

# THE FUNCTIONS OF DIVINATION AMONG THE OROGUN PEOPLE OF DELTA STATE

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**Abstract:** *Divination is a practice that is deeply rooted in the cultural and religious beliefs of the Orogun people, and it plays a significant role in the social, cultural, religious, spiritual, and even economic spheres of their lives. But due to the influence of Western civilization, of which Christianity is a vehicle, the essence and functions of this phenomenal aspect of the people's culture are not properly understood. More so is the fact that the practice is not well documented among the people. The objective of this study is to ethnographically investigate the practice of divination among the Orogun people with a view to portraying its existential values. The study, therefore, explored and analyzed the various forms, essences, and functions of divination among the people. Drawing upon both analyzed secondary sources and primary data generated through oral interviews, this study therefore examined the existential significance of divination in the social, cultural, religious, spiritual, and even politico-economic aspects of the lives of the Orogun people. The findings reveal that divination is a*

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*veritable means of communicating with the supernatural realm in order to acquire knowledge and get information from ancestral and guardian spirits, deities, divinities, or the Supreme Being, as the case may be, for guidance, protection, fruitfulness, prevention, and solutions to problems.*

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***Keywords:*** *Divination, Orogun, Cultural, Existential.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Common in African societies are certain categories of people such as diviners, seers, priests among others that are vested with special religious/spiritual knowledge, power and skills (Akpan, 2013; Echeng, 2021a; Echeng, 2021b). Of particular interest in this study is the act of divination, even though the activities and functions of these persons overlap sometimes. From ancient times, people have used divination as a means of inquiry and investigation. It could lead to the knowledge of the future, about prevailing circumstances or the past. The practice continues as those who claim supernatural insights read palms, tealeaves, tarot cards, star charts, and more. Ray (2018) noted that the office of a diviner is sacred and as such, it is the exclusive preserve of only those who are called by a particular deity and or spirit being that

functions with this capacity. Parrinder (2015) observed that the practice involved the accumulation and storage of secret knowledge that bring the occupant of the office closer to nature.

The world is enshrined in mysteries, and man is faced with various problems which he cannot understand, especially understanding the past, present complexities and knowing what the future holds. It is against this background that the art and act of divination becomes imperative (Osim, 2014; Ushie & Ekpenyong, 2019). The practice of divination has long been a vital aspect of many African societies, serving as a means to communicate with the spiritual realm and seek guidance on various aspects of life. Among the Orogun people, divination is deeply embedded in their cultural and religious practices, playing a significant role in their social, political, and spiritual spheres of existence.

Divination as a practice is an act and process of seeking knowledge to answer difficult questions by consulting the supernatural through a medium (Osim, 2016). Simpson (2019) posited that it refers to the varied forms of communication between humans and the supernatural which is aimed at gaining knowledge

that is otherwise hidden or unattainable within the physical sphere because it is hidden. As a practice, it finds its way into most religions and cultural practices of the world with varied and diverse modes of operation. Divination is an attempt to form, or possess an understanding of reality in the present and additionally, to predict events and reality of a future time (Oguoma, 2023).

One observable reality is the impact of such factors as globalization, western civilization and the spread of Christianity on the culture and tradition of the Orogun people, like other African societies, which has cast a shadow on the essence and significance of such practices as divination (Ekpenyong, et al., 2017; Ironbar, et al., 2020; Chuktu, et al., 2024). Omosor (2020) has called attention to the erosion of African values and knowledge system due to the influence of Western civilization. The introduction of new belief systems, modernization and socio-economic changes has influenced the classification and characterization of divination and its traditional functions (Owa, et al., 2024). This calls for a reexamination, reevaluation and proper documentation of the nature, essence and functions of the practice among the people.

This research therefore, is aimed at examining the function of divination among the Orogun people. Understanding the function of divination among the Orogun people requires an examination of its nature and cultural context. This study explores the oral traditions and eyewitness accounts to understand the various forms and essence of divinatory practices in Orogun. Additionally, an examination of the socio-cultural, politico-economic structure and religious beliefs of the Orogun people provides valuable insights into how divination functions as a mechanism of governance, conflict resolution, and social harmony as well as a means of enhancing the religio-spiritual and physical wellbeing of the people.

## **SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF OROGUN PEOPLE**

Orogun people constitute a tribal group within the Urhobo ethnic nationality in Delta State, Nigeria. They have a rich cultural heritage and a deeply rooted religious belief system. According to Eguono (Personal Communication 2023), *Orogun* kingdom practices a system of government known as gerontocracy. Gerontocracy is government by old people or it is the

government by the elders in the community and headed by the oldest man in the community (Ndifon, 2008). At the extended family level, the eldest man is the head of family; at the level of the quarter or kindred (*Umusu*), the oldest man in the quarter is the head of the quarter; at the village level, the oldest man in the village is the head of the village. In *Orogun* clan, the oldest man is the head of government and he is known as the *Okpara-Uku* (Edeki, 1980; Eneji, et al., 2024).

*Orogun* people celebrate life. They celebrate event in the life of the individual and the community. These include occasions like the birth of a child, naming, circumcision and other initiation ceremonies, marriage, funeral, harvest remarkable achievements and so on. One of the major ceremonies in *Orogun* kingdom is the yearly celebration of *Erose-eфе* festival to commemorate the war act of *Orogun*, the son of *Eфе* and a grandson of *Owhowha*. The celebration begins in the morning with the preparation of cutlass and gun charms to protect indigenes from being harmed during the festival. The men dance in groups from each street to the main street of *Orogun* and to the village square blandishing and displaying their cutlasses and other war instrument. Each groups and villages end up dancing to the *Erose-*

*Efe* shrine. Afterwards they dance back to their respective quarters and villages giving room for the female folks to carry out their performance popularly known as *Ighomo* (Igba, 1996). The festival comes to an end with social parties during the night. Burial ceremonies and farming are forbidden during this period for the next seven days that follows. Tradition has it that, any person having *Orogun* blood in him or her must not eat Iguana (*Ogborigbo*) which they hold sacred. People come from far and near to perform sacrifice of cleansing (Odakpo, 1996).

There have been varied opinions about the personality of *Orogun* as a person. Hence scholars are divided about the personality. Okumagba (1979) noted that *Orogun* was a woman. Another aspect of *Orogun* worldview is the belief in witchcraft. In *Orogun*, witches (called *Oriader*), have the ability to cause harm and even kill humans. This belief is so strong in *Orogun* kingdom that if anyone dies young or at the peak of life, it is believed that witches are the cause of such death. According to Akporogu (Personal Communication 2023), witches are known to operate at night when people are sleeping; some fly to the coven with plantain leaf, others turn into different kinds of animals such as

cat, bat and dog among others. They oppress their victims at night when they are sleeping and they negatively influence the destiny of their family members. The witchcraft activities are reduced in *Orogun* kingdom due to the activeness of *Erose* (clan god) who uncovers the acts. There is a law in *Orogun* kingdom concerning witchcraft, anyone confirmed to be a witch or a wizard is banished from *Orogun* kingdom never to return.

### **RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN OROGUN PEOPLE**

The religious worldview of the Orogun people consists of the understanding that the universe is the creation of a Supreme Being who administers it through various agencies and intermediaries including divinities, deities, ancestors, priests and special or privileged human beings. Okumagba (1979) noted that *Orogun* kingdom comprises of a group of people who hold their religious beliefs in high esteem. They believe in the Supreme Being called *Oghene* as well as divinities, spirits (*erinwin*). The traditional *Orogun* clan divinity is called "*Erose*", The god, *Erose*, was believed to live in a conically shaped ground in the form of an ant-hill which rises or shrinks depending on whether the god, *Erose*, is in a happy mood (of which he



rises) or in an unhappy mood (whereby he shrinks) (Efemena, Personal Communication, 2023). The location of the *Erose* is identified by the presence of shrine materials like cowries and old pieces of *orhe*, kaolin (native chalk). The “Holy of holies” section of the shrine that is exclusively reserved for the “chief priest” (*Ukomo*) is clearly marked with a line of young palm-leave (*ouwe*) across the main shrine entrance. *Orogun* children use the soil from the ant-hill together with the *orhe* (native chalk) at the shrine to rub themselves before war and all their enemies were subdued. So, this god, *Erose*, which help them to win wars must be a god of wealth and peace. Hence *Erose* is praised and honoured as a god of war and peace with these appellations (Anabohi, Personal Communication).

“*Eroseefe*” (*Erose*, the god of wealth)

“*Erose ufuoma*” (*Erose*, the god of peace)

According to Odeka, (1996), once all the traditional prayers are said by the chief priest over the native chalk dedicated to *Erose*, all the supernatural powers of *Erose* are automatically transferred into the native chalk for war, for healing and for forgiveness of sins’. Hence, the abstention of the native chalk from *Eroseshrine* by *Erose* worshippers is considered to be an

important religious exercise. Like other Urhobo tribes, Orogun people believe in three major Totems, namely *Ogborigbo* (Iguana), *Erako* (Dog) and *Edjenekpo* (Tiger); these totems are connected with the Orogun clan god *Erose* while *Ogborigbo* guards *Erose* shrine, *Erako* is the warrior totem of *Erose* and *Edjenekpo* is the totem messenger of *Erose* (Anabohi, Personal Communication).

The Orogun cosmology comprises of two inseparable realms, namely, *Akpo* (the visible and tangible world of the living) and *Eriviwin* (the invisible world of the spirits or the realm of the sacred). Otherworldly forces are God/gods, divinities, spirits and ancestors. They influence human affairs. The well-being of the people in *Akpo* (world of the living) depends upon the good will of the forces in *Eriviwin* (Igba, 1996). The Orogun people have two distinct sculptural traditions that employ nearly life-size wooden figures to portray either spirits, or actual or mythic ancestors. They represent a lifestyle and religious beliefs that are still maintained in Orogun kingdom which has been influenced to some extent by modern and Christian values. *Esemo* (Ancestral Spirits) are the spirits of the dead members of particular families in the community.

They live in *erivwin* (spirit world). The actual location of *erivwin* is unknown. The social organization of *erivwin* is believed to be patterned as that of the living. It is believed that there is a structure with kings, chiefs, elders, and children, each performing his responsibility as the living, the population is organized in lineage, family and households (Adogbo, 2000). The ancestral spirits are very important in the religious life of the *Orogun* people.

### **DIVINATION AMONG THE OROGUN PEOPLE**

Orogun people have unique cultural and religious practices that incorporate divination as a means of seeking knowledge and guidance from the spirit world (Greenspoon, 2018). As noted in the preceding section. There is the belief in the preponderance of spirit beings that influence human lives in different ways. As it is the case in Africa generally, in different puzzling and bewildering circumstances, the people often consulted the gods and spirits to understand their situations (Omosor, 2019). Hence, divination serves as a crucial element in their daily lives. Divination among the Orogun people is conducted by diviners, who are regarded as mediators

between the human and spiritual realms. These diviners are believed to possess the ability to communicate with ancestral spirits and deities, gaining access to hidden knowledge and insights.

Okonofua (2006) explains that divination is an integral part of the Orogun people's religious and cultural practices. He notes that the Orogun people believe that divination is a means of communication with the spirit world and that it offers insights into the future and resolution of conflicts. Oguoma (2012) also noted that divination among the Orogun people has social and spiritual significance. Oguoma further explained that divination is used to identify spiritual problems and diagnose illnesses and diseases, and in some cases, it is used to settle disputes or maintain social equilibrium. Divination among the Orogun people is commonly performed by skilled individuals known as diviners (*obo-evwha*). These individuals are believed to possess a special connection with the spirit world and have the ability to interpret signs and symbols from the divine. The process of divination involves seeking guidance or answers to specific questions through the observation of omens, casting of lots, or communication with ancestral spirits.

The Orogun people like other ethnic groups in Urhobo land, practice a divination system known as *Epha or Evwah*. According to Ottuh (2021) *Evwah* is similar to the Yoruba *Ifa* system of divination. The diver is called *obo-ewwha*, and may be a male or a female. The practices of divination can be done anywhere at any time. Among the Orogun people, Diviners consult the ancestors and not the Supreme Being (Aruegodore, Personal Communication). There are different ancestors among the Orogun People, and they are identified by problem they solved. There are family ancestors as well as community ancestors. Community ancestors are more or less in the category of divinities.

Divination can be done in the shrine of the diviner where he has the image of the ancestors present, and it can also be done anywhere. Divination among the Orogun people does not need a special place before it can be done (Enakpodia, Personal Communication, 2023). The song, chant or incantation of the diviner depends on the problem at hand. The diviner calls all the names of all ancestors in his/her family line, acknowledging their presence and singing praise to them (Miriodere, personal communication 2023). According to Onajite, some persons are born a diviner

and it becomes their gift, such a diviner can look at someone's eyes and be able to tell what the problem is all about. Some persons learn how to divine, and pass through the process of apprenticeship. The diviners resolve issues of stealing, infidelity in marriage, demonic manipulation, misfortune, afflictions and tabbos among others (Personal Communication, 2023). Divination is not restricted to the chief priest (*Ukomo*) alone, but to sons and daughters of Orogun whom the gods find worthy to possess and endow with such abilities. Some diviners claim that they interpret the language of birds by means of special measures. A kind of such divination power is derived from a potion made with special ingredients mixed with the head of a talkative bird known as *Agbreghede* (Nabofa, 1981). A living *Agbreghede* is procured and the preparation is applied to the ears of both the person and the bird. This is done seven times daily for seven consecutive days, at the end of which the bird is released. This bird becomes mystically associated with the prospective diviner and from it he receives revelations first-hand. From this bird he gradually learns to understand words uttered by other *Agbreghede*. The person eventually graduates to understanding the language of other birds, though not

as much as he would that of *Agvreghe*. Some diviners, priests and traditional healers are said to have such special reporter-birds which perch on trees in and around their compounds. They inquire from the birds which deliver the messages accordingly.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS OF DIVINATION AMONG OROGUN PEOPLE**

According to Nabofa (1981), there are many methods of divination among the Urhobo. These include divining with cowries, kola nuts, wine, coins of the same denominations, alligator pepper, a mirror, birds and *Agbragha*. *Agbragha*, is a tool made up of four divining chains each of which comprises four shells of the supposedly sacred *Agbragha* tree. It is the most common instrument for the practice of divination. It is also termed *Epha*. Its revelations are conveyed in a strange language that is confusing even to those who are native speakers of Orogun. Other commonly used methods of divination in Orogun are the cowries and kola-nut.

- a) **Cowries (*ibigho*)**: there are male and female cowries; the male cowries are round and smooth while the female cowries have flat back with rough

surface. The diviner usually makes use of seven (7) pieces of cowries. It is understood that the number is a perfect number for divination (Edojah, Personal Communication, 2023). The Cowries and a special white kola nut of four lobes are also used by some diviners (*obo-evwha*). In using this form of divination, the diviner uses *orhe*, native chalk (Kaolin) to make a circle on the floor into which he tosses either the cowries or the lobes of kola nut. He looks at them deciphering the message they convey. The diviner looks at the divination elements as if a spiritual being is communicating with him. In fact, most of the diviners claim to be absorbed in a mood of meditation and to be engaged in such a communion with super-natural beings. It is when he emerges out of that mood of meditation that he reveals the message to his client.

- b) **Kola nut (*evwe urhobo*):** This native kola nut is broken into four parts, like the cowries, the kola nut also has male and female. The male part of the kola nut has a straight line at the center while the female part of the kola nut has two angles that are located at both sides. In some cases, the kola nut when broken may have only one male part on it. The numbers of



men or female found in a broken kola nut is not certain and it does not affect the divination process (Orodena, Personal Communication, 2023).

- c) **Akpakpa:** *akpakpa* is a mat woven out of thick back of palm fronds; this is also one of the items used by the obo-evwha (diviner). The diviner spreads the mat on the ground and sits on it with his legs opened and makes incantations while he throws the kola-nut or the cowries on the *akpakpa* and then reads out whatever is the message (Orodena, Personal Communication, 2023). Due to civilization, the use of *akpakpa* is gradually fading away, although it is still used by old diviners in Orogun (Efemini, Personal Communication, 2023).
- d) **Ekpu Evwha:** this is a bag used to keep and transport divinatory materials, these are sacred objects used by the diviner (Onomakpo, Personal Communication, 2023). The bag is not dropped or kept on the ground, but is hung on the wall, the bag is made of textile material.

## METHODS

Various methods are used when a diviner wants to diagnose a problem:

- a) He shakes the kola nut or Cowries on his hand
- b) He makes incantation and pour libation to the ancestors depending on the problem at hand
- c) He asks the ancestors or the associated spirits to come and reveal the cause of the problem to him,
- d) He makes incantation again and throws the kola nut on the ground or on a round plate. When the kola nut faces the ancestors, it means the problem has a solution and the diviner will have full assurance to proceed. But when the kola nut or Cowries turns against the ancestors, it means there is a serious problem and as such the ancestors had turned their back against him (the diviner).
- e) He pleads with the ancestors and makes incantations, he throws the kola nut again, if the kola nut is still turning their backs on the ancestors, the diviner tells the client to go away as he cannot help them (Ighovavwerhe, Personal Communication, 2023).
- f) When the female kola nut faces the victim(s), it indicates that an offence has been committed and as such, he/she will be asked to confess what he/she has done wrong for it is the wrong doings that has resulted to the predicament (Ojanomare, Personal Communication).

## **FUNCTION OF DIVINATION IN OROGUN**

Divination plays a significant role among the Orogun people. It is an ancient practice that has been handed down through generations and is considered an essential tool for discovering hidden truths, understanding the will of the gods and ancestors, and making critical decisions (Apa Dede, Personal Communication, 2023). The Orogun people believe that the world is filled with unseen forces, and divination serves as a means of communication between the physical world and the spiritual realm. They believe that the spirits and ancestors communicate through divination, and the results provide guidance and insight into different aspects of life, including health, family, career, and relationships (Efemini, personal Communication, 2023).

Ighovavwerhe (Personal Communication, 2023) reveals that divination also serves as a means of resolving disputes, especially among family members or community members. When there are disagreements or conflicts, they consult a diviner who uses divination tools such as cowries, shells, kola nuts, or palm fronds to reveal the cause of the problem and a possible solution. It is an essential aspect of their religious and

cultural beliefs. Orogun people believe that their ancestors play a vital role in their daily lives, and they honor them through divination. Diviners are believed to have a special gift or connection with the spirit world, and they act as mediators between humans, gods and ancestors (Irorokpaka, Personal Communication, 2023).

1. **Diagnostic and Therapeutic function**

Divination is used as a diagnostic tool to identify the causes of problems, illnesses, or misfortunes. Diviners utilize various techniques, such as observing patterns, interpreting signs or symbols. Divination is a traditional practice that has significant diagnostic and therapeutic functions in the culture of Orogun (Ogheneochuko, Personal Communication, 2023). The diviner (*Ogbe-vwa*), uses divination tools such as cowries, kola nuts, or palm nuts to communicate with the deities, ancestors, or other spiritual beings. By interpreting the patterns and formations of the divination tools, the *Ogbe-vwa* could identify the underlying causes of the problem and the appropriate solution. Divination helps to identify the root cause of health issues and provides guidance on how to address the problem at hand (Irorokpaka, Personal Communication, 2023).

In addition to the diagnostic function of divination, divination also has therapeutic functions in Orogun culture. According to Omormerhi (Personal Communication, 2023), divination helps people to understand the spiritual factors contributing to their illness or difficulties and offer guidance on the materials that can be used to heal the condition and improve their wellbeing. The diviner may recommend sacrifices, rituals, or herbal remedies to help restore balance, harmony, and wellbeing. Divination also provides people with a sense of control, agency, and hope, as they learn how to address their problems and improve their situation. Embarking on any journey or adventure, *Orogun* people make consultations to determine the fate of their adventure, to know if it will be fruitful or not. Farmers also consult to determine the productiveness of the farm produce for a particular season (Aruegodore, Personal Communication, 2023).

Thus, divination plays a significant role in diagnosing and treating health issues, difficulties, and problems among Orogun people. Divination is a potent tool for communicating with spiritual entities, and it helps people to understand the spiritual factors affecting their lives. By providing guidance, insight and

solutions, divination promotes positive outcomes and helps people to navigate life's challenges.

## **2. Preventive Function**

Divination is also prophylactic. Sometimes, oracle may reveal unpleasant situations or calamities lying ahead. Through divination, the ritual or spiritual performances that could avert such omen could be revealed. In the same vein, when there is a course or serial negative happenings such as serial and successive deaths, epidemic or affliction, divination usually serves as a means of preventing the evil omen from reoccurring through the revelation of the causes and remedy.

## **3. Guiding Decision-Making:**

In Orogun, divination also serves as a compass for decision-making, helping individuals navigate the complexities of life. When faced with complex choices concerning marriage, business ventures, family matters, occupational and career decisions, people turn to divination to seek guidance from the spiritual realm (Aruegodore, Personal Communication, 2023). The diviner, a revered figure in the community uses various methods, such as casting cowries shells or interpreting dreams, to communicate with the deities and ancestors.

Through this interaction, divination provides insights and advice that aid individuals in making informed decisions. By relying on divination, the people of Orogun believe they are aligning their actions with divine will, ensuring a harmonious path forward (Ojanomare, Personal Communication, 2023).

#### **4. Providing Spiritual Guidance and Communal Cohesion**

Divination in Orogun serves as a conduit between the moral and spiritual realms, offering individuals a means to connect with their ancestors and deities. It is believed that the ancestors possess wisdom and knowledge that can be tapped into through divination. By seeking their counsel, people in Orogun gain a deeper understanding of their purpose, receive spiritual healing, and find solace in times of distress. Divination serves as a bridge, allowing the people to communicate with their ancestors, receive their blessings, and maintain a spiritual connection that strengthens their faith.

The practice of divination also plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of communal unity in Orogun. The diviner serves as a mediator between the community and the spirit world, acting as a unifying force. When

important decisions need to be made collectively, the villagers gather around the diviner, seeking guidance that benefits the entire community. Divination rituals and ceremonies bring people together, reinforcing their shared values and beliefs. The collective participation in divination strengthens the social fabric of Orogun, creating a sense of belonging and unity among its residents.

## **CONCLUSION**

Divination serves as a potent tool of inquiry. Among the Orogun people, it is part and parcel of the people's culture. Despite the influence of Christianity, the practice still subsists in various forms. This is because the worldview of the people is such that they understand that life is both physical and spiritual and that the spirit realm is superior to the physical realm. Hence, problems that defy physical and orthodox solutions may have spiritual causes, and once the spiritual dimensions are unraveled, there will be effective treatment. More so, there is the unequivocal conviction that certain secrets are locked in the supernatural realm where the answers to so many issues of life can be accessed. Divination makes it possible for such secrets to be revealed to the effect of



knowing the causes, effects and remedies of various conditions.

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