

## ARTICLE

# Religious, Social, Cultural Significance of the Usage of *Orhue* (Chalk) at Birth in Edo: Implications for the Practice of Christianity

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### Abstract

*Orhue* (indigenous powder, chalk) has several uses in African traditional culture and religion, especially among the Edo people of Nigeria. However, some Christians reject its usage and regard it as fetish or demonized substance. This rejection is related to colonization and modernity. This paper investigates *Orhue*'s meaning, purpose, and implications for the practice of Christianity; uses qualitative research methodology. It reveals that religiously *orhue* serves as a means of appreciating God (*Osanobua*), celebrating His providence, and expressing His holiness and blessings. Socially, it unifies people in a shared sense of solidarity. Culturally, it announces the birth of a child and the welcoming of the newborn. This essay examines contextualization and some of its related concepts—inculturation, enculturation, and absorption—in order to decolonize and formulate bases for its Christian application. As an exercise in contextual theology, it concludes that a faithful usage of *orhue* strengthens Christianity's social expression, cultural participation, preservation, worship, and evangelism.

### Keywords

Orhue, Christianity, Edo, syncretism, worship, evangelism, Nigeria, African Traditional Religion

*Orhue* is the indigenous name for chalk among the Edo ethnic-speaking people of Nigeria. It is produced locally from clay and is only ever white in color. It is sold in lumps of different sizes and can be dried or wet, depending on the purpose and surface on which it is applied. Its name and white color describe its meaning in the people's worldview. It combines the general cultural symbols of white with its specific purpose for the people. Although the name varies slightly in syllable among differing tribes and clans, it does not affect the usage, purpose, and meaning shared among them. Thus, its nature and role are similar everywhere in traditional African society.

Technically, *orhue* has a vast array of uses. It is replete with meaning and significance. Consequently, it profoundly affects people's religious, cultural, and social reflections and interactions. The celebration of birth, which is the focus of this paper, is an instance in which *orhue* is employed. As an African Christian scholar and theologian, I have firsthand knowledge of the use of *orhue*. I have noted that many African Christians view the substance and its use to be completely idolatrous. They thus reject *orhue* completely. I enter this conversation as a theologian seeking to clarify and, ultimately, defend its usage within Christian rituals. Correcting some erroneous views, I will demonstrate how the Church can accommodate the use of *orhue* and in fact positively benefit from it.

### **Edo Usage of *Orhue* at Birth**

Edo is the name of an influential group of people in Nigeria. They share linguistic similarities, religious beliefs, practices, and traditional, social, and cultural values. The similarity also includes their political and administrative systems. Benin is the primordial ethnic group. Its subgroups are Esan, Etsako, Owan, and Akoko-Edo. They are further subdivided into clans and sub-clans. They trace their ancestral origin to Benin, from where they migrated to their present location.

Thus, Edo terminology has two references to its meaning. First, it refers specifically to Benin as the foundational route of the people. Second, it is used as a reference name for the people by foundation and migration with a shared boundary. Moreover, Ebohon asserts that "Although the Binis [the local term with reference to the people of Benin] can be found in all parts of the world, their ancestral home is in Edo South."<sup>1</sup> Thus, Edo State is a

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1 Osemwegie Ebohon, Olokun, *Worship in Benin Kingdom*, (Benin City: Ebohon Centre Publications, 2010), 4.

collective reference to their geographical boundary. This research cuts across the three senatorial districts or areas of the state.

*Orhue* is a means of dedication, employed for the announcement of the blessing of a safe delivery, the arrival of a newborn, and its celebration. It is a process that expresses the people's attachment to their religious beliefs, disposition, and interactions with God and one another. It further shows how the beliefs and practices are shared in social-cultural domains. It brings people together in a shared sense of joy and solidarity, irrespective of their religion. Tillotson reflects this view: "Birth is a time of huge rejoicing."<sup>2</sup> Consequently, it has a shared implication for interfaith relations, particularly between adherents of Christianity and African Traditional Religion in its religious, social, and cultural milieu. This claim substantiates the following investigations among the different ethnic groups structured into three regions: Edo South, Central, and North.

### **Usage of *Orhue* at Birth in Benin (Edo South)**

*Orhue* (chalk) in Benin symbolizes joy, peace, and happiness. It is not associated with evil. Thus, proverbially it is expressed as follows: *Ogbe orhue egbibi*, meaning one who rubs with *orhue* does not dab with grief, sorrow, mourning, harm, suffering, weeping, or displeasure. *Ibi* is a black powder or charcoal. It is the direct opposite of *orhue* in terms of name and meaning. *Ibi* is associated with whatever is not pleasing.<sup>3</sup> But because *orhue* symbolizes "happiness and good fortune it is...used in all joyous occasions."<sup>4</sup>

When celebrating a birth, a lump of *orhue* is broken into pieces or ground into powder on a plate. Water is added to some and mixed into a white coloring material. The powder type is distributed to men and women by pouring it on their palm, head, or shoulder as it pleases the recipient. Those who receive it with their palm will rub it adequately on their face, shoulder, or head as they wish. The one who does the sharing is usually a woman. She moves around in the quarter with a song or spoken words of request:

2 M. Tillotson, "Family Rites," *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, 259.

3 Agho Johnbull, Personal Interview, 8 July 2022.

4 Rebecca N. Agheyisi, *An Edo English Dictionary*, (Benin City, Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 1986).

*Wa gu mwen gb'orhue*  
*Orhue ghi kho na gbe n'osio mwan*  
*Orhue ghi kho*

Join me to rub orhue.

*Orhue* is not harmful to rub for/with a friend.

*Orhue* is not harmful.

Those within her reach will respond with a question asking the source or reason behind the appeal. Then the announcer will state the purpose, namely, to celebrate the birth of a child, and then specify who. To this end, they will also join in the birth celebration.<sup>5</sup>

*Orhue* is applied as dots on the face, forehead, sides of the face (the location between the upper and the lower jaws), and the chin. It can also be rubbed on the chest and shoulder as part of the birth celebration. This ritual use of *orhue* on the face and some parts of the body has distinct traditional meanings. It conveys joy and happiness on the face. Specifically, the forehead refers to the totality of the personality and is a means of keying into their source of joy.<sup>6</sup>

In other instances, *orhue* has significance for its placement on the ear, chest, back of the palms, and on the leg or toes. For the ear, it connotes that the person, so marked with it, will hear something good that will be a source of joy and peace. Similarly, *orhue* exudes peace and joy in a person's mind when used on the chest. It is a sign of goodwill from a mother to her child. It reflects on the breast or shoulder of a woman the desired fruitfulness of the womb. In other words, *orhue* relates to the desire between her and her children. Thus, it is used at the point or time of delivery. It has other uses on the day of the naming ceremony.<sup>7</sup>

Despite how *orhue* is traditionally and symbolically connected to moments of joy and good news, many Christians often misunderstand it. For example, even when it is available, some prefer to use synthetic powder instead of *orhue*. In other words, they still perform the actions, but not with *orhue*, only an imitation thereof. Evidently, some Christians reject it completely because they consider it connected to evil. However, nothing in its use suggests that *orhue* is synonymous with evil or harm—quite the opposite, in fact. Moreover, it is not linked directly, partially, mainly,

5 Agheyisi, *An Edo English Dictionary*.

6 Agheyisi, *An Edo English Dictionary*.

7 Agheyisi, *An Edo English Dictionary*.

or otherwise with idolatry, which is a typical concern for many African Christians. Nonetheless, they feel more at home with synthetic powder as a replacement.

Additionally, some African Christians perceive *orhue* as a fetish or, like *juju* (a belief and practice common in West Africa), as a magical practice. However, as an African Christian theologian I reject this view. It has nothing to do with its use in traditional practices, which were performed before Christianity and continue to be performed today. I suggest that its ultimate goal is rather determined by the user's motive.<sup>8</sup> My primary source of information is Juliet Oviawe, whom I interviewed in 2022. She is a typical traditional religious worshipper, wife, and grandmother. She has not had any contact with Christianity—either as a believer or church goer.

To elicit a clearer understanding of the above situation, it is pertinent to consider R. A. Akanmidu's submission about issues relating to the function and use of a thing. Accordingly, this African scholar of religion stresses that,

The word “function” means “what a thing does by virtue of existence.” What a thing does by virtue of existence predicates on what would not have been done except that thing exists. For the concept of function(s), existence of a thing runs synonymously with the functions of a thing. Therefore, the function(s) of a thing implies what a thing does in a particular situation by means of presence or existence. In this respect a thing is not a tool unless it asserts some meaning without reference to external determination.

On the other hand, the concept of the “uses” of a thing does not evolve from the nature of a thing but dependent on the ways a thing is identified as a tool by an individual or by a collection of persons to achieve some different goals. In this very sense, the idea of the uses of a thing is subject to external determination. For example, water functions to sustain life, whereas water is used in so many other ways. The function of a thing derives from the nature of a thing while the use of a thing derives from human determination.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Juliet Oviawe, Personal Interview, 23 July 2022.

9 R. A. Akanmidu, “The Social Uses of Religion: The Nigerian Case in Perspective,” *Religion and Service to Humanity*, R. S. Abubakre, E. Ade Odumuyiwa, and M. O. Opeloye, eds. (Ilorin: Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions, 1993), 79.

With this succinct explanation distinguishing the “function” from the “use” of a thing, I suggest that *orhue* neither assumes nor occupies the position of idolatry in terms of its function. That is, *orhue* is not idolatrous by virtue of its existence. Rather, *orhue* is simply a natural substance. It is like any other thing, namely, a part of the natural existence in the universe and particularly a mineral substance found within the earth. By implication, it is part of God’s creation and a provision for humanity.

Consequently, *orhue*’s usage, *how it is used and for what purpose*, is externally determined. Whatever belief, meaning, value, and importance built around it does not come or evolve from its nature itself. *Orhue* becomes a tool according to how the Edo peoples—and others in Africa—use it to obtain some specified goal. To this end, how it is perceived and used is a matter of the people’s determination about it—there is nothing *natural* or *innate* about it that determines its purpose.

How some Christians negatively judge *orhue* may likely be a product of modernization and modernity imposed on them by colonization. Additionally, missionaries both produced and received misinformation about *orhue* when they first encountered it. Theologian Yusufu Turaki provides insight to this claim:

African ... values become confusing and compounded due to the work and influence of modernizing agents which have brought about social transformations of African societies and peoples. These modernizing agents are: colonial masters; Christian and Islamic missions and western modernity. This state of crises resulted from the social interaction and relationship between African culture and modernization (foreign values and institutions). .... Modernization affects Africa in general at two basic levels: at the level of culture and values, and at the level of social structures and institutions.<sup>10</sup>

This explains how the value of *orhue* was diminished, since it is one among many African cultural elements that were condemned and rejected during the process of colonization. Decades later, the stigma continues in a postcolonial context. Christians assume that *orhue* belongs innately to a non-Christian tradition and therefore is inferior at best, or evil at worse. However, I argue that the *use* of *orhue* should determine its value, irrespective of which

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10 Yusufu Turaki, *Tribal Gods of Africa*, (Jos: Crossroads Communication, 1997), 84–85.

tradition uses it, African Traditional Religions (ATR) or Christian traditions. There is nothing innate that disqualifies it from its use in Christian rituals.

### **Syncretism or Contextualization?**

How should we conceptualize the use of orhue within Christian traditions and rituals? Two words come to mind: syncretism and contextualization. In this section, I will briefly define each term and how they are used in differing disciplines.

Syncretism is equivocal. In the study of religion, Paul Hedges notes that “the term syncretism is a loaded and contested term.”<sup>11</sup> This is because the term is often used by Christian theologians in ways different from how scholars of religion use it. The broader meaning of syncretism, the one taken from the study of religion, reflects the ongoing process of adapting, adopting, assimilating, and blending that religious traditions undergo historically in their encounter with the other surrounding religious and cultural contexts to which practitioners migrate and in which institutions emerge. In this view, “No religion is a cultural and conceptual island,” because borrowing is inevitable.<sup>12</sup> That is, all religious traditions are syncretic.

However, what scholars of religions call “syncretism” many Christian theologians—I among them—call “contextualization.” This is because among Christian theologians, particularly in Africa, syncretism pertains to the mixing of “beliefs” or “doctrines” and not the contextualization or *translation* of the Christian tradition into other cultural contexts. Employing syncretism as a term is complicated further because, in the case of *orhue*, for example, opponents of its use label the practice *syncretic* and use the term pejoratively. However, in this essay I employ not syncretism but contextualization to explain and clarify the use of *orhue* in Christian contexts.

To this end, the basis of fear and misunderstanding of *orhue* among some Christians stems in part from their characterizing it as syncretic—but syncretic in its Christian, pejorative meaning. P. Ade Dopamu (an African scholar of religion) alludes to this, referring to a statement credited to Willem Visser’t Hooft,

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11 Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies*, 72.

12 Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 72.

Some speak of syncretism whenever a particular religion makes use of concepts which have their origin in the life of another religion. This is not syncretism, for every religion that steps out of its original environment has to be communicated through the expression and concepts which are familiar to the people to whom the religion is being communicated. To speak of syncretism in this connection makes every religion syncretistic.<sup>13</sup>

Here, I pause to note that Dopamu is not rejecting syncretism. He in fact affirms, like scholars of religion, that all religions are syncretic. He continues:

The proper word for this exercise ...is translation. Another group of writers use the word to indicate that a particular religion has taken into its own life ideas or practices which have their origin in another religious world. This...is not syncretism but rather absorption....*Real syncretism should be reserved for the view that says all religions lead to one God, all their teachings should be pulled together to provide a common religion for common humanity...* Real syncretism denies any specific revelation but always looks for the common denominator in religions.<sup>14</sup>

Dopamu defines and deploys syncretism with theological resonances. That is, it is a *belief* or *theological position* that all religions should be blended, or practices mixed, or the “least common denominator” among religions should alone be kept, or that all religions lead to God. This is decisively *not* how scholars of religion use it. In Dopamu’s case—and as I am using it in this essay—“translation” or “absorption” is not syncretism, as will be discussed later. Indeed, translation and absorption are forms of contextualization.

Ironically, Dopamu later appears to hold the belief of syncretism as elaborated by Visser’t Hooft, and this is instructive for the purpose of this essay: “In view of the above, we would not regard a Christian ... who taps the spiritual resources of [African Religious Traditions] as practicing syncretism.”<sup>15</sup> But this is a key distinction: if the Christian *believes* they are “tapping the spiritual resources” of another religious tradition, in this case, African indigenous traditions, then, in my view, it is no longer merely

13 P. Ade Dopamu, “African Religion in Nigerian Society: Past, Present and the Future,” *Studies in Religious Understanding in Nigeria*, R. D. Abubakre et al. (eds.), (Ilorin: Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions, 1993), 245.

14 Dopamu, “African Religion in Nigerian Society,” 245. [*emphasis added*]

15 Dopamu, “African Religion in Nigerian Society,” 245.



contextualization but rather syncretic (in the theological sense). This is why tapping spiritual resources in this regard must be taken in our context with a sense of caution. Moreover, it should not include a participation in worship and by extension the liturgy of other religions and in this case of African Traditional Religion. As Osadolor Imasogie clarifies, liturgy includes “all the elements that make up the order of worship at the shrine. This will include the invocation and its implications, the names or attributes by which the divinity is called at worship and the prayers and songs used, [since] songs contain the theology of the traditional divinities.” As he explains further, “liturgy also includes the rituals, the taboos, the types of sacrifices, the colour of the sacrifices as well as the colour of the ceremonial clothing of the priests and sacred objects.”<sup>16</sup>

Imasogie’s clarification is further based on the application made by Dopamu in which, unlike Visser’t Hooft’s opinion, he describes a situation that is, in my view, obviously syncretic:

On 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 1991, I attended an Iguunu Festival at Ladojo village, near Abeokuta. Thousands of people from Ibadan, Lagos, Abeokuta and other places were there for various interest and needs—child bearing, commercial enterprise, prosperity at work and the like. Many of these visitors were ...Christians and they received the blessings of the Iguunu masquerades....We would regard their participation as an acknowledgement of the spiritual resources they can gain from both religions.<sup>17</sup>

Iguunu Festival is a traditional religious cult dedicated to certain deities in some parts of Yoruba. It started in Lagos in 1805 and later spread to Abeokuta in Ogun State, Nigeria. It is conducted to appease the deities.<sup>18</sup> In this case, I argue theologically that when Christians receive blessings from the Iguunu masquerades, they have crossed over from contextualization into syncretism, namely, “tapping the spiritual resources” of certain Yoruba deities.

As an African Christian theologian, I reject Dopamu’s conclusion, namely, that “we would regard their participation as an acknowledgement

16 Osadolor Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion*, (Benin City: Imasogie Publishers, Third Edition 2008), 10.

17 Dopamu, “African Religion in Nigerian Society,” 245–46.

18 Hayzeeworld, “‘Igunnuko’ Masquerades Having Their Day in Abeokuta,” *So True* [blog] (November 8, 2015).

of the spiritual resources they can gain from both religions.”<sup>19</sup> This position is syncretic as I have defined it theologically above and beyond the notion of mere translation or adaptation; rather, it suggests a fusion of religions into a single whole. It falls short of the concept of contextualization in all respects. In this example, I would argue that it is holistically syncretic in both spiritual and physical senses, and consequently in contradiction to Christian belief and practice. Thus, syncretism goes beyond the mere beliefs or teachings of the commonality of all religions to include the practice of their rituals and liturgies.

I seek to distinguish the use of *orhue* from the examples above. *Orhue* is used within the context of Christian rituals and adhering to the purpose or goal of Christian rituals. It does not include the process of seeking spiritual blessings and power from activities that are utterly and completely outside the limits of Christian beliefs and practices—for example, the blessings of deities from African indigenous traditions. Moreover, it rejects the expectation of grace or power from deities other than Jesus Christ as mediated by Christian elements of worship or rituals.

For further clarification, Moreau gives a simple and straightforward meaning of syncretism from an Evangelical Christian perspective: “Blending of one idea, practice, or attitude with another.”<sup>20</sup> In relation to Christianity, he stresses, “Traditionally, among Christians it has been used for the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements. Examples range from Western materialism to Asian and African animistic beliefs (whatever that may be) incorporated into the church.”<sup>21</sup> This is the view and tendency I seek to avoid while proposing that *orhue* is a means of Christian communication in social, ecclesial, and spiritual life. Moreau also suggests that to achieve an avoidance of syncretism, the process must include:

. . . a phenomenological approach in which we simply uncover what is happening or being taught. Built on that, we use theological and cultural analysis to understand what is happening. Finally, we evaluate what we have discovered in light of biblical truth. As a replacement of the essential elements of the gospel with alternative religious practices or understanding, syncretism must be exposed

19 Dopamu, “African Religion in Nigerian Society,” 246.

20 A. Scott Moreau, “Syncretism,” *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission*, A. Scott Moreau et al (eds). (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 924.

21 Moreau, “Syncretism,” 924.

and challenged. The means by which this is done are critical and must be culturally informed.<sup>22</sup>

This is contextualization in process. It is taken with every sense of seriousness and applied in this study. I understand that scholars of religion may employ syncretism merely to describe what I, as an African Christian theologian, call contextualization. However, I must acknowledge the emic definition of this term in an African Christian context: it is used pejoratively, as already mentioned, and our theological heritage has another word to describe the use of indigenous elements in Christian ritual, namely, contextualization.

Consequently, the process of contextualization is the underlining approach we have taken in the treatment of *orhue* as a source of religious, social, cultural significance for the practice of Christianity.

### **Goodwill Practices, Aesthetic, and Medicinal Purposes of *Orhue* in Benin**

With the above discussion on the process, meaning, and purpose of contextualization in relation to syncretism, we resume on the discourse of *orhue* as it occupies a prominent place in goodwill practices in Africa. It has numerous aesthetic and medicinal purposes as well. For instance, a newly delivered woman uses the paste on her breast to facilitate milk production and on the baby to smoothen his body. It works by shrinking and softening the breast. In this way, it makes it possible and easy for the baby to suckle the mother.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, *orhue* is applied to the umbilical cord to quicken its separation from the navel. Outside of birth, it is used in traditional worship as paint to tidy and decorate the shrine and place of prayer. *Orhue* beautifies the environment, and makes it neat, pleasant, and attractive, particularly to the ancestors and benevolent spirits. Thus, it serves as a mark of honor, beauty, and reverence. Consequently, it attracts the favor of the divinities and spirits.<sup>24</sup>

It is also given with medicine to a patient. They are not to be taken orally or used with the drug, whatever it may be, irrespective of the

22 Moreau, "Syncretism," 924.

23 Gabriel O. Obazee, "Pregnancy to Child-Birth: Traditional Care in Old Benin," *From Birth to Death: A Benin Cultural Voyage*, S. U. O. Igbe (ed.), (n.p, np n.d.), 29.

24 Obazee, "Pregnancy to Child-Birth," 29.

requirement of the drug, but as a symbolic expression of the release of the medicine’s potential and a wish for the desired result. The role of *orhue* and the sand in this regard is termed *akhase*. It is a positive affirmation of its expectation. Thus, they are used to communicate in symbolic prayer the favor and power of the recipient authority, which could be The Supreme Being, ancestors, deity, or spirit, as well as the hope of the dispenser.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, the significance of *orhue* as a common phenomenon for the celebration at birth cannot be overemphasized. In similar circumstances like those mentioned above, it goes with singing and dancing to announce a safe delivery and the welcome of a newborn. The occasion or jubilation is led by a woman who sings:

*Orhue omo igbe,  
Siwo! Siwo!! Siwo!!!*

I am rubbing a child’s *orhue*.  
*Siwo!* (an exclamation of joy or happiness).

Well-wishers join her in the singing and dancing while the sharing of *orhue* continues and is used by them as earlier described. Thus, the ritual serves to announce and celebrate birth.

Another usage of *orhue* in Benin is that it serves as a goodwill presentation to well-wishers who visit at birth. In this case, kola nuts are added to a lump and presented to the visitor. They use them to pray for the child and the family. One or more nuts are broken depending on the number of persons present. The pieces are shared among them. But if the nut is one and only one person is involved in the process, he takes the nut along with the lump of *orhue* earlier given as a present. Prayer is rendered through the ancestors (*Enikao*). It is done for the efficacy of the prayer since the ancestors in traditional religious belief are the custodian of the people’s welfare. They mediate between them, and the deity, in turn, serves as a channel to the Supreme Being.

The significance of *orhue* is based on its white color. Traditionally, it depicts purity, holiness, and perfection. It has both human and divine dimensions of its role in the celebration. Thus, it is a mark of honor to The Supreme Being, divinities, and spirits. It is used as an expression or attraction of potency, holiness, goodness, and blessing for humanity.<sup>26</sup>

25 Obazee, “Pregnancy to Child-Birth,” 29.

26 Victory Efe, Personal Interview, 23 July 2022.

The usage of *orhue* in the celebration of birth begins at home immediately after a child is born. The newborn and its mother are escorted from the hospital, maternity, or local midwife with the use of *orhue*, as previously described, singing and dancing using a particular song meant for the occasion:

*Wa gum wen gb'orhue*  
*Orhue ikho na gbeno sio omwan.*  
*Iy'omo vbe ovbiee di'owa*  
*Akponmw'Osa*

Please join me to rub *orhue*.  
 It is not harmful to rub with *orhue*.  
 The mother and her child are coming home.  
 The mother and her child are coming home.  
 Thanks to God.<sup>27</sup>

God is the source of life, creation, and existence. He provides children and every good thing. He guarantees the baby's and its mother's safety and makes the delivery possible. So at the birth celebration this goodness is acknowledged and gratitude is given to Him for it. An affirmation is added as part of the song:

*Orhue igbe oh.*  
*Orhue er'ikhian gbe*

I am rubbing with *orhue*.  
 I shall continue to rub with it.

It shows the extent of the significance and the role attached to *orhue* in Benin, Edo, and Africa.<sup>28</sup>

### Usage of *Orhue* at Birth in Esan (Edo Central)

Esan has far-reaching similarities with Benin being their ancestral home, having migrated from it.<sup>29</sup> They are also close regarding the significance, usage, and purpose of *orhue*. In Esan, the native chalk is called *erhe* or *orhue*.

27 Felicia Ohamu Isiuwa, Personal Interview, 22 July 2022.

28 Ibid.

29 Osemwegie Ebohon; C. G. Okojie, *Esan Native Laws and Customs with Ethnographic*

*Erhe* has no diversity of type. It is made from clay and has white color. Very close to it and from the same source of raw material is another local product called *ekoh*. Unlike *erhe*, *ekoh* is edible. It has the shape of a disc and is dark brown. It is used only for medicinal purposes for pregnant women.<sup>30</sup> Its existence and use are also similar in Edo as a whole. *Erhe* symbolizes joy, happiness, and peace. It is used to proclaim and jubilate at birth with the song:

*Obhimen gbobie.*  
*Oyo yo!*  
*Oigbobiere.*  
*Oyo yo!*

My child has given birth again.  
*Oyo yo!* (is an exclamation of joy).  
 She would give birth again.

The jubilation is done at home, outside, and when the celebrant goes to the market.<sup>31</sup>

Another song used as part of the occasion is: *Ukhahon ibiele nemen ghon ghon. Otuonkpa imuihe no suhonmhon*. (Join me to celebrate when you hear I have given birth. No individual can lift a load on his head.) This song portrays the sense of community and solidarity shared by Africans towards one another. Thus, it is a clarion call to others to share in the joy of the celebration as a sign of support, unity, and peaceful coexistence. At the center of the jubilation is the *erhe* that serves in this case as the element of unification and identification.<sup>32</sup>

The usage of *erhe* does not stop after the first celebration of the birth. It goes on continuously by the celebrant for three months. Thus, the announcement continues at home or when the baby's mother or grandmother goes out formally in the community.<sup>33</sup>

As usual, *erhe* is dotted on the face by the women. Men only use it as a dab on the forehead (not dots), shoulder, or arm. Along with dots, women also wear red earrings and beads on the neck to match the white patches of

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*Studies of the Esan People*, (Brnin City: Ilupeju Press Ltd, 1994), 1.

30 Christy Omoamienelo, Personal Interview, 7 July 2022.

31 Omoamienelo interview.

32 Ese Muhammad, Personal Interview, 7 July 2022.

33 Mariam Aibaegbe, Personal Interview, 7 July 2022.

the chalk. To this end, the substance signifies joy, happiness, and jubilation. But the red beads and earrings, including the location of the dots on the face, are indicative of the purpose, joy, happiness, and celebration of birth.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, *erhe* is the qualifying expression of what is good. Hence, it is known as *emhie si* (what is good). Thus, its unifying quality is expressed with a maxim: *ogbe erhe ane ghonghon* (he who rubs *erhe* deserves solidarity in celebration).<sup>35</sup>

Besides, *erhe* is used as a means of reconciliation. Its offer is something not to be rejected. Consequently, when shared by rivals, like in the instance of the celebration of birth, it brokers a sense of forgiveness, sympathy, tolerance, reconciliation, and harmony among them. If someone refuses to share in the joy of a supposed enemy by neglecting to accept it, the person is considered as doing evil, devilish, and an arch enemy. Therefore, the incident is taken as an open declaration of hostility, which is abhorred and unacceptable to God. In this way, *erhe* serves as a means of reverence and obedience to God in loving, sharing in one's concern, and reconciliation where unity is lacking.<sup>36</sup>

The concept of using *erhe* is hinged on the fact that it does not cause or attract shame to the user: *Ono ghere oigbi ibi*. It is a source and reflection of joy and excitement, a sign or symbol of a good omen. That is why people strongly associate with it. It is a link to all that is good, used by women for dressing as an indication of happiness for safe delivery, and the gift of a newborn. Thus, the concept is deeply rooted in the knowledge and practice of the people. It has extensive usage. Indeed, it covers every aspect of the people's sense or source of joy, success, progress, peace, and prosperity. Consequently, it is used to celebrate safety in a venture like arriving home successfully after a distant journey, war or deliverance in an accident, success in a significant endeavor, and much more.<sup>37</sup>

*Erhe* is intended to declare and attract attention and involvement. These factors underlie women dotting it on the forehead, arm, chest, or neck. In this way, women can use it for three months. The number or nature of birth determines how many dots are put on a particular spot on the face. A single dot indicates a lone birth. Two or more reveal several deliveries within the family; twins or triplets in one delivery. The importance of *erhe*

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34 Mariam Aibaegbe.

35 Theresa Aleebalulu, Personal interview, 7 July 2022.

36 Theresa Aleebalulu.

37 Hope Ekperan and Akhimien Osaigbovo, Personal Interview, 8 July 2022.

is noticeable in the songs that go with it. They are not entirely different but have similarities as one moves from one place to another. Thus, the variation depends on the locality of the song. This is apparent in the following when compared with the previous:

*Ukhamie khibiele,  
Nughonghon khavade.  
Otuonkpa imuihe no suhonmhon.  
Bha nemhen gbo erhe.  
Erhe ikho na gbe no soria.*

When you become aware I have given birth,  
Please come with jubilation.  
No individual can lift a load on his or her head.  
It is not harmful to rub *erhe* on behalf of someone.)<sup>38</sup>

The significance is not limited to the mere idea of sharing in another's burden or joy. *Erhe* is a replica of blessing. Therefore, it is a call to participate in the pleasure and invitation to be a recipient of the same. Consequently, it is a source of general blessing and goodness to whosoever shares in it.

*Erhe* is a projection of happiness and joy. Men and women, no difference in the whole of Edo use of it. It is a sign of wealth, money, riches, and prosperity. This notion conveys this meaning in a song as follows at birth with an explanation on it:

*Omon bigho,  
eghon ghon,  
ena mie uwa*

Child and money,  
Joy and celebration,  
Are desires from wealth.<sup>39</sup>

In this song, *erhe* portrays the epitome of provision in general with the birth as a standard. It is not by itself an object that makes the provision possible but as a motif believed to be useful for seeking God's blessings and providence. This view is based on its concept of holiness and purity which is desirable to God. It is thus used to appeal to Him for His favour and benevolence for humanity. Moreover, *orhue* is regarded as something with

38 Hope Ekperan and Akhimien Osaigbovo.

39 Hope Ekperan and Akhimien Osaigbovo.



which a person expresses his or her deepest sense of commitment, faith, and trust and of one's earnest appeal in the best and highest way possible; a symbol of the highest good, humility, dedication and love; identical with the ultimate expression of peace and joy without limit. Hence, it is earnestly applied with a deep sense of faith and trust in God with the hope to be enrich with money, wealth, and prosperity.

Thus, *erhe* is simply a symbol, an emblem of a medium bequeathing blessings from God. Consequently, *erhe* is always to be accepted. He who accepts *erhe* does not declare evil against himself. He who accepts *erhe* claims happiness or joy for himself. To this end, when a woman uses it after delivery, she also expresses herself as an emblem or source of joy to others.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, there is the notion that *erhe* connotes life, not death or mourning. In addition to other ways of using it, men can also rub it on their palms. It also shows the expectation of a similar type of blessing and other wishes. It is a genuine way of showing true involvement in a neighbor's joy course. Therefore, those who participate in one's celebration hope to be joined someday for their own.<sup>41</sup>

*Erhe* is used in all forms of celebration. It features prominently in coronation. It is repeated in a child's naming ceremony. This occasion holds after seven days of birth. It is known in Esan as *ihó-eto* (merriment). The song that goes with it for this program is: *Ukpere omo ihó nireso. Ona khe efe nai de bhéki.* (I wish to rub with a child's *erhe*. It is the wealth not purchasable in the market.) The song portrays the importance attached to the gift of a child and the source of creation.<sup>42</sup>

Consequently, *erhe* is symbolic of the trust in the Supreme Being (God). It is the concept inherent in the slogan and proverb: *Ogbe erhe igbi ibi* (one that dabs with *erhe* does not dab with coal). As earlier referred, charcoal is symbolic of evil, harm, shame, failure, mourning, and whatever is undesirable. Thus, it is the direct opposite of *erhe*. There is an exclamatory response to the song of jubilation, *Okho o erhe ma gbe. Okho o*, an exclamatory shout of joy. *Erhe ma gbe* responds to the exclamation, saying, "Yes, indeed, we are dabbing with *erhe*." It emphasizes the importance attached to the celebration and a deep desire to have more of it.<sup>43</sup>

40 Hope Ekperan and Akhimien Osaigbovo.

41 Itua Ehis, Personal Interview, 8 July 2022.

42 Itua Ehis.

43 Joab Oriabure, Personal Interview, 8 July 2022.

For more emphasis, charcoal (*ibi*) signifies an ill omen. It relates to what is evil in general. It does not equate with *erhe*. They are the direct opposite of each other. For this reason, unlike *erhe*, it is used during mourning or when evil occurs. The sharp contrast between the two is further reflected in the statement, *Ogberhe igbi ibi*: he who dabs with *erhe* (joy, peace, blessing, and so on) does not dab with *ibi* (harm, sorrow, grief, and so on).<sup>44</sup>

*Erhe* is an indication of happiness. It does not express sadness or what is wrong, evil, or harmful. Besides, it has a rich medicinal purpose, prevents heat rashes on the body, and does not obstruct faith in God or being a Christian. It marks the celebration of God's blessing, His mercy, kindness, providence, peace, and so on.<sup>45</sup> To this end, it is linked with the belief in God or the divinities, as the case depends on the celebrant's religious disposition. Ultimately the celebration honors God as the source of providence, even in the belief of the traditionalist.<sup>46</sup>

The usage of *erhe* in childbirth celebrations lapses after two or three months with a visit to the market. But the main duration is three months. At its conclusion, the festival is observed formally with ceremonial dressing by the baby's mother and one or two of the grandmothers. They wear the best of their attires, preferably white, dot as usual with *erhe*, put on red earrings and beads on their neck and wrist. The baby is dressed beautifully and carried on the back by any of them. The mother and her baby are escorted by any of the grandmothers or both to the market. The mother alone can take the baby to the market or be accompanied by one or more of her close relatives in the same way.<sup>47</sup> They are welcomed, congratulated, and greeted at the market with excitement and pleasantries. Various gifts in cash and kind (foodstuff, baby's clothes, and so on) are given to assist with the child's care. As part of the welcoming, they sang for them: *Erhe omon igbe* (I am rubbing a child's *erhe*), *Siwo! Siwo!! Siwo!!!*<sup>48</sup>

Some people, particularly Christians, do not go to the market anymore. They go to the church for the child's dedication within seven days, a month, or two or three, depending on the health and fitness of the mother. Artificial powder is used in the place of *erhe* by some Christians to dress to the church. Similarly, they use it to dab instead of *erhe* for the celebration at home. The outing, traditional visitation to the market or the Christian type of dedication

44 Anthony Idehenre, Personal Interview, 14 July 2022.

45 Ihunde Anabel, Personal Interview, 19 July 2022.

46 Janet Aluyah, Personal Interview, 23 July 2022.

47 B. I. Oboh and Martina Ehize, Personal Interview, 20 January 2023.

48 Oboh and Ehize.

in the church, marks the end of the birth celebration with the usage of *erhe*. Therefore, the baby's mother resumes her usual activities or routine.<sup>49</sup>

### Usage of *Orhue* at Birth in Edo North (Okpekpe)

*Etse* is the name for *orhue* among the people of Okpekpe in Edo North. It symbolizes joy, happiness, peace, and so on. It indicates and expresses pleasure in different ways, such as birth, safety in an accident, success, and so on. The lump is ground into powder. It can be dried or wet with water and then dot on the body or face. It is potent for celebrating birth and in any situation of joy. It is observed with singing, jubilation, and dancing. Generally, the celebration is captured in a song:

*Alona nimi kha rovie,*  
*Etse mi gbe do oghelē.*  
 The eyes I would have used to cry,  
*Etse* has bought (do) them into happiness (*oghele*) for me.<sup>50</sup>

Specifically for the celebration of birth, the following song is used: *Omo fida ka chi ya. Omo fida rho wao. Oshenogba oshio revhowa.* (Baby has come into the world. Baby has come to the house. God has brought it to the house.) After the jubilation following the baby's delivery, *etse* is kept within the room for visitors. It is used by both males and females irrespective of age. It is expressive of thanksgiving to God and His joy for humanity.<sup>51</sup>

### Usage of *Orhue* at Birth in Edo North (Owan)

Indigenous chalk is called *erhe* in Owan and occupies a higher degree of importance among the people. It is an effective instrument in performing sacrifices, coronations, and so on. However, its practice is more visible in its usage in the birth celebration.<sup>52</sup> Generally, it is regarded as a channel or medium of blessing. Thus, it is used alone or along with other items. It has a wide range of usage in the celebration of birth. It begins immediately after a

49 Oboh and Ehize.

50 Patience Friday and Izigah, Personal Interview, 8 July 2022.

51 Patience Friday and Izigah.

52 Joseph Imohimi, Personal interview, 14 July 2022.

child is born. It has enormous benefits, used for dotting on the face or strokes on the body to identify the principal celebrant in a program.<sup>53</sup>

At birth, the grandmother or eldest woman in the child's family goes around the area to announce the delivery using *erhe* in a celebrative mood. In the process, she shares it, sings, and dances. Thus, she calls the people with a song: *Ikhue omo mi hoin. Ehor rume mi yho.* (I heard the cry of a child. My ear gave me a good sign.)<sup>54</sup> Grace Ekperigin, a native of Ora, corroborates the belief and practices of *Erhe* with the claim that "it is a common practice for jubilation to rend the air at the shrill cry of a now baby, which is followed by the breaking of indigenous chalk that is pulverized to decorate faces, necks, breasts, and shoulders. It is an age long act to herald the safe delivery of a new baby and the health of the mother and in a show of appreciation to Osanobua for a gift that arrived safely."<sup>55</sup> This evidence further depicts the importance and role of *erhe* in the whole of Edo.

*Erhe* is also used as a mark of celebration when a child is circumcised using the following song: *Khaivie. Ose uholo.* (Do not cry. You are being beautified.) *Erhe* is shared while the song goes on. The celebrant's chest is marked with designs using *erhe*.<sup>56</sup>

The above has shown robust connectivity among Edo people, particularly in the usage of *orhue* at birth. Moreover, it clarifies that the beliefs and practices in this regard are very close, quite similar, and the same. The variation occurs only in terms of the slight differences in their languages. However, it becomes deeper the further one goes away from Benin.

### Significance of the Usage of *Orhue* at Birth in Edo

At this juncture, *orhue* has rich significance in Edo life and practices. Its role in the celebration of birth is well known and understood. It comprises religious, social, and cultural imports drawn from the above, which is true of Africa.

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53 Joseph Imohimi.

54 Joseph Imohimi.

55 Celsius E. Ohain, *A Biography of Grace Unuogie Imoesiri-Ekperigin JP: This is My Story*, (Benin City: Phobos Global International, 2020), 1.

56 Celsius E. Ohain.

## Religious Significance

The religious significance of *orhue* comprises being a means of the recognition of the existence of God. It showcases His powers, preeminence, care, creation, and love for humanity, praise, admiration, and gratitude to Him.

Moreover, it provides a channel of submission to His majesty, control, and guidance. It facilitates a call and sense of worship, testimony of God's goodness, display of pleasurable desire, peace of mind, safety, joy, happiness, and beauty for humankind. To this end, a proverbial expression illustrative of the above goes thus: *Osa gbemo orhue*, God has rubbed me with blessings, God has done me well, God has beautified me, and so on.

Notwithstanding, *orhue* enhances an act of obedience to God's command of one's love for their neighbor and the need for people to have a sense of concern, goodwill, cordial relationship, unity of a good course, and purpose. It aids in displaying a sense of aesthetics, cleanliness of the body, beauty and tidiness of a place of worship, purity, holiness of character and mind. It is a motif of hope and faith in God, a potent of love for humanity, a means of seeking His favor, actualizing, and celebrating His providence.

## Social Significance

Socially, *orhue* unifies the people in a shared sense of celebration. Thus, it brings them together irrespective of tribe, clan, family, social status, influence, and religion. It bridges the gap between the rich and poor; gives no room for discrimination, nepotism, segregation, and apathy. Instead, it gets people together in each other's interest, concern, and goodwill, thereby sharing in one another's fortune. Imasogie buttresses this view when he opines:

Among the Edos, the easiest way to get people to express spontaneous solidarity with you in terms of joy is to get a lump of white chalk, grind it and put it in a receptacle. Rub some on your forehead. If you then call on the neighbours and the passers-by to join you in your joy, you will be surprised to see how many people will join you spontaneously. They will not only rub the chalk on themselves but they will also dance along with you. In doing this, the neighbours are not only sharing in your joy, they are also

hoping by virtue of their bodily contact with the symbol, bless them as you have been blessed.

The truth of this prayerful wish is brought out in the following song which is usually sung on such occasions:

*Wa gunvben gb'orhue.*  
*Orhue i kho nagbe nosiovhān.*  
*Agha gb orhue, ai gb ibi.*  
*Ede akhie, agb ibi.*  
*Edoghogho, aghigbo orhue.*

Join me in rubbing on white chalk.  
 No danger in rubbing on white chalk,  
 On behalf of one's friend.  
 When you rub on chalk, you do not rub on charcoal.  
 Charcoal is rubbed on a day of mourning.  
 But white chalk is rubbed on a day of joy.<sup>57</sup>

At this juncture, it is clear that *orhue* indeed acts as an agent of reconciliation and peacebuilding and improves human relationships; creates harmony, friendship, and peaceful coexistence; demonstrates the importance of childbearing, care, and birth celebration. Besides, it depicts a child as the possession of all in traditional African society. Thus, it involves others in its care, nurture, and training.

Therefore, the symbolic significance of *orhue* is also observable in other parts of Africa. For example, Sarpong traces the significance of *orhue* which among the Akan of Ghana is called *hyire*, to its white colour. Thus, he stresses that, "White symbolizes among the Akan in general, purity, virtue, joy, victory, and all such virtuous spiritual entities as God, and the spirits of the ancestors." The white color that serves as a basis of the significance of the clay (*orhue* in Edo and *hyire* in Akan) does not in this case imply a physical representation of God or spirits but of the symbolic attribute of His holiness and other virtues. This is true also of the spirits when it is used with reference to them. Thus, a distinction has to be made in terms of the reference it indicates in a setting when it is used.<sup>58</sup>

57 Osadolor Imasogie, *Olokun—The Divinity of Fortune* (Benin City: Osadolor Imasogie Publishers, 2008), 19.

58 Peter Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti*, (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977), 70.

*Hyire* (*orhue*) is used on the body by Akan in occasions of joy, at child-naming ceremonies, and during festival days. It is very much used in traditional court cases as a mark of “not guilty,” “freedom from guilt or blame.” The ceremony of the declaration of the innocence using the white clay is known as *Hyiregu*. In the process, the individual is besmeared with *hyire* on the left shoulder if a female and on the right shoulder or head if a male.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, it is sprinkled on a priest or priestess during his or her religious performances to symbolize sanctity. A divorced woman is under a taboo to have sexual intercourse with another man unless she is cleared of the implications by her ex-husband when he sprinkles *hyire* on her. The sprinkling is indicative of her forgiveness, freedom, and cleansing of the bond she had with her former husband.<sup>60</sup>

White or sacred chalk (*orhue*) also exist in Kenya with similar meanings and uses. For example, it is used as a means of the rite of passage or manhood (*Eunoto*) ceremony among the Maasai. The inductee performs the rite by rubbing the wet chalk over his body. Decorative patterns are designed with the fingertips. In this way, the dark skin beneath the wet powder is exposed. Thus, he becomes unrecognizable particularly to his mother. The experience symbolizes his passage into a new phase of life.<sup>61</sup>

### Cultural Significance

*Orhue* is a veritable means of the preservation of the people’s art and culture in language, song, dance, and dressing. It preserves the people’s belief and value in their interpersonal and godly relationships, and is a basis for their aesthetic expression. These cultural values are inherent as shown in the songs with their different language of expression across Edo. The situation is the same for the dance and dresses from one language and ethnic group to the other. Aesthetically, it shows the people’s taste and love for arts in the ways *orhue* is used on different parts of the body with varied meanings and symbols.

Moreover, the ideas enshrined in the usage of *orhue* in songs and sayings make it a reservoir for the people’s heritage in perpetuating it from one generation to another. Religiously, it helps convey the people’s sense of hope,

59 Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites*, 70–71.

60 Sarpong. *Girls Nubility Rites*, 71.

61 Carol Beck and Angela Fisher, *Maasai Warrior with Chalk Paint*, Holden Luntz Gallery.

trust, dependence, and submission to God in linguistic expression. From the social perspective, the language of *orhue* is an epitome of love, unity, peaceful coexistence, and cordial relationship.

**Implications for the Practice of Christianity**

The usage of *orhue* holds enormous implications for the practice of Christianity. It is a basis of contextualization, social and cultural interactions, worship, and evangelism.

**Basis of Contextualization**

By its social and religious status, the dispensation of *orhue* enables Christians to participate and express the cultural significance of the birth celebration. It is done without the involvement of traditional African religious rituals. It is a faithful expression of joy, goodness, and providence in the pregnancy and the safe delivery of a child. It enhances commitment and worship at the social level without contradicting central teachings and practices of Christianity. In this regard, *orhue* is simply a natural object with significance for worship. Therefore, it is not a fetish or worshipped in itself. It has no magical power or inherent force, nor is it considered to be inhabited or controlled by any spirit.

*Orhue* in African society and religion in the celebration of birth concerning the church as it is being proposed in this paper can be seen in some other perspectives of the church itself. The first one is in the light of the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist.<sup>62</sup> The argument here is that though in the Catholic tradition, the sacrament or substances are said to have taken on the body and blood of Jesus Christ,<sup>63</sup> however, they are not seen or regarded as fetish or something else that is strange to Christianity by the people who see *orhue* as such. The second example is taken from the Baptist elements used in the Last or Lord’s Supper, or water in baptism and oil in anointing. In these instances, the bread, wine, water, and oil do not become or assume the role and authority of the object of worship.<sup>64</sup> Besides, none of them is thought of as demonic, idolatrous, or repudiated.

62 M. E. Osterhaven, “Lord’s Supper, Views of,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell (eds.), (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 504.

63 Osterhaven, “Lord’s Supper,” 504

64 M. M. Oboh, “Baptismal Service,” *The Minister’s Manual*, Emiola Nihilola, Samuel



Nevertheless, the materials do not come from heaven. They are produced and sold in the market by people who may not be Christians. Even if they are, it does not translate or make them to become holy, sacred, or godly for the purpose to which they are used by the church. So, using *orhue* with all its value in an African context in Christian activities does not mean something different from other substances used by the church. The perception of viewing it as strange, disgusting, barbaric, heathen, base, discredited and being resented was a creation of colonial mentality infused through the instruments of modernization and modernity as earlier discussed.

Moreover, the Catholic rosary is neither perceived as magical, fetish, or juju nor regarded with indignation. Nonetheless, the materials are used and seen as aids in human and divine relationships. Consequently, they underscore the basis for the understanding of the contextual implications of *orhue* in African Christianity which is the goal of this paper. It is not an idol. It existed with the people before the advent of Christianity and other religions. The people have also used it from time immemorial in their religious, social-cultural expressions and not as an object of worship. To this end, it becomes a more relevant tool to reach and absorb the people particularly those at the grassroots who are still very much abreast with the culture and traditions into the mainstream of Christianity. Awoniyi's perception on the use of elements in African churches further substantiates and clarifies the view we hold on this matter when he submits:

The usage of elements or substances should be carefully handled, though this is common among African Instituted Churches where the use of water, olive oil (anointing oil), salt, palm leaves candles and wine are prominent. It is observed by this writer that some mainline or historic churches are gradually getting involved in the use of some of these elements. When they used [sic] these elements, it should not be assumed that Africans have no faith in Jesus Christ who shed His blood for humankind. [However,] these materials are only elements to promote faith, so are not to be used

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O. Akintola and Adelojokoji O. Ijaola (Gen Eds.), (Ibadan: Publication Department, Nigerian Baptist Convention, 2019), 302; M. M. Oboh, "Holy Communion," *The Minister's Manual*, Emiola Nihilola, Samuel O. Akintola and Adelojokoji O. Ijaola (Gen Eds.), (Ibadan: Publication Department, Nigerian Baptist Convention, 2019), 314; Peter Ropo Awoniyi, "African Conceptual Issues of Gospel Ministries," *The Minister's Manual*, Emiola Nihilola, Samuel O. Akintola and Adelojokoji O. Ijaola (Gen Eds.), (Ibadan: Publication Department, Nigerian Baptist Convention, 2019), 106.

as charms or magic tools to conquer spirits. . . . [T]hese are symbols only representing visible and tangible evidences of the invisible, intangible and spiritual entity.<sup>65</sup>

Nonetheless, Okhueleigbe's view touches on rite(s) in Esan, wherein he states that, "Rites...are meant to consolidate, vivify, mystify and promote traditional culture. They are therefore, the entelechy of every culture and they perform not just cultural but religious and social functions."<sup>66</sup> This enhances the perception that *orhue*, like every other element in African Traditional Religion or in African Christianity as further highlighted by Awonoyini's viewpoint, should not be regarded as demonic, magic or syncretic in nature. This opinion further clarifies the essence of *orhue* in African beliefs and practices, particularly in the context of the rite of the celebration of birth as a template for its role in the church.

Nevertheless, a pragmatic approach in the sense in which *orhue* integrates with other rituals or sacraments of initiation such as baptism as alluded above is not far fetch at all. For instance, it is a common practice in Africa and among the people to dress using a white outfit for baptism. Thus, in preparation for it whether in a river or baptistery women will put on white top and skirt, the men will use a singlet and short or trouser. Both men and women in the absence of the former or out of choice can use a white overall as well. It is a contextual practice that incorporates with the people's cultural norm and value attached to white as a symbol of holiness and purity in the process of baptism. It has become an act of sacredness in the church though a carryover from the tradition. However, Oboh asserts that in baptism people should avoid the use of dresses that will show off their body even if it is white which in this case epitomizes purity.<sup>67</sup>

Consequently, people will easily understand the usage of *orhue* as a complementary part of other Christian rituals. To this end, there are two ways to do it. First is to rub on the prospect as a sacred act of acceptance by God and His transformation into salvation in baptism. Similarly, it can be applied as dots on the four corners of the face, the forehead, jaws, and chin;

65 Peter Ropo Awoniyi, 106.

66 Amos O. Okhueleigbe and Paul Oboh, "Naming Cum Presentation Ceremony of Infants in Esan Community," *Esan People: Our Culture, Our Faith*, Matthew Ovabor Ihensekhien, ed. (Uhiele-Ekpoma: Association of Seminarians of Uromi Diocese, 2016), 70–71.

67 M. M. Oboh, "Baptismal Service," *The Minister's Manual*, Emiola Nihilola, Samuel O. Akintola and Adelojoko O. Ijaola (Gen Eds.), (Ibadan: Publication Department, Nigerian Baptist Convention, 2019), 305.

the palms and toes, the whole person as a complement to either baptism by immersion or sprinkling. Second, the dried form of *orhue* can be mixed with water to dissolve it into a paste which will then be applied as shown above. It would so portray a sense that the person concerned has confessed and accepted Christ as Lord and Savior—and that he or she has joined the church. Thus, in the mixture, the water and *orhue* play a significant role as the symbol of conversion, transformation, consecration, and sanctification in salvation. To this end, Oboh declares:

The Holy Communion and baptism are closely related. None is less important than the other. Baptism precedes the Communion as a step and qualification for the latter. They are instruments by which God demonstrates and proclaims His love to humanity and draws them to Himself. Believers, on the other hand, use the Communion and baptism to respond in love and obedience to God as well as to express their individual and collective unity and fellowship that exist within the Church.

Moreover, the Communion is also a medium of testimony and invitation to the world to believe in Christ. It reflects on His works and looks forward to a joyful, hopeful and salvific resurrection of believers at His second coming. While baptism serves as an outward evidence of an inner purification of the believer, the Holy Communion serves to maintain such purification and holiness. In addition, it authenticates and strengthens the believers' union with Christ and fosters their sense of relationship.<sup>68</sup>

Additionally, Gilliland's definition and emphasis on contextualization further substantiates this view:

The goal of contextualization perhaps best defines what is humanly possible, an understanding of what it means that Jesus Christ, the Word, is authentically experienced in every human situation. Contextualization means that the Word must dwell among all families of humankind today as truly as Jesus lived among his own kin. The gospel is Good News when it provides answers for a particular people living in a particular place at a particular time. This means the **WORLDVIEW** of that people provides a framework for communication, the questions and needs of that

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68 Oboh, "Holy Communion," 315–16.

people are a guide to the emphasis of the message, and the cultural gifts of that people become the medium of expression.<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, the use of the concept of contextualization with its related ideas as previously presented in terms of “translation” or “absorption” is given here with emphasis to add credence to the authenticity or creativity of *orhue* in practical Christianity which this paper seeks to establish. Thus, Hesselgrave, in his discussion on the issue of contextualization also posits:

[T]heological reflection without revelatory givens can lay no valid claim to being Christian... [A]daption to cultural contexts and existential situations is incumbent on both theologians and participants in mission, adherence to the Scriptures remains basic to all authentic theology and mission.<sup>70</sup>

This view underscores the idea of having to look intently into the concept and practice of *orhue* as reflected in this study in order to situate it in the realm of Christianity and to make it acceptable and practicable by the church. In that way, *orhue* has been projected as a symbol of holiness, purity, blessing, acceptance, love and its expression; joy, and wellbeing, as well as seal, transformation, consecration, and sanctification. These are both on human and divine relationships and interactions. In the same vein, it serves as a link between human and divine connectivity and as a means of cohesion among persons by promoting understanding, positive, helpful, and encouraging involvement in each other’s affairs, as well as bridging the gap of separation and individualism. Consequently *orhue* as it is being proposed for use in the Christian context does not deny nor remove anything about the idea of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, His will, and purpose for humankind. Rather, it aids in one’s knowledge, understanding, and intimate walk and service to God and humanity. In this context, we portray *orhue* in mission and evangelism. Therefore, it provides a basis for knowing the people, reaching and carrying them along as Christians, and their relating with one another.

69 Dean Gilliland, “Contextualization,” *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, A. Scott Moreau, Harold Netland, and Charles Van Engen, eds. (Grand Rapids: Bakers Books, 2000), 225.

70 D. J. Hesselgrave, “Contextualization,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 211.

Similar to the idea of contextualization is inculturation, which Arrupe defines as “the incarnation of Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the church and remaking it so as to bring a new creation.”<sup>71</sup> To this end, inculturation captures more directly and in a deeper dimension the role of *orhue* as it is being projected in this paper. It involves a cultural element and practice serving as a principle of animation, direction, and unification. Thus, it transforms and brings into a new awareness and creation of the people’s views and disposition to their Christian faith and practice through the processes proposed in this study.

In the same vein, John Paul II also echoes the concept of inculturation as “the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through the integration in Christianity and insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, the centrality of inculturation in contextualization is an aspect of culture. In other words, it is the cultural practice of using Christianity to transform people’s values and deepen Christianity within them. This view further buttresses the basis and importance of *orhue* in contextualization.

Additionally, according to Chidili, enculturation is an idea that is close to inculturation.<sup>73</sup> It is a “process whereby individuals are conditioned by, adjusted to, and integrated with the cultural norms prevalent in the society of which they are members.”<sup>74</sup> This view further widens the understanding of the usage of *orhue* as an element of contextualization. However, Shorter provides a difference between the two. He opines that enculturation is simply an issue bordering only on sociological perspective with inculturation being only of the aspect of theology.<sup>75</sup> But acculturation has been defined as the adaptation or assimilation of a different culture whatever it is.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, Richard emphasizes that the church should be able to entrench itself within

71 Pedro Arrupe, “Letter to the whole Society,” *Studies in the International Apostolate of Jesuits*, (Washington: Jesuit Missions, 1978), 4.

72 John Paul II, “Redemptoris Missio,” No 53 (7 December 1990).

73 Barth Chidili O. S. A, *Inculturation: As a Symbol of Evangelization*, (Jos: Mono Expressions, 1997), 17.

74 S. V., “Enculturation,” *The Funk and Wagnalls New Comprehensive International Dictionary*, Delux (ed.), (New York: Publishers International Press, 1973).

75 Aylward Shorter, *Towards Theology of Inculturation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 5.

76 “Acculturation,” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*.

a given culture under its truth.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, it is not inimical for the church in Africa to evolve the idea and usage of enculturation and acculturation.<sup>78</sup>

Consequently, on the basis of the idea of contextualization presented above and as strengthened by its various related concepts, we expand the basis by which *Orhue* can help to form part of the Christian tradition. This is the case with announcing or celebrating a birth, conducting naming ceremonies, or worshipping.

### **Basis of Strengthening Social Expressions and Interactions**

Similar to its role in traditional African life, *orhue* can be used to enhance social interaction among Christians and others. Thus, it bridges the gap between the church and society. The church does not exist in isolation. It coexists with a people it seeks to bring into its fold. Thus, *orhue*, as used in the birth celebration, can pave way for interactive social engagement for the church when people irrespective of their religion are invited with the use of it to join in Christian and the church programs. In turn, it will help believers get closer to their neighbors and for their neighbors to come to them, thereby strengthening relationships within the church and between it and the society.

### **Basis of Cultural Participation and Preservation**

Christianity is a culture built on the belief and practices of Jesus Christ. However, it is lived within an existing cultural background in which it domiciles. It is also one of the reasons why contextualization in Christianity is critical in helping to create meaning for a people within its cultural setting. Thus, through cultural participation, people can express their Christian religious beliefs and practices in the context of their cultural background. *Orhue* facilitates the process of the celebration of birth. Consequently, it serves as a means of preserving the culture when used in the dressing, songs of praise, adoration, and prayer. The exercise is possible because Christianity does not damage the culture in which it thrives. It only leans and takes from

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77 Lucien Richard, "Inculturation," *The Dictionary of Catholic Socio Thought*, Judith A. Dwyer, ed. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994).

78 *Ad Gentes* No 22 Document of Vatican II, Austin Flannery, ed. (Newport: Costello, 1980).

what is acceptable and discards those that are not and contrary to its beliefs and practices.

### **Basis of Worship**

The importance of *orhue* as a unifying symbol, source of appreciation, and appeal to God, celebration of His providence, expression of His holiness, and blessings strengthen its use as a means of worship. This can be done by applying it as in the case of birth with a dot each on the forehead, the two sides of the face or jaws, on the chin, and nose. But in this regard, unlike its meaning in the latter, which is in the case of the celebration of birth, the five dots could be symbolic of the Cross, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ as well as the salvation He provides. It could also portray His holistic personality in the Godhead, and the celebration of His presence. Thus, it can be used at the church annual programs of Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year, and other special events.

Moreover, the paste and dried powder of *orhue* can be brought and shared in the church during the occasions. This can also be done on the way to it as a means of sharing in the goodwill and solidarity in Christ. In line with this, it can as well serve as a means of calling others to participate in the church activities and for those yet to be converted to come to believe in Christ within the time of the above programs.

Both materials can be kept and used at home in the same manner as in the church with similar intentions. Likewise, it can serve at other times when the Christians may have something else to celebrate such as birth, naming ceremony, house or other dedications and so on. Anyone that is so blessed can, as well, dress with it and bring some to the church to announce or testify his or her fortune with the brethren, invite them to share in the joy, and to convey a wish of the same providence and more for others. The pattern of usage for the male which is to rub the powder on the face or arm as one may wish can be adopted in the process.

### **Basis of the Expression of Faith and Oneness with Christ in Baptism**

The importance of *orhue* in its Christian application can also be very remarkable in baptism. Thus, the paste can be dotted on the forehead, shoulders, and the big toe to symbolize a participation with Christ in His

death, burial, and resurrection that the baptism portrays. Similarly, it serves as a significant emblem of one's faith and union with Him. Well-wishers at the time can also share of the substance as it is expected of them in other cases as a mark of celebration with their loved ones.

### **Basis of Evangelism**

Evangelism is a significant task of Christianity. Its goal is to reach people with the gospel, enlighten, and persuade them to believe and join in its faith. The usage of *orhue* in childbirth celebrations guarantees the process of evangelism if applied by the church because it brings people together. In the process, it can serve to make each other's concerns a thing of all and can provide a forum to express their gain in faith and worship. Besides, it would make it possible for the celebrant and well-wisher to evolve a lasting relationship that would lead to sharing the gospel and inviting a prospect to the acceptance of Christ.

A biblical basis in the case of Jesus' encounter with the woman of Samaria (Jn. 4:4–26) explains the process. The meeting point between them was facilitated by the woman's desire to come to the well to fetch water, around which He was waiting for His disciples, whom He sent to the city to buy some food. Jesus uses water to bring her to the awareness of salvation which she gladly accepts. The occurrence was evangelistic in nature.

Similarly, *orhue* brings people together at the birth celebration. Thus, it can serve as a suitable means of enlightenment and understanding in missionary activities, as an aid to communication and clarification of common issues or themes, as a witness to the people in the context of mission and adaptation, and as a viable tool for one-on-one evangelism intended to convert people to Christianity. Technically, its intricate aspects as an emblem used in prayer to seek for God's power, favor, mercy, grace, holiness, blessing, transformation, purity, and more are also to be seen in its adaptation to Christianity. This is also what we seek to bring out in trying to harness the people's consciousness for their need of salvation in Christ and in keeping them to that root in any form of evangelism using *orhue* as a symbol, like Jesus in His application of water as a basis of discussion with the woman of Samaria.



## Conclusion

At this juncture, it is obvious *orhue* has laudable religious and social-cultural significance in its usage in the celebration of birth in Edo. Nevertheless, it has meaningful and desirable implications for the practice of Christianity. It is an emblem of fortune, holiness, and godliness. It fosters peace, reconciliation, and acceptance. It enhances the people's sense of love, unity of purpose, faith, care, providence, aesthetics, and other cultural practices. *Orhue* is famous as a basis for expressing the beliefs and values attached to childbirth and its celebration in songs and dressing. It opens the people's rich musical artistry and the importance of cultural dialogue and spirituality.

Consequently, it provides much of its implications for the practice of Christianity in the backdrop of contextualization, social expression, cultural participation, preservation, and evangelism. The system is not limited to Edo. Other tribes in the South-South and South-East of Nigeria have similar usage in childbirth celebrations. Moreover, *orhue* has several aspects of life in Edo and among several indigenous tribes in Nigeria and Africa.

Contextualization adds and deepens the reality, in-depth understanding, and application of the gospel message. In this study, *orhue* plays the role of a cultural material enabling the people as Christians to exhibit their faith in their concrete life situation. Language is another unique tool in this regard. It helps people to capture and express their faithful feelings and emotions ecstatically in linguistic art, music, culture, and worship as presented in this paper, with transliteration and interpretation of the peoples' display of their usage of *orhue* in the various songs and sayings across Edo: Benin, Esan, Owan, and more.

Moreover, *orhue* is not a product of Satan. It is God's natural gift to humanity. It is not a domain of power and controls nothing. It is simply a material used at will by anyone who cherishes and applies it to what he feels, believes, and how he wishes. Thus, the choice and practices of the people in this regard is the expression of a cultural symbol.

Consequently, in the realm of Christianity, it would enhance the people's grip on the gospel and relations with God. Additionally, it would facilitate or pave the way for the Good News of Christ to be well-rooted in them. Thus, depriving them of its substance will be counterproductive to their sense of Christian spirituality regarding their religious self-actualization as a people.

Notwithstanding, those who deny themselves of it are losing out on the cultural value of their professed faith. Consequently, people should be taught about it and encouraged in it. Therefore, the application of *orhue* in

the religious, social, and cultural milieu of Christianity would intensify and renew African trust and hope in God, fortified fellowship with one another, demonstrate their joy, and be able to reach out to others with the gospel in their cultural setting. Indeed, it is one of the ways believers in Africa can answer and fulfill the great commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, the concept and scope of the religious, social-cultural significance of the usage of *orhue* at birth in Edo and its implications for the practice of Christianity should be taught and encouraged.



### Author

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79 Matthew 28:19–20a: *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version: Global Study Bible, 2012.