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Promoting African Musical Aesthetics through the Tiv *Imar* (Flute)

Authors Details

Jilaji Simon Torkuma[1*]
Department of Music, Faculty of Arts, University of Jos, Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria

Corresponding Author: *Jilaji Simon Torkuma*

ABSTRACT: African indigenous musical instruments constitute an important aspect of the continent's cultural heritage, yet many aerophones have received limited scholarly attention despite their enduring roles in ceremonial, religious, and social life. The Tiv *Imar* (flute) is one such instrument whose aesthetic significance remains insufficiently documented. This study examines the contribution of the *Imar* to the promotion of African musical aesthetics through its construction, performance practices, symbolic functions, and contemporary relevance. A qualitative ethnographic research design was adopted. Data was collected through oral interviews with experienced performers, instrument custodians, and cultural practitioners, complemented by documentary evidence from books, journal articles, and other scholarly sources. The data were analysed thematically within the framework of African musical aesthetics and functionalist musicology. Findings reveal that the *Imar* serves as a melodic instrument, accompanies ensemble performances, directs dance movements, reinforces ceremonial symbolism, and preserves Tiv cultural identity. The study also found that declining intergenerational transmission, inadequate documentation, and the growing dominance of foreign musical traditions threaten its continued survival. These findings demonstrate that the *Imar* possesses enduring artistic, educational, and cultural value for African music scholarship and heritage preservation. The study recommends systematic documentation, curriculum integration, community-

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based apprenticeship programmes, increased governmental support for cultural festivals, and sustained public sensitisation. It concludes that preserving the *Imar* is essential for safeguarding Tiv musical heritage and strengthening African musical aesthetics for future generations.

Keywords: *Imar flute, Tiv music, African musical aesthetics, indigenous musical instruments, cultural heritage.*

Introduction

African music is a holistic concept that describes not merely a musical genre but an entire way of life, encompassing the culture and worldview of African peoples as expressed through indigenous and artistic musical practice. It is the music of native Africans, irrespective of religious and linguistic differences, and represents the sound and performance practices of the continent's indigenous communities (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). Following the classificatory conventions established in Western organology, African musical instruments are commonly grouped into four families: membranophones, chordophones, idiophones, and aerophones. Nketia (1974) observes that musical instruments in African contexts are mechanisms constructed and deployed to produce organised sound in the service of communal, ceremonial, and recreational life, and that the human voice, though central to African musical expression, is conventionally treated apart from this instrumental taxonomy.

This paper is concerned with the *Imar*, an aerophone belonging to the flute family, and its role among the Tiv people of the north-central Nigerian middle belt. The *Imar* shares with other African transverse and end-blown flutes a melodic and harmonic function within ensemble performance, while carrying features specific to Tiv cultural expression, particularly in its tuning, its association with the tonal inflections of the Tiv language, and its ceremonial deployment. According to Denis Tswalev (personal communication, May 11, 2021), performers of the *Imar* vary the pitch of the instrument by opening and closing the finger holes along its body, thereby altering the air pressure and the harmonic resonance produced, a technique through which skilled flutists captivate and hold the attention of listeners.

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The *Imar* is, in effect, a generic term covering the several varieties of flute found among the Tiv, an integral instrument of the aerophone family typically fashioned from bamboo, gourd, wood, clay, or animal horn and bone, materials that recur across African flute traditions more broadly (Bebey, 1975). In every instance of its construction, careful attention is paid to the melodic target of the surrounding musical culture; the Tiv *Imar* is most commonly carved from a durable, rounded piece of wood, and its sound structure is deliberately tuned to reflect the tonal accent of the Tiv language, distinguishing it from superficially similar flutes found among neighbouring groups.

Despite this richness, scholars and performing-arts practitioners have, for a considerable period, given insufficient attention to the documentation and development of Tiv aerophones, and the *Imar* in particular has not received the recognition accorded to more prominently studied instruments such as the drum ensembles of the Yoruba or the string traditions of the Sahel (Nketia, 1963). This paper is therefore necessitated by the need for the *Imar* to compete favourably with other African flute traditions, to be documented systematically, and to be repositioned within both scholarly discourse and contemporary cultural practice. Pr*Imar*y data were gathered through oral interviews with practising flutists and culture bearers, complemented by documentary evidence drawn from published books, journal articles, and reputable online sources. The study found that many African indigenous flutes, including the *Imar*, are underrated and denied their full expressive potential in contemporary musical practice, a consequence of diminished usage and inadequate scholarly exploration of their capabilities. The paper accordingly calls for a sustainable, coordinated programme, including an indigenous instruments festival, aimed at discovering and promoting the aesthetic value embedded in African music through instruments such as the *Imar*, to the benefit of Tiv culture and the wider African artistic community.

Conceptual Clarification

Music and African Music: Music resists a single, universally accepted definition, and scholars have tended to interpret the concept according to the particular functions it serves within their own societies. Bebey (1975) observes that African music enables communities to translate the experiences of both the physical and the spiritual world into organised sound, celebrating and enhancing life through songs, dances, stories, and other traditional

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musical activities. African scholars broadly agree that African music performs an especially important role during moments of collective sorrow, such as bereavement or serious illness, when communities turn to established musical and cultural practices for consolation and meaning. This functional orientation, in which music is inseparable from the social occasions it accompanies, distinguishes much of African musical practice from purely recreational or concert-oriented conceptions of music found elsewhere, and it is central to understanding why an instrument such as the *Imar* cannot be assessed on melodic or technical grounds alone, but must be situated within the ceremonial life it serves.

Aesthetics in African Musical Thought

The concept of aesthetics, broadly understood as the philosophical study of beauty, artistic value and the nature of creative expression, has often been associated more closely with the visual arts than with music because of music's abstract and temporal character (Scruton, 1999). African musical thought approaches aesthetics from a different perspective. Rather than separating beauty from social life, African traditions generally evaluate musical performance according to its appropriateness to context, its ability to foster communal participation, its emotional impact on performers and audiences, and its faithfulness to established melodic, rhythmic and cultural conventions (Chernoff, 1979). Recent scholarship has reinforced this understanding. Katingima Day (2024), drawing on the East African philosophy of Utu, argues that African musical aesthetics should be understood as an "aesthetic of life" in which beauty emerges through relationships, participation and interconnectedness rather than existing as an isolated quality of a musical object. Olatunji (2023) reaches a similar conclusion from a philosophical standpoint, maintaining that African aesthetic judgement departs from the Kantian ideal of detached contemplation because artistic value is grounded in communal experience, shared identity and everyday life. Bateye et al. (2023) further situate African notions of beauty within a critical dialogue with dominant Western aesthetic traditions, while Effiboley (2023) argues that the decolonisation of African aesthetics requires the recovery of indigenous standards of artistic evaluation that colonial scholarship often marginalised or misunderstood.

Among the Tiv, as in many African societies, music occupies a central place in cultural life because it gives audible expression to communal identity, memory, emotion and

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philosophical reflection. Musical beauty is therefore measured not simply through technical excellence but through the extent to which performance communicates meaning, reinforces social relationships and fulfils its cultural purpose. Music has long served as a medium through which ideas, emotions, moral instruction and even political commentary are conveyed within Tiv society (Gbilekaa, 1993, as cited in Adega, 2014). Contemporary scholarship supports this broader understanding. Dor (2022) argues that the continent's musical traditions demand complementary analytical approaches capable of reflecting their cultural diversity rather than forcing them into a single interpretative framework. Within Tiv musical culture, this aesthetic philosophy is embodied in instruments such as the *Imar*, a wooden flute played by resting its tip against the lower lip while covering finger holes to produce varying pitches. Beyond its melodic function, the instrument reflects communal values, artistic discipline and cultural continuity, demonstrating that Tiv musical aesthetics are rooted as much in social meaning and collective participation as in formal musical structure (Adega, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

The paper is anchored in the functionalist perspective associated with African musicological scholarship, particularly as advanced by Nketia (1974), who argues that African musical instruments and practices cannot be adequately understood in isolation from the social occasions and communal needs they are designed to serve. Within this framework, an instrument's aesthetic worth is measured against its capacity to fulfil ceremonial, communicative, and cohesive functions within the community, rather than against abstract or purely technical criteria imported from outside the culture. This is complemented by Chernoff's (1979) treatment of African musical sensibility, which stresses the inseparability of aesthetic judgement from social action, arguing that a musical performance is judged beautiful in large part by its capacity to organise and harmonise collective participation, whether in dance, ritual, or communal celebration. Read together, these frameworks support the paper's central contention that the *Imar*'s aesthetic significance among the Tiv is structural rather than incidental: the instrument is valued because of, and not despite, its deep embeddedness in the ceremonial and social fabric of Tiv life.

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Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative, descriptive research design combining pr*Imar*y and secondary sources of data. Fieldwork was undertaken among Tiv communities in Benue State, guided by semi-structured oral interviews with practising flutists and recognised custodians of Tiv musical tradition, including Denis Tswalev, Kparev Tyotiav, Jilaji Nguemo, and Ukan Lubem. These interviews were triangulated with documented sources drawn from published books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and reputable online repositories on African organology and aesthetics. The combination of oral testimony and documentary evidence allowed the researchers to reconstruct both the technical features of the *Imar* and the cultural meanings attached to its performance, while guarding against the loss of knowledge that accompanies the ageing of custodian populations and the declining rate of intergenerational transmission of the craft.

The Tiv *Imar* (Flute): Description, Construction, and Typology

The *Imar* is one of the most recognisable indigenous wind instruments in Tiv musical culture, valued for its melodic versatility and its role in both recreational and ceremonial performances. Although it may be fashioned from different species of wood, its construction follows a relatively uniform process that has been preserved through generations of indigenous craftsmanship. Instrument makers typically select a cylindrical piece of wood with a soft central pith, which is carefully removed by passing a heated metal rod through the length of the wood to create a hollow air passage extending from one end to the other. The exterior is then smoothed and refined to ensure comfortable handling, while finger holes are bored at carefully measured intervals to regulate pitch and tonal variation. The quality of the finished instrument depends not only on the type of wood selected but also on the precision with which the bore and finger holes are crafted, since even slight variations influence tonal clarity, resonance and ease of performance. This indigenous manufacturing technique demonstrates the remarkable technological knowledge embedded within Tiv material culture, where practical experience rather than written measurement guides instrument production.

Despite sharing the same basic construction process, the *Imar* exists in several distinct forms, each possessing unique structural and acoustic characteristics. The varieties are

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pr*Imar*ily distinguished by the number of finger holes incorporated into the instrument, a feature that directly influences tonal range, fingering technique and performance possibilities. The three principal types identified in this study are the *Imar anyiin*, *Imar Ataan* and *Imar Ateratar*, which contain four, five and six finger holes respectively. Beyond differences in the number of holes, these instruments also vary in their playing position, embouchure technique and expressive capacity, enabling performers to select the variety most suited to a particular musical context. Collectively, these three types demonstrate the sophistication of Tiv indigenous instrument classification, where structural differences are closely associated with musical function and aesthetic preference rather than serving merely as physical variations.

Imar Anyiin **(The Four-Hole Flute)**

The *Imar anyiin* represents the simplest and perhaps the most widespread variety of the Tiv flute. It is characterised by four carefully positioned finger holes arranged along one side of the instrument, each communicating directly with the internal air column to produce different pitches. These openings form the essential sound-producing mechanism of the flute, enabling performers to manipulate airflow and finger placement to create a range of melodic patterns (D. Tswalev, personal communication, May 11, 2021). The upper end of the instrument is gradually tapered into a smooth point that rests comfortably against the player's lower lip, allowing air to be directed into the bore with considerable control. Unlike many Western flutes that are designed for a fixed playing orientation, the *Imar anyiin* may be played from either side, making it adaptable to both right-handed and left-handed performers.

Playing the *Imar anyiin* requires considerable coordination between both hands and a refined level of breath control. The upper hand normally covers the three holes nearest the mouthpiece using the fingertips, while the lower hand supports the lower portion of the instrument and uses the thumb to regulate the fourth hole situated some distance below the others. This arrangement provides both stability and flexibility during performance, enabling players to execute subtle changes in pitch and expressive ornamentation. Tiv musicians regard mastery of this variety as requiring prolonged practical experience because successful performance depends upon balancing controlled breathing, finger dexterity and rhythmic precision. Although comparatively modest in structure, the *Imar*

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anyiin remains capable of producing expressive melodic lines that serve both recreational and communicative purposes within Tiv musical tradition.

Imar Ataan (The Five-Hole Flute)

The *Imar Ataan* differs from the *Imar anyiin* in both physical construction and playing technique. This variety is equipped with five finger holes, giving performers access to a broader range of notes and greater melodic flexibility. According to Kparev Tyotiav (personal communication), the instrument is cylindrical in form and is played horizontally rather than vertically. Instead of directing air into the tip of the instrument, the performer blows across a side embouchure, allowing the airstream to strike the internal opening that produces vibration within the hollow bore. This transverse design aligns the *Imar Ataan* more closely with side-blown flutes while retaining construction methods and performance practices unique to Tiv musical culture.

Performance on the *Imar Ataan* demands coordinated movement of both hands, with each finger hole contributing to the production of distinct pitches and melodic sequences. The additional hole expands the instrument's tonal possibilities beyond those available on the *Imar anyiin*, enabling musicians to perform more elaborate musical phrases and expressive embellishments. Tiv performers readily distinguish its sound from that of the end-blown flute, recognising a fuller tonal quality and a different style of articulation produced through the transverse playing technique. These characteristics have made the *Imar Ataan* particularly suitable for performances requiring greater melodic complexity while preserving the distinctive tonal identity associated with Tiv indigenous flute music.

Imar Ateratar (The Six-Hole Flute)

The *Imar Ateratar* is the most advanced and acoustically versatile member of the Tiv flute family. Longer than both the *Imar anyiin* and the *Imar Ataan*, it is distinguished by the presence of six finger holes arranged along its body and is likewise played horizontally using a side embouchure. Its extended length allows for a larger internal air column, producing deeper resonance and a wider tonal compass. Denis Tswalev (personal communication, May 11, 2021) describes the *Imar Ateratar* as the richest among the three varieties because of the broad range of sounds and expressive possibilities available to

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experienced performers. The instrument is therefore highly valued by accomplished musicians who require greater flexibility in melodic performance.

The tonal richness of the *Imar Ateratar* results from the increased number of finger combinations made possible through the addition of a sixth sound hole and the instrument's elongated structure. These features significantly expand its pitch range, enabling performers to execute more complex melodic passages, smoother tonal transitions and a wider variety of ornamental effects than can be achieved on the four-hole or five-hole variants. Skilled players regard the instrument as the most versatile member of the *Imar* family because it accommodates both simple traditional melodies and more elaborate musical expressions without sacrificing tonal clarity. Its construction reflects the depth of indigenous Tiv knowledge of acoustics and instrument making, demonstrating how gradual structural modifications can produce substantial improvements in musical capability while preserving the cultural identity of the instrument.

Performance Contexts and Players of the *Imar*

The *Imar* occupies a central position in Tiv musical performance, functioning as both a melodic instrument and a powerful aesthetic symbol across a wide range of cultural, social and religious events. Its use extends beyond entertainment to occasions that affirm communal identity, celebrate important life events and preserve indigenous traditions. According to Jilaji Nguemo (personal communication, August 2022), the *Imar* is regarded as an indispensable instrument in virtually every major Tiv ceremony, including marriage celebrations, funeral rites, traditional festivals, title-taking ceremonies and ritual observances. Music within Tiv society is almost always accompanied by dance, and the *Imar* frequently assumes the role of initiating or directing dance movements through its distinctive melodic phrases. This function is especially evident in traditional performances such as the *Adenden* dance, where the flute provides the musical cue that guides dancers' movements and establishes the emotional atmosphere of the performance. Its clear and penetrating tone enables it to stand above accompanying instruments, making it an effective medium for signalling transitions and sustaining audience engagement throughout the performance.

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The prominence of the *Imar* becomes even more apparent during highly ceremonial occasions, where its performance often marks moments of honour, dignity and public recognition. Within many Tiv musical ensembles, the flute is deliberately introduced at the climax of a performance, prompting accompanying instruments to reduce their volume while attention shifts to the melodic line produced by the flutist. Such musical practice commonly signals the entrance of a distinguished personality, a principal dancer or a traditional title holder. This convention was prominently displayed during the coronation of the Tor Tiv, the paramount ruler of the Tiv people, held in Gboko in 2017, where the *Imar* served as an instrument of ceremonial prestige and cultural identity. Melodies specially composed of the flute are frequently performed to honour respected individuals, reflecting the instrument's capacity to communicate admiration, authority and communal respect. Beyond traditional ceremonies, the *Imar* also features in national celebrations, religious gatherings and, historically, in situations associated with warfare and communal defence, demonstrating its adaptability across changing historical and social contexts. Such versatility illustrates the careful attention Tiv musicians give to selecting instruments whose melodic, symbolic and ceremonial qualities are appropriate for each occasion (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

Performance of the *Imar* is open to both men and women who possess the necessary musical ability, although cultural expectations and the nature of the occasion often influence who performs and in what context. Adult men remain more commonly associated with performances during traditional festivals, ritual ceremonies and chieftaincy events, whether performing while standing, sitting or squatting. Women, however, increasingly perform the instrument within Christian worship services, church fellowships and other contemporary musical settings, reflecting the dynamic nature of Tiv musical practice. Andrew Adega (personal communication, August 2022) observes that Tiv women also perform on demanding indigenous wind instruments such as the kakaki, a long ceremonial trumpet requiring considerable breath control and technical skill, despite its historical association with male performers. These developments demonstrate that musical competence, rather than gender alone, increasingly shapes opportunities for performance within contemporary Tiv society.

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The acquisition of *Imar* performance skills follows the traditional African model of informal apprenticeship, where practical knowledge is transmitted through observation, imitation and sustained participation rather than formal classroom instruction. Young learners gradually master fingering techniques, breath control, rhythmic coordination and performance etiquette through regular interaction with experienced musicians during rehearsals, festivals and communal celebrations. Denis Tswalev (personal communication, May 11, 2021) explains that accomplished flutists may perform while standing, sitting or squatting, depending on personal preference and the demands of the occasion. Only highly skilled performers are capable of playing the *Imar*, communicating musical ideas, coordinating bodily movement and dancing simultaneously, a combination that Tiv society regards as the mark of a complete musician. Such artistry is regularly displayed during the annual Mbajor Cultural Day, popularly known as Jor-day, held in Vandeikya Local Government Area, where expert flutists demonstrate the expressive, communicative and aesthetic potential of the *Imar*. These performances affirm that the instrument functions not merely as a source of melody but as a cultural voice through which Tiv history, identity and artistic excellence continue to be preserved and celebrated.

Maintenance and Care of the *Imar*

The *Imar* is relatively easy to maintain because of its simple construction and the durable nature of the wood from which it is made. Nevertheless, proper care remains essential if the instrument is to retain its tonal quality, structural integrity and aesthetic value over an extended period. Tiv musicians recognise that the quality of an instrument depends not only on skilled craftsmanship but also on the attention given to its routine maintenance. Consequently, experienced performers observe several traditional practices that preserve both the physical condition and acoustic performance of the flute. These practices, handed down through generations of musicians, reflect indigenous knowledge of instrument conservation and ensure that the *Imar* continues to produce its characteristic rich and resonant sound.

The first requirement is to keep the *Imar* in a clean, dry and well-ventilated environment. Proper storage prevents insects from nesting inside the hollow bore and protects the instrument from moisture that could produce unpleasant odours, fungal growth or gradual deterioration of the wood. Before performance, the interior of the flute is traditionally

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lubricated using a lightly oiled bird feather, carefully inserted through the bore to reduce friction and enhance tonal resonance. After use, the feather is cleaned and stored separately to preserve its effectiveness. Regular playing is also regarded as an important aspect of maintenance because continuous use helps sustain the instrument's acoustic responsiveness. Where an *Imar* has remained unused for a prolonged period, performers normally wash the interior with clean water, allow it to dry thoroughly and repeat the lubrication process before returning it to use. This preparation restores the instrument's resonance and ensures consistent sound quality during performance.

Careful handling is equally important in preserving the longevity of the *Imar*. The instrument should be stored in a secure location where it is protected from accidental damage, excessive pressure and careless handling, particularly during public gatherings where it may easily be dropped or stepped upon. Although lightweight, the *Imar* can crack or break if subjected to rough treatment, and such damage often affects both its appearance and its tonal quality. Performers also recommend replacing the lubrication feather periodically, whether obtained from a chicken, duck or another suitable bird, because worn or deteriorated feathers may leave fibres inside the bore or obstruct the sound holes, thereby reducing the clarity and resonance of the instrument. Through these simple but consistent maintenance practices, Tiv musicians preserve not only the physical durability of the *Imar* but also its cultural significance as an enduring symbol of indigenous musical artistry.

Aesthetic Functions of the *Imar* in Promoting African Musical Aesthetics

Aesthetics, broadly understood as the study of beauty and artistic value, has traditionally been associated more closely with the visual arts than with music, even though music remains one of the most expressive and culturally significant forms of artistic creation. Among the Tiv people, artistic expression encompasses both visual and performing arts, each serving distinct social, cultural, and spiritual purposes. Artistic practices permeate virtually every aspect of communal life, finding expression in weddings, graduations, birthdays, religious observances, funerals, coronations, naming ceremonies, inaugurations, and other important public events. Tiv society also preserves a rich heritage of festivals, including the renowned Kwagh-hir puppet theatre, the Akata fishing festival, and numerous dance, marriage, and burial ceremonies in which artistic performance is

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indispensable. Like many African societies, the Tiv distinguish between sacred and secular ceremonies according to their cultural and religious purposes, yet both categories continue to inspire artistic creativity and reinforce communal identity. Against this background, this section examines the role of the *Imar* in promoting African musical aesthetics, paying particular attention not only to the beauty of its sound but also to the cultural work that beauty performs within Tiv society.

This perspective reflects the theoretical framework underpinning the study. Nketia's (1974) functionalist approach to African musicology argues that musical instruments acquire meaning through the social responsibilities they fulfil rather than through purely technical or formal qualities. Consequently, an instrument's aesthetic value is closely connected to its effectiveness in facilitating communication, strengthening social cohesion, supporting ritual activities, and enriching ceremonial life. Chernoff (1979) advances a similar position, maintaining that beauty in African music is inseparable from social action, since musical performance derives its artistic value from its capacity to coordinate dancers, performers, and audiences within a shared communal experience. These complementary perspectives provide an appropriate framework for interpreting the *Imar*. Its aesthetic significance lies not simply in its pleasing tone or technical craftsmanship but in its enduring contribution to Tiv ceremonial life, communal interaction, and cultural continuity. Recent African scholarship reinforces this interpretation. Katingima Day (2024) describes African musical aesthetics as an "aesthetic of life" realised through relationships and participation rather than through detached contemplation, while Olatunji (2023) argues that African conceptions of beauty emerge from communal social values rather than individual aesthetic judgement. Viewed from this perspective, the beauty of the *Imar* cannot be separated from the social, cultural, and symbolic functions it performs within Tiv society.

Although music is an abstract art, it possesses remarkable aesthetic power because it combines organised sound with creativity, emotion, and cultural communication. Musical performance conveys joy, grief, celebration, reverence, philosophical reflection, and even political commentary through carefully organised melodic and rhythmic structures. As Adega (2014), citing Gbilekaa (1993), observes, music among the Tiv communicates ideas and emotions capable of shaping both individual experience and collective consciousness. The *Imar* gives practical expression to this communicative power. Its melodies do far more

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than entertain audiences; they regulate movement, announce significant moments, reinforce ceremonial order, inspire emotional responses, and sustain the cultural identity of the community. The discussion that follows examines these aesthetic functions in detail, demonstrating that the enduring beauty of the *Imar* resides not merely in its sound but also in its profound contribution to Tiv musical life and the wider discourse on African musical aesthetics.

Melodic Aestheticism

The *Imar* performs a distinctive melodic function within Tiv musical practice, providing a practical expression of melodic progression through the orderly movement from one pitch to another. During performance, the instrument introduces melodies, raises songs, and guides vocal rendition through the African pentatonic scale, thereby shaping the overall melodic direction of the ensemble. One of its most remarkable musical characteristics is its flexibility in improvisation. Skilled performers can approximately make many pitches associated with Western tonal systems while simultaneously introducing ornamental variations that enrich the melodic texture beyond the instrument's conventional range. This improvisational freedom allows the *Imar* to remain expressive without departing from the established tonal traditions of Tiv music.

The *Imar anyiin* illustrates this melodic versatility particularly well. Closing the first and second finger holes together produces a pitch closely corresponding to the Western tonic (doh), while other combinations generate notes approximating the supertonic (reh), mediant (mi), subdominant (fa), dominant (soh), submediant (la), and the upper tonic through increased air pressure. Beyond these basic fingerings, each position is capable of producing two or more tonal variations depending on the performer's breath control and articulation. Such flexibility is evident in celebrated Tiv performances, including the *Adenden* dance tradition of the late 1980s, where the *Imar* served as the principal melodic instrument. Its role extends beyond producing attractive melodies; it carries songs, directs vocal performance, and organises musical participation throughout an ensemble. This function reflects Chernoff's (1979) understanding of African musical aesthetics, where beauty is measured not merely by pleasant sound but by the instrument's capacity to coordinate and sustain communal musical activity.

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The *Imar* as an Instrument of Accompaniment

Beyond its melodic responsibilities, the *Imar* serves as an important accompanying instrument within Tiv musical ensembles. During performance, it frequently produces independent melodic phrases that complement rather than duplicate the principal vocal line. These accompanying passages remain carefully aligned with the prevailing rhythmic structure established pr*Imar*ily through drumming, creating an intricate interaction among the various instruments within the ensemble. Depending on the character of the performance, the *Imar* may remain active from beginning to end or enter strategically during pauses between vocal passages, functioning as a musical bridge that preserves continuity and prevents abrupt transitions.

This accompanying role demonstrates the cooperative character of African ensemble performance. Rather than competing for musical prominence, the *Imar* supports the collective texture of the performance by weaving melodic patterns around the dominant rhythmic framework. Such interaction reflects Nketia's (1974) observation that African musical instruments achieve their fullest significance only within the broader ensemble to which they belong. The instrument's ability to sustain musical continuity also illustrates the relational conception of beauty advanced by Katingima Day (2024), according to which aesthetic value emerges through interaction, participation, and communal engagement instead of isolated musical display. Within Tiv performance practice, accompaniment therefore becomes an essential aesthetic function rather than a secondary musical role.

The *Imar* and Dance

The relationship between the *Imar* and dance represents one of the clearest expressions of African musical aesthetics within Tiv culture. The instrument not only accompanies dance but actively directs it through melodic phrases that indicate appropriate body movements, tempo, and rhythmic intensity. While maintaining its principal melodic role, the *Imar* simultaneously produces ornamental sound effects that diversify musical texture and inspire corresponding variations in dance movement. Its melodies establish the emotional atmosphere of a performance and provide dancers with clear rhythmic cues that determine when particular movements should begin, intensify, or conclude. A familiar example is the

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melodic pattern *tilo tilo-to-tilo-toto tilo-tilo-to-tilo-totoo*, which experienced dancers immediately recognise as signalling a specific sequence of traditional dance movements.

At the height of many Tiv performances, vocal accompaniment gradually recedes, leaving the *Imar* as the principal melodic voice, often introduced through the sounding of a traditional whistle. This convention demonstrates the authority the instrument exercises within the performance ensemble. Its melodic patterns draw upon the tonal characteristics of the Tiv language, allowing performers to communicate musical meaning through culturally familiar rhythmic and linguistic structures. Chernoff's (1979) observation that African musical beauty is evaluated through successful communal participation finds practical expression in this relationship between flute and dance. The *Imar* does not merely entertain listeners; it organises collective movement and transforms musical sound into coordinated bodily expression. Such functions also support Dor's (2022) argument that African musical systems require analytical approaches attentive to performance context rather than formal musical notation alone.

Symbolic and Ceremonial Aesthetics

The aesthetic significance of the *Imar* extends beyond melody, accompaniment, and dances into the symbolic life of Tiv society. Within major ceremonies, the instrument functions as an audible marker of honour, prestige, and communal recognition. Its appearance at the climactic stages of important events, including the coronation of the Tor Tiv, signals moments of exceptional social significance and ceremonial transition. In this respect, the *Imar* performs functions comparable to those of praise instruments found elsewhere in West Africa, particularly the kakaki used within Hausa royal courts to announce authority, celebrate leadership, and communicate ceremonial importance (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). The instrument therefore serves simultaneously as a musical voice and a cultural symbol embedded within the social fabric of Tiv life.

This symbolic function reinforces the functionalist perspective adopted throughout this study. The beauty of the *Imar* cannot be understood independently of the meanings attached to its ceremonial use. During coronations, festivals, and other public occasions, the instrument communicates respect, authority, continuity, and communal identity through sound. Such symbolic expression confirms Nketia's (1974) argument that African musical

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aesthetics is inseparable from social function. Similar conclusions emerge from recent African philosophical scholarship. Bateye et al. (2023) and Effiboley (2023) argue that African concepts of beauty should be interpreted through indigenous cultural values rather than external aesthetic theories. The ceremonial deployment of the *Imar* illustrates this principle precisely, demonstrating that its artistic value resides as much in what it represents culturally as in the quality of the sounds it produces.

The *Imar* in Contemporary Times: Challenges and Prospects

The *Imar* remains one of the most distinctive aerophones in Tiv musical culture, yet its continued relevance is increasingly challenged by the rapid transformation of musical taste, performance practice, and cultural priorities. The expansion of contemporary Nigerian popular music, the dominance of electronically produced sounds, and the growing preference for Western musical instruments have gradually reduced the visibility of indigenous instruments within both secular and religious settings. This shift reflects a broader historical process that began during the colonial and missionary eras, when indigenous musical traditions were frequently regarded as incompatible with Christian worship and Western notions of civilisation. Ademiluka (2023) observes that nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries actively discouraged the use of indigenous musical instruments in church services because they associated them with traditional religious practices. Indigenous musical expression gradually re-emerged through youth fellowships, local choirs, Aladura churches, and later Neo-Pentecostal movements, allowing selected African musical forms to regain acceptance within Christian worship. Despite this recovery, many indigenous instruments, including the *Imar*, continue to occupy largely ceremonial and cultural spaces, while guitars, keyboards, drum sets, and digital sound technologies dominate contemporary worship and entertainment. The consequence is that younger generations encounter the *Imar* less frequently than earlier generations did, reducing opportunities for familiarity, appreciation, and practical engagement with the instrument.

Another challenge concerns the transmission of indigenous knowledge associated with the construction, performance, and maintenance of the *Imar*. Throughout Tiv society, mastery of the instrument has traditionally depended on apprenticeship, observation, and prolonged interaction between experienced performers and younger learners. Such informal systems

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have preserved the instrument for generations, yet they have also made its survival dependent upon the availability of knowledgeable custodians. As many experienced performers grow older without adequate succession, valuable knowledge concerning tuning techniques, performance practice, repertoire, craftsmanship, and ceremonial application faces the risk of gradual disappearance. Limited scholarly documentation further compounds this problem, since much of the available knowledge remains preserved in oral memory rather than in systematic publications, audio recordings, or digital archives. Similar concerns have been expressed across the African continent, where increasing attention has shifted from merely documenting endangered musical traditions to developing sustainable strategies for their revitalisation within educational institutions and local communities (Netshivhambe, 2024). The situation surrounding the *Imar* therefore reflects a wider continental concern regarding the preservation of indigenous musical heritage in an era of rapid cultural change.

These challenges, however, should not obscure the considerable prospects that exist for the revitalisation and continued promotion of the *Imar*. Renewed scholarly interest in African indigenous knowledge systems, growing cultural consciousness among younger generations, and expanding opportunities created through digital technology provide favourable conditions for preserving and promoting the instrument. Documentation through books, academic research, audio-visual archives, and digital repositories would preserve valuable performance techniques while making them accessible to future generations of performers and researchers. Educational institutions could incorporate Tiv indigenous musical instruments into music curricula, while cultural festivals and community-based workshops would encourage practical engagement among young people. The inclusion of the *Imar* in intercultural performances, contemporary musical compositions, and heritage tourism initiatives would further expand its visibility beyond traditional ceremonial contexts. Such measures correspond with Netshivhambe's (2024) argument that sustainable preservation requires moving beyond conservation towards active revitalisation embedded within education, community participation, and cultural policy. The future of the *Imar* therefore depends not simply on safeguarding an artefact of the past but on creating opportunities for the instrument to remain a vibrant and creative component of contemporary African musical life.

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Recommendations

1. Educational institutions, cultural centres, and community organisations should incorporate practical instruction on the construction, performance, and cultural significance of the *Imar* into music curricula and extracurricular activities. This approach would encourage intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge while developing a new generation of skilled performers and researchers.

2. Universities, museums, cultural agencies, and researchers should collaborate to document the *Imar* through audio and video recordings, musical transcriptions, photographs, and scholarly publications. Creating accessible digital archives would preserve performance techniques, craftsmanship, and historical knowledge for future generations while supporting further academic research.

3. Government cultural institutions, traditional councils, and performing arts organisations should encourage the inclusion of the *Imar* in cultural festivals, national celebrations, intercultural performances, and contemporary musical productions. Such initiatives would increase public appreciation of the instrument and demonstrate its continued relevance within modern African musical practice.

4. Relevant government agencies, cultural institutions, and traditional authorities should develop sustainable programmes that provide financial support, training opportunities, and recognition for indigenous instrument makers and performers. Such policies would safeguard the *Imar* as an important element of Tiv cultural identity while ensuring its continued contribution to the promotion of African musical aesthetics.

Conclusion

The *Imar* remains one of the most significant indigenous musical instruments in Tiv cultural life, serving purposes that extend far beyond the production of sound to encompass communication, ceremony, social cohesion, artistic creativity, and the preservation of cultural identity. Examination of its construction, performance practice, aesthetic functions, and contemporary relevance demonstrates that the instrument occupies a central position within African musical aesthetics, where artistic beauty is understood through communal

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participation, cultural meaning, and functional significance rather than through purely formal qualities. The study also reveals that, despite increasing pressure from globalisation, changing musical preferences, and the declining transmission of indigenous knowledge, the *Imar* continues to possess considerable cultural and artistic value that can contribute meaningfully to contemporary African music. Its melodic versatility, ceremonial symbolism, and capacity to shape collective musical experience affirm its enduring importance within Tiv society and beyond. Sustained documentation, educational integration, community participation, and institutional support are therefore essential for ensuring that the *Imar* remains a living cultural resource rather than a historical relic. Preserving and promoting the *Imar* not only safeguards an important aspect of Tiv heritage but also strengthens the broader project of sustaining African musical aesthetics as a dynamic expression of indigenous knowledge, creativity, and cultural continuity.

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