

Selective Synthesis of Secondary Amines via *N*-Alkylation of Primary Amines and Ammonia with Alcohols by Supported Copper Hydroxide Catalysts

Jinling He, Kazuya Yamaguchi, and Noritaka Mizuno*

Department of Applied Chemistry, School of Engineering, The University of Tokyo, 7-3-1 Hongo, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 113-8656

(Received September 6, 2010; CL-100767; E-mail: tmizuno@mail.ecc.u-tokyo.ac.jp)

The *N*-alkylation of primary amines and ammonia (in situ generated from urea or aqueous ammonia) with alcohols to secondary amines was efficiently promoted by supported copper hydroxide catalysts, Cu(OH)_x/Al₂O₃ and Cu(OH)_x/TiO₂. The observed catalysis was truly heterogeneous, and the catalysts could be reused without an appreciable loss of catalytic performance.

The *N*-alkylation of primary amines to secondary ones is of great importance because the products have been utilized as important synthons for pharmaceuticals, agricultural chemicals, and bioactive compounds.¹ Frequently, alkylhalides have been utilized for the *N*-alkylation with stoichiometric amounts of inorganic bases.¹ However, the reaction with alkylhalides produces large amounts of inorganic salts as wastes.¹

An alternative environmentally-friendly approach is the *N*-alkylation with alcohols as alkylating reagents in the presence of appropriate transition-metal catalysts, so-called “borrowing hydrogen strategy” (or “hydrogen autotransfer strategy”):² The dehydrogenation of an alcohol initially proceeds to afford an aldehyde (more electrophilic than an alcohol), followed by the dehydrative condensation with an amine to produce an imine. Then, the imine is hydrogenated by the transitory formed metal hydride species, giving the desired *N*-alkylated amine. Although many homogeneous catalysts, in particular platinum group metal complexes, have been reported to be active for the *N*-alkylation with alcohols,^{2,3} these systems have shortcomings of the recovery and reuse of expensive catalysts and/or the indispensable use of co-catalysts such as bases and stabilizing ligands. The development of easily recoverable and recyclable heterogeneous catalysts can solve the problems of the homogeneous systems and has received a particular research interest.^{4,5}

In this paper, we report that easily prepared inexpensive supported copper hydroxides, Cu(OH)_x/Al₂O₃ and Cu(OH)_x/TiO₂,⁶ can act as efficient heterogeneous catalysts for the *N*-alkylation of primary amines and ammonia (in situ generated from urea or aqueous ammonia) with alcohols. Generally, copper-catalyzed *N*-alkylation reactions require high H₂ pressures (≥100 atm), high reaction temperatures (≥160 °C), and/or stoichiometric amounts of bases (e.g., K₂CO₃) to attain high yields of desired amines.⁵ In contrast, the present *N*-alkylation with supported copper hydroxide catalysts efficiently proceeded under relatively mild reaction conditions (1 atm of Ar, 135 °C) without any co-catalysts.⁷

The catalytic activities for the reaction of *n*-octylamine (**1a**) with benzyl alcohol (**2a**) to form *N*-benzyloctylamine (**3a**) were compared (Table 1). Among various catalysts tested, supported copper hydroxide catalysts such as Cu(OH)_x/Al₂O₃ and Cu(OH)_x/TiO₂ (see Supporting Information¹¹ for preparation and characterization) showed the highest catalytic activities and

Table 1. The *N*-alkylation of **1a** with **2a** by various catalysts^a

$n\text{-C}_7\text{H}_{15}\text{NH}_2 + \text{Ph-CH}_2\text{OH} \xrightarrow{\text{cat.}} n\text{-C}_7\text{H}_{15}\text{N(Ph)} + n\text{-C}_7\text{H}_{15}\text{N(Ph)}_2$			
1a	2a	3a	3a'
Entry	Catalyst	Yield/%	
		3a	3a'
1	Cu(OH) _x /Al ₂ O ₃	85	3
2 ^b	Cu(OH) _x /TiO ₂	80	4
3	CuCl ₂ /Al ₂ O ₃	nd ^f	6
4	Cu(OH) ₂	nd	10
5 ^c	Cu(OH) ₂ + Al ₂ O ₃	nd	9
6	CuCl ₂ ·2H ₂ O	nd	7
7	Cu(NO ₃) ₂ ·3H ₂ O	nd	9
8	Cu(CH ₃ COO) ₂ ·H ₂ O	nd	6
9	Cu(PhCOO) ₂	nd	6
10	Cu(CF ₃ SO ₃) ₂	nd	7
11	Cu(acac) ₂ ^d	nd	7
12	[Cu(μ-OH)(tmen)] ₂ Cl ₂ ^e	nd	8
13	CuCl	nd	6
14	[Cu(C≡CPh)] _n	nd	8
15 ^c	Al ₂ O ₃	nd	5
16	None	nd	10

^aReaction conditions: Catalyst (Cu: 0.04 mmol), **1a** (0.5 mmol), **2a** (2 mmol), mesitylene (2 mL), 135 °C, 65 min, under 1 atm of Ar. Yields (based on **1a**) were determined by GC analyses. ^b60 min. ^cAl₂O₃ (200 mg). ^dacac: acetylacetonato. ^etmen: *N,N,N',N'*-tetramethylethylenediamine. ^fnd: not detected (<1%).

selectivities to the secondary amine **3a** (Entries 1 and 2). No formation of **3a** was observed in the absence of the catalysts (Entry 16) or in the presence of Al₂O₃ (Entry 15). The catalyst precursor CuCl₂·2H₂O and commonly utilized copper salts and complexes such as Cu(NO₃)₂·3H₂O, Cu(CH₃COO)₂·H₂O, Cu(PhCOO)₂, Cu(CF₃SO₃)₂, Cu(acac)₂, [Cu(μ-OH)(tmen)]₂Cl₂, CuCl, and [Cu(C≡CPh)]_n were not effective (Entries 6–14). The catalytic activities of supported copper hydroxides were much higher than those of unsupported Cu(OH)₂ (Entry 4) and a physical mixture of Cu(OH)₂ and Al₂O₃ (Entry 5). The reaction hardly proceeded in the presence of the copper chloride species supported on Al₂O₃ prepared without the base pretreatment (CuCl₂/Al₂O₃, Entry 3, see Supporting Information¹¹ for preparation). These results suggest that the generation of the highly dispersed “copper hydroxide species” on the surface of supports is very important to achieve the high catalytic activity and selectivity.⁷

The Cu(OH)_x/Al₂O₃-catalyzed reaction of **1a** with **2a** was carried out under the conditions described in Table 1, and the catalyst was removed from the reaction mixture by hot filtration at ca. 50% yield of **3a**. After removal of the catalyst, the reaction

Table 2. The synthesis of various secondary amines^a

$$R-NH_2 + R'-OH \rightarrow R-NH-R' \text{ or } NH_3 + R'-OH \rightarrow R-NH-R'$$

Entry	N Source	Alcohol	Time/min	Yield/%
1	1a	2a	65	85
2	1a	2b	60	84
3	1a	2c	60	81
4 ^b	1a	2c	75	75
5	1a	2f	780	87
6	1b	2c	105	91
7	1c	2a	90	79
8	1d	2a	90	70
9	1e	2a	360	83
10	1f	2a	70	93
11	1g	2a	480	85
12 ^c	1g	2c	480	95
13 ^c	1g	2d	900	91
14 ^c	1g	2e	1500	98
15	1h	2a	720	80

^aReaction conditions: Catalyst (Cu: 0.04 mmol), N source (amine: 0.5 mmol, urea: 0.25 mmol, or ammonia: 0.5 mmol), alcohol (2 mmol), mesitylene (2 mL), 135 °C, under 1 atm of Ar. Yields (based on the amounts of nitrogen in N sources) were determined by GC analyses. ^bReuse experiment. ^cAlcohol (2.5 mmol).

was again carried out with the filtrate under the same conditions, and no further reaction proceeded. In addition, it was confirmed by inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectroscopy that no copper was detected in the filtrate (below detection limit of 7 ppb). The catalyst retrieved after the *N*-alkylation could be reused without significant loss of catalytic performance (Entry 4 in Table 2).⁸ All these results can rule out any contribution to the observed catalysis from copper species that leached into the reaction solution and the observed catalysis is truly heterogeneous.⁹

Next, the scope of the present Cu(OH)_x/Al₂O₃-catalyzed *N*-alkylation was examined (Table 2). Various combinations of substrates (eight nitrogen sources and six alcohols) have been investigated, and all reactions efficiently proceeded to afford the corresponding unsymmetrically as well as symmetrically substituted secondary amines in high yields without any co-catalysts such as bases. When urea (**1g**) was used as a nitrogen source, the corresponding symmetrically substituted secondary amines could be obtained in high yields through the *N*-alkylation of in situ generated ammonia from **1g** (Entries 11–14).^{4b,10} In addition, aqueous ammonia could be directly utilized for the present *N*-alkylation (Entry 15).

The reaction profiles for the Cu(OH)_x/Al₂O₃-catalyzed *N*-alkylation of **1a** with **2a** showed that **3a'** was initially formed, followed by the formation of **3a**. Under aerobic conditions, the reaction of **1a** with **2a** exclusively gave **3a'** without the formation of **3a** (Figure S1).¹¹ It was confirmed in a separate

experiment that the oxidative dehydrogenation of alcohols and the hydrogenation of imines to amines in the presence of alcohols efficiently proceeded with the Cu(OH)_x/Al₂O₃ catalyst (Figure S1).¹¹ Thus, the present *N*-alkylation likely proceeds via the following three sequential reactions. First, the dehydrogenation of an alcohol to a carbonyl compound proceeds with the transitory formation of the copper hydride species. Then, the carbonyl compound readily reacts with a starting amine to form the corresponding imine. Finally, the hydrogen transfer reaction from the hydride species to the imine proceeds to afford the corresponding secondary amine.

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- Supporting Information is available electronically on the CSJ-Journal Web site, <http://www.csj.jp/journals/chem-lett/index.html>.