

The Kwagh-hir Theater: A Weapon for Social Action. By **Iyorwuese Hagher**. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2014. Pp. xxx + 256. \$80 Hb/\$34.99 Pb.

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Iyorwuese Hagher is well-known for his pioneering study of the *Kwagh-hir*, the most prominent indigenous theatre of the Tiv of Nigeria. Hagher has written extensively, as well as presenting papers at conferences on the subject over many years; so, his full-length monograph on this fascinating performance tradition was highly anticipated. But alas, its rich content notwithstanding, the book was rather disappointing.

The central objective of the book, as stated in the Preface, is to demonstrate how the *Kwagh-hir* rearranged the other traditional arts of the Tiv and in doing so transformed itself into a cultural weapon in the hands of Tiv puppeteers (p. ix). Hagher suggests that *Kwagh-hir* is a major Tiv cultural institution, a forum, as well as an instrument of resistance for Tiv peasant farmers in their fight against various oppressive regimes in Tiv history. In the introductory chapter, Hagher asserts that at the core of the *Kwagh-hir* is its 'attribute as a "change agent"' (p. xvi) and gives the background to the *Kwagh-hir* which is derived from the myths and storytelling performances of Tiv people (p. xx). The author questions the myth that the *Kwagh-hir* was invented by one individual, Adikpo Songo, under instruction from the spirits. Hager points out that the *Kwagh-hir* is, in fact, made up of many art forms such as 'music and dance', 'music and song', storytelling, poetry and puppetry (p. 23). Thus, this form of theatre has many artists taking part in it: the sculptors, although seldom seen during performances, 'are the backbone of any *Kwagh-hir* group' as it is they who 'determine visualization and scope of the action' (p. 100); the musicians, masked performers, puppeteers, set designers, and costumiers. The book's main strength is that it highlights the wide range of skits, storylines and characters that make up the *Kwagh-hir* repertory. The book describes vividly

the mechanics of the theatre: how the puppets are manipulated; the details of how they are made; how the masks are embodied and brought to life by the musicians and the actors; and the interaction with the spectators.

That said, errors litter the book, often undermining what could have been a wonderful resource. A notable irritant throughout is the author's polemical determination to force the reader into acknowledging the 'historical' oppression of the Tiv in the broader politics of Nigeria. Granted the *Kwagh-hir* emerged in response to these perceived oppressions and ensuing crises in Tiv consciousness, the many times that this is brought up in the book adds nothing to the narrative. The book comes alive mainly at moments, for instance when the vibrancy of the performances is described, giving the reader a sense of the form and the mechanics of its realisation, including the role of the audience during the performance (p. 109). But the volume is often repetitive, such as when the author laments that the carvers hardly make up to one hundred dollars a month; that the art emerged out of Tiv oppression; and occasionally, exact descriptions of performances appear in different chapters or sections. The classification of plays into four categories is not very helpful as it seems arbitrary and uneven. In addition, the use of the English language is surprisingly slipshod: the book would have benefitted from copy-editing before publication as it is poorly written.

In summary, the book promised much, and to some extent delivered thanks to the author's deep knowledge of the *Kwagh-hir*. However, the numerous grammatical mistakes and overall writing style make it structurally and linguistically disappointing.