

## HEEDING OUR ANCESTORS: URHOBO AND CONFUCIUS' CONCEPTS OF ANCESTORSHIP AND THEIR RELEVANCES TO SOCIO-POLITICAL/ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Ikeke Mark Omorovie<sup>1\*</sup>

Darah Moses<sup>2</sup>

Brume Toma<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1, 2</sup>Delta State University, Nigeria.

\*Corresponding Email: [drikeke@delsu.edu.ng](mailto:drikeke@delsu.edu.ng)

**Citation:** Ikeke, M.O., Darah, M. & Brume, T. (2022). Heeding our ancestors: urhobo and confucius' concepts of ancestorship and their relevancies to socio-political/ecological challenges. *KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(3), 29-45

### ABSTRACT

The world today is troubled by socio-political and ecological problems. These problems include corruption, terrorism, wars, violence, modern-day slavery, deforestation, desertification, marine, and atmospheric pollution, climate change, and so forth. In the pursuit of solutions to these myriads of problems, different solutions such as environmentalism, socialism, communism, capitalism, anarchy, feminism, and many others have been proposed. This paper argues that there are aspects of the concept of ancestorship that can contribute to ameliorating these problems. It is in this light that the paper will examine the concept of ancestorship among the Urhobo people of the Nigeria Delta and as opined by the Chinese philosopher, Confucius. The paper finds that the concept of ancestorship in these two traditions is still relevant. It concludes that adherence and emulation of viable aspects of ancestorship can help in resolving socio-political and ecological problems in the contemporary world.

**Keywords:** Urhobo, tradition, culture, ancestor, Ancestorship, Socio-political, social, politics, Confucius, Confucian, and ecology

### INTRODUCTION

Some beliefs and practices date back to ancient times or many generations past. They could still be considered relevant to the contemporary world. These beliefs and practices include traditional rites of passages of birth, marriage, death, burial; age grade associations, veneration of the earth as sacred, child-rearing practices, telling of folktales at moonlight, extended family system, communal ownership of land and other resources, and veneration of ancestors. Unfortunately, some of these African cultural beliefs and practices are demonised by a so-called westernised mind-set rooted in a negative understanding of Judeo-Christian theology. Because of this mind-set, a field study or any

other research into African cultural traditions is often sceptical and biased against the tradition. Despite this mid-set, there is a need to phenomenologically examine African cultural beliefs and practices to reclaim what is viable in them. One of the beliefs and practices that have been so vilified is that of the cult of the ancestors. This paper takes a critical analytic and hermeneutic look at the concept of ancestorship among the Urhobo people of the present Delta State in the Niger Delta of Nigeria and the thought of the wise sage, Confucius. The imports and implications of these for some contemporary international socio-political and ecological challenges will also be presented. The concept of ancestorship is not only found in the Urhobo and Confucius' thoughts. A study of ancestral cults and veneration is not an endorsement of every aspect of this phenomenon.

It should be noted that the international contemporary world is inundated with socio-political and ecological challenges. These concerns include terrorism, urban violence and gangsterism, economic and political corruption, inept and poor leadership especially in the so-called developing world, human trafficking, child labour, civil wars, deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, marine and atmospheric pollution, and so forth. There is hardly any region of the world that you turn to where there are no challenges. Places like Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and many others have experienced or are experiencing some forms of war. The environmental problem of deforestation is taking place in Brazil, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, etc. Leadership problems and corruption are rampant in many African and Asian countries and other continents. Racism, xenophobia, sectionalism, hate speech, and discrimination are common in the United States of America, South Africa, etc. This paper argues forthrightly that aspects of the concept of ancestorship among the Urhobo and Confucius have relevance to the above concerns. The paper does not in any way assert that ancestral beliefs and practices are a total panacea to contemporary socio-political and ecological challenges.

### CONCEPT OF ANCESTORS AND ANCESTORSHIP

Encyclopedia Britannica (2022) defines an ancestor as: "a person who was in someone's family in past times: one of the people from whom a person is descended" (p. 1). Wex Definition Team (2022) says: "An ancestor is a predecessor in the family. In a legal sense, especially in the law of inheritance, any person whose estate is inherited by legal act or descent is an ancestor. The term ancestor applies only to natural persons" (p. 1). Encyclopedia of Buddhism (2018) states that:

The meaning of ancestor differs among different cultures, depending on their kinship system and their beliefs regarding the deceased. Ancestor could refer to

the originator of an ancestral lineage or the soul of a dead person who is memorialized in a family shrine. The Sanskrit word for ancestor, *preta*, is related to the Vedic term *pitarah* (fathers). According to an *abhidharma* commentary, *Mahāvibhāṣā* (Chinese, *Dapiposha lun*; Great Exegesis), Yama, the first mortal who died and became the king of the netherworld, is called *preta-rāja* (king of the dead) or *pitr-rāja* (king of fathers). Thus, in ancient India, the words *preta* and *pitarah* were almost interchangeable in their use. This reflects the patrilineal kinship system of ancient India and the ancestral rites that were performed and maintained through the male line (p.1).

By implication, though an ancestor is someone that one is connected to by blood, the term is equally now used in a spiritual form. One's ancestors today may simply be dead people you are connected to by influence or even civil naturalization process. In Christian theology today, Jesus is spoken of as a spiritual ancestor and there is what is called today ancestral Christology. The present people of the United States for instance may consider the founders of the United States of America as their ancestors though some of them are not connected to them by blood. Alanamu (2003) writes that: "Ancestors are senior members of the social group of a clan who have died," and "...are duty bound to act as invisible guardians of the ethics of the society" (p. 16).

A prominent way that human beings relate to ancestors is through ancestral veneration. IGI Global (2022) states that ancestral veneration refers to: "A variety of ritual and role-playing practices through which living people celebrate the lives of deceased family members" (p.1). What some scholars call veneration, others call to worship. Merriam-Wester (1999) avers concerning ancestral worship that it is "any of a variety of religious beliefs and practices concerned with the spirits of the dead persons regarded as relatives, some of whom may be mythical" (p. 54). Concerning veneration, Merriam-Webster (1999) relates that "veneration is shown those persons who in their lifetimes held positions of importance, such as head of families, lineages, clans, tribes, kingdoms, and other social groups. In some societies only the spirit of the recently deceased are given attention..." (p.54). Veneration of ancestors is an important way of expressing kinship. You and your ancestors are part of one kinship family.

Though the focus of this paper is on ancestorship that is blood-based, the figurative sense of ancestorship will not be discounted. The contemporary forms of ancestorship that are discussed here have to do with the figurative usage of the term. What are contemporary forms of ancestorship? The term is used in this section in a metaphoric sense. There are many different ways in which people remember and honour heroes and significant others who have died. They may not call them ancestors but it is similar and akin to aspects of this phenomenon of ancestorship. One prominent feature of the ancestral practice is an annual festival in honour of the ancestors. Many nations or

countries of the world today have annual memorial days set to honour past heroes and founders. In the United States of America, it is called Memorial Day. What is Memorial day? It is a day set aside, the last Monday of May to pay honour to women and men who have served and died while serving as military personnel. On Memorial Day people visits the cemetery, and hold gatherings and parades to honour the military dead. In Nigeria, there is an Armed Forces Remembrance Day. On this day the nation honours those who laboured, worked, and fought in defence of the Nigerian state. World over celebrations are held in honour of Martin Luther King, Jnr, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, the Pilgrim Fathers, Kwame Nkrumah, Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Winston Churchill, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, and many others. Even if some argue that these are not called ancestors, these practices of honouring the dead are akin to traditional ancestral practices and beliefs. But the reality is that people like Nelson Mandela, Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and many others are truly African ancestors.

### ANCESTOR AND ANCESTORSHIP AMONG THE URHOBOS

The Urhobo people are the major ethnic group in the present Delta State of Nigeria. Delta State in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The ethnic nationality group is presently made of twenty-four sub-kingdoms of Olomu, Ogor, Agbarha-Otor, Idjerhe, Okpe, Okparabe, Ewu, Okere-Urhobo, Arhavwarien, Effurun-Otor, Udu, Orogun, Orhwarivie-Abraka, Umiaghwa-Abraka, Ughelli, Ewreni, Ughievwen, Agbassa, Agbon, Uwheru, Mosogar, Oghara, Uvwie, and Agbarho. In Urhobo, ancestors are called *esemo* (this is the masculine form) or *iniemo* (feminine form). *Esemo* literally means father of children and *iniemo* mother of children. There is this wrong notion that Urhobo and other African peoples worship their ancestors. Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica (2017) state that: "The Urhobo traditionally worship Oghene, the Supreme Creator, who is connected with the sky. Individuals may also worship personal or ancestral spirits and supernatural powers." The African family system is that of an extended family. The family is made up not only of the nuclear or immediate family members but of all who come from common ancestry. The family includes uncles, aunts, cousins, distant relatives, and also adopted children. One's kinsmen and kinswomen are also part of one's extended family. The family includes also members who are departed from this world. Some of them now live in the world of their ancestors. The ancestors live in the spirit world. The family includes plants and animals and other cosmic realities. The Urhobo people like other Africans also accept and practice the extended family system. Tonukari (n.d) writes that the Urhobo extended family includes ancestors and other spirits who are above and superior to human beings, "They are believed to be benevolent and powerful representatives of the community in the subterranean world of 'erivwin' (underworld).

Their symbols and shrines are common features among most traditional Urhobo people. For example, women of the child-bearing age are bound to observe several prohibitions. Such women run a serious risk of becoming childless if they flout such taboos, since it could result in scaring away of souls of unborn babies that are believed to hover around homesteads and families wanting to incarnate in wombs of potential mothers.” Adogbo (2000) enunciates that ancestral spirits called *Esemo* who live in *erivwin* have a structure of having people like chiefs, elders, children, and kings. Adogbo (2000) states further that:

The ancestral spirits are very important in the religious life of the Urhobo people. They are next to God in the religious hierarchy of people. The significance is better appreciated if discussed against the background of their roles in the daily life of the people. The ancestral spirits live in intimate association with the living members of the family. Both are interdependent; while the ancestors function as the guardian of the family, the living reciprocates by showing signs of hospitality by regular sacrifices and acknowledgement of their presence in every part of daily life.

In Urhoboland, there are mediums and diviners who can communicate with the spirit world. Urhobo mediums as we have noted, are not possessed by ancestral spirits. Rather, they are possessed by the primordial spirits who serve as agents of communication between the physical world and the spiritual realm. However, ancestral spirits manifest themselves in dreams and visions. They are seen physically by the people from time to time, during which they send messages to the living members of the community.

The prayer given below is a sample of how they invoke the ancestors in Urhoboland. Tonukari (n.d) cites Popor who in turn cited his father Ekeke of Isiokolo in the prayer below:

O my ancestors, A wild dog can never lie near a wolf's den;  
You have now finished eating. I offer you an imported drink;  
It is gin. Please receive it for all members of the lineage,  
Here is the drink we have brewed ourselves; It is corn beer. Receive this one also.  
May you be as a powerful medicine to protect the entire lineage. May we all be  
in good health always, All our children too.  
All our customs which are going to the Europeans,  
May they understand them well.  
They should take good care of the black people....  
Look! Prayers offered for one's in-laws should not become ineffective.  
No ! Never!  
Here is gin; Here also is water.  
Help us to succeed when we use your nets;  
Your coconut plantation too must be fruitful,

To provide a means of livelihood for us;  
May trouble be far from us. May poverty be far from us;  
May sickness be far from us; May death be far from us.  
Give us plenty of wealth; Give us plenty of children;  
Just as we have also given you,  
May you too give us even more abundantly.

Through prayers, petitions, and libations the ancestors/tress are venerated. This payer expresses also the Urhobo belief regarding ancestors. The ancestors are not dead. Their influence and power can still be felt among the people. Many Urhobo people live in reverential fear and awe of their ancestors. The ancestors have an ethical moderating influence on people's behaviours. Many know that if they don't live well, they can be punished by their ancestors or visited with sicknesses. Tonukari (n.d) writes further that:

For Urhobo people, there are the belief and ideas about ancestors being able to form an essential part of the effort to inculcate, mobilize and promote the community ideal of harmonious living in society. As benevolent spiritual guardians of their respective families and communities, ancestors are believed to reincarnate in new-born babies in the community. A child is named after the ancestor that is believed to have reincarnated in the life of that child. Special attention and favours are bestowed to such a child as a mark of respect to the ancestor. Family elders make regular offerings of gifts, food and drinks to the ancestors. The Urhobo male elder does not normally eat or drink without first offering some portion on the ground, or at the shrine or symbol of the ancestors.

Urhobo beliefs about ancestors are demonstrated in various ways. People name their children by the former names that were borne by those who are now considered ancestors. The Urhobo people believe in reincarnation. Ancestors are believed to come back to life in newborn children. It is believed that some persons who lived difficult lives or were deprived of their rights and feel that they have not fulfilled their destinies do come back to life. In a personal interview that one of the authors of this paper had with his grandmother, Mrs. Ukeke Ophori, the grandmother affirmed that there is the belief that her co-mate in marriage who suffered some maltreatment came back in one of her grandchildren who died as a teenager. There are reincarnated ancestors who come back to take revenge on the living over the injustice they suffered in their earlier lives on earth. In Urhobo religious culture as in other African ethnic cultures, there are conditions for becoming an ancestor. It is not every dead person that becomes an ancestor. People who died violent, unusual, and suicidal death and die out of committing abominations are not considered ancestors. To be an ancestor you must have lived a fulfilling life, died a good death, and enjoy a good burial.

The concern of this paper is not to enter into a debate on every aspect of ancestral beliefs and their believability. The debate on reincarnation or whether Africans worship ancestors will not be entered into here. It suffices here to note the followings-ancestors are venerated with high regard. Aderibigbe (2016) argues that the veneration accorded to ancestors in African religion is often confused and termed worship. Wotogbe-Weneka (2006) corroborates this fact when he cites E B Idowu to show that many foreign investigators and cursory lookers confuse the high attention, reverence, and veneration given by Africans to the ancestors as worship and equate African religion with ancestor-worship; but this is wrong and for African, the supreme being is far superior to ancestors and other beings in the universe.

In discussing ancestors, the ethical and environmental values that the ancestors kept and upheld should be kept in mind. Urhobo beliefs about ethics and environment are traditional values that come from the ancestors. Aderibigbe (2016) notes that African peoples believe that ancestors can cause adversity or promote prosperity, they foster cohesion in the society. To use the words of Idowu (1973), "To some extent, they are believed to be intermediaries between the Deity or the divinities and their own children; this is a continuation of their earthly function of ensuring domestic peace and the wellbeing of their community, to distribute favours, to exercise discipline or enforce penalties, to be guardians of community ethics and prevent anything that might cause disruption." Urhobo ancestors like their other African ancestors believed in the sacredness of the earth (land), the earth and sky are created by God and filled with divine presence, frugal use of the resources of the earth, a life of generosity and sharing of resources, hospitality and friendliness among human persons, etc. Ikeke (2014) writes that:

Because of the belief in a sacred presence to a certain degree even in non-human lives, they were accorded respect, reverence and preserved. It would seem that in some areas in Urhoboland as elsewhere in Africa, spectacular animals, mountains, and streams that are perceived to carry mystical powers were given worship... To other things in the universe, reverence and respect should be given depending on the position that they occupy in the hierarchy of creation. Hierarchy is perceived here as one of stewardship not domination (p.79).

As noted previously, it is veneration that Africans give to their ancestors. In discussing ancestors and ancestorship, the values that the ancestors upheld should be a central concern. In contemporary forms of ancestorship the deeds, and achievements of heroes, founders of nations, and pioneers of different humanitarian causes are given prominence. This ought to be in recalling traditional forms of ancestorship. There is a dimension to ancestral veneration in Urhoboland that should never be overlooked.

According to Ohwovoriole (2010) ancestors are venerated on *Edewo*, while ancestresses are venerated on *Eduhre*; and on these days' people abstained from going to the farms and streams. Both *Edewo* and *Eduhre* are sacred days in Urhobo mythology. It is important to note that a modern industrial-technocratic cosmopolitan society often has no place for allowing the earth to lie fallow and rest. It is work, and work, and work. In light of the contemporary environmental crisis, there is a need to argue for sacred days to allow the earth and its resources to rest and recover their energies and nutrients for the health of the earth and the entire cosmos.

### ANCESTOR AND ANCESTORSHIP IN CONFUCIUS' THOUGHT

In stating the concept of ancestorship of Confucius it is imperative to state the notion of ancestors in the pre-Confucius era. The pre-Confucius religion is a folk religion in which all aspect of life is considered religious. This notion is common to all traditional and indigenous cultures. Religion was not strictly separated from daily life. Clemmons (2008) writes that:

Under the heading of folk religion, ancestor veneration played an integral part from the beginning of the Chou Dynasty....Ancestors were not so much worshipped as deities, but revered as older, wiser members of the family unit, The older the person was at the time of death, the more honoured, People believed ancestors had two souls. One should would disappear at death while a second one was immortal. This second soul was the object of reverence. It was the responsibility of the male head of the household to make sure ancestors receive proper care. Failure to offer proper reverence to ancestors could anger them to the point that they might destroy crops, send illnesses, or cause mental distress, including nightmares (p. 282).

About ancestral veneration, commenting on Chinese culture, Clemmons (2008) states that it is "a religious practice based on the belief that deceased family members are still living and that they have an interest in family affairs and can influence the fates of family members. Ancestor veneration refers to various ways of showing respect and reverence for family ancestors after their death, Family members bring offerings to their ancestors to obtain protection and guidance" (p. 282). DeAngelis (2007) writes that in Chinese folk culture, it is believed that deceased family members continue to live after death in another spiritual realm from which they can influence the living by transferring blessings and good fortune to them; and the living family members show reverence, remembrance and even worship to the dead. DeAngelis (2007) notes further that ancestral worship consolidates family bonds and solidarity, fosters family cohesion, a retelling of ancestral deeds and recounting their names



Confucius' concept of ancestors arises from and is essentially not different from that of his Chinese background. The Chinese understanding of ancestors ground his ideas on the subject. Who is Confucius? Permit the following brief biographic data in this paragraph taken from Clemmons (2008), except where noted otherwise. Confucius (whose original name is K'ung Fut-tzu) is a Chinese philosopher and a wise sage who lived about five hundred years before Christ. His wise sayings are collected together in the *Analects*. He was born in 551 BCE and died in 479 BCE. The period of his life occurs during the eras of weak imperial governments struggling for power. It was in the state of Lu that he was born. His father was a military hero. The father of Confucius died when he was just three years old. He and his mother were rejected by his father's family after the death of his father. His mother died when he was twenty years old. Concerning marriage, he married at the age of nineteen. He taught young people like Socrates. He aspired for public office throughout his adult life. He spent his last years on earth teaching. Ilega and Iheanacho (2006) note that for a brief period he was appointed a Justice minister in the state of Ch'i and he used the time to institute some good governmental policies but because his total aims were not achieved he returned to Lu at the age of 51 years. He became an adviser to the Duke of Lu but will resign from that post when the Duke received 80 dancing girls. A portrait of Confucius is given by Kramer (1986) citing Pierre Do-Dinh:

Confucius was tall, though his legs were rather short, if credence on the latter point is to be given to his school's Taoist adversary, Chaung-tse. He had the "five projections": protuberant eyes, a prominent nose with large nostrils, a pronounced Adam's apple, flat ears, and teeth that protruded slightly beyond his lips so that they were not quite closed... his face was broad, with marks like those that are to be "on ripe melon". His hands were strong, resembling a tiger's paws; his beard was luxuriant, his mouth was wide. His walk was rapid. His complexion was dark. It was difficult to determine whether his portrait is accurate.

His manner was gentle, calm, and austere; he inspired respect without arousing fear; he was sober and serene. At court or in the temple he expressed himself clearly but with respectful attention and a noble gravity. With simple people he too was simple, though speaking little. (p. 99-100)

Clemmons (2008) opines that Confucius proposed that the much chaos and upheavals that he witnessed in society required the recovery of ancient values that can be found in rituals such as worship of the high god Heaven, death rites, and ancestral veneration. The ancestors are very important in Confucius and Confucian thought. Kramer (1986) cites Confucius saying that human beings need to cultivate filial piety towards their superiors and ancestors, and these ancestors include not just one's blood family members but kings, queens, and the heavenly king of all kings (Shang Ti). Confucius had a great reverence for the traditions of the ancient. Stanford(2010) shows that: "The

Chinese philosopher Confucius...regarded himself as neither an original thinker nor the founder of a religion. He was, he said, a 'transmitter' of existing ideas, gathered by studying the wisdom of the past and applying it to the present" (p. 156). In other words, as Clemmons (2008) puts it: "Confucius regarded himself as a transmitter of ancient Chinese social values rather than as a founder of a religion or a philosophy. He studied ancient Chinese scriptures and attempted to revive their wisdom in his society. Confucius was not inventing anything new. He was simply putting his contemporaries in touch with their ancestors" (p. 285). Kramer (1986) writes that:

Along with reverence for nature, another major component in the classical Chinese sacred story was ancestor worship, or reverence for the human, what Joseph Kitagawa calls "family-ism"... The dead, it was thought, benefit the living with next-worldly wisdom, whereas the living benefits the dead with reverential remembrances through prayers, sacrifices, and commemorations. Just as there was a synchronistic connection between the living and the dead. To revere the aged as wise and the dead as most wise was to participate in the sacredness of life through funeral rites, mourning observances, and continual sacrifices. Such rituals were not merely confined to one's blood-family but included kings, queens, even the heavenly king of all kings (*Shang Ti*), the ancestors, the Supremely Wise (p. 102)

Confucius's notion of ancestors is also related to the Chinese concept of spirit. Iheanacho and Ilegu (2006) state that ideas, customs, and beliefs from traditional China informs Confucius' thought. Both authors just quoted now aver that the Chinese believed that benevolent spirits caused good to happen to people, while the malevolent ones caused calamities and evil. The influence of this is evident in the teaching of Confucius that, 'heaven favours the good, but that adversities occur that the virtuous must endure patiently' (p.137). Iheanacho and Ilegu (2006) state that ancestors are spirits that carry some supernatural powers. Merriam-Webster (1999) states that it is believed that ancestors do help the living and can harm the living if they are not offered propitiation. Ancestors are seen as maintenance of morality.

His beliefs on the ancestors are rooted in tapping from the wisdom of those ancestors for the good of the present generation. As stated by Stanford (2010) Confucius believed that Ceremonies of rites and rituals to the ancestors are important in promoting the ethical values that promote social cohesion. The author just quoted opines that Confucius's emphasis on rites and rituals to the deities and ancestors is the first pillar of Li (the ethical behaviour of the ruled and rulers based on sincerity and justice). The performance of rites and rituals is not for its own sake but a righteous and ethically sound society. Kramer (1986) states that his emphasis on ritual performance has more to do with the appropriate attitude of connecting it to a life of respect and reverence not

just for the living or one's superiors but also one's ancestors. Confucius (2000) opines that one must be faithful to the teachings of the ancients, the ancestors and passed them on.

### RELEVANCE OF URHOB0 AND CONFUCIUS' NOTIONS OF ANCESTORSHIP FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL/ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

In attempting to reclaim aspects of the concepts of ancestors in the above two traditions, this paper is critical of mere romanticism and admiration of the past. Any study of the past should be critically hermeneutical and pragmatic in light of today's realities. There are aspects of ancestral traditions that are challenged today as not fostering human flourishing and should be rejected. These dimensions include patriarchy, slavery, child labour, uncritical docility to elders, fratricidal wars, and so forth. Both the Urhobo tradition and Confucius affirm the reality and existence of ancestors. They believe that ancestors should be venerated through prayers, offerings, and other rituals. They are in consonance that ancestors have influence and power over the living. They are also in agreement that the values and virtues of the ancestors should be practiced by the living.

The relevance and implications of ancestral veneration and beliefs should be evident. In discussing ancestors and ancestorship, many works often fail to pay attention to the beliefs and practices of the ancestors themselves. The ancestors were once human beings in the community. They believed and stood for certain values and virtues. The positive and healthy values that they stood for should be reclaimed and fostered. When people and nations celebrate their great heroes and founders in celebrations like Armed Forces Remembrance Day, Memorial Day, Thanksgiving Day, Independence Day, etc, these celebrations focus also on what these past heroes stood for and perhaps died for. Celebrations of past heroes, founders of towns, and ethnic groups should emphasise the nobles' values that they stood for and lived by. African people like Jewish people are people of memory. Urhobo ancestors were people who saw the earth as sacred and protected it to the best of their abilities. There were sacred days in Urhobo culture when people were not allowed to go to the forest or streams. The earth was allowed to rest and lie fallow. This helped in the preservation of the earth. Modern industrial society often does not see the value in this. In the modern capitalist culture there seems to be no place for Sabbath. The ancestors practiced sacred groves and had *ewharode* (big forest) which the Whiteman wrongly called an evil forest. About Confucius and his ancestors, nature was respected and given reverence. People are to live in balance and harmony with nature. The Encyclopaedia of Religion (2019) notes that: "For Confucians, nature is not only inherently valuable, but it is also morally good. Nature thus embodies the normative standard for all things. There is not a fact/value division in

the Confucian worldview, for nature is seen as the source of all value.”

The beliefs in ancestors and the practice of ancestorship in the above-named traditions also have implications for socio-political concerns. The ancestors stood for certain ethical values. They lived by values like Ubuntu (humanness), Ukama (inter-relationship of all things), communalism, the extended family system, humanism, *omamoakpo* (the good life). Ancestral veneration should not just be for the performance of rituals. Rituals are meaningless if they have no positive impact on the practical life of the living. This was clearly emphasised by Confucius. Rites are to be performed for social harmony and the creation of a peaceful society. Among the Urhobo people prayers and offerings to the ancestors are filled with wishes for protection, peace, well-being, and welfare of the people. In these prayers, human beings are expected to show what they pray for in their lives. Human beings are to live in consonance with the values and virtues of their ancestors. Well-being and a peaceful society happen not simply because the ancestors are invoked but because human beings exhibit these values in society. Among the Urhobo people, human beings are not to live *akpofafarien* (reckless and wicked life). The ancestors upheld moral values and shunned vices such as stealing, sexual permissiveness, shedding of innocent blood, wanton destruction of your neighbour's properties, disrespect for elders and the laws of society, oppression of the poor, greed, etc. In a world riddled with corporate greed and corruption and other anti-social vices there is need to re-echo these ideals.

All societies need these values and virtues. In a world in which many nations in Africa and beyond are filled with corrupt practices, criminality, terrorism, political and economic maladministration, injustice, etc. The practice and study of ancestorship should be grounded in a retelling and recovery of the values they practiced. Veneration of ancestors or study of ancestorship will be useless if it is just for its own sake. Some wonderful authors who wrote books or papers that stand in this tradition of emphasizing the stories of the ancestors and their relevance to the environmental crisis are Hart (1984), Griffin (2011), Krautkremer, Srebalus, and Meyer (2002), Grim (2001), Simpson (2004), and Gottlieb (2004).

The positive and healthy values that the ancestors practiced are still very needed in the contemporary world. There can be disagreement over how the ancestors should be venerated, but the values they stood for that align with human and environmental flourishing ought to be cultivated. It is true in the days of the existence of the ancestors in Urhobo, Chinese and other cultures' values such as patriarchy, slavery, the killing of twins, etc did exist. These values are evil and inimical to human flourishing. Respect for the traditions of the ancestors should not be for all that they should for but for critical

and authentic aspects of what they believed and practised that helped create a better human civilization. Simpson (2004) writes: “Our traditional teachings tell us that we must treat our earth with respect and humility and that we must change our unsustainable ways to ones based on the traditional values. They warn that the consequences of greed, exploitation of natural resources, and consumerism will not make us healthy or well. If we listen to their teachings, then we should be terrified by the agreements driven solely by corporate interests” (p. 132). In retelling and reclaiming the stories of the ancestors whether from Urhobo, China, and other traditions, the philosophies of ecosolidarity and Afroecosolidarity proposed by Ikeke (2005, 2021) respectively should be kept in mind. These philosophies assert that human beings are an intrinsic part of the earth and should feel a sense of solidarity with the earth and act to conserve it. Human beings must imbibe the value of *Avwerotakpokugbe* (Let us take care of the world/all life together). Human beings should not separate and oppose themselves to nature. This is what the ancestors teach humanity.

In discussing the veneration of ancestors, it is important to relate the power of memory in a people’s culture or tradition. Humans are people of memory. Remembrances and memorials are important aspects of all religions and human culture, including the Judeo-Christian tradition. Erhimeyoma (2022) remarks that remembrance holds a prime place in the history of the Jewish people. The Passover and the Eucharist are key points in the biblical narrative and they help to keep in mind the deeds of Yahweh and also the human instruments through which he acknowledged those deeds. No society can exist without the past. All education and socialisation process is rooted in past practices. There is no society without the conservation of the past. Not everything from the past should indeed be preserved. Some things and realities from the past must be transformed. A lot of things from the past that needs to be conserved come from the teachings, wise sayings, practices, and ways of life of the ancestors, past heroes, founders of communities, and great liberators from the past. What would human civilisation have been without the past ancestors and heroes like Jesus Christ, Muhammed, Confucius, Buddha, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jnr, Oba Ovonoramwen, Moses, Socrates, Plato, and many others? The memory of the past concerning ancestors is a core issue in the teaching of Confucius. So also it is among the Urhobo people. These past ancestors and heroes lived humanistic lives for the betterment of humanity. Humanity has a lot to learn from these ancestors and past heroes in resolving present socio-political predicaments. Their humanism can help in mitigating anti-humanistic forces that bedevil humanity. From the lives of the ancestors and past heroes, humanity can learn courage and fortitude to wrestle against anti-social ills and imperialistic forces. There are African and Asian ancestors that struggled for justice.

It must be stated that ancestral wisdom is valuable in the present socio-political and environmental crisis that the world is facing. There are sustainable practices that come from ancestral wisdom. People especially indigenous peoples like the Urhobo, the Aborigines of Australia, Chinese, Indians, Native Americans, etc have a right to conserve their ancestral wisdom. The United Nations (2007) asserts in article 11 that:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature. 2. States shall provide redress through effective mechanisms, which may include restitution, developed in conjunction with indigenous peoples, with respect to their cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property taken without their free, prior and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs (p. 6).

The United Nations (2007) reiterates this further in enunciating that:

Article 12,1. Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains (p. 6).

In article 13, the United Nations (2007) says: "Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons"(p.7). Conserving one's ancestral tradition, which includes wisdom, philosophies, theologies, and religious and spiritual practices, is a fundamental human and group right. Urhobo ancestral wisdom and Confucius' thought on ancestors should be brought into dialogue with contemporary world problems to see where they can help.

## CONCLUSION

---

The paper examined the concepts of ancestor and ancestorship among the Urhobo people and also in Confucius. It was clearly shown that ancestors are still considered to be living even though they have departed from this world. They are still part of their families and have an influence and impact on those still living on earth. The present human persons who are not yet dead are expected to live in veneration and respect of the dead. The ancestors are to be honoured and their values and virtues are also

propagated. Among prominent values that the ancestors lived for are sacredness of the earth, respect for human life and life of other beings in the universe, communalism, life of sharing, environmental care, hospitality, etc. Ancestors and ancestorship should not be discountenanced but critically studied and viable aspects of the belief applied to contemporary society. A practice of moral and eco-ethical values from both Urhobo and Confucius can help to mitigate contemporary socio-political and ecological problems.

## References

- Aderigigbe, I.S. (2016). *Contextualizing religion: Study and practice*. Ilorin: University of Ilorin Press.
- Adogbo, M. P. (2000). The spirit world of African people. In Samuel U Eriwo and Michael P. Adogbo (Ed.), *Contemporary essays in the study of religions* (pp. 104-121). Lagos: Fairs and Exhibitions Nigeria Limited.
- Alanamu, S.A.K. (2003). *An introduction to comparative religion in Nigeria*. Ilorin: Ahnour International.
- Clemmons, N. (2008). *Exploring the religions of Our world*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press.
- Confucius. (2000). *The Analects*, trans. Arthur Waley. New York: Alfred A Knopf.
- DeAngelis, G.D. (2007). Ancestors (Chinese). In Orlando O Espin and James B Nickoloff (Ed.), *An introductory dictionary of theology and religious studies* ( p.52). Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press.
- Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. (2017). Urhobo. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved August 18, 2022, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Urhobo>
- Encyclopedia Britannica. (2022). *The Britannica dictionary*. Retrieved August 18, 2022, from <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/ancestor>
- Encyclopedia of Buddhism. (2019). Ancestors. In *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*. Retrieved August 18, 2022 from Encyclopedia.com, [https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/ancestors`](https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/ancestors)
- Encyclopedia of Religion. (2019). Ecology and religion: Ecology and Confucianism. In *Encyclopaedia of Religion*. Retrieved August 25, 2022 from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/ecology-and-religion-ecology-and-confucianism>
- Erhimeyoma, E. (2022). Remembrance with hope Rev Fr John Ibekwe. *The Messenger of Peace*, 21(8):13-14.

- Gottlieb, R.S. (2004). *This sacred earth: Religion, nature, and environment*. New York: Routledge.
- Griffin, J. (2011). *On the origin of beauty: Ecophilosophy in the light of traditional wisdom*. Bloomington, ID: World Wisdom.
- Grim, J.A. (Ed.). (2001). *Indigenous traditions and ecology: The interbeing of cosmology and community*. Cambridge, MA: Center for the Study of World Religions Harvard Divinity School.
- Hart, J. (1984). *The spirit of the earth: A theology of the land*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Idowu, E.B. (1973). *African Traditional Religion: A definition*. London: SCM Press.
- IGI Global. (2022). *What is ancestral veneration?* Retrieved June 10, 2022, from <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/ancestor-veneration-avatars/1160>
- Ikeke, M.O. (2005). *Redesigning and Ecosolidarity and indigenously-informed education*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: ProQuest Information and Learning Company.
- Ikeke, O.J.M. (2014). Respect for all life: Urhobo and Catholic perspectives. In Jude Obiunu, Gregory Ogbenika, and John Mark Ikeke (Ed.), *Faith transforming culture: Focus on the Catholic Diocese of Warri* (pp. 75-85). Benin City: Floreat Systems Publications.
- Ikeke, M.O. (2021). The concept of Afroecosolidarity and its implications for the African environment. In Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu (Ed.), *African indigenous ecological knowledge systems* (pp. 317-345). Retrieved August 20, 2022, from <https://www.acjoi.org/index.php/jassd/article/view/1915>
- Ilega, D.I., and Iheanacho, N.N. (2006). Confucianism: History and teaching. In Protus O Kемdirim and Abdulrazaq Kilani (Ed.), *World religions: History, structure and teachings* (pp. 134-149). Ado-Ekiti: Hamaz Global Publishing.
- Kramer, K. (1986). *World scriptures: An introduction to comparative religions*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Krautkrer, C., Srebalus, J., and Meyer, M. (2002). *Wisdom for changing time: Learning from culture, ecology and Psychology*. Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa.
- Merriam-Webster. (1999). *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of religions*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Incorporated.
- Owhovoriole, F. (2010). Eschatological motifs and sociospiritual aspects of Urhobo funeral poetry. *Uluslararası Sosyal Aratırmalar Dergisi: The Journal of International Social Research*, 3(11): 445-454; Retrieved August 18, 2022; from



<https://www.sosyalarastirmalar.com/articles/eschatological-motifs-and-socio-spiritual-aspects-of-urhobo-funeral-poetry.pdf>

Simpson, L. (2004). Listening to Our ancestors. In J.A. Wainwright (Ed.), *Every grain sand: Canadian perspectives on ecology and environment* (pp. 121-134). Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Stanford, P. (2010). *50 ideas You really need to know: Religion*. London: Quercus.

Tonukari, O. (n.d). *Urhobo community as unity of two worlds*. Retrieved August 20, 2022, from  
<https://urhobodigitalibrarymuseum.com/urhobo-community-as-unity-of-two-worlds/>

United Nations. (2007). *Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Retrieved August 15, 2022:  
[https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf)

Wex Definition Team. (2022). *Ancestor*. Retrieved August 15, 2022;  
<https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/ancestor>

Wotegbe-Weneka, W.O. (2006). Basic structures of African religions. In Protus Kemdirim and Abdularazaq Kilani (ed.), *World religions: History, structure and teachings* (pp. 74-86).