

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Assessment of Herbal Utilization and Religious Commitments in Yoruba Naming Ceremonies

Olugbenga Olagunju <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Professor, Department of Biblical Studies, Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho, Nigeria

[samuel200607@yahoo.com](mailto:samuel200607@yahoo.com)

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## Abstract

This study explores the intersection of herbal rituals, and religious commitment within Yoruba naming ceremonies. In Yoruba tradition, herbs are not only medicinal but symbolically rich assets believed to confer protection, purification, vitality, and communal blessing to the community. This paper adopted a theological-ethnographic method featuring participant observation and non-structured interviews with traditional custodians, herbal practitioners, faith healers, and family members. It also analyses some text of Yoruba oral literature. In summary, this research examines how these herbal rituals endure and are reinterpreted, as well as how they reflect and impact religious identity and doctrinal commitments, particularly among Baptist Christian communities in Ogbomosho land. Findings suggest that herbal rituals and religious commitment persist both as cultural heritage and spiritual expression, often being reinterpreted in the context of the Yoruba people rather than discarded by fanatical religious actors. This has implications for contextual theology, interfaith sensitivity, and culturally-informed policies in African contexts.

**Keywords:** Yoruba naming ceremony, Herbal rituals, Religious commitment, Ethnography, Baptist Christianity, Cultural continuity

## Introduction

In Yoruba communities, the naming ceremony—*Ìṣomọlórúko*—is a culturally foundational event held on the eighth day after a child is born (Oduyoye, 1995)[1]. Aside from being given a name, this ceremony welcomes a child into spiritual, ancestral, and cultural realms of the family (Adeboye, 2014)[2]. Central to this naming rite are herbal rituals that are, bathing with herbal infusions, such as *Malevoría Bouldeia* (*ewe akoko*), anointing with leaves, sprinkling of herbal concoctions, introduction of traditional condiments like salt, palm oil, *Aframumum melegueta* Atare, honey, kolanut and bitter kola, which carry meanings of protection, purification, long life, prosperity, vitality, and moral orientation (Olupona, 2011; Ogunyemi, 2016; Dopamu, 2016)[3, 4]. However, in contemporary Yorubaland, religious pluralism has complicated these rituals: Christians (particularly Baptists) and Muslims often reinterpret or negotiate these practices in light of their doctrinal commitments. The problem lies in the scant empirical attention given to this convergence of culture, health symbolism, and faith. While scholars have documented naming rites and herbal significance (Oduyoye, 1995; Abimbola, 2006)[5, 1], and others have examined the Christian appropriation of

local customs (Hiebert, 1987; Akinola, 2019)[6, 7], few studies have focused on the nuanced interplay among these elements in naming ceremonies specifically. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for theology, pastoral practice, and cultural policy, enabling faith healers and health promoters to engage respectfully with traditional rituals that remain meaningful for many families.

## Literature Review

Yoruba worldview embraces a unity of the spiritual and physical world, where herbs (*ewe*) are believed to contain authority (*aṣe*) that is embedded in a spiritual life force, and can convey protection, healing, and blessings when ritually activated (Abimbola, 2006; Awolalu, 1976; Mbiti, 1969; Idowu, 1962)[5]. Proverbs like "Ewe lo l'agbara òògùn" ("Leaves are the power of medicine") underscore their perceived potency (Ogunyemi, 2016)[3].

Naming ceremonies integrate herbal elements with symbolic efficacy. Alligator pepper symbolizes truth and courage, red palm oil denotes peace and vitality, bitter kola represents endurance, and an herbal bath signifies cleansing from malign influences. Honey represents a sweet life, and salt represents preservation from evil (Ade-



boye, 2014; Olupona, 2011)[2, 4]. These are accompanied by prayers and oral declarations meant to shape the child's destiny (ori) (Oduyoye, 1995)[1].

In Christian theology—especially within Baptist traditions—culture is assessed through frameworks of critical contextualization, which demand discernment: practices may be retained if they carry compatible meanings, but discarded if they conflict with Scripture (Hiebert, 1987; Imasogie, 1989; George, 2010)[8, 7]. Nigerian Baptists often cautions against syncretism yet affirm cultural expression when properly reframed (NBC, 2018; Akinola, 2019)[6, 9]. Similar dynamics occur in other denominational contexts, where cultural rituals may be reinterpreted or replaced in light of their perceived Christian doctrine (Falola & Genova, 2009)[10].

Theoretical lenses include lived religion, which focuses on how everyday practices reflect faith beyond formal doctrine (Ammerman, 2014)[11], and ritual theory, which views ritual as a strategic enactment that constructs meaning, identity, and community (Bell, 1992)[12]. Applying these to Yoruba naming rituals reveals how herbal acts serve as both symbolic vehicles of cultural continuity and means of negotiating religious identity.

## Methodology

This paper employs a theological-ethnographic approach (Ward, 2012)[13], where participant observation is utilized: attendance at naming ceremonies across three Yoruba communities—urban, peri-urban, and rural. Detailed field notes document herbal usage, prayers, and participants' explanations.

Semi-structured interviews: conducted with 20 individuals, including traditional custodians (ritual specialists), herbal practitioners, elders, Baptist pastors, imams, and Christian and Muslim parents involved in naming ceremonies. Topics include nature of herbal use, meanings, religious perspectives, and adaptations.

Oral literature and documentation: collection of proverbs, naming liturgies, and community narratives that frame herbal symbolism. The data were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006)[14], with coding focused on themes such as "herb as protection," "doctrinal reframing," "cultural continuity," and "ritual adaptation." Reflexivity was maintained to mitigate researcher bias; pseudonyms ensure participant anonymity, and ethical clearance followed relevant guidelines.

## Findings and Discussion

### Continuity of Herbal Practices

All observed ceremonies included herbal components: red palm oil anointed the infant's forehead; herbal baths were conducted in tubs infused with local leaves; alligator pepper and bitter kola were distributed; honey was offered. Participants across Christian/Muslim/traditional communities acknowledged these as age-old customs.

An elder shared: "We cannot name our children without the oil and the leaves—these are our heritage. They protect and sweeten their life." Another parent (Christened Baptist) explained: "I still use the herbs, but I say a prayer that Christ protects—not the leaves themselves." Another person a woman said during the naming ceremony of her son they make use of traditional condiments such as salt, pepper, adun, honey, kolanut and bitter kola. She said this is to affirm the sweetness of life and some bitter experience the child will face in the world. She said life is full of ups and downs and that is what all the ingredients represent.

### Health and Spiritual Symbolism

Most participants described herbal rituals as health symbols more than spiritual acts. The herbal bath, for instance, was seen as purgative, cleansing potential pathogens, as well as spiritual ill-intent. A Muslim mother commented: "Even if we believe in Allah's protection, the herbs help with cleanliness and calm."

An interview with a herbal practitioner revealed that "When palm oil touches the brow, it calms the child's head—meaning peace of

mind. It is both healthful and protective." Honey's representation of sweetness and vitality was nearly unanimous. He said Alligator pepper is very unique among the ingredients provided because it symbolizes authority and power.

### Reinterpretation within Religious Commitments

Among Baptists: Many pastors encouraged families to reinterpret herbs symbolically or substitute biblical elements (e.g., water for cleansing, oil for anointing). One pastor stated: "If a mother insists on the herbal bath, let it be understood as symbolic, but if they wish, we can anoint with oil and pray it comes through Christ." The Baptists tend to be contextual in their approach to the naming ceremony. They didn't reject the ingredients, they blessed the ingredients in the name of Jesus to sanctify it before applying it on the child.

Some families practiced dual rituals: herbal actions conducted quietly by elders, followed by Christian prayer, creating layered rituals that reflect negotiation. A parent explained: "My mother sprinkled the leaves in secret; I followed behind with prayer."

Among Muslims: Similar patterns emerged. Some elders acknowledged the determination to avoid invoking spirits by emphasizing cultural over spiritual significance. One Imam endorsed allowing herbal acts but prefaced them with Islamic blessing: "We say Bismillah Rahamani Rahaim over the leaves. Their worth is in tradition, not jinn."

### Negotiations, Adaptations, and Hybrid Practices

Hybrid rites were common. In some ceremonies, herbal items were replaced with secular symbols—e.g., scented water instead of herbal bath; honey placed on tongues without herbs. In another case, palm oil was substituted with commercially available baby oil, reinterpreted as "pure and clean," distancing it from spiritual attribution. These negotiations reflect inculturation rather than syncretism: cultural forms are retained, but meanings evacuated or reshaped consistent with religious convictions. Faith actors exercised agency, deciding what aspects to preserve for cultural identity and what to reframe to safeguard doctrinal integrity.

### Impacts on Community Identity and Cultural Transmission

The persistence of herbal elements—even in adapted forms—supports communal cohesion and intergenerational identity. A young mother reflected: "Using the leaf or even just honey connects me to my lineage. My child carries our story." Naming ceremonies thus become loci of cultural memory and faith negotiation.

## Implications

**For Theology and Ministry:** The study confirms that avoiding cultural rituals outright may estrange families; instead, pastors and imams can facilitate healthy reinterpretation. Music, liturgy, prayer, and symbolic analogs can preserve cultural resonance without doctrinal compromise.

**For Interfaith Understanding:** Shared cultural rituals—herbal baths, anointing, proverbs—can serve as spaces for ecumenical dialogue, celebrating common heritage while acknowledging doctrinal differences.

**For Health and Cultural Policy:** Public health messaging may engage more effectively when tapping into existing symbolic practices. For example, suggesting herbal baths with hygienic water or emphasizing cleansing—aligning ritual hygiene with public health goals—could leverage deeply held traditions to promote healthy behaviors.

## Conclusion

Herbal rituals in Yoruba naming ceremonies continue to flourish as cultural and symbolic forms, though their spiritual interpretations are increasingly reframed by Christian and Muslim adherents. Through critical contextualization, many retain the form while recasting the meaning to align with faith commitments. These prac-

tices serve as cultural bridges, preserving identity and facilitating continuity even as religious communities negotiate doctrinal boundaries. Understanding these dynamics is valuable for contextual theology, pastoral practice, interfaith respect, and culturally sensitive health initiatives.

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### Author's note

Prof. Olugbenga Olagunju, PhD, is a scholar of New Testament Studies with specialization in New Testament languages, theology, and African contextual hermeneutics. He holds a PhD in New Testament Languages, Theology, and Literature and has published widely in the areas of Gospel studies, Pauline literature, African Christianity, syncretism, and religious peace building. He has extensive experience in pastoral ministry and theological education and has taught a wide range of biblical studies courses. He is affiliated with the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, Nigeria.

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