

RESOLVING THE AGE-LONG PROBLEM OF EVIL USING THE TIV INDIGENOUS RESOURCES

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ABSTRACT

The problem of evil remains a central challenge in theology and philosophy. Atheists often appeal to evil through logical or evidential arguments to question God's existence or attributes. The traditional view of God as loving, good, all-knowing, and all-powerful appears incompatible with the persistent reality of evil, particularly moral evil arising from human agency. This tension raises critical questions: If God did not create evil, where did it come from? If God knows about evil and can eliminate it, why does it persist? These questions have practical significance among the Tiv people of north-central Nigeria. Traditional Tiv responses to moral evil, including *Namakaa*, *Haakaa*, *Inyambuan*, and *Inyamora*, failed due to cruelty, lack of legitimacy, or ineffectiveness. This study focuses on Swem, a sacred and widely respected indigenous institution, nationally recognized across Tiv-land. Unlike earlier methods, Swem is non-violent, culturally coherent, and promotes justice by holding *Mbatsav* and envious individuals accountable. This research addresses a gap in scholarship: the absence of a systematic philosophical-theological framework that treats Tiv indigenous institutions as normative moral resources. While Tiv cosmology has been largely documented descriptively, and classical theodicy remains detached from African indigenous thought, little interdisciplinary work has integrated Tiv justice systems into philosophical ethics or Christian moral theology. Using qualitative methods, library research, and field interviews, the study develops a contextual moral-theological framework in which Swem functions as a culturally grounded institution for addressing moral evil. Swem embodies Tiv intuitions about justice, responsibility, and moral order. By integrating Tiv categories with philosophical ethics and Christian theodicy, the research offers an interdisciplinary model for contextual theology. The study contributes to African Christian theology, contextual Christology, and moral philosophy by showing that indigenous justice systems can constructively engage moral evil while affirming both local ethical resources and theological principles.

KEYWORDS: Problem of Evil, Tiv Indigenous resources, Moral Philosophy, Cosmology, and Witchcraft.

INTRODUCTION

The existence of evil presents a profound challenge to both theology and human experience. Despite numerous efforts over the years to address and resolve this issue, no lasting solution has been achieved. The presence of evil continues to cast doubt on the theistic claim that God is good, omnipotent, and benevolent. Theists cannot deny the reality of evil, as it is encountered daily in both natural and moral forms. Atheists often use the existence of evil as an argument against the existence of God, suggesting that a good and all-powerful God would not permit evil. If God neither created evil nor eradicates it, questions arise concerning His omnipotence and goodness.

Philosophers like Alvin Plantinga have responded to the atheist's disproof by offering explanations for why God and evil can coexist. Yet, the debate continues, with evil still posing challenges not only to theology but also to human society. Among the Tiv people of Benue State, Nigeria, evil has caused immense setbacks and underdevelopment. Many individuals live in fear, unable to confront evil or pursue societal advancement. Testimonies from various community members describe how evil has manifested in business failure, untimely death, sickness, infertility, crime, and poverty.

Attempts to combat evil through indigenous resources such as *Namakaa*, *Haakaa*, *Inyambuan*, and *Inyamor* have largely failed. These resources were not sanctioned by the traditional Tiv authority and were often motivated by personal gain. Furthermore, they brought about cruelty, civil unrest, hunger, and the weakening of traditional institutions. Consequently, the problem of evil remains unresolved. This issue is not limited to the Tiv people but continues to receive attention from scholars globally.

This study seeks to contribute to enduring responses to the problem of evil within Tiv society through a contextual analysis of *Swem* as an indigenous moral resource. Rather than proposing a universal or final resolution to the problem of evil, the research examines how *Swem* functions as a culturally grounded mechanism for interpreting, regulating, and responding to moral disorder within Tiv-land. Widely acknowledged as a nonviolent and justice-oriented institution, *Swem* occupies a central place in Tiv moral consciousness as a communal framework for accountability and social order.

The study first clarifies the nature of evil as a moral and relational disruption rather than merely an abstract metaphysical problem. Within this moral universe, *Swem* functions as a regulatory institution that responds to moral disorder through communal judgment and transcendent accountability. Philosophically, it operates analogously to Kant's conception of moral law as an externalized moral constraint and to Anselm's understanding of moral order as a structure of justice grounded in the good. *Swem* thus embodies the Tiv conviction that moral evil must be judged, exposed, and resolved, not merely explained. In this sense, Tiv indigenous categories do not exist outside philosophical discourse on evil but represent culturally embodied expressions of universal moral intuitions concerning justice, responsibility, and moral accountability.

Philosophers such as St. Anselm (1967) and St. Augustine describe evil as the "privation of good." Classical philosophical treatments of evil provide conceptual tools

for interpreting Tiv moral cosmology. Anselm's understanding of evil as *privatio boni* (privation of the good) resonates with Tiv moral ontology, where evil is not conceived as an independent metaphysical force but as a disruption of moral order, communal harmony, and covenantal balance. In Tiv thought, *tsav* represents a distortion of moral power rather than a neutral capacity, functioning as a corruptive force within social relations. This mirrors Anselm's claim that evil lacks ontological substance and exists only as moral corruption within created good (Anselm, *De Casu Diaboli*). According to utilitarian ethics, good refers to what benefits the greatest number of people. Thus, any condition that deprives most of well-being is considered evil (Tardi n.d). Some scholars define evil as that which disrupts the natural order and structure of the world, meant for good. Hopkins and Richardson (1976) observed that Anselm located the origin of evil in the fall of Satan, a view common in medieval theology. In contrast, Immanuel Kant attributed evil to human inclination, distancing himself from the idea of Satanic origin and even the will defense. Kant's moral philosophy, which locates evil in the misuse of human freedom and moral agency, provides a useful interpretive lens for understanding Tiv notions of moral responsibility. *Tsav*, in Tiv cosmology, is not merely a mystical capacity but a morally charged agency that can be directed toward communal protection or toward destructive manipulation. This parallels Kant's conception of radical evil as the deliberate subordination of moral law to self-interest (Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*).

Kendatsuba (2004) defines evil as any condition that causes pain, harm, or distress. Pecorino (2000) identifies two major types of evil: moral and natural. While both types affect people, the Tiv people suffer more from moral evil. Although this paper refers to witchcraft (*mbatsav*), its primary concern is not to explore witchcraft itself, but to understand the existence of evil, its impact on human life, and possible indigenous remedies.

Among the Tiv, *mbatsav* are believed to be responsible for numerous misfortunes, including illness, death, accidents, and social tragedies. Chiichi (1991) noted that no death occurs without the knowledge or involvement of *mbatsav*. Similarly, Ahenekaa and Achineku (1997) noted that even students were taught hygiene practices to counter the belief in *mbatsav* as the sole cause of sickness. Dzurgba (2006) provided vivid descriptions of how *mbatsav* allegedly operate. This study seeks to address these real-life concerns and offer a solution to moral evil, particularly through the use of indigenous and widely respected Tiv resources.

EVIL IN TIV SOCIETY

Possession of *Tsav* Element

In Tiv society, evil is referred to as *kwaghbo* in the singular and *akaabo* in the plural. One of the foundational beliefs among the Tiv is that moral evil is closely linked to the practice of *tsav*, which refers to a spiritual force or element associated with witchcraft. The perpetrators of evil are known as *mbatsav* witches and wizards who are believed to operate with this spiritual element. According to Tiv belief, *mbatsav* may either work for the good of the community or for its harm, creating a dual understanding of *tsav*.

There are two categories of *mbatsav* in the Tiv worldview. The first type is considered natural and is believed to be inherited by birth. This form of *tsav* is seen as a gift used to protect and purify society, often functioning as a force for justice or moral order. The second type, acquired rather than inherited, is believed to be counterfeit and is used for selfish or harmful purposes. This latter form is responsible for various destructive activities and is the focus of concern in this study. The paper specifically addresses the challenges arising from counterfeit *tsav* and its effects on society.

Dzurgba (2006) attributes many forms of evil in Tiv society to the activities of witches and wizards. He writes: "Witches and wizards are believed to have natural and inherent vices which mean evil or criminal activities such as adultery, stealing, robbery, murder, or assassination, forgery, impersonation, examination malpractice, electoral malpractice, and sexual harassment, among other evil criminal activities" (p. 142). *Mbatsav* are said to operate in the spiritual realm, where they manipulate natural elements to harm people. They are believed to send poisonous or deadly animals, such as snakes or scorpions, to attack individuals. They are also accused of destroying crops (resulting in poor harvests), causing miscarriages and barrenness, inflicting sickness on livestock, triggering accidents, and even causing untimely job loss or mysterious deaths.

Given that the Tiv are predominantly agricultural, any disruption to farming productivity, fertility, or child survival is interpreted as a serious misfortune. The drowning of individuals is also believed to be the result of *mbatsav* activity, often referred to as *mbatsavkor* or *shin mnger*. Victims are frequently found dead, having been spiritually overpowered. Amase (1999) affirms that *mbatsav* are believed to be capable of killing. Furthermore, *mbatsav* are accused of abducting individuals and hiding them in the forest, as well as engaging in cannibalistic practices.

In Tiv society, any negative phenomenon, especially one that brings suffering or opposes the well-being of the community, is believed to be caused by *mbatsav*. The consensus is that witches and wizards are behind much of the pain, hardship, and moral corruption experienced within the society.

Human Inclinations of the Heart

Scripture attests that "the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9, New International Version). This verse underscores a core biblical understanding: human beings are inherently susceptible to evil. Beyond the influence of *tsav* (as previously discussed), there exists another category of evil that arises directly from the corrupt inclinations of the human heart. This form of evil is not attributed to any spiritual force or inherited condition, but rather to the conscious decision of individuals to act malevolently.

Humans are capable of evil of their own volition. Many people harbour resentment and ill will toward the success or well-being of others. As Peter Genger (2020) observes, such behaviour is rooted in envy, the unwillingness to see others prosper. This envious disposition often leads individuals to devise harmful plans against others, thereby violating the communal spirit that defines Tiv society. Those who act with such malicious intent are typically ostracized and viewed as threats to the collective good, as their actions are motivated solely by personal interest.

These wicked inclinations manifest in various social vices, including theft, kidnapping, abuse, assault, gossip, lies, and hatred. Tiv society strongly condemns such behaviors. Historically, morality has been highly valued, and cultural mechanisms were put in place to uphold it. For instance, to protect unmarried girls from sexual abuse, the Tiv used the *Ikyor* (snail shell) emblem. Any man who violated this moral boundary would face serious consequences. Nevertheless, some individuals, driven by envy (*iyuhe*), disregarded such boundaries.

Luther Anum Timin (2019) explains envy as a state of discontent toward another person's success, where the envious person desires to appropriate the good fortune for themselves. Envy, he argues, contributes significantly to stagnation and underdevelopment in Tiv land. Additionally, fear of evil perpetrated by envious individuals has made many Tiv people conceal their achievements from relatives and the community. Timin notes that individuals often hide their wealth or progress out of fear that malicious individuals will scheme against them. The most persistent challenge, therefore, is identifying the actual perpetrators of evil. In what follows, this study will explore the traditional resources that have been used to confront and address the problem of evil in Tiv society.

INDIGENOUS RESOURCES FOR RESOLVING THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Over the years, evil has caused significant distress and setbacks in Tiv land, prompting a strong desire among the people to find effective means of combating it. In response, various indigenous resources were developed and adopted at different times to address the persistent challenge posed by evil. These indigenous resources refer to traditional methods and systems employed by the Tiv people in resisting and eradicating evil influences.

Namakaa/Haakaa Movement

One of the earliest indigenous efforts was the Namakaa/Haakaa movement, which emerged in 1929 as a campaign aimed at cleansing Tiv land of *tsav*-related activities that were believed to foster evil. Although the movement was facilitated by the British colonial administration, its roots were tied to local concerns about witchcraft and spiritual corruption. According to Weor (2012), the movement's objective was to identify and suppress witches and wizards (*mbatsav*), who were perceived as the perpetrators of various evils in Tiv society.

The Namakaa/Haakaa movement has been interpreted differently by scholars. While some see it as primarily political, others understand it as religious or social in nature. Ityavkase B. Shii (2013), for instance, argues that the movement had political undertones, citing an incident in Ukum where a failed promise of chieftaincy led to conflict and eventual colonial intervention. However, the primary aim of the movement was arguably religious and social: to eliminate perceived sources of spiritual and moral corruption.

A key historical account is that of Mr. Aganyi, who reported a case of cannibalism and murder to Captain Down, a British colonial officer. Aganyi accused four individuals, Ihoon, Agishi, Amu, and Chief Chembe, of conspiring to kill his

brother, Dzegeate, and beheading him. To prove the claim, Aganyi presented a severed head (later found to be from a different corpse), which prompted Captain Down to take aggressive measures. Suspects were tortured, and special courts were established throughout Tiv land to investigate and confiscate items believed to be linked to *mbatsav* practices. Gyangyan Ierve (n.d.) provides a detailed list of such confiscated items, including *Abengamtende*, *Ikyehgeh*, *Adeunee*, *Ambe*, *Atsuku*, and *Bagu*, among others.

Out of fear of punishment, many people surrendered their items voluntarily, while others disposed of them secretly. Despite the initial momentum, the Namakaa/Haakaa movement ultimately failed to achieve its intended objective. According to Shii (2013), "Many people lost their lives during Naakaa, and since Tiv continue to die even today, Naakaa's purpose was defeated." With the failure of this movement to bring lasting reform, another initiative, the Inyambuan movement emerged a decade later as a renewed effort to address the issue of evil in Tiv society.

Inyambuan Movement

The Inyambuan movement was another indigenous effort, similar to the Haakaa/Namakaa campaign, aimed at addressing the activities of *mbatsav* (witches and wizards) in Tiv land who were believed to possess *tsav* and perpetrate evil. There are varying accounts regarding the originator and the inception date of the movement. One account claims that it began in 1934, introduced by a non-Tiv man named Shiki. Despite his non-Tiv ethnicity, Shiki gained the support of several Tiv men who popularized the movement and gave it an indigenous character (Ierve, n.d.).

According to Gyang-Gyang (n.d.), however, the movement was initiated in 1939 by Mr. Gbankwein. Although Shii (n.d.) supports the 1939 date, he presents an inconsistency by stating elsewhere that the movement was already active by 1938. Moreover, he does not specify when the movement officially ended. In contrast, Rubingh (1969) notes that the movement concluded on November 11, 1939, while Bohannan (1958) dates it more broadly, from 1939 to 1948.

The Inyambuan movement had two primary objectives: first, to combat *tsav* and *mbatsav* in Tiv land by identifying and confiscating their ritual objects; and second, to offer adherents a promise of "eternal life." In the context of the movement, "eternal life" referred not to the Christian idea of life after death, but rather to physical protection from the powers of witches and wizards. It was believed that freedom from the influence of *mbatsav*, who were thought to cause death and misfortune, meant one had achieved a form of invincibility or ongoing life.

The movement also had its own methods of identifying individuals who were believed to be in possession of evil powers. A notable instrument used in this process was the whisk, a stick wrapped in leather and used like a fly whisk. Adherents of the movement who were declared free of *tsav* were given this whisk to operate with. Suspected individuals were tested by pointing the whisk at them; if the person possessed *tsav*, it was believed that the evil would recoil and manifest, exposing them. If no reaction occurred, the person was considered innocent.

Further, suspects who denied possessing *tsav* were required to drink a poisonous concoction made from sasswood. According to local belief, an innocent person would vomit the poison and survive, thereby proving their purity, while a guilty person would

be unable to vomit and would eventually die. Iorkighir (interview) criticises the movement by describing it as "eliminating evil using evil means." Nonetheless, it is widely believed that through these harsh methods, the Inyambuan movement temporarily sanitized Tiv society of certain forms of evil.

Despite its temporary success in curbing perceived evil, the Inyambuan movement caused numerous societal disruptions. Rubingh (1969) reports that many people died, agricultural activity ceased, and most of the youth who constituted the productive workforce joined the movement, resulting in famine. The population involved in Inyambuan also failed to meet tax obligations. Religious activities in various parts of Tiv land were disrupted, forcing missionaries such as Rev. De Lange and Rev. Visser to leave Shangev-Tiev and Korinya. A missionary from the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM) eventually reported the movement to colonial authorities due to its dangerous impact, prompting government intervention.

Although the movement partially succeeded in addressing evil, its promise of eternal life was unfulfilled, as people continued to die. Shii (2013) argues that the movement was also a means by which leaders enriched themselves at the expense of the people.

Anongo Nyamor Movement (1998–2000)

The period between 1948 and 1998 saw a resurgence of the same kinds of evil that had previously been challenged by the Haakaa/Namakaa and Inyambuan movements. Reports of *tsav*-related activities and other forms of malevolent behavior remained prevalent in Tiv society. This persistence of evil led to the emergence of the Anongo Nyamor movement.

Anongo Nyamor, the central figure of the movement, believed it was necessary to purge the Tiv land of evil once again. He thus initiated a movement named after himself, *Nyamor*, which originated in the Gaav area of Konshisha Local Government Area. According to Karna and Atswande (interview), Nyamor had a method for identifying *mbatsav* (witches and wizards), which involved casting a spell (*haa agbende, shin nenge mngerem*) to expose culprits. Once a person was identified as a *mbatsav*, they were required to surrender any ritual items in their possession.

Nyamor would then ask the individual to demonstrate how the item functioned, after which he would confiscate it. Following this, he performed a ritual procedure: he used a razor to make small incisions (referred to as *niondo*) on the person's body and applied a medicinal substance he had prepared. This was intended to disarm the individual of their *tsav* power. In an interview with Atswande (interview), several individuals were identified as having surrendered items, including Agber Bashi, Agune, Mchiga Abaya, Iornenge Ordondo, Sulega Anula, Lian Abanyi, Abur Akpen, Sereki Tasa, Shioron Haako, and Adogo Kuma, among others. Nyamor was invited to many regions within Tiv land, including Mbakor, Mbayion, Yandev, Tombo, Ipav, Kunav, and Ushongo.

Despite these efforts, the Nyamor movement did not achieve the hoped-for societal purification. Several challenges arose, including issues of financial exploitation. Before Nyamor could be invited to any community, people were expected to contribute money as a form of payment. Additionally, discontent grew due to accusations of false

identification, instances of brutality, and violations of fundamental human rights. As a result of these controversies, the government of Benue State under Governor George Akume officially banned the Nyamor movement on November 10, 2000. This marked the end of the movement.

One critical observation comes from Shii (2013), who remarked, “*The Tiv still die in spite of the huge collection of tsav emblems.*” This poignant statement reflects the ongoing mystery and difficulty in resolving the problem of evil within Tiv society. Consequently, this research proposes *Swem* as a more sustainable and culturally resonant resource for confronting evil in Tiv culture.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF TIV INDIGENOUS MOVEMENTS ADDRESSING MORAL EVIL

Failure of the Namakaa/Haakaa Movement

Beyond brutality and limited popular legitimacy, the failure of the Namakaa/Haakaa movement can be understood within broader structural, cultural, and colonial dynamics. Structurally, the movement lacked institutional continuity and was not embedded within enduring Tiv authority structures; instead, it was mediated through colonial power. This external mediation distorted its legitimacy, transforming what could have been a culturally grounded moral reform into an instrument of coercive governance. Moral authority shifted from communal consensus to colonial enforcement, weakening its normative power (Bohannan, 1958; Shii, 2013).

Culturally, the movement failed to distinguish between moral culpability and cosmological suspicion. The logic of accusation was based on symbolic association rather than moral responsibility, creating a culture of fear rather than genuine ethical transformation. Evil was externalized and personified, but ethical internalization did not occur, producing social fragmentation, distrust, and moral panic (Dzurgba, 2006; Shii, 2013).

Colonially, the Haakaa/Namakaa movement was shaped by British epistemology and power structures. The administration instrumentalized indigenous fears of *tsav* to consolidate control, using legal coercion and violence rather than moral persuasion. This politicization transformed a moral crisis into a colonial security project. Consequently, the movement addressed only the symptoms of moral disorder, not the underlying moral structures of Tiv society, leading to its eventual collapse once colonial oversight receded (Bohannan, 1958; Shii, 2013).

Philosophically, the movement failed because it treated evil ontologically as a force to be eliminated rather than ethically, as a condition requiring moral transformation of human agency. Punishment was prioritized over cultivating moral responsibility, making lasting reform impossible (Mbiti, 1990; Aboh, 2005).

Failure of the Nyamor Movement

The Nyamor movement failed not only because of brutality, financial exploitation, and human rights violations, but also due to deeper structural and cultural contradictions. Structurally, it centred on charismatic authority rather than institutional legitimacy. Reliance on the perceived power of a single figure made the movement

vulnerable to abuse, manipulation, and eventual political suppression (Rubingh, 1969; Karna & Atswande, 2023).

Culturally, the movement disrupted Tiv communal ethics by replacing collective moral discernment with unilateral spiritual judgment. Fear replaced moral responsibility as the primary regulator of behaviour, undermining trust in traditional systems and creating social instability (Dzurgba, 2006; Shii, 2013).

Politically, the movement emerged in a postcolonial state context where legitimate violence and judicial authority are monopolized by government institutions. Any parallel justice system posed a threat to state sovereignty. Its official banning by the Benue State government reflects structural incompatibility between charismatic religious movements and modern state authority rather than mere political suppression (Rubingh, 1969).

Philosophically, the Nyamor movement shared a conceptual weakness with earlier efforts: evil was treated as a mystical force to be extracted from individuals, rather than as a moral condition requiring ethical cultivation, communal reform, and human responsibility (Mbiti, 1990; Aboh, 2005).

Theologically, the movement lacked a redemptive anthropology. It offered purification without transformation, punishment without ethical formation, and spiritual power without accountability structures, making it unsustainable as a moral system (Mbiti, 1990; Aboh, 2005).

Comparative Insight

Across Haakaa/Namakaa, Inyambuan, and Nyamor movements, a common structural pattern emerges all sought to eradicate evil without transforming moral consciousness. They relied on fear, coercion, and ritual authority rather than ethical formation, communal accountability, and institutional legitimacy. None were fully integrated into enduring Tiv moral institutions. Consequently, when charismatic authority faded, colonial power receded, or state intervention occurred, the movements collapsed.

This historical pattern demonstrates that sustainable responses to moral evil require institutional legitimacy, cultural integration, ethical formation, and communal trust. Without these elements, even spiritually powerful movements become socially destructive and morally ineffective (Bohannon, 1958; Dzurgba, 2006; Shii, 2013; Mbiti, 1990; Aboh, 2005; Rubingh, 1969; Karna & Atswande, 2023).

SWEM

Origin: Geographical, Ancestral, and Judicial Significance

In Tiv oral history and cultural heritage, Swem is identified as a mountainous region in present-day southwestern Cameroon, often described as the ancestral homeland of the Tiv before their migration into the Benue Valley. Scholars note that the Tiv oral tradition consistently situates Swem as the origin site from which the Tiv people migrated, reinforcing its status as a foundational cultural memory and symbol of collective identity (Nomishan, 2022). Yet other scholars contend with this version,

pointing out that they originated and migrated from South Africa or Congo among the Batu speaking tribe.

In addition to its geographic significance, Swem is also recognized in Tiv tradition as a sacred object for administering justice. Some scholars debate whether Swem should primarily be understood as a place of origin or as an institutional object. According to local accounts, Swem, as a sacred judicial object, was prepared by a Tiv man named Mr. Karagbe from Ikyurav. The object typically takes the form of a pot containing a combination of ritual substances, including ashes, pieces of Gbaaye wood (*Prosopis africana*), the *Ayandegh* plant (*Marantochloa flexuosa*), *Ikyula-nomsu* (*Lophira lanceolata*), *Ikyula-kase* (*Sarcopholus latifolius*), and a symbolic thunderbolt (*Ijembe-aôndo*) (Irom et al., 2025; Nomishan, 2021; Tsaaïor, 2015). It is widely believed that after Karagbe prepared *Swem*, the God of the Tiv imbued it with power, making it the most potent object in Tiv religion and culture.

Cultural and Judicial Symbol

Beyond its physical and ancestral significance, Swem functions as a cultural and judicial symbol. It operates as an oath and institutional mechanism of justice through which innocence is vindicated, and wrongdoing is sanctioned. This dual role as both an ancestral homeland and a sacred instrument of justice renders Swem simultaneously a tangible and intangible element of Tiv heritage, integrating geography, cosmology, and social regulation within the moral universe of the Tiv people (Nomishan, 2022; Afaor & Timin, 2025).

Within Tiv traditional religion and cultural memory, Swem occupies a central normative position as both a spiritual emblem and the highest authority for the administration of justice. It is widely regarded as the most sacred and unifying symbol among the Tiv, embodying collective identity, moral authority, and communal cohesion. Some scholars further interpret Swem symbolically as the spiritual place of Tiv origin, reinforcing its function as a foundational anchor of identity and moral order (Nomishan, 2022). Custodianship of Swem is vested in the Tor Tiv, the paramount traditional ruler, who bears responsibility for its preservation, regulation, and proper administration within Tiv society.

Rituals Associated with Swem

Functionally, Swem operates as a powerful oath-taking institution invoked in serious moral disputes, particularly when ordinary evidence is insufficient and communal norms are threatened. Individuals accused of wrongdoing are brought before a Swem pot or emblem to declare their innocence under solemn oath, appealing to ancestral or spiritual forces to determine truthfulness. Traditional belief holds that falsehood will attract punitive consequences, including severe illness or death, locally described as *ngyor*, a kwashiorkor-like condition, while innocence is confirmed through the absence of harm (Irom et al., 2025; Tsaaïor, 2015).

The ritual process is typically public, with disputants and witnesses gathered in the presence of elders. Participants recite formal declarations of innocence and invoke the spiritual authority of Swem to judge veracity. This communal aspect reinforces shared moral codes and collective responsibility, making Swem not merely a personal

ordeal but a social mechanism of accountability that preserves harmony and deters antisocial behaviour (Irom et al., 2025; Afaor & Timin, 2025). For example, those swearing before Swem traditionally say:

This Swem, listen! If I know anything about witches, or I have donated my child to be killed by witches, let this Swem cause my stomach to swell up so that I shall die! But if I do not know anything about this death, but it is by force that my child has been bewitched and made to die, I shall be safe, while all who are involved in the plot shall die (Aboh, 2005).

Operational Mechanism of Swem in Tiv Society

Operationally, Swem embeds moral accountability within culturally sanctioned practice, regulating behaviour in cases of theft, adultery, incest, or maleficence. By compelling individuals to confront their own statements in a sacred context, Swem enforces ethical norms not through secular legal mechanisms but through indigenous cosmology and communal moral expectations (Tsaaior, 2015; Irom et al., 2025). Its judgments are collectively respected as impartial, fair, and binding, contrasting sharply with earlier indigenous movements such as Haakaa, Inyambuan, and Nyamor, which were often personal, coercive, or unsanctioned by communal authority. Swem's legitimacy stems from its collective endorsement across Tivland and alignment with longstanding moral and social institutions (Afaor & Timin, 2025).

Although the influence of Swem has diminished in some communities due to Christianity and modern legal systems, its symbolic resonance endures, reflecting its ongoing role as a culturally embedded resource for interpreting moral evil and restoring ethical equilibrium. Swem thus provides a nonviolent, justice-centred, and culturally coherent mechanism through which Tiv communities confront wrongdoing; maintain social order, and articulate accountability in alignment with traditional moral intuitions (Nomishan, 2022; Afaor & Timin, 2025).

TIV MORAL INTUITIONS AND PHILOSOPHICAL PARALLELS

Unlike earlier indigenous movements, Swem enjoys collective endorsement across Tivland, serving as a unifying symbol for the entire community. It is nonviolent and justice-centred, offering a means of accountability that simultaneously respects human rights. Furthermore, Swem is culturally and ethically coherent, reflecting Tiv moral intuitions while aligning with broader philosophical principles concerning responsibility and justice. Philosophically, Swem functions analogously to Kant's moral law, acting as an externalized enforcement of ethical norms, and to Anselm's conception of moral order, affirming that evil inevitably attracts consequences and reinforcing universal moral intuitions. Theologically, Swem provides a contextual lens for engaging Christian theodicy. Its logic resonates with the biblical message that God judges sin and restores justice, allowing Tiv Christians to interpret local ethical concerns in a way that affirms biblical Christology (Mbiti, 1990).

SCHOLARLY EVIDENCE ON LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS

While *Swem* is widely regarded in Tiv tradition as impartial, accurate, and fair, such claims are grounded in cultural belief rather than systematic empirical evidence. Comparative scholarship on African customary justice systems shows that traditional adjudication, including oath-taking, ritual processes, and elder-based judgments, lacks formal evidentiary standards and procedural safeguards associated with modern concepts of fairness (e.g., presumption of innocence and burden of proof). Moreover, these systems may be subject to social bias, inconsistency, and influence from community dynamics, which challenge assumptions of uniform impartiality (see Kariuki, 2017; *Journal of African Justice Studies*; Lawmara, 2024). In some customary contexts, witchcraft oaths and ordeal practices are explicitly criticized for violating basic principles of fair trial, as well as for lacking clear mechanisms for appeal or rights protection, raising human rights concerns (see Lawmara, 2024). Therefore, claims about *Swem*'s objectivity need to be situated within a broader scholarly discussion of both its cultural authority and its limitations as a justice mechanism.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored a complex and often controversial topic in the philosophy of religion, with a particular focus on the Tiv people of North-Central Nigeria. The study found that evil remains a significant problem in Tiv society, hindering both human and infrastructural development. Many individuals who might have contributed to the growth of their families, communities, and the broader Tiv nation have died prematurely due to evil practices.

Importantly, evil in Tivland does not exist in isolation; it is believed to be orchestrated by individuals identified as witches and wizards (*Mbatsav*), who possess the spiritual element *tsav*. Despite the deployment of several indigenous resources throughout history, such as the *Haakaa*, *Inyambuan*, and *Nyamor* movements, these initiatives failed to provide lasting solutions, often due to flaws such as brutality, human rights violations, or lack of sustained community support.

However, the research has identified *Swem* as the most ideal and culturally acceptable resource for addressing the problem of evil in Tiv society. *Swem* commands universal respect, and its judgments are widely perceived as fair and divinely enforced. Those found guilty of evil through *Swem* are punished, often by death, which reinforces accountability and deters others from engaging in harmful practices. The following recommendations are made:

i. The Tiv Traditional Council Should Harness Indigenous Resources: Currently, there is no scientific or technological tool specifically developed to curtail spiritual or moral evil in Tivland. Indigenous resources remain the most viable option. Therefore, it is recommended that the Tiv Traditional Council which holds authority over grassroots governance should re-evaluate and harness historical indigenous resources. By doing so, they can consolidate these methods into a single, standardized approach for dealing with evil and related social problems.

ii. The Tiv Traditional Council Should Promote the Use of *Swem* as a Justice Mechanism: *Swem* serves as both a unifying and judicial tool in Tivland. Its authority is widely respected, and its judgments are viewed as impartial and effective. Therefore, individuals suspected or accused of engaging in evil should be required to swear before *Swem* as a way of affirming their innocence. This process ensures justice, minimizes false accusations, and enhances communal trust in traditional systems. Promoting the use of *Swem* would provide a culturally grounded, non-violent means of resolving disputes and upholding morality in the Tiv nation.

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