[Working Paper] **The Pleasing Aroma of Christ: An Analysis of Sudanese *Bakhor***

CAROLINE REEL

Caroline Reel is pursuing a PhD in Orality Studies with Asia Graduate School of Theology online. She lives in Kampala, Uganda, and works with Sudanese and Ugandans toward accessible discipleship and theological education suited to anyone. She has ten years of cross-cultural ministry practice in Eastern Europe and East Africa and loves researching and learning how cultural expressions of orality can nurture Jesus-followers in gospel communities. Storytelling and feeding people are her favorite cultural arts to experience and practice to remember the places and people she has called home. Email: caroline.elisabeth.reel@gmail.com

Upon entering any Sudanese home, in their motherland or in exile around the world, you are greeted with an aroma impossible to define in Western vocabulary. A woman seats you, and with the spiced tea or ginger coffee she brings to show you hospitality, she will often bring a wire basket or ceramic dish-like incense burner with a live coal or two. Placing this near the hem of your skirt or under the central coffee table if you are one of a crowd of guests, she will arrange a fresh piece of *bakhor* on top of the coal: an incense made either from treated wood chips or compounded from resin. The incense begins to send up a fine thread of smoke as the room fills with the smell of Sudanese hospitality, of welcome, of home, of community.

The carefully blended combination of aromas in bakhor carries deep social, spiritual, and cultural meaning to Sudanese. It triggers cherished memories of home and family. According to a nostalgic Sudanese blogger,

> Airports around the world, they say, blur into an anodyne sameness. Khartoum is different. There is an unmistakable scent as you make your way, bleary-eyed and stiff, into the arrivals hall at three in the morning. Aromatic and dense, it welcomes you home. It is the scent of Sudanese suitcases opened in exile, crammed with fragrant woods and oils. The scent of Sudanese weddings and honeymoons—sandalwood and cinnamon, frankincense and musk. (Women's Literacy in Sudan 2020)

Like much of Sudanese culture, even this richly detailed imaginary walk through the Khartoum airport is now only a nostalgic memory never to be experienced in the same way again. After generations of conflict, the airport is now a bombed-out skeleton of what it once was. In spite of these irreversible changes, art and traditions like bakhor nurture small seeds of Sudanese culture planted and tended in exile by refugees and immigrants around the world.

The art form of Sudanese incense or bakhor, like many folk arts, is both a quintessential icon of culture and has been deeply shaped by culture. An art this embedded into the cultural makeup of a society has great potential for the Kingdom of God. The following analysis of bakhor will explain the cultural weight it carries and how that weight may be leveraged for the Kingdom.

Artistic Analysis

Brian Schrag has practiced, researched, and published in the fields of missiology, art therapy, ethnomusicology, and ethnodoxology. In his *Creating Local Arts Together* manual, he proposes seven analysis lenses that can helpfully structure an examination of the art form of bakhor. He proposed that to deeply analyze art and appreciate its cultural

and situational context, one might evaluate the art through seven lenses, or categories: space, materials, participants, content, shape of the event through time, enactment features, and consolidation and meanings (Schrag 2025, 131–146). As an olfactory art form, bakhor does not necessarily fall into the categories of visual or performance arts, but all these categories can illuminate something of the art involved in the final product.

Bakhor often takes up space, according to Schrag's first lens, in homes and food or tea stalls as a domestic art form. People take pride in their homemade versions, especially if made for special life events like circumcisions, weddings, or other rites of passage. Airtight plastic or glass jars of bakhor for sale occupy crammed shelves in market stalls or Sudanese shops. It is also frequently used in mosques or wherever religious ceremonies are held (Women's Literacy in Sudan 2021). But most often, bakhor is found in homes, where it is used in sitting rooms or bedrooms. The components used to make bakhor vary by type, but the recipe materials and the artistic content of final product—two more of Schrag's lenses—are much the same and can be analyzed together. The wooden type of bakhor is made first with either sandalwood, acacia wood, or wood from Combretaceae trees (Women's Literacy in Sudan 2020). The wood chosen is then prepared in thin, thready chips or shards. Perfumes and or essential oils, musks, powdered mastic gum (a dried resin from tree sap), lemon juice, and sugar are also ingredients commonly used in the preparation process (Women's Literacy in Sudan 2020). Other recipes can include other ground resins like myrrh and frankincense, as well as animal byproducts such as ambergris and what the Sudanese call *dhufra* that comes from seashells (AROMATIX 2023a; Women's Literacy in Sudan 2020). Some types of bakhor use small quantities of very fine wood chips similar to sawdust, or no wood at all and are simply compounded from resins, oils, and sugars (AROMATIX 2023b). The final product is highly perfumed and can hold its scent for years if properly prepared and sealed (Women's Literacy in Sudan 2020). The two forms are either sticky, gummy, resinous wood chips, or grainy, sugary clumps, of which one or two pieces are chosen at a time to be burned on charcoal in an incense burner.

Next in an art analysis using Schrag's framework are the lenses of enactment features and the shape of the event through time. These two lenses examine, respectively, the actions performed and then the processes or steps involved in the making and use of the art. These lenses together direct our attention to bakhor's preparation process and usage. To make the wood-based type of bakhor, the small wood chips are soaked in the fragrant oils mentioned above by the preparer who turns or stirs them until they are saturated. Then the pan with the wood is heated while the contents are coated in a lemon juice and sugar syrup. As the syrup begins to caramelize and the wood pieces become sticky, more perfumed oils are added, and then the bakhor is finished off with powdered resins such as mastic gum that seal the individual pieces (Women's Literacy in Sudan 2020). The clumpy type of bakhor, made with little or no wood, undergoes a similar process, except the sugary final mixture is finished heating while it is still in a liquid state; it is left for around two weeks to dry and harden in a single pat, which is then crumbled into the final product and stored (AROMATIX 2023a). The finished bakhor of either type may be stored for many years before it is burned by its owner to welcome guests, to kindle romance, to banish odors or perfume a house and clothes, or in religious rituals or women's beautification or cosmetic practices in the smoke bath.

The enactment features of making and using bakhor overlap somewhat with Schrag's lens of participants. Bakhor is a widely used substance, but its variety of uses may be noted not only by differences in scent, but differences in those who use it and the social contexts in which they use it. These varied uses are also illuminated by Schrag's last art analysis lens, consolidation and meanings, which directs attentions to symbolic images, words, or actions heavily laden with culturally specific significance. Special bakhor with specific aroma profiles may be prepared for religious use or general home use or romantic or cosmetic use. It is not uncommon for the women of

bridal parties to work together to prepare special wedding and honeymoon bakhor for a bride, or for women to use bakhor in a communal smoke bath along with other beautification procedures before special events or parties. As one author notes, "Sudanese life is rounded by scent and incense. Wreathes of incense anoint both births and deaths, circumcisions, marriages, periods of illness and great joy. Bakhor is believed to be cleansing, propitious, healing and protective against the evil eye" (Women's Literacy in Sudan 2020).

To put it in terms of Schrag's lenses, participants' underlying symbolic meaning systems largely determine both what they perform with bakhor and how they perform it. Many Sudanese traditionally follow folk Islam beliefs, so bakhor may be burned as incense both at a Friday mosque gathering and in a home ritual conducted by a witch doctor to cleanse or banish evil spirits and sickness (Women's Literacy in Sudan 2021). Bakhor can be a symbol with many meanings, and so it may be used in religious and nonreligious rituals and spaces, in public or private, for the mundane or the celebratory. For this reason, too, both a Muslim and a Christian may assume a house smelling of bakhor to be clean, healthy, and welcoming.

Cultural Analysis

While Schrag's lenses help structure an artistic analysis of bakhor, a cultural analysis can further reveal its role as a social cornerstone. The Global Orality Mapping Project (GOMAP) website presents one possible framework with which to analyze a culture, according to fifteen traits in five clusters of three traits each. Three of these trait clusters are most relevant for an analysis of bakhor: *Expressing* involves rituals, art, and symbols; *knowing* consists of memory, learning, and sensemaking; and *relating* includes identity, respect, and environment (GOMAP 2025).

Certainly bakhor shapes Sudanese cultures' ways of expressing. The making of bakhor itself is an art form passed down by generations with aggregate symbols. Some trace the popularity of bakhor in Sudanese culture back to a relatively unpopular incense shop that burned the odd combination of what was accidentally dropped and swept off the floor outside in a trash pile at the end of the day, and over time people came to believe the smell or smoke itself was healing and protective (Women's Literacy in Sudan 2021). Whether Sudanese believe bakhor repels insects, provides spiritual protection, promotes good health, or simply smells nice, it has irrevocably become a symbol of their culture. The making of bakhor is an art practiced both by novices for the sake of creating their own unique or personal incense and by professionals who can sell high-quality bakhor both domestically and internationally at high value because of their mastery of the craft (Women's Literacy in Sudan 2020). And of course, as explained above, bakhor is an integral part of many rituals, both spiritual and domestic. It is a rich art form that expresses culture, identity, emotion, and community.

The knowing cluster of cultural traits can help us further explore bakhor. Those who learn to make it often do so through apprentice-like experience and practice rather than following written instructions or recipes. Bakhor also plays an important cultural role under the trait of memory. Olfactory stimuli are well known to trigger memory recall. Interestingly, one recent study noted that olfactory stimuli are strongly linked to emotion and memory; odors, when combined with other artistic visual stimuli, prompted better recall than when the visuals alone were presented (Suarez Argudin 2023, 2–3, 36). Bakhor and other scents trigger memory recall like this in a roundabout way, alluding to moments, relationships, people, or feelings without the structure of words. These memories sprung from familiar scents can be poignant and deeply personal, evoking a religious experience, a loved one who has passed away, or feelings of friendship, well-being, and community. Sudanese typically possess an olfactory fluency which plays a role in the way they process both the creation and appreciation of bakhor. As a Westerner not exposed to the

scent notes common in bakhor until I moved to an area with Sudanese residents as an adult, I lack the olfactory fluency to differentiate a particularly beautiful bakhor from a more standard and utilitarian batch. But Sudanese who have been versed in these aromas and sometimes even the preparation process for their whole lives can easily recognize an expensive bakhor from a cheap one, and one made with the famous "Bint el Sudan" perfume from one made with more basic oils. They have an olfactory knowledge that makes the enjoyment of bakhor richer because they can appreciate nuance and variation in the scents that others miss.

Lastly, the relating cluster of traits can provide a greater understanding of bakhor as well. Sudanese often understand the smoke and smell it exudes to be both a spiritual and physical influence on the environment. Bakhor smoke is variously assumed to cleanse and refresh and to welcome guests and benevolent spirits and banish unwanted insects and evil spirits. Bakhor also expresses a Sudanese cultural group identity, as one can often identify a Sudanese neighborhood or stranger passing in the street by the aroma in the air or on their clothes. A Sudanese home whose owners take pride in it and hospitably welcome guests will almost always smell of bakhor. But the incense also expresses a strong group identity, as it is most often used in communal settings and binds communities together. Bakhor can also demonstrate Sudanese respect, since it is used in nearly all rites of passage ceremonies to honor individuals and show them worthy of increasing respect, as well as mark their transition to a higher social standing. Bakhor may be seen as a mother of networks and connection. In the same way that bakhor is made of known individual scents compounded together to create a new and unique experience, bakhor itself compounds communities together. It infuses the air in which relationships are made and maintained. It carries ideas and conversations on its thready smoke as together they fill a room. It would not be too much to say that deep welcome cannot be expressed, enduring friendships cannot be made, and true celebration cannot be complete among Sudanese without bakhor.

Use in Christian Life

Bakhor clearly fills a key cultural space for the Sudanese, so how can this cultural heavyweight be leveraged for Kingdom purposes? Scripture itself is suffused with incense, and the culture surrounding it bears striking similarities to Sudanese incense culture. Incense and fragrant spices in the Bible are also used for beautification, setting a scene for romance, demonstrating wealth and hospitality, cleansing spaces spiritually and physically, burials, and marking holy spaces. Thus, very little of the Bible's content on incense needs cultural 'translation' for Sudanese. They already understand bakhor or incense and its capacity as a spiritual vehicle. A problem does come, however, in *how* they understand bakhor's spiritual uses. For Sudanese, bakhor does not inherently relate to Islam or African traditional religious practices, but the forms of their cultural expressions or rituals using bakhor do not always align with Scripture. If Sudanese believers are to use bakhor in God-glorifying ways, they must carefully consider the form and content of their related rituals and practices to determine which they may use with impunity and which they must adapt or totally discard. But since bakhor already has multiple meanings for different Sudanese communities, no meaning should be so inherently tied to the art form itself that it cannot be divorced from its substance and redeemed or rehabilitated for uses that glorify God.

All uses of bakhor in welcome and hospitality may remain unchanged for believing Sudanese, as well as all or nearly all for celebratory, family, and romantic uses. Ceremonies involving bakhor for spiritual cleansing or anointing may need to be carefully evaluated according to Scripture and believers' convictions, but because incense in the Bible is often used for these very purposes, there should be many spiritual functions bakhor can still serve in Christian communities. In fact, bakhor can culturally mark those who use it, just as Esther's beauty treatments with spices and

perfumes hid her cultural identity and marked her as indistinguishable from the other Persian women brought as queenly candidates to King Xerxes (Esther 2:3–15). Many Sudanese currently live outside their homeland as refugees and exiles. They long for reminders of home and art in their daily lives that keep their cultural identity alive. This is a role bakhor is perfect to fill. It aromatically marks those who use it as part of a community, whether they are in exile or not, and it is a special art form with the capacity to fill them with pride in their cultural identity that is so often challenged or ignored in foreign spaces.

Bakhor can not only restore dignity to Sudanese cultural identity in exile, but it can also be leveraged by Christians to welcome outsiders into the beauty and richness of Sudanese culture. I have experienced this and grown to love the smell of bakhor on my clothes or in a home because it viscerally reminds me of friendship and feeling welcomed in a foreign land as a foreigner myself. In this way, bakhor may be used for more than simply preserving and admiring Sudanese cultural identity; it may serve to build new community. Bakhor may function as a marker of Christian fellowship and hospitality in spaces as it offers the gospel invitation through scent if not words, beckoning like Jesus, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28 NIV). Bakhor has the cultural leverage to foster new family ties and extend welcome as it promotes deep discussion and discipleship among the family of believers.

Bakhor also has a powerfully proactive role to play in worship. Smells trigger memories, and Scripture repeatedly exhorts us to remember God and his works, reminding us how quickly we forget without intentional effort otherwise. Many of Scripture’s most intimate encounters with God are redolent with the perfume of incense or anointing oil: heartfelt prayers or life-changing visions at the tabernacle or temple (1 Samuel 1:9–20; Luke 1:8–16), choosing leaders in God’s presence and showing community support for them (Leviticus 8:30–36; 1 Samuel 16:1–13), anointing a stone that commemorated a vision (Genesis 28:10–19), a show of devotion over Jesus’s feet (Mark 14:1–9), burial and resurrection from his borrowed tomb (Mark 16:1; Luke 23:55–56), anointing the sick in earnest prayer and dependence on God (Mark 6:7–13; James 5:14), and many more. Could bakhor be used in places of worship to set the tone in a similar way and to help Sudanese believers compound memories of God’s gracious interactions with them in those places, just as the many scents in bakhor are compounded to make a rich new whole? Bakhor often reminds Sudanese of feelings or people who are not present. Can that power of memory be used to remind Sudanese of a very personal God whom they cannot at present see?

Incense serves yet one more beautifully symbolic purpose in Scripture that bakhor could also fill. When God gave Moses the instructions for the tabernacle and the recipes for holy anointing oil and incense, he told Moses and the Israelites to make a special altar only for incense. They were to place this altar immediately in front of the curtain to the Holy of Holies, where God’s presence would dwell, and to burn incense there morning and night before the Lord (Exodus 30–31). From New Testament discussions about incense, and especially the images in Revelation of incense rising before God’s throne in heaven with the prayers of his people (Revelation 8:3–4), we see incense as a picture of people’s praise and prayers rising to God. With this symbol, incense becomes a way to make the invisible visible—to demonstrate how worship is like a pleasing aroma to God. It becomes a tangible demonstration of an abstract spiritual reality that may not be as easy to grasp otherwise.

I believe the incense in the tabernacle served another purpose, too. When Jesus meets with Nicodemus in John 3, he discusses the Spirit and how God’s Spirit and people’s rebirth in the Spirit are real even if they cannot be seen. He explains that we cannot see wind but can nevertheless feel it and know of its existence. I imagine that incense smoke in front of the tabernacle curtain veiling God’s presence ribboned up into the air and filled the space with that

special smell associated with holiness. While God himself could not be seen in the tabernacle except as an occasional cloud of vapor, that incense signaled his presence in the same way Jesus described the wind and Spirit to Nicodemus—as something experienced but not seen. Just as bakhor laces conversation and community to bind people together, it can also symbolize and remind Sudanese of the fellowship they have with God. Its heady, comforting aroma can be used in worship to call to mind God's presence and accentuate the opportunity to commune with him in prayer.

Conclusion

At a recent church gathering with Sudanese refugees in Kampala, I opened a bag of homemade bakhor on the table in front of me to perfume the room. I shared most of the Bible stories above, linking this vibrant part of biblical worship and community with its beautiful echo in Sudanese culture. Proud grins slowly spread across faces as the women contemplated how this beloved cultural art was dignified and upheld by Scripture. One woman grieved that evangelical Sudanese church services never seemed to use bakhor. She exclaimed in sudden revelation, "But it doesn't just belong to Muslims or Catholics! It's in the Bible! It belongs to us!" These women expressed that no church teaching before had encouraged them to consider how this cultural artistic expression could facilitate worship. Only one of the women had ever personally connected her cultural bakhor to biblical bakhor, though the same word for incense is used in their daily speech and in Bible translations.

Teaching on bakhor and incorporating it as a practice of these women's faith dignified and gave value to their unique cultural expressions. One woman in the group makes and sells perfumes and bakhor, and she proudly opened the bag she had with her after our meeting to sell to any of us interested. Not only did the women feel dignified, but their bond with and respect for me as a cultural outsider deepened, too; many laughed with knowing pride when I rattled off common experiences with bakhor, like identifying a Sudanese in the street because of it. More than one warmly greeted me afterward and told me I was becoming more Sudanese. The teaching was also more memorable to them because of the cultural connection. Rarely, if ever, are teaching topics referenced again in later meetings, but two women separately mentioned in the next meeting a week later how the teaching on bakhor had encouraged their prayer life throughout the week and reminded them to be a witness to Jesus, like a sweet fragrance of life to those around them. Cultural art forms like bakhor clearly carry a weight cross-cultural ministry cannot afford to ignore if it seeks to build the Kingdom of God.

Bakhor is a beautiful icon of Sudanese culture and art. This unique type of incense carries deep meaning in many spheres of Sudanese life. It is quintessential in both highly spiritual or momentous occasions and mundane daily life. The entire loving process from making to burning bakhor is as steeped in community and rich tradition as the bakhor itself is in fragrant oils and resins. As one would expect, an art form this beloved and fundamental to Sudanese cultures can have great impact to be leveraged for the gospel. It can be a token of fellowship, a worshipful aid to memory, and a physical symbol to be experienced as a reminder of the very presence of God. May the most singular smell of Sudanese life be harnessed and transformed to become the sweet aroma of Christ to welcome people into God's Kingdom (2 Corinthians 2:15)!

References

AROMATIX. 2023 (September 10). “How to Make Bahkoor at Home for Beginners!” YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iH4_uqQbB4g.

AROMATIX. 2023 (September 12). “What Is Bahkoor, Oud & Incense—101.” YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u12S7aZSSFE.

Global Orality Mapping Project. “The 15 Traits of Orality.” Accessed July 1, 2025. https://gomap.pro/orality/#15.

Schrag, Brian. 2025. *Creating Local Arts Together: A Manual to Help Communities Reach Their Kingdom Goals*. William Carey Publishing.

Suarez Argudin, Monica. 2023. “Olfactory Vision: Recollection of Visual Information Through Smell in Graphic Design,” Master’s Thesis, Georgia State University. https://doi.org/10.57709/35362760.

Women’s Literacy in Sudan. 2020 (March 27). “The Clove’s Fragrance: Bakhur, Bint el Sudan, and Khumra.” https://womensliteracysudan.blog/2020/03/27/the-cloves-fragrance/.

Women’s Literacy in Sudan. 2021 (October 17). “Incense (بخور Bakhūr) in Sudan: Censing Body and Spirit.” https://womensliteracysudan.blog/2021/10/17/incense-in-sudan/.