduring relevance and impact of *Kwagh-hir* theatre in a postmodern world and stresses the need for the resuscitation and preservation of this great cultural art form, product and indeed heritage of the Tiv people of Benue State. The qualitative approach of research was taken in this study, utilizing both primary and secondary sources to generate its data. The primary tools deployed were personal interviews and participant observation. Moreso, the study engaged a document analysis tool to mine relevant data. This study was anchored on and grounded in the UNESCO Framework of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which has provided a widely recognized framework for the identification and preservation of intangible cultural heritage. Findings of this study showed that the *Kwagh-hir* art form, which was hitherto amongst the few surviving indigenous arts, but now faces a similar fate to several tribal arts that have sunk into oblivion and some have gone into oblivion after coming in contact with modernity. This paper establishes *Kwagh-hir* as a dynamic cultural art form of the Tiv people, enumerating its cultural, social, political, national, and even international significance and relevance in present-day society. This concludes by canvassing the urgent need to resuscitate and preserve Kwagh-hir for posterity.

Keywords: *Kwagh-Hir*, Theatre, Intangible, Cultural Heritage, Relevance, Postmodern World

Introduction

In an earlier study (Idyo 2025), this writer has advocated the preservation of *Kwagh-hir* puppetry theatre performances for posterity. In particular, this writer has examined the possibilities that film archiving offers for the preservation, access, and revenue generation of video films of Kwagh-hir performances. This earlier study discussed how to preserve video films of *Kwagh-hir* performances through archiving for posterity at a time when the art is gradually fading away and going into oblivion. Amongst other findings in the earlier study or studies by this writer on the *Kwagh-hir*, it has been established that the *Kwagh-hir,* which was hitherto amongst the few surviving indigenous performance arts of the Tiv people in Nigeria and beyond, has since faced a similar fate of fading away and even going into oblivion after coming in contact with modernity.

This earlier study has highlighted an urgent need to preserve and promote *Kwagh-hir* as an indigenous art form and to establish Kwagh-hir video film archivesto preserve the video

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films of *Kwagh-hir* performances for posterity. However, one may wonder as to why such concerted efforts should be made over an art form like the *Kwagh-hir* puppetry theatre. In other words, what significance does this art form have in a postmodern world? It is pertinent to recall that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) had on Thursday, December 12, 2019, at the 14th session of the Inter-governmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage held in Bogota, Colombia, adopted and inscribed the Tiv *Kwagh-hir* performance on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity.

The adoption and inscription of the *Kwagh-hir* theatre on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity by UNESCO is not a development that should be treated lightly. It took so much effort to achieve this feat, as Gowon Doki, one of the figures at the centre of the efforts leading to this development, testified (personal interview). In other words, the inscription of the *Kwagh-hir* theatre as an intangible cultural heritage did not happen on political grounds, but rather on the basis of the enduring cultural value and relevance of this artform. As such, it seems to be a matter of great concern that an art form of this magnitude will face the kind of neglect and near erasure as it seems to be in its present state. It is to this end that this study underscores the potentially enduring relevance and significance of the *Kwagh-hir* theatre as a product of intangible cultural heritage, even in a postmodern world.

UNESCO's Framework of Intangible Cultural Heritage

This study is conceptually and functionally anchored on and grounded in the UNESCO Framework of Intangible Cultural Heritage. It is a given that UNESCO's definition of intangible cultural heritage has been confronted with serious academic criticism over the years for several reasons. However, despite these criticisms, this definition, as Dewi et al rightly acknowledge, "has provided a widely recognized framework for the identification and preservation of intangible cultural heritage" (71). Additionally, "it has legitimized the cultural practices of diverse communities, ensuring they are valued and protected" (710). Nevertheless, it has also provided a conceptual framework within which to undertake critical studies in the area of cultural heritage and this is what this current study relies upon.

Going back to the definition itself, UNESCO in the "2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage" posited that 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' means "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith, that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (5). Furthermore, UNESCO maintains that: This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (5).

This conceptual framework aligns very much with the *Kwagh-hir* theatre heritage. It has been transmitted from generation to generation to this point, when it is going into oblivion. *Kwagh-hir* has constantly been recreated and by Tiv communities and groups in response to the social, political environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides Tiv people with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. *Kwagh-hir* blends puppetry, masquerading, music,

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dance, and storytelling to educate, entertain, and teach moral lessons, reflecting the social realities, history, and values of the Tiv people in totality. Also significant in UNESCO's framework is the concept of "safeguarding". In this light, UNESCO's convention maintained:
'Safeguarding' means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage" (5).

This study finds this consistent with what is required to be done about the *Kwagh-hir* as a vibrant cultural heritage. It deserves to be safeguarded. Deliberate measures must be put in place to ensure the revival and sustainability of this great cultural heritage. These include all of the areas highlighted in UNESCO's framework: identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of the *Kwagh-hir* heritage. It is in view of the foregoing propositions of UNESCO's Framework of Intangible Cultural Heritage that this study has attempted to examine the enduring significance and relevance of *Kwagh-hir* in a postmodern world.

Methodological Approach

The qualitative approach of research was taken in this study, utilizing both primary and secondary sources to generate its data. The primary tools deployed were personal interviews as well as participant observation. Moreso, the study engaged a document analysis tool to mine relevant data. Thus, texts of all kinds (articles, seminar papers, journals, and other books of readings) were largely consulted for that purpose, including credible online sources. Other than texts, the researcher's observation of cultural events and happenings, especially those surrounding *Kwagh-hir* theatre performances over the years in Benue, contributed significantly to the generation, analysis and interpretation of the data in this study.

This study conducted personal interviews in three ways: face-to-face, by phone, and by email because of the distance between two of the interviewees. The interviewees were Mr Lazarus Samber, Mr Stephen Tyozua, and Mr Emmanuel Ajinge, all of the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture; Professor Iyorwuese Hagher of African Leadership Institute, Dayton, Ohio, United States; Professor Gowon Ama Doki of the Benue State University, Makurdi; and Ethan Rider and Richard Bunch of the "Jerome Bunch Collection" and "The Jerome Bunch *Kwagh-hir* Group", USA.

The above selected interviewees were considered the right authorities to share opinions on the subject matter, having made their efforts in that regard over the years. In addition to personal interviews in this study, several documents on the major variables, *Kwagh-hir* and intangible cultural heritage, were reviewed, from which relevant data were generated for this study. Additionally, the participant observation tool formed the basis of data generation and analysis from the researcher's personal experiences of *Kwagh-hir* performances and developments around the art form in Benue State. These methods and tools put together proved to be effective in the inquiry leading to the findings of the study.

Historical Background of the *Kwagh-hir* Theatre

It is important to locate the Tiv *Kwagh-hir* theatre in the history and in the tradition of the community. The origin of the *Kwagh-hir* can be said to be in three phases. Foremost, the *Kwagh-hir* is rooted in the storytelling tradition of the Tiv people. Storytelling in Tiv land

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was done with the storyteller using symbols, costumes and props in enacting his stories. Not only these, but the storyteller also acts out, mimes and dances to give life to his acts as well (Hagher 51). The elaborate and character representations inherent in the Tiv traditional storytelling culture are, no doubt, one of the influential origins of the Tiv puppetry theatre tradition. Other factors that may have given birth to the Tiv *Kwagh-hir* include various protests and revolts. In the Tiv traditional belief, the world's inhabitants are divided into three main categories: the spirits, human beings, and animals (Akinsipe 47).

The spirits are identified as the *adzov* or *ijov,* who are unseen mates of the living who, in everything they do, reside with and act like humans. We also have the *Mbatsav*, who are believed to be human beings with extraordinary or "spiritual" powers of Tsav which they acquire and manipulate to their own advantage, and almost always, at the expense of other human beings. The *Mbatsav*, therefore, are the wicked (evil or dangerous) people of the society, like witches, sorcerers and wizards. The need to curb and check the activities and wrongdoings of the *Mbatsav* in the Tivland had led to a series of protests and revolts from the "Hoyo cult" in the first decade of the 19th century, the *Ijov* cult movement of 1912, the *Haakaa* in 1929 and the *Nyambuan* of 1939. The first form of protest was against spiritual oppression, while the second one was a reflection of human, political (colonial/post-colonial) and religious oppression. This was most evident in the *Haakaa* and *Nyambuan* revolts (Akinsipe 47).

The strong belief and the fear of *Mbatsav* in the Tiv people made governance difficult for the colonial masters. It also hindered the conversion of most of the Tiv people to Christianity. This was why the colonial masters and the missionaries combined in the *Haakaa* to launch an attack on the *Mbatsav* to "liberate the Tiv from the props of fear of the *Mbatsav* as well as help the missionaries in converting the Tivs that were "freed", to Christianity (Hagher 36). One of the things the colonial masters did was demand the artefacts of Tasv from people suspected of possessing them. However, this only led the clever people to quickly improvise various artefacts at a massive and speedy rate in order not to part with the real idols. This gave rise to the making of fake ones and this had important consequences for the later development of puppetry for the theatrical tradition in Tiv land (Hagher 38).

Another revolt that has direct linkage to and influence on the *Kwagh-hir* is the *Nyambuan* of 1939. It was both a revolt against the Tsav and the British administration. It involves a kind of drama in which all the political forces were attacked. In their dramatic enactments, they not only ridiculed the unholy alliance of the missionaries and the colonial agents but also exposed the disorder of an imposed alien rule. The drama of protest was followed by a resolution not to pay any taxes to the white man (Hagher 41). The colonial administrators did not take kindly to this refusal to pay taxes that spread all through Tiv land. The *Nyambuan* revolt was crushed with utter brutality and this then forced the dramatists (revolters) to go underground.

When the modern *Kwagh-hir* began about two decades later, the dramatic enactment of people impersonating other human beings, as well as speech and dialogue, was absent. This must have been due to the brutal experience of 1939. Therefore, instead of the realistic actor, a marionette was created and instead of speech, dialogue was songs and gestures. This probably marks the beginning of weaving the stories in dance and creating new dances to reflect peculiar historical epochs, which arebelieved to be a natural desire of the Tivs (Iorapuu 35). This is exactly how the modern *Kwagh-hir* is practised today. In 1960 and 1963, during another revolt against government repression in Tiv land, the protesters wore

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costumes similar to those worn by the *Kwagh-hir* players. The "rioters" also called themselves *adzov*, similar to the *adzov* shown in the *Kwagh-hir* (Hagher 109).

When a combined team of police and Nigerian Army officers eventually disbanded the rioters in 1964, the *Kwagh-hir* art form emerged shortly after, using songs, dances and puppetry as its chief means of communication. It is thus "the introduction of the Puppet into the storytelling and poetic and dance traditions that began the modern *Kwagh-hir* (Hagher 107). According to Iyorwuese Hagher, the Tiv do not want the personalization of artworks. The Tiv would attribute any level of excellence to witchcraft; tsav or *adzov*, who could protect the gifted from harm of other Tsav. Thus, his inquisition into the originator of the *kwagh-hir* may have been lost on the Tiv people. Hence, they offered the leading *kwagh-hir* artist (Tor-*Kwagh-hir*) as the originator. Hagher concluded that no one person started the *kwagh-hir* in its present form (44–48).

However, Gowon Ama Doki avers that contemporary *kwagh-hir* puppet theatre owes its birth to Adikpo Songu from the Mbatyav clan in Gboko area of Benue State when he held an audience spellbound with his puppets and masquerades in 1960 (128). Nevertheless, the nexus of *kwagh-hir* scholars, including Doki, is that, like any other theatrical performance, *kwagh-hir* cannot be linked to a single individual as an originator. Rather, it is a creation of a people's mass populace, coming together to share experiences. It was in the 1960s that the extraordinary creative statement of *kwagh-hir* was made; combining visual, musical, creative and kinetic arts to expand the words of a storyteller into the form of a whole theatre (Hagher, *The Kwagh-hir Theatre* 44–48; Doki 128; Harper 371–376; Hagher, *The Tiv Kwagh-Hir Theatre* 12–61).

The State of *Kwagh-hir* in a Postmodern World

Kwagh-hir, a singular subject that has enjoyed abundant scholarship over the years, has been described as an art, an activity, a festival, and an event (Hagher 23). Hagher, the foremost scholar of the art, argued that the *Kwagh-hir* is a form of African theatre in the sense that it provided secular entertainment, education, and socialization through the enactment of the past and contemporary events, by performers using puppets and masquerades (Hagher 23). *Kwagh-hir* is a puppet theatre of the Tiv people of Benue State, Nigeria. There is no doubt that a typical African (Nigerian) festival or theatre is a fusion of some or all the performing arts and the visual arts, music, dance, drama, mime, pantomime, poetry, costume display, masks, etc. The *Kwagh-hir* perfectly falls into this category.

From the 1960s, when the contemporary form of *Kwagh-hir* puppet theatre is generally considered to have emerged in (Doki 128) to precisely in the 70s, 80s and 90s, the *Kwagh-hir* puppet theatre troupe under the Benue State Arts council, toured the world entertaining various audiences and holding them spell bound as a spectacle, while they tell stories using mime, costume, and scenery, to simply interpret the musical accompaniment usually composed for a particular occasion. However, as the years rolled by, from the 1990s into the 2000s, *Kwagh-hir* activities began to decline until they faded away at a point in time due to several factors that are not the focus of this study. This period witnessed the death of *Kwagh-hir* performance and activities. Eventually, there was a return of *Kwagh-hir* in 2016. This was orchestrated by the administration of Governor Samuel Ortom, which stepped in to revive the *Kwagh-hir* festival.

The return of the 2016 Fiesta, with the theme "Celebration of Creativity," created no small excitement among spectators, participants, and even event sponsors, including the Benue State government in collaboration with NEXIM Bank. Thus, ever since then until 2022, as at

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the time of this study, there have been pockets of *Kwagh-hir* performance activities here and there in Benue State and scarcely any other parts of the country and world. With the return of *Kwagh-hir,* performance activities also came the availability and accessibility of recording devices like cameras, camcorders, phone cameras, etc. This way, everywhere *Kwagh-hir* performances were and are presented, whether organized by the clan, community, Local government or the State government, they were and are recorded formally by the organizers and informally by the viewers.

These video films help to preserve the memory of the performance, are distributed to reach a wider audience and when preserved, could be available for posterity. However, it is the observation of this study that the video films of *Kwagh-hir* performances and the art form itself are going into oblivion of late. This situation is occasioned by several factors like lack of sponsorship, insecurity, influx of modern entertainment media, etc. However, to lose the video films of *Kwagh-hir* performances and the art itself will be to lose such a great dynamic cultural heritage of the Tiv people. To this end, this study found film archiving as an option for the preservation of video films of *Kwagh-hir* performances that are fast going into oblivion. This could be done by building *Kwagh-hir* video film archives, which would significantly contribute to preserving the Tiv people's rich cultural heritage for posterity.

By this, video footage of Kwagh-hir performances, available in different formats (VCDs, DVDs, YouTube videos, etc.) and from different sources scattered across the country and the world, could be collected and deposited in a Kwagh-hir video film archive, for the purpose of preservation, access, and revenue generation. If these video films of *Kwagh-hir* performances scattered around are not collected, organized and preserved, they may be lost with time and this great heritage contained in them would be lost as well. This is because only a video or film archive has the capacity to safeguard storage for even centuries; as a video in an archive, even in a digital storage format, has an estimated lifespan of about a hundred years (100).

However, in the state where the video films of *Kwagh-hir* performances are found, there is very little or no likelihood of their survival in the next fifty (50) years or less. This study thus examined the potential of film archiving in preserving video films of *Kwagh-hir* performances and how this can be done to prevent them from diminishing with time. This study thus focused on examining film archiving as an option for the preservation of video films of *Kwagh-hir* performances found in Benue State and across the world, available in different formats like VCDs, DVDs, YouTube videos, etc., for posterity.

This writer, in an earlier study, considered Kwagh-hir video films recorded over the years and available at the time of research, including VCDs, DVDs, and YouTube videos. These *Kwagh-hir* video films in the hands of individuals, YouTube, stores of the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture and Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) Makurdi Centre, etc., may suffer loss with time. However, if a dedicated archive is created and these videos are collected, digitized and preserved, they have the potential to last for a period of a hundred (100) years with the option to reconfigure them to last even longer. Thus, the study was conducted within the boundaries of the following concepts: film archiving, preservation, and video recordings of *Kwagh-hir* performances.

The Relevance of *Kwagh-hir* Theatre in a Postmodern World

It is pertinent to state that, if the *Kwagh-hir* theatre had no form of cultural, social, political, national and even international significance and relevance in the present-day society, there

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would be little or no need to spend hours putting ink on paper, canvassing for it to be archived so as to preserve it for posterity. But because the *Kwagh-hir* theatre is a composite art form that is replete with significance and relevance on all fronts, even in our postmodern world, the earlier study has apparently been necessary. At this point in the current study, therefore, the writer has turned the focus to discussing the socio-political, economic, national, and international significance and relevance of the Kwagh-hir theatre, which makes it a potential art form to be preserved via the mechanism of archiving. This is done within the parameters of UNESCO's "Intangible Cultural Heritage and Social Development" framework.

The Cultural Relevance of *Kwagh-hir* Theatre

Needless to say, one of the major takeaways from UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage is its recognition of the "importance of the intangible cultural heritage as a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development" (3). This is true of the Kwagh-hir to a large extent. The *Kwagh-hir* is a vibrant Tiv theatrical performance and more so, "more than just entertainment" according to the Mdzough u Tiv. *Kwagh-hir* is a vibrant cultural institution that combines puppetry, masquerade, music, dance, and storytelling into a dynamic spectacle that both entertains and educates. If *Kwagh-hir* is described as a cultural institution, it lends credence to the fact that its cultural significance and relevance are transgenerational.

Arguably, the *Kwagh-hir* theatre is the biggest cultural art form of the Tiv people of Nigeria. Apparently, it is a composite art form that encapsulates and communicates the totality of the Tiv people's origin, worldview, moral values, development, challenges, hopes and aspirations and has been utilized for diverse purposes over the years; for instance, to educate, inform, entertain, conscientize, resist external influences, to mention but a few. "Mdzough u Tiv" equally recognize the *Kwagh-hir* as "a powerful affirmation of Tiv identity, language, and artistic expression, especially important in an increasingly globalized world". This goes to show that in spite of the colossal effect of globalization with its saturation of digital media platforms, the cultural significance and relevance of the *Kwagh-hir* remains critical. Ukuma expands further as he states that:

> …it provides cultural content for the enjoyment of all members of society; deepens the practices of the people and critiques their everyday life; brings the community together to watch performances, therefore deepening social cohesion; employs specialist artists engaged in the visual and performance arts, therefore representing an important livelihood (4).

Similarly to Ukuma's position above, Panam et al. examine the cultural relevance og Kwagh-hir from the angle of aesthetics. They maintain that, "*Kwagh-hir* aesthetics are drawn from the patterns of the Tiv culture and depicts the Tiv understanding of their life. This is projected by the use of varied design concepts that are sewn into various styles so as to connote societal activities" (60). Indeed, the *Kwagh-hir* theatre is closely linked with the culture of the people; it depicts values, cultural traits and belief systems of the Tiv people. It is a potent cultural avenue for reawakening, promotion and preservation of the culture of the people. This has become more expedient as indigenous cultures face the danger of erasure by the forces of globalization and modernity.

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The Socio-Political Relevance of *Kwagh-hir* Theatre

The indigenous theatre landscape in Africa, and indeed in Nigeria, offers a rich resource for the articulation and appreciation of indigenous performance modes. This is because indigenous performances in Nigeria are closely tied to the socio-cultural and religious essence of the people (Ododo and Gana 249). In a similar vein, Jerry Idah Odey postulates that the changing social-political, cultural, religious and technological patterns here referred to as cultural subjects form the basis and ideation for design creation in *Kwagh-hir* theatre (13). It is through human creative ingenuity that these "socio-political patterns" are presented either in representational or presentational forms. With regards to *Kwagh-hir* in the foregoing light, Hagher informs that:

> The birth of *Kwagh-hir* came at the opportune time when the development of the art form combined with historical consequences... the *Kwagh-hir* origins can be found first and foremost in Tiv consciousness and ideological predilection. The Tiv concept of freedom and community are central to the innate nature of *Kwagh-hir* theatre as a vehicle for consolidating social and political egalitarianism (89-90).

Therefore, the thematic focus of *Kwagh-hir* informs its various design formations. Presented in skits, each of these skits dramatizes different subjects. Again, to gain full insight into the various subjects of *Kwagh-hir*, it is pertinent to refer to Gowon Doki's lucid explanation of the thematic preoccupation of this performance element, which includes:

i. Cosmological and ontological reality
ii. Occupational reality
iii. Contemporary and social reality (137)

It is within the context of these realities that design creations and utilization in *Kwagh-hir* performance will be understood. For the purpose of this study, only the contemporary and socio-political reality thematic niche of *Kwagh-hir* is of great interest. Doki writing on the contemporary and social thematic tilt of *Kwagh-hir* maintains that skits "offer valuable commentary on the social purviews of the society from where the *Kwagh-hir* derives its themes of dramatization". He further writes that, "Dominant socio-political, economic, religious and cultural phenomena constitute the major headings upon which puppets, masquerade and animals are designed and created. Also, included are plays that present aspects of modern technology that are not easily explained by Tiv technology or worldview" (151).

As a theatrical performance, the aesthetic foundation of the *Kwagh-hir,* according to Hagher, is to return mankind to laughter, which is best expressed when there is harmony as expressed above. Therefore, the aesthetic foundation and focus on harmony are what situates the *Kwagh-hir* style in its expressive mould, ruled by playfulness and surprise. The performers manifesting as musicians, dancers and audience together create an activity, the *Kwagh-hir*, the magic, which is characterized by specialized nuances that are unique to the Tiv culture (qtd. in Ododo and Gana 255).

The Economic Value of *Kwagh-hir* Theatre

Culture is the vehicle that drives tourism. It is the product, which we have in abundant supply in Nigeria that are now making conscious efforts to boost their internally generated revenue (IGR) through the promotion of cultural tourism. As a point of fact, cultural tourism, as an aspect of tourism, embodies historical sites and places, people's cultures, art

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forms, as well as sharing their social, political, and economic experiences at least during the visit (Doki, *Indigenous Art Forms* 122-129). This explains why various states are embarking on the development of unique tourism products.

Ama Gowon Doki looks at the *Kwagh-hir* theatre from the perspective of its cultural tourism potentials in Nigeria, which, he says, rightly, is enormous. According to him, apart from the actual theatrical performance of *Kwagh-hir*, the artistic finesse of the puppets and masquerades could easily attract tourists. Furthermore, the skill and dexterity of fine artists and carvers of the *Kwagh-hir* totems could be developed into finely constructed artefacts used for exterior and interior decorations. These items, if collected for art exhibitions and carnival displays, could be purchased, thus attracting foreign earnings. He surmises that, with the level of *Kwagh-hir* theatre today on the tourism map, it could attract both local and international tourists if it is transformed into a national festival. The implication is that it will receive elaborate publicity, thereby boosting the economic base of Nigeria's tourism sector and the country at large (Doki, *Indigenous Art Forms* 122-129).

Ayakoroma goes on to highlight services that people can seamlessly carry out during cultural festivals like Kwagh-hir withoutbeing part of the official organising committee, thus promoting the economic life of the people. These include, airport shuttles, inter- and intra-city transportation, hotel accommodation and other lodging facilities, volunteer security services, retail of food and drinks, electronic and print media publicity, unofficial tour guides, production and sale of arts and crafts, production and sale of indigenous dresses, printing of posters, flyers, banners, T-shirts, face caps, and other souvenirs, photo and video services.

From the foregoing, we could safely posit that there are several benefits to celebrating the creativity and economic potential of a cultural art form like *Kwagh-hir*. The *Kwagh-hir* theatre, undoubtedly, can make a special brand and it can contribute significantly to the economic development of Benue State and Nigeria at large. There is no gainsaying that Benue State, "the food basket of the nation," is endowed with a rich and diverse cultural heritage, which finds expression in the colourful cloths, exotic masquerades, sophisticated music and dances of the people, all wrapped up in the *Kwagh-hir* theatre. It thus remains to convert the art's potential into enhancing the state's economic development.

The National and Global Impact of *Kwagh-hir* Theatre

By the early 70s in Nigeria, when the festivals of Arts began as a form of reuniting the country after the Civil War, and different states were encouraged to come out with their dances and arts, the *Kwagh-hir,* which soon became the trademark of Benue state, emerged from the Tiv land and later featured at FESTAC '77. Since then, several groups have emerged and the *Kwagh-hir* has been used to educate, entertain and instruct audiences all over the world. Lyndersay asserts that the Ibiobio and the Tiv puppets in Nigeria are used to "illustrate current and historical events, as well as incorrect behaviour, minority opinions, ignorant indigenes, obnoxious foreigners, simpletons or fools, and other aspects considered undesirable in the society" (356).

The Tiv *Kwagh-hir* has doubtlessly served this purpose, surviving where most (indigenous) ethnic theatrical forms such as the Yoruba Alarinjo travelling theatre have fizzled out or have been stamped away by religious and cultural imperialism and particularly by social, economic, political, and technological challenges and pop culture (qtd. in Aguoru 13). According to Adelugba, *Kwagh-hir* has moved from being an ancient art into contemporary

relevance, in his words, "… *Kwagh-hir* fits in my own overall view ... the role of the theatre" (qtd. in Aguoru 13).

Iyorwuese Hagher's appointment as an ambassador is not undeserved because he and his team have continued to promote *Kwagh-hir* extensively, nationally and internationally. *Kwagh-hir* has been celebrated in countries such as Russia, Bulgaria, Great Britain and France, in essence, promoting international scholarship of the form. Instead of the dominant recurring themes that portray cultural conflict and resistance to Western medicine and technology in most of African literature, one finds that *Kwagh-hir* plays promote all-around enlightenment and technological advancement; examples of such plays are a doctor conducting a caesarean section, the Benue Cement factory, flying airplanes and mobile motorbikes (Aguoru 14–15).

Nevertheless, it bears mentioning that *Kwagh-hir* has attained and sustained national and global success, and consistent efforts must be made by the Tiv nation to develop, preserve and keep the form relevant in contemporary times. It is glaring to note in that respect, as noted earlier in this study, that, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) had on Thursday, December 12, at the 14th session of the Inter-governmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage held in Bogota, Colombia, adopted and inscribed the Tiv *Kwagh-hir* performance on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity. This makes it the 5th of Nigeria's inscription on the Representative List.

With this inscription, it was expected that it would not only increase the element's visibility but also enhance the dignity and pride of the performing community. It is equally the expectation that, by this inscription, *Kwagh-hir* would now enjoy the support and protection of UNESCO. This kind of development definitely contributes significantly to the preservation of the arts and cultures of the peoples that Kwagh-hir theatre encompasses, thereby promoting an extremely positive and strong national identity, which is the identity of most successful nations in the world. All of the above and more are critical factors that place the *Kwagh-hir* theatre on a high pedestal of relevance; thus, making it a veritable product that deserves preservation for posterity via the agency of archiving, especially with the seemingly unlimited possibilities that digital archiving offers today.

Conclusion

This study, drawing from UNESCO's framework, has established that, most undoubtedly, the preservation of cultural heritage resources is essential to sustainable development. It recognizes the importance of cultural continuity and of human history in nourishing social cohesion, a sense of self, of belonging, and of place in a context within which to understand the past and to contemplate the future. Consequently, efforts to preserve resources on cultural heritage have gained new momentum throughout the world nowadays; even as protecting cultural heritage is economical, as well as historical and also a cultural process. Likewise, this study's findings revealed that, while cultural heritage preservation has not yet become firmly rooted in the Nigerian consciousness as football is, a great number of people and organizations see cultural resources as critical to the nation's economic development through tourism.

Owing to the fact that cultural heritage is based on the aspects of our past that we cherish, there is a great need to preserve and pass on to future generations and the outside world. There are equally economic benefits of preservation, which may be secondary to the

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intrinsic value of the heritage preserved; nevertheless, useful. It is sad to note that the producers of the *Kwagh-hir* theatre themselves have never given thought to the preservation of their artwork for posterity. Little wonder, the rich art form is on the verge of diminishing completely. To secure the *Kwagh-hir* theatre productions, so as to sustain the life of the art form and preserve it for posterity, archiving is not an option but a necessity. The makers of *Kwagh-hir* theatre must borrow a leaf from the filmmakers to create avenues to market their works and contribute significantly to sustaining the art that they have inherited.

Although *Kwagh-hir* has been fading away over the years, looking at the enduring relevance of this enigmatic art form, all hands must be on deck to ensure its resuscitation and preservation for posterity. In other words, drastic actions must be initiated to salvage the situation of this great cultural product from the Benue valley that is fast speeding into oblivion. Consequently, it is the position of this study that there is an urgent need to strategize on how to preserve and promote indigenous theatrical traditions like the *Kwagh-hir* performances under discourse here. This should encapsulate the transition of these forms and the cultural value system they showcase to the next generation—posterity. Institutionalizing them as is being done in other countries with strong national identities, which derive from their art and culture, must be an immediate national goal.

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