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# A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE IDEA OF THE 'IDEAL MAN' IN CONFUCIAN AND YORUBA THOUGHT

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## ABSTRACT

The comparative analysis of Oriental and African thought is starting to grow. This is not surprising because there are many similarities as well as interesting differences between African thought and Oriental thought. One concept which is worthy of examination is the concept of the ideal or perfect man. This work sets to compare the idea of the ideal man or the 'perfect man' in Confucianism and in the Yoruba Thought Systems. The work considers the educational, historical and sociological factors that lead to the development of the ideal man. In Confucian thought the term used is *Junzi* and in Yoruba thought it is *Omoluabi*. This work will consider the similarities and differences in these cultural approaches. The work also reflects on how this formation of the ideal man is increasingly less obtainable in today's world.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, Yoruba; Omoluabi; Junzi; ideal man, perfect man

## Introduction

The concept of the ‘ideal man’ or the ‘perfect man’ has a long tradition. It is considered an important concept in religious thought, for instance in Islamic thought and Buddhist thought. This is also an important consideration in both African and in Chinese thought, especially with regard to the education or the development of the ideal man. In Africa, the Yoruba people, emphasize respectable character. They believe that education is not just about academic performance but rather encompasses the overall moral and character development of a child. For instance, a good person is not equivalent to a learned person. In Chinese culture there is emphasis on character development beginning with the child, and this extends to the idea that only people with good character should be allowed to hold political positions. The Yoruba calls a person that exhibits an ideal character *Omoluabi*, Confucianism calls such a person *Junzi*.

This paper carries out a comparative analysis and critical evaluation of the ideal man both as *Omoluabi* and as *Junzi*. The work concludes by considering the obtainability of these qualities in today’s world.

## The Concept of *Junzi* in Confucianism

“Confucianism emphasizes ethics, and the orderly arrangement of society and in correct relationships between people.”<sup>3</sup> Confucius himself lived during the Eastern Chou Dynasty, a time when China was split up into a number of smaller republics, each of which was ruled by a warlord or aristocrat who gave the emperor, who oversaw the Middle Kingdom (China) from the capital Loyang, little more than lip service. The regular battles between these republics upended the social order. A philosophy of society that would serve as a unifying force and could bring the Chinese people together was therefore desperately needed. “A number of philosophies (e.g. Mohism and Legalism) arose to fill this need, of which the philosophy of Confucius was eventually the most successful.”<sup>4</sup> People according to the Confucian moral order are divided into many groups based on their diverse levels of moral development. One who embodies moral excellence is referred to as “the superior person”

(*Junzi*) “Those who not only have superior moral character themselves but also help others to cultivate themselves, are men of humanity (men of *ren*); and finally, those who can extend benevolence to all people and bring succor to the multitude, are the sages (*sheng*).”<sup>5</sup>

To fully develop one’s moral self, one must devote one’s entire lives to this endeavor. Sheng’s ultimate state can only be attained by a select few people. If moral perfection is the aim of our existence, we are not born faultless. But, in Confucius’ view, people are capable of improvement. The notion of human nature is one of Confucianism’s most significant themes. Contrary to his later followers, Confucius rarely examines human nature. Instead, he places more emphasis on the goal of moral development. Or as Waley says: “Confucius is more concerned with what we can become than with what we are born as.”<sup>6</sup> But first, we must examine who we are at birth in order to comprehend our moral objective. The idea that people are similar in nature is one thing Confucius affirms about human nature. They differ because of habit. Confucius believed that although we are born righteous, we can make mistakes due to our numerous passions. Until he turned 70, he could not even assert that he had total control over his desires. Smith writes: “Therefore, in his view, Human beings are not born perfect, but we can *become* perfect.”<sup>7</sup> Or as Dawson observes: “One should dedicate one’s life to the task of moral self-cultivation. Few people are genuinely able to reach sheng’s ultimate state. The superior person is concerned with sanctions; the petty person is concerned with personal favors.”<sup>8</sup>

Confucius also says, “The superior person seeks the way and not a mere living... The superior person worries about the way and not about poverty.”<sup>9</sup> We cannot devote our complete attention to the development of our moral qualities if we crave worldly possessions and bodily comfort. Confucius says: “A fellow who is ashamed merely of shabby clothing or meager food is not even worth conversing with.”<sup>10</sup> To fully attend to one’s moral development requires ongoing introspection. Have I neglected to develop my virtues? Have I fallen short of going into what I’ve learned more detail? Have I been able to take steps toward what I’ve

just discovered to be right? Have I been able to make up for my mistakes? Thus, a person who is interested in seeking the proper way is constantly diligent and never self-justifying. As Benjamin Schwartz puts it: “Moral cultivation is a long and difficult process; not everyone can accomplish the final goal.” “Those who aim for the final goal are called *Junzi*, “the superior person.” They are superior not by nature, but by their constant practice of self-examination and self-reform.”<sup>11</sup> But why is it necessary for us to strive for moral development? Why can’t we be happy with our present level of comfort? Confucius held that discovering what it meant to be a person was the goal of life. He adheres to a moral code that considers all of humanity: *Ren* (humanity). Finding a single Western ethical standard that may be compared to the concept of *ren* is difficult. *Ren* is neither a moral idea that gives us specific guidelines for how to live, nor is it something that can be acquired by a single action.

The ideal man, the good man, or the superior man is a common theme in Confucian moral philosophy. This hypothetical perfect man is the person who embodies every aspect of Confucian morality. He is a man of morals who understands how to respond to any challenge in life and how to adjust to different situations in a decent manner. He retains his inner peace and is unaffected by life’s ups and downs. He is a man who personifies loyalty, diligence, and modesty. He is not arrogant, but rather modest and straightforward. He displays filial piety, charity, and the ability to see the best in people. He is attentive to other people’s needs and well-being rather than being egotistical or self-centered. He is impartial rather than narrow-minded, and what is right rather than what will make money drives his behavior. He is a man of action who speaks slowly but moves quickly; not a man of many words. He has a friendly disposition, a dignified demeanor, faithful speech, a diligent demeanor, and a cordial interaction with others. He is a loving man. Confucius like Aristotle believed that virtues may be found in between two extremes. The ideal man steers clear of extremes and upholds equilibrium in his behavior. He does what is proper in the situation in which he is. He does not exceed this. He also performs the duty of a parent by providing and caring for them while yet alive and helping them complete their projects

and care for their descendants after they have died.

However, several issues can be raised from the Confucius idea of *Junzi*. First, if Confucius himself did not attain the state until the age of 70. This suggests that such an attainment may never exist among the youth or young adults. And we recognize that a person's experience and social influences plays vital role in sharpening his moral conducts over time.

This idea of experience also brings into challenges the entire basis of Confucius philosophy. For his positions were not divinely bestowed on him as in revealed religion, rather, they were an offshoot of acquired life experience. So to what extent should a moral principle be guided by a single man's perceptions? Can we take Confucianism to be truly an objective ethics? Because, if we are to hold on to what Confucius is saying, it implies that the society has the capacity drive people towards moral goodness but on a contrary, a scholar like Jean Jacques Rousseau would reject such an idea.

Needless to say that, some of Confucius prescriptions are indeed good moral standards that should be adopted. The philosophy is tailored towards regulation of human excesses. But we see that it still needs clarification. Therefore, it is useful to look at the Yoruba idea of the ideal man.

### **The Yoruba Conception of *Omoluabi***

The Yoruba people of Western Nigeria have a long tradition and a cherished culture which they strive to preserve. For the Yoruba, ethics or morality is of the utmost of importance when considering life.

“The moral concept that is most highly valued is the concept of *Omoluabi*. Conceptually, the concept *Omoluabi* is a derivative noun which has the words – “*Omo + ti + Olu-iwa + bi*” as its morphological components. Literally translated and separately, *omo* means ‘child’, *ti* means ‘that or which’, *Olu-iwa* means the chief or master of *Iwa* (character), and *bi* means ‘born’. When combined, *Omoluabi* translates as “the baby begotten by the chief of Iwa.”<sup>12</sup>

Such a child is thought of as a paragon of excellence in character. So, who exactly is an *Omoluabi*? Generally, an *Omoluabi* is a individual who combines all the virtues. Akinyemi opines that “the principles of Yoruba traditional education are based on the concept of *Omoluabi*, translated loosely as an “ideal being”.<sup>13</sup> Akanbi and Jekayinfa in similar way assert that, “the end of Yoruba traditional education is to make every individual ‘*Omoluabi*’. To be ‘*Omoluabi* is to be of good character. That is why the goal of Yoruba traditional education has always been to foster strong character in the individual and to prepare each person to become a useful member of the community”.<sup>14</sup>

Also, “the concept of “*Omoluabi*” is seen as the peak of moral uprightness among the Yoruba’s regardless of one’s background. The goal is in all cases to be an *omoluabi*. This is the popular conception of *omoluwabi*, but it has some ambivalence”.<sup>15</sup> Segun Gbadegesin suggests that every baby is born an *omoluwabi* and that *Olu-iwa* means “God, the creator of every infant.”<sup>16</sup> Yet in terms of Yoruba linguistic structure, Gbadegesin’s interpretation is not absolute because *olu-iwa* might also refer to a respectable father with a sterling character. However, there is no assurance that the child would continue to be a person of dignity or an exemplar of character like the biological father who was created by *olu-iwa*. Additionally, the ambiguity may be seen in the chance that the child might end up being an *Omoluwabi* while not being born to a person of honor. The conception of *omoluwabi* by Sophie Oluwole is more instructive, thought-provoking, and reflective of the Yoruba cultural experience.<sup>17</sup> According to her, “the phrase ‘*Omo-ti-o ni-iwa-bi*’ is incomplete because it raises the question: ‘*Omo ti o ni iwa bi tani?*’ (a child whose character takes after... who?)”. In the light of this, Oluwole sees “*Omoluabi* as ‘*Omo ti o ni iwa bi eni ti a ko, ti o si gba eko*’ (a person that behaves like someone who is well nurtured and lives by the precepts of the education s/he has been given)”.<sup>18</sup> This perspective helps us understand *Omoluabi* in Yoruba culture better because it teaches people how to be self-disciplined and responsible in both their private and public lives, which is a quality that wins respect in Yoruba society. And

an *Omoluabi* can also be defined as a “decent and cultured person,” in contrast to *eniyan-keyan* or *eniyan la-san*, which mean “caricature person” and “a worthless child,” respectively. As a result, the Yoruba frequently substitute the adjective *eniyan-gidi*, which means “an ideal person,” for the noun *omoluwabi*, which means “a good person.” Fafunwa then listed roughly seven fundamental aims or objectives of indigenous education, all of which centered on developing the whole man.

To develop the child’s latent physical skills. To develop character. To inculcate respect for the elderly and those in positions of authority. To develop intellectual skills. To acquire specific vocational training and to develop a healthy attitude towards honest labor. To develop a sense of belonging and to participate actively in family and community affairs. To understand, appreciate, and promote the cultural heritage of the community at large.<sup>19</sup>

However, the concept of *Omoluabi* is such that is controversial in itself, because, there are no universal qualities that point to who an *Omoluabi* should be. Hence, various persons have define *Omoluabi* to suit their own selfish aims. Another issue is the fact that, *Omoluabi* does not showcase or exemplifies how one ought to act in situation of ethical dilemma. For Instance, can an *Omoluabi* fight injustice, can an *Omoluabi* steal in case of death threatening starvation among others. Does moral action change the status of who an *Omoluabi* is, or an *Omoluabi* remains who he is regardless of the action, just as in Aristotle’s virtue ethics.

It the conformity to the societal values that makes someone an *Omoluabi*, or when someone maintains what he or she thinks is right. Because not all societal standing are good, yet they are accepted. For instance, anyone who protested the killing of the King’s Horseman at the demise a Yoruba king in Nigeria in early history would not be considered to be an *Omoluabi* by the society at that time. So who confers the *Omoluabi* status? A solution and clarification can be found through the comparison of *Omoluabi* with the concept of the ‘idea man’ in Chinese Confucianism.

## Comparison of the Concept of *Junzi* with *Omoluabi*

One of the most important things that must be noted in bringing the features of the Chinese philosophy and that of the Yoruba together is that the concept of an ideal man, which means someone with good character, cuts across the two philosophies. Suffice it to say that the meaning of an ideal man in Chinese philosophy is *Junzi*, which also suggests the understanding of *Omoluabi* for the Yoruba people. An *Omoluabi* is someone that has *Iwapele* and *Iwapele* according to Wande Abimbola “is ‘good or gentle character’ and it is ultimately the basis of moral conduct in Yoruba culture and a core defining attribute of *omoluwabi*.” Hence both cultures ensure that people are gentleman and not just gentleness in the aspect of keeping mute, but in the aspect of maintaining a good character.

Confucius asserted that, “A superior man in dealing with the world is not for anything or against anything.” He follows righteousness as the standard”.<sup>20</sup> A crucial moral and psychological characteristic of an *Omoluabi* is called *inurere*, which is defined as having a good mind or intention towards others.

“A person is expected to have, along with being truthful and honest. *iwa* (character)”<sup>21</sup> A person’s *iwa* (character) determines whether they are valued or not, and it is here that the difference between good character (*iwa rere*) and bad character may be found (*iwa ibaje* or *iwa buburu*). We can see that the act of performing a righteous deed cuts across the two philosophies; they both believe that one who is referred to as a ideal man or a gentleman must follow righteousness and have good intent towards humanity. An ideal man in both systems of thought is a person with a righteous character and good behavior. It must be noted that the hallmark of both philosophies is character formation, which will in turn lead to a better nation.<sup>22</sup> This is also consistent with *Junzi*, which is a person that has been able to master himself and can respond to situations in the right way. He knows the right words to say and always speaks the truth. He is hard-working and intelligent. Confucius said, “The superior man has nine wishes.”:

In seeing, he wishes to see clearly. In hearing, he wishes to hear distinctly. In his expression, he wishes to be warm. In his appearance, he wishes to be respectful. In his speech, he wishes to be sincere. In handling affairs, he wishes to be serious. When in doubt, he wishes to ask. When he is angry, he wishes to think of the resultant difficulties. And when he sees an opportunity for gain, he tries to think of righteousness”.<sup>23</sup>

These are similar traits that cut across both *Junzi* and *Omoluabi*. Confucius was gentle yet firm, dignified but not harsh, respectful yet well at ease. This statement of Confucius demonstrates the importance of moderation in the life of *Junzi*. The Yoruba also preach moderation as a core virtue of *Omoluabi*. This is evident in the Yoruba axiom that says *ashe ju ni baba a she te*, that is, when you are not moderate in your dealing, you are disgraced or *iwon tun wosi ni nkan dun mo*. All this pointer to the fact that *Omoluabi* must be moderate in all his actions.

The Yorubas will say *ti okete ba di agba tan omu omo e lo'n mu iwa Omoluabi niyen*, which means that an *Omoluabi* is expected to take care of his parents when they grow old, and to obey and be respectful to them while still alive. This they express that, *omo ti o ba mo iya re loju, osi yio to mo na pa*, that is ‘a child that eyes his mother with disrespect will suffer till death,’ this attribute is also expressed in Confucianism. One who is *Junzi* must be able to obey the parent and take care of them even at old age. Yu Tzu said, “Few of those who are filial sons and respectful brothers will show disrespect to superiors, and there has never been a man who is not disrespectful to superiors and yet creates disorder,” and continues, “A superior man is devoted to the fundamental (the root). When the root is firmly established, the moral law (Tao) will grow. Filial piety and brotherly respect are the roots of humanity (jen)”.<sup>24</sup> This shows that to become *Junzi* it depends on how well you are respectful in your immediate home, the Yoruba will also say, *ise ile ni gbeni de ita*, that is the behavior from home takes one to the larger society.

Moreover, both *Omoluabi* and *Junzi* also applies to the event of the parent's death. This is one of the filial duties of both *Junzi* and among the Yoruba. A good child to look after the deceased parents and make sure their legacy lives on. These are similar traits in both philosophies. Lastly, Confucius said,

“Wealth and honor are what every man desires.” But if they have been obtained in violation of moral principles, they must not be kept. Poverty and humble station are what every man dislikes. But if they can be avoided only in violation of moral principles, they must not be avoided. If a superior man departs from humanity, how can he fulfill that name? A superior man never abandons humanity, even for the lapse of a single meal. In moments of haste, he acts according to it. In times of difficulty and confusion, he acts according to it.”<sup>25</sup>

This statement is similar to Yoruba proverbs that say *oruko rere san ju wura ati fadaka*, which means ‘a good name is better than silver and gold.’ Thus one's good name and social image is more glorious than the acquisition of wealth.

## **Conclusion**

Although the concept of “good man” and “*Omoluabi*” in both Confucianism and the Yoruba thought systems aim at promoting a better individual, some of the doctrines or positions of these concepts might be difficult to inculcate in light of present-day realities. Hence, there is a need to critically examine some of these basic assumptions, to rescue them from being empty dogmas.

First, both worldviews require that a good person should foster the parents' legacy after they go to the world beyond. But the fundamental problem comes when the legacy of a deceased parent is not good, or the child does not agree with the parents' legacy. Does this diminish the child's virtue from the perspective of *Omoluabi*? We believe that the

child should not be pressured into living the legacy of the parent, but rather encouraged to discriminate between the good and bad, and strive to continue the good and acceptable values of the parent.

Second, both world views do not give special credence to the society one is born into or lives in. Taking cognizance of the fact that a child does not develop good traits in isolation, a person who qualifies as a good man is someone who has been brought up in a good society. What we regard as character formation or mastering oneself is not done in isolation from society, so if society is bad, it is very much possible that it will frustrate or perhaps corrupt the good man. This insight was evident as far back as the work of Jean Jacques Rousseau. In today's world, we often see the negative effects of social influence on child's upbringing. Needless to say that in recent times, the concept of both *Omoluabi* and *Junzi* has become difficult to define due to the misuse by people for both personal and political interests. People who are bad are called good because they do what pleases the leaders of the day.

Both philosophies embrace the fact that a child should take care of their parents when they grow old. Undoubtedly, this is a good thing that should be encouraged in all cultures philosophy, but if we consider some older Yoruba metaphysical practices, we can understand why children tend to abandon their parents even in old age.

Needless to say that the concept of good man enhances a humanist philosophy that enables a better life. Yet along with preserving this concept we must re-examine some of its characteristics and applications if we hope to try to universalize it as a moral standard. It must be stressed that both *Junzi* and *Omoluabi* could either be a male or female. This paper has been able to identify the fact that every culture has their idea or conception of a good man and goodness is a core virtue of every culture. Through comparative analysis we have been able to draw out critical synergy between the Chinese philosophy and the Yoruba philosophy. Although the concept of good man differs between cultures, an intercultural approach in philosophy allows us to search for its more universal elements. By contrasting the idea of the ideal man between the Chinese and Yoruba

culture, we can further clarify the ideal of the ideal man and its meaning in today's world.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>3</sup> Smith, D. H, *Confucius* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 212.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, D. H, *Confucius*, 213.

<sup>5</sup> "The Perfect Gentleman in Confucianism" 2.

<sup>6</sup> Waley, A, *The Analects*, 45

<sup>7</sup> Smith, D. H, *Confucius*, 214.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Dawson, *Confucius*, (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1981), 45.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Dawson, *Confucius*, 46.

<sup>10</sup> Waley, A, *The Analects*, 112.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, D. H, *Confucius*, 13.

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<sup>20</sup> Lau, D. C, Confucius: The Analects, 4: 10

<sup>21</sup> Wande Abimbola, “*Iwapele: The Concept of Good Character in the Ifa Literary Corpus*”, In *Yoruba Oral Tradition: Poetry in Music, Dance, and Drama*, ed. Wande Abimbola, (Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 1975), 393.

<sup>22</sup> “Macgregor, Kirk”, Predestination. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Lau, D. C, Confucius: The Analects, 16: 10

<sup>24</sup> Lau, D. C, Confucius: The Analects, 1: 2.

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