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Who's Afraid of Confucius?

East Asian Values and the Africans

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Abstract

The paper examines the popularly known Confucian values and ritual practices and questions the notion that these norms and practices are unique to East Asia. By evoking the essential social values and norms of the Akan culture (in West Africa) the analysis posits that the so-called East Asian values as codified by Confucius are actually universal principles. The essay examines how the principles of filial piety and ancestor worship play out in the social practices of the Asante people (of the Akan ethnic group) and the Confucian communities, and suggests that a proper comparative examination of these practices across cultures would show that some cultural groups outside the East Asian zone might turn out to be more 'Confucian' than some of the East Asian countries.

Keywords

Confucianism – Japan – China – Akan – Asante – modernity

Zizhang said: "What is meant when the *Documents* say: 'When Gao Zong [a ruler of the Yin Dynasty] was in his mourning hut, he did not speak for three years'?"

The Master said: "Why insist on Gao Zong? The men of antiquity all did likewise"

(CONFUCIUS, 1993: 51)

Introduction

The trouble with Confucius (Master K'ong, 551-479 BC), according to Wm Theodore de Bary (1991: ix-xiv), is that he refuses to “stay buried”, seemingly taking delight in tantalizing, if not teasing, us. Although he is permanently updating his ideas – these days faster than ever – like a bird in the wild he remains elusive. More importantly, we seem to have been tricked into believing that Confucius was the eternal source of what, in many respects, are universal values; or could we have misinterpreted the ancient sage? After all, did he not say that he was merely a transmitter of tradition? (Waley, 1945: 3, Puett, 2014). De Bary (1991: 3) indeed confirms that: “the idea of the sage-king was a Chinese reality before it became a Confucian Myth.”

The main purpose of this paper is to show that there is nothing uniquely Chinese (or East Asian, for that matter) about the forms of social norms and behaviour that are described as Confucian, and to suggest that the major tenets of these values may in fact be universal. The questions to be examined here are as follows: did the values that we refer to as Confucian emanate from Master K'ong, or were they values that existed before they were neatly itemized by the ancient Chinese scholar? The second question is whether these values were projected from China to other East Asian societies, which further begs the question of whether the said core values were alien to ancient Japan, for example, until the latter embraced Chinese “ideas” and forms of government from the sixth century? This leads to a third question, the one that is most pertinent to this paper. Are the values we refer to as Confucian original to China, and therefore East Asia? I will touch on the first two in passing in our discussion because they are posed only as a lead to the third question, which we hope to respond to in some detail. Conceivably the answers that may emanate from the discussion of the third question may further throw some light on the first two concerns.

In attempting to answer the third question I will in the main compare some of the core Confucian values to aspects of the core ethical values of the Asante people (of the Akan ethnic group, including the Fanti) in Ghana. I have chosen this ethnic group for the simple fact that in evaluating the social system of others we should start, as is natural enough, with that which is natural to us, our own. Specific examples of Confucian values will be drawn largely from Japan since I know it better than any other society in East Asia. To broaden the discussion I will make reference to ancient Greek ethics where appropriate. I will also refer to some relevant examples from modern France.

Essentially, this analysis concerns how the values examined here play out in the socio-political cultures of the societies discussed. I should like to note, however, that legalist discourse is only mentioned in passing in this assessment because I am primarily interested in the conception that the agency of

living persons (in their association with the natural environment) through moral suasion plays the dominant role in shaping society. This is in contrast to the institutionalization and application of objective mechanisms of “behavioural” control which, according to the Legalist vision of society, “become automatic instruments for achieving well-defined socio-political goals” (Schwartz, 1985: 328). As Chang Hao (1997: 79) points out however in regards to Neo-Confucianism, its “emphasis on an exemplary center by no means implied a lack of awareness with respect to the significance of an institutional order”, affirming that “True, Confucianism had a practical side that allowed it to see the necessary place for coercion and management in the functioning of a government” (Chang, 1997: 81). Consequently, in Neo-confucian Japan under the Tokugawa regime (1600-1868) a premium was placed on strict bureaucratic functions, which were firmly controlled through an elaborate network of administrators, with discussion within the government (Shils, 1997: 57-60).

A good working definition of Confucianism available to us is by Warren Smith (1973: 1), who points out that it “seems originally to have been a system for regulating the relations of men according to certain beliefs concerning the fundamental forces in nature and society”. The forces in nature that Smith alludes to are indeed central to the core values of Confucianism, not least because in many of his didactic verses in *The Analects* Confucius refers to the pre-eminence of Heaven in the existence of man. Thus, he tended to link Heaven to the order of nature, as in the following conversation with one of his followers: “I would prefer not to speak,” he says, to which Tzu-kung responds as follows: “if our Master did not speak, what would your little ones have to hand down about him?” Confucius responds with a question on which he elaborates, and for effect repeats the question: “What does Heaven say? Yet the four seasons run their course through it and the hundred creatures are born through it. What does Heaven say?” (Waley, 1945: 214). Benjamin Schwartz (1985: 123) has argued that “here Heaven is associated with the ‘impersonal processes’ and cycles of nature as well as with the generative processes which do not suggest deliberate thought or discrete, finite ‘decisions’”. Nature, it would seem, is the cradle of Confucian thought. Thus Confucianism may also be defined as a system of codified natural principles, which became the governing formulae in China and subsequently in the rest of East Asia. Essentially, it embodies values concerning proper conduct in the relationship between (1) rulers and subjects, (2) parents and children, (3) husband and wife, (4) siblings, and (5) friends. In that respect Confucianism is deemed an outlook that has an extraordinary faith in good behaviour and proper relations between people. Goodness in traditional Confucianism was however predicated on filiality – blood ties – even though many modern Confucian scholars see ‘Benevolence [*ren*] [as] the most important moral quality a man can possess’ (quoted in Liu: 236).

The Uses of Confucianism

For the easy convenience of compartmentalizing national values and forms of social behaviour Confucianism was accepted, it seems, as embodying values exclusive to East Asia, and has in view of that been used in “Orientalist” fashion to either vilify or applaud East Asian societies and peoples. At best this sort of labelling is suggestive of Richard Rorty’s position (Sayers, 1997) “that moral and political ideas are social products, developed in particular situations for particular purposes”. Thus, such ideas are always historical and relative, and localized (Burchill, 1998: 10-11). They are also said to be consequential. The popular wisdom is that there is a correlation between these acquired morals and our political and economic functionality. Thus social scientists have attempted to raise Confucianism to the rank of a scientifically approved worldview – Max Weber, for example, had no qualms pontificating that Chinese economic backwardness in the nineteenth century was attributable to the Confucian values of the society (Max Weber, 1951: 237, 246-249; Tu Weiming, 1997: 6-10). Fukuzawa Yukichi, Japan’s foremost enlightenment leader was also convinced of the negative influences of Confucian values – which he and many of his contemporaries saw as backward – on Japan and systematically argued for them to be expunged in Japan’s desperate attempts to modernise in the nineteenth century. Indeed “it was often argued that Japan’s industrial success was due to the fact that the Confucian influence was much weaker in Japan than in other East Asian countries” (Watanabe, 1997: 121). As such, these values were seen by social scientists in particular as depriving East Asia of the right to apply its developmental potential, not least because they legitimized and excused the feudalist aspects and tendencies of these societies.

In the recent past, however, the arguments concerning Confucianism have been rephrased and calibrated to emphasize what are seen as its positive aspects, and to correspond to the progressive and dynamic forces determining economic development in the region. In other words, since the 1950s, starting with developments in post-World War II Japan, as life chances have improved enormously in East Asia through economic growth the pundits have tended to credit Confucius with these new developments in the region. They have conveniently and unashamedly moved the goal posts, as it were, claiming that: “some East Asian countries have been ‘successful’ because of their traditions, not in spite of them” (Watanabe, 1997: 120).

Admittedly, this newly invigorated conception of Confucianism as “good” may eventually melt into oblivion the deep seated inferiority complex that East Asians have vis-a-vis the West. But Watanabe Hiroshi (1997: 121) also suggests that, “the theory probably [also] sounds pleasant to the ears of conscientious Western intellectuals who are trying to overcome a Eurocentric worldview”.

In 1992 George De Vos, the American anthropologist, gave a talk at the Nissan Institute for Japanese Studies at Oxford on “The Aesthetics and Morality of Propriety: The Confucian Continuities in the Japanese Family”, and firmly professed that the Japanese are successful because of the Confucian values that they inherited from China. But during questions and answers an Oxford Don gently but firmly informed the speaker that in many ways Japan was not a good model as a Confucian society. This was illuminating, simply because it exposed the danger in simplifying contrasting social structures and attempting to homogenize regional identities and cultures. Indeed in pre-modern Japan under the Tokugawa regime when neo-Confucianism was a national creed, it was not the intellectuals who ruled, as was the case in China and Korea, and should be the case in a classical Confucian society, but the warriors – the samurai. Nor was the Japanese Emperor answerable to Heaven as was the Chinese monarch, as dictated by the Mandate of Heaven, according to the official state version of the nature of historical change in China (Puett, 2014), which was central to the Confucian ethos. The Japanese Emperor was answerable to his ancestors, and the country’s belligerent warrior rulers from the twelfth century were answerable to their peers who were always ready to take over. Apparently, this did not deprive the Japanese of the central values that are labelled as Confucian, even if they were not good Confucians.

Not surprisingly, Robert Smith (1995:156) has argued that “how Confucianism is described, the praises sung of it, the importance assigned to it, and the terms in which it is denounced all are very strongly coloured by the historical period in which the assessments are made, the position of the social hierarchy of the person expressing the opinion, and – not least in recent times the age and gender of those whose views they are”.

Watanabe has identified three methodological features of these convenient uses of Confucianism. He notes first that the focus is almost invariably on the period after the 1950s or since WWII at the earliest. Second, attention is paid to similarities among East Asian cultures rather than their distinguishing characteristics. Third, the emphasis is on the differences between East Asia and the West rather than similarities (Watanabe, 1997: 120-121). It is tempting to add a fourth methodological problem to these, which is that in these analyses there is a consistent yet an inconsistent predisposition not to compare East Asia to either the South Asian, African or Latin American societies. This is a very serious methodological flaw because, as the Ibos (of Nigeria) say, a common snake might look like a python in the eyes of the man who does not care to look hard enough; and as Rudyard Kipling asks in *The English Flag*, “And what should they know of England who only England know?” In essence, we need a comprehensive insight into the social ethics of more than the East and the West before we can conclude one way or the other.

It may be appropriate at this point to quickly note that whether Confucianism is fully, partly or in any way responsible for the economic outcomes in East Asia either in the past or the present, and whether it would affect the economies or politics of the future of the region, is of no real relevance to this discussion. Suffice to say, “the claim that Confucian ethics, as reflected in government leadership, competitive education, a disciplined work force, principles of equality and self-reliance, provides a necessary background and powerful motivating force for the rise of industrial East Asia has yet to be substantiated” (Tu, 1997: 2-3).

An inspiring quality of classical Confucianism is that, despite its inherent feudalist tendencies, it prized learning, which it saw as a way of reordering (through, in China, the state examination system) social positions among men who were otherwise created equal by Heaven, implying that the so-called rigid hierarchy within the system was makeshift (Watanabe, 1997: 130).¹ This belief in learning, which was strengthened in Japan in the Meiji era (1868-1912), for example, was instrumental in Japan’s modernization because the Meiji state made education universal and through that created a productive labour force to enhance its fledgling capitalist economy.

The Universality of the Core Confucian Values

In Chapter vii of *The Analects* (Confucius, 1993: 24; Waley, 1945: 123; Hsiao, 1979: 86; Puett, 2014: 36, 39), Master K’ong affirms that: “I transmit but do not create. Being fond of the truth, I am an admirer of antiquity”. He further confirms, “I am not one who knew about things at birth; I am one who through my admiration of antiquity is keen to discover things” (Confucius, 1993: 25).¹ Thus, apparently Confucius was merely a transmitter of ancient values. As Schwartz (1985: 40) notes it was to the Chou dynasty (c.1025-256) that Confucius turned in search of “his image of the good society”. Kung-chuan Hsiao (1979: 93) also confirms that, obsessed with the political institutions of the Chou dynasty Confucius drew essentially on the Chou rites. He suggests that, “In order not to ‘follow the Chou’ Confucius would have to abandon all the institutions of Kings Wen and Wu [founders of the Chou dynasty] and to create something different in their place”. “Would that really have been possible?”, Hsiao (1979: 97) ponders. In essence, most of the core values and practices that have been

1 In Tokugawa Japan merchants (who were at the bottom of the social hierarchy) used their wealth to circumvent the system by marrying their children up into Samurai families, higher up the social hierarchy.

attributed to Confucius were existing realities if not universal truths before they became a Confucian myth, and the manifestation of the same ideals and principles in slightly differing renditions across cultures² is simply an affirmation of the diversity and dynamism of human geography.

But unwittingly, it seems, East Asia has appropriated and monopolized what is essentially a universal value system simply because somewhere in the 6th century BC, it is said, the followers of Confucius codified these values and essentialized them as a system of government and social behaviour according to which Chinese society was run, especially during the time of the ancient Three Dynasties.

The popular conception is that geographical proximity made it possible for other East Asian societies to embrace and internalize these values that the Chinese sages supposedly created and documented as a system of rules. Other societies (African, Arabic, European, Latin American, South Asian, etc.) were apparently too far away to be affected – either negatively or positively – by these principles. Yet as Robert Ellwood and Richard Pilgrim have pointed out with regard to Japan “one could argue, as many have, that these principles go back beyond Confucian influences on early Japan to the values inherent in ancient clan structures and an agricultural society with their demands for loyalty and cooperative effort”. They also maintain that: “Confucianism did not so much create as articulate the values by which Japanese society works”(Robert Smith, 1997: 171).² The same argument could be applied to China itself, that is to say, as with Japan Confucianism merely explicated the already existing norms and values of Chinese society. By extension it could be argued that the said Confucian values (determining the relationship between ruler and subject, husband and wife, parents and children, siblings, and friends) designed to ensure harmony and order in society are universal values – values that are common to the whole of humanity. These values are “loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, courage, decorum, endurance, frugality, harmony, honesty, modesty, obedience, patience, respect, selflessness, and sincerity”. As Robert Smith (1997: 174; Tsunoda, 1958: 547-548) asks, “What moral code, what ethical teaching, what set of principles (dare we ask, what religion) fails to extol these virtues?”

In essence, what did Confucius say that Jesus, Mohammed, the Buddha, or the shamanistic leaders of Japan, the Asante, or the Inca did not say? Quite clearly, there is plenty of evidence to show that these values come close to being what Noam Chomsky might refer to as “behavioural universals” (Burchill,

2 See Kwame Gyekye's discussion in *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, p. 196.

1998: 8). Benjamin Schwartz has made the point that there is nothing unique about the Confucian ethic. But he argues that “Where Confucius’ ethics may, in fact, seem specifically and exotically Chinese is in his attitude toward the *li*” (Schwartz, 1985: 84), the correct performance of rituals for all spirits both natural and ancestral (Schwartz, 1985: 48). And “the system of *li* within the analects presupposes and reinforces the proper networks of hierarchy and authorities”. Thus, within family for example, “the *li* of family life . . . requires the father to be a living source of authority, and power” (Schwartz, 1985: 68). I will come back to the essence of *li* in due course, but will now address issues relating to the role of the family within the social order.

The Family and Filiality

Certainly in the Japanese and Akan traditions, and seemingly in the Chinese and Korean’s, the family encompassed the household with the children and their parents, grandparents and, in the case of the Akan, members of the extended family, including some relatives of the husband, such as the children of his sister (of the same mother) since “succession and inheritance are transmitted in the matrilineal line” (Busia, 1976: 196; Rattray, 1969: 2-3).³ And although of the same Confucian tradition the composition of the Japanese family (*ie*) deviated markedly from the Chinese and Korean’s since lineage was not absolutely crucial. In other words, if a Japanese “man had no son, he usually adopted somebody, with or without blood relationship, in order to continue the *ie*” (Watanabe, 1997: 120). Despite these differences, the location of authority within either of these family traditions was nevertheless the head of the household, invariably the father.

In evaluating the role of the family in the social milieu it may be worth looking at a few passages in the introductory chapter to Tu Wei-ming’s edited volume, *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity*, as a way of assessing – by the similarities between social forms and norms across cultures – our common heritage. The chapter informs us that the lack of clear boundaries between public and private in East Asian societies, occasioned by the pervasive influence of politics in all segments of life, may not conform to the *Western model of modernity* (my emphasis), with its differentiated spheres of interest, although this is often exaggerated as we shall show below with Jacques Donzelot’s work.

3 Due to the possible multilateral nature of the Akan family with the children belonging to the mother’s clan (because of the matrilineal system) “the authority of the ‘house-father’ was lessened”, according to Rattray, pp. 2-3.

It further notes that this obfuscation of boundaries between public and private spheres is wholly commensurate with the centrality of the family in East Asian society, not only as a basic social unit but also as a metaphor of political culture (Tu, 1997: 7-8). The passage further notes that although “the structure and function of the family varies substantially among Chinese, Japanese, and Korean societies... the family’s supreme role in capital formation, power politics, social stability, and moral education is comparable in all of East Asian communities”. And it affirms the “classic Confucian vision that ‘only when families are regulated are states governed’”, insisting that this is “still taken absolutely seriously in East Asian political culture” (Tu, 1997: 8). Hsiao confirms this correlation between the family and the state: “their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their States were rightfully governed” (Hsiao, 1979: 103). Thus, according to Schwartz, “to Confucius, it is precisely in the family that humans learn those virtues which redeem the society, for the family is precisely the domain within which authority comes to be accepted and exercised” (Schwartz, 1985: 70).

Incidentally, as the Akan also say, *oman rebebo a efi afia mu* (the ruination of the nation begins at home) (Danquah, 1968: 192). R. S. Rattray (1969: 11-14) informs us that the bringing up of a boy in an Asante family naturally falls on the father, and the girl on the mother, and thus “even in the nursery, the Ashanti child is trained to avoid those pitfalls which in later life constitute his chief danger of coming within the arm of the law”. Thus among the Akan the family is seen as the basis for social cohesion, which is articulated through modes of interpersonal communication and moral education. And proper rites within the family will ultimately preserve the stability of the nation, it is assumed. This idea is certainly transferable to the order of the modern state.

Across cultures and nations governments and authorities have always “crossed” the threshold of the front door of the family home to instruct the household about values – basically interfering in what is supposedly a private affair. Take France for example. Under the *ancien regime* the family was perceived as the smallest political organization possible. As Jacques Donzelot (1982: 49) demonstrates in *The Policing of Families*, this

had two consequences for the exercise of social power. With regard to the central apparatuses, the head of the family was accountable for its members. In exchange for the protection and recognition of the state, he had to guarantee the faithfulness to public order of those who were part of that order; consequently, the fact of not belonging to a family, and hence the lack of a socio-political guarantor, posed a problem for public order.

Essentially, to ensure public order the state relied on the family for direct support. It is interesting to note that the end of the *ancien regime* did not bring to an end this strategic uses of the family by the state. Again to ensure public order “the family was cast into the center of the most significant political debate, since the very definition of the state was at issue” (Donzelot, 1982: 52). Based on our analysis above the conflation of the family with political order in society is not an idea that was exclusive to East Asia. Consequently, it is tempting to generalize Schwartz’s point that, “It is in the family that one learns how to exercise authority and how to submit to authority. . . . The family is ideally the first school of virtue and the source of those values which make possible the good society” (Schwartz, 1985: 100). Clearly, the crucial importance of hierarchy and authority for social order across cultures and national boundaries cannot be overemphasized as the above passages show; Schwartz (1985: 101) correctly points out that, “There was of course little in the history of medieval Europe or early modern Europe which would have shaken Confucius’ implicit belief that hierarchy and authority were the necessary basis of social order in any form of polity extended over wide territories”.

Emphasizing the communitarian spirit that is said to be central to East Asian societies, the introduction to Tu’s edited volume (1997: 8) asserts that: “The lack of development of Western-style civil society rooted in voluntary associations is clearly attributable to the saliency of the non-contractual, extra-legal, and ascriptive network”. It further makes the point that “Implicit in the significance of the family for social intercourse is the idea of duty”; the chapter also claims that “The sense that one is obligated to, and responsible for, an ever-expanding network of human relatedness may not be a constraint on one’s independence and autonomy”, not dissimilar to the duties that devolve upon the head of the family in the Asante tradition. The point to stress here is that, as with the Akan, “since personal dignity is predicated on one’s ability not only to establish oneself but also to take care of others, one’s level of independence and autonomy is measurable in terms of the degree to which one fulfils obligations and discharges responsibilities to family, community, state, the world, and Heaven”. In essence, personal dignity (among the Akan, and indeed as enunciated by Confucius) is first and foremost predicated on the interests of the family.

How does such an enormous responsibility on an individual play out in reality? As Master K’ong intimates in Chapter xiii of *The Analects*, “Fathers cover up for their sons and sons cover up for their fathers”. He was convinced that “Uprightness is to be found in this”. But then fathers covering up for their sons, and vice-versa, is another basic Akan truth, and possibly a universal trait. With regard to this Confucian moral, Confucius was apparently responding to the Duke of She who boastfully reported that a certain man in his locality bore witness against his father who stole a sheep (Confucius 1993, 51; Liu, 2003: 237;

Waley, 1945: 175). The implication was that by so doing the man had done right by the community and, abstractly Heaven. But as is evident from Confucius' response above, the man had flouted the rules of filial piety and was therefore not upright. In that context the responsibility on the individual is one that clearly manifests a conflict of interests, and worse still, if we followed Confucius' own judgement on the matter, does no good for the nation as a whole since it encourages corrupt behaviour. As Schwarz (1985:102-103) informs us, "One feels that Confucius places family above polity" because of his emphasis on the sacred familial ties which he saw as overriding in importance (Liu, 2003). On the other hand, in Japan the Tokugawa regime demanded loyalty (McMullen, 1987), seemingly de-emphasising filiality, conceivably in order to consolidate the powers of the regime following the decades of political instability and internecine warfare earlier in the country. On the other hand, in Japan the Tokugawa regime demanded loyalty (McMullen, 1987), seemingly de-emphasising filiality, conceivable in order to consolidate the powers of the regime following the decades of political instability and internecine warfare earlier in the country. And Plato (1955: 236-237) wrote off the family as a source of virtue precisely because of its particularistic and "private nature" (Schwartz, 1995: 100), which fuels its ambitions for its own specific interests within the polis.

de Barry (1997: 33-34) argues that, "Insofar as family relations . . . have been conceived primarily as affective, emotional ties rather than as legalistic and contractual ones, the language of rights or of legal entitlements do not fit the [Confucian] case well". He further notes that "Forms of mutual respect, rooted in a deep reverence for life and for all life-generating or life-sustaining forces, were thought of by the Confucians as shared rites, possessing a religious aura but resting in practice on a voluntary or consensual basis instead of on the coercive threat implied in the legal enforcement of rights". Incidentally, this again invites a sense of *déjà vu*, since it is common practice among the Asante (Appiah, 1992: 91).

Filial piety is a central tenet of the Confucian ideals, and it is generally thought of as service to one's parents. According to de Bary (1991: 33), "Confucius . . . defined filial piety laconically as 'not being contrary'", meaning "'When parents are alive, serving them according to what is rite; when dead, mourning them according to what is rite and sacrificing to them according to what is rite'". Thus Qingping Liu (2003: 236) affirms "consanguineous affection [as] the foundation of the ideal person" in Confucian thought. But Confucius articulates filial piety in a manner that conflates the family with government. Thus, asked why he does not take part in government he answers back as follows: "*The Book of Documents* mentions filial piety, doesn't it?" He then instructs his interlocutor to "be dutiful towards your parents and friendly towards your brothers, and you will be contributing to the existence of

government". The implication is that "these virtues constitute taking part in government" (Confucius, 1993: 8), which is based on the conception that "family responsibilities and political responsibilities are part of one set of responsibilities, and they are inseparable" (Hsiao, 1979: 120). I have already noted that in the Akan tradition as well, the family and its filial implications are perceived as highly correlated to "government". And filial piety is unquestionable in Akan society, as parental authority is incontrovertible. Thus, as the Asante proverb affirms, "even if your mother is not a good woman, she is your mother nevertheless" (Rattray, 1969: 10) And Meyer Fortes (1987: 139) corroborates this by noting that: "the condition of filial dependence from infancy to adulthood is the model of subordination to authority throughout the domain of descent". He also contends that: "the *experience* of filial dependence... provides the material for the code of symbolism and ritual by means of which reverence for authority can be regularly affirmed and enacted". And while Confucius eulogized filiality, as with the Akan, he was particular about reciprocity for he also believed that it was through parental concern for the child that the latter would learn the essence of filiality.

How then is the nature of filial piety as an unquestioning reverence for one's parents different from Michel Foucault's (1986: 32) assessment of it in his analysis of Artemidorus' classic work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. As Foucault points out, "the mother is someone who ought to be cultivated, honored, served, maintained and enriched in return". Such words, one might say, express a universal sentiment alluding to a shared notion that motherhood demands an automatic reverent treatment from its children, as noted above in regard to the Asante. The Asante tradition further confirms this by affirming that "when your mother is poor you do not leave her to go to make someone else your mother" (Rattray, 1969: 128). The father, they thought, has the moral, even the legal, right to profit from the fruits of his children's labour despite the proverbial injunction that (*yen wo nni*), one should not have children for profit (Rattray, 1969: 10). But the Japanese enlightenment leader of the nineteenth century, Fukuzawa Yukichi, regarded filiality, which he attributed to Confucianism, as exploitative of children (Blacker, 1964: 74). He was contemptuous of the traditional (understood as Confucian) belief that one owes it to one's parents to be filial, irrespective of how they treated you. Fukuzawa was the modernizer *par excellence*.

The Gender Matrix

The discussion demands an assessment of gender relations since it is central to the discourse of Confucianism and indeed the family. First, if we go by the

present modes and forms of behaviour in most non-Western societies it is clear that these societies are highly organized according to gender roles. In Chinua Achebe's (1974: 93) *The Arrow of God*, the priest Ezeulu said of his son who had just taken a wife: "when strangers see him they will no longer ask *Whose son is he?*" but *Who is he?* Of his wife they will no longer say *Whose daughter?* but *Whose wife?*" That basically encapsulates the structure of the family within traditional West African societies. But as Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992: 104) points out, "What is distinctive in African traditional thought is that it is traditional, there is nothing distinctively African about it". Basically, this gender matrix is still as applicable to the Akan as it is to Japanese, Chinese and conceivably any East Asian or South Asian society.

The Confucians were indeed very concerned about the relationship between men and women, and correspondingly husband and wife, and therefore insisted on an elaborate hierarchy within the household along gender lines which even stretched to enclose girls and boys. Thus in Japan, for example, Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714), a Neo-Confucian and moral entrepreneur of the Tokugawa era, preached about and emphasized a wife's responsibilities within the household, her duties towards her husband and in-laws. He articulated views about what he referred to as women's innate inferiority. But Kaibara's injunctions about women were in reality no different from those articulated in the Greek classical texts, such as Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Politics* and *Nichomachean Ethics*. Aristotle, for example, "bestowed upon men the possibility of developing to the point of perfection, virtues which in women would always remain inferior, justify their subjugation" (Foucault, 1986: 161). And as Sharon Nolte and Sally Hastings (1991: 172) tell us with reference to the modern conception of the gender matrix in Japan, "certain Confucian rhetoric on women's responsibility for the inner realm and male dominion in the outer corresponded neatly to the Western concept of the separate male and female domains". They add that, even "As the United States industrialized in the early nineteenth century the true woman was characterized by piety, purity, submission and domesticity". Thus as an insightful observer of gender relations of the early 19th century Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* of her classic novel of the same name (1985: 141) laments how early 19th century English "Women suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation. . .", and pronounces that it is "narrow-minded" of men to expect women "to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. . . and thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex."

What is particularly intriguing is how the compartmentalization of gender roles in Japan made the domestication of Japanese women seem original and unique (to Japan), from an orientalist perspective. Yet, notwithstanding the

male/female divisions enforced by the Confucians, both men and women, as in most traditional/pre-industrial societies, worked on the farms, unlike in early capitalist Japan where the adult female population, in particular married women, were generally divorced from the corporate establishment, and home-bound. And despite the husband being hardly at home, because industrial growth and the expansion of capitalism, as part of the modernization process, seemingly conspired to practically divest him of his parental duties by keeping him either in the office or the factory, he still remained the legal head of the family.

And among the Akan, despite the primacy of the matrilineal line in the composition of the family, which gave the husband less control over his wife because “to her husband she does not appear to be bound by any tie that . . . really counts” (Rattray, 1969: 22),³ he was still the head of the household because marriage was “patrilocal – the wife goes to reside with her husband”,⁴ not the other way round. Another implication of the matrilineal system was that the wife’s mother’s brother(s) controlled her; and ultimately the head of her mother’s clan, who was invariably a man, also had control over her.

Rites and Ancestor Worship

This is where I should further address the issue of *li* – ritual in the context of Confucianism. Appiah (1992: 115) is right in suggesting that “social relations of importance require ceremony in traditional cultures”. Schwatz (1985: 121) informs us that “to Confucius the *li* which govern the relations of human actors concern an actual transaction among actors, and unless those involved in the transaction infuse the *li* with the proper spirit – with the proper intentionality towards all the actors involved – they remain empty form”. Most importantly, in the Confucian conception of the universe, “Heaven and earth are harmonized by the system of *li*”. Thus in a general sense rituals may be seen as the thread that binds all of the separate components of Confucian society together. Schwarz articulates this perfectly when he defines *li* as referring “to all those objective prescriptions of behaviour whether involving rite, ceremony, manners, or general deportment, that bind human beings and the spirits together in networks of interacting roles within the family, within human society, and with the numinous realm beyond”. This, as he reminds us, is an indication “of the shadowy boundary between proper ritual to ancestors and proper be

4 That is not always the case in Japan – a husband could be adopted by the wife’s family, move into her parental home with her, and also take her family name.

haviour toward living kin members". We are also instructed that "what makes *li* the cement of the entire normative socio-political order is that it largely involves the behaviour of persons related to each other in terms of role, status, rank, and position within a structured society" (Schwartz, 1985: 67). Crucially, "it does not simply refer to general behaviour of unconnected human beings in certain universal categories of human situations". It is more important within the family, where "it involves proper behaviour of father to son, husband to wife, elder brother to younger (vice versa), just as in religious ritual in the narrow sense it involves proper rituals toward ancestral and nature spirits" (Schwartz, 1985: 67-68). And the *li* that binds the whole society is actualized by the "kingship through which virtuous kings may influence" society (Schwartz, 1985: 68), just as the father as a living source of authority and power may, through his influence, properly guide the family. All that is perfectly fine, but Schwarz is of the opinion, as mentioned earlier, that "Where Confucius' ethic may in fact seem most specifically and exotically Chinese is in his attitude toward the *li* as holy rite" (Schwartz, 1985: 84). This begs the question: how exotically Chinese is the *li* as a pietistic rite? To paraphrase Appiah, what is distinctly Chinese in this case is that it is traditional; there is nothing distinctly Confucian about it.

As with the Chinese Emperor, the Asante King is the link between the living and the dead. The King, they say, fills a sacred role as the "one who sits upon the stool of the ancestor" (Busia, 1976: 202). According to K.A. Busia (1976: 201), "This emphasizes the close link that exists in Ashanti cosmology between the world of the living and the world of spirits". Busia further affirms the Asante belief that there is a world of spirits (*asaman*), "where all their ancestors live a life very similar to life on earth, and this conception is implicit in Ashanti funeral rites." Thus, "The dead are given food and drink and gold-dust to help them on their journey to the world of spirits. Receptacles, bedding, ornaments, and clothing which it is believed they will require in the world of spirits are buried with them, and the newly dead are asked to convey messages to the ancestors". Busia also confirms that: "An Ashanti has his ancestors constantly in mind. At meals, the old Ashanti used to offer the first morsel of food to the ancestors and to pour libations to them daily". The link between ancestor worship and kinship system in Asante society is unquestionable, not least because the King is the final epiphany of religious, social and political order just as Confucius conceived of the Chinese ruler as the apex of both political and religious order.

According to Meyer Fortes, "ancestor worship by sacrifice, libation, and prayer is a lineage cult; a cult that is of the basic politico-jural unit of Ashanti society . . . In other words, ancestor worship belongs to the region of kingship and descent structure" (Fortes, 1987: 73). He further intimates that, "Ashanti

political and jural organization is permeated with the notion of the sanctity of ancestrally ordained authority" (Fortes, 1987: 80). Essentially, the power of the Asante King derives from his ancestors and is legitimized and sustained by the rites expected of, and performed by, the court. These rites are the religious expression of the kingship's claim to supremacy, which is not unlike the Confucians' conception of the Son of Heaven serving as the intermediary between Heaven and its people, itself a responsibility sanctified by elaborate rituals with emphasis on ancestor worship.

It is also important to emphasize the Confucian belief that it is wisdom to show reverence to ghosts and spirits by assuaging their appetites with sacrifices (Confucius, 1993: 10), just as the Asante did (Rattray, 1969: 5). As is evident in Chapter iii of *The Analects*, Confucius enjoins the Chinese leaders to "sacrifice to the spirits as if the *spirits* were in one's presence" (Confucius, 1993: 10). Rites, proper rites that is, are said to be crucial to the essence of Confucianism and Confucius makes the point in Chapter i of *The Analects* that harmony is the most essential thing in the practice of rites. Master You (You Ruo) notes that "in the ways of the ancient kings this is regarded as the most beautiful thing. It is adopted in all matters, both small and great. But sometimes it does not work". Uncompromisingly, he stipulates that, "If you behave harmoniously because you understand harmony, but do not regulate your conduct with ritual, surely that cannot be made to work" (Confucius, 1993: 4). Schwartz (1985: 48) corroborates this by noting that under the Chou dynasty, "the correct performance of rituals was crucial".

But ritual and virtue were constant themes in Greek political thought: the ancient Greeks also believed that a city could be happy and well governed only if its leaders were virtuous (Foucault: 88-89). These virtues, Marcus Aurelius recalls, were "simplicity, goodness, purity, dignity, justice, piety, kindness, graciousness, and strength for your appropriate duties". The Greek ruler was also to revere the gods (Foucault, 1986: 90), an act that was expressed only through proper rituals. Thus, as with the virtuous Greek leader and the sage king, the virtuous Asante King, embodied virtue in order to rule correctly.

Conclusion – The Clash of Cultures: Tradition and Modernity

As traditional society develops into an industrialized capitalist state it gradually loses that communal bond that is free of the legal and contractual strictures that de Barry speaks of. Japan is a recent example of this phenomenon, following on from the European states, which had been transformed, into

industrialized capitalist societies much earlier. These developments, to recast what may be common knowledge, made the people in these transformed, modern societies highly conscious of their “property rights”, for example the right to a private income that is not dependent on the whims of the family head or the clan.

In regards to Japan, developments since the end of WWII further accelerated the decline of the Confucian moral standards of the country, while emphasizing individualism, the post-war moralists might argue. The democratic dispensation that was forced on it, based on the 1947 Constitution with its emphasis on rights and political accountability, replacing the Imperial Constitution of 1889, which was designed to entrench the powers of the Emperor, fashioned a more liberal Japanese society that focused on cultivating the diplomacy of peace, and material gain through economic growth.

Thus, as Karl Polanyi might say, in affluent Japan for example, “individualism is regarded as the norm, and society remains invisible as a cluster of individual persons who happen to live together without responsibility for anyone other than kin” (Dalton: 1968: 213), affirming the point that the more advanced is a society as a capitalist entity the more likely it is to lose its respect for the traditional values expounded above. The following account might further illustrate the point. I was travelling on a train away from Tokyo in autumn 2010, in a coach that was full with Japanese travellers, mostly middle aged. About an hour into the journey a boy of about six years old began to cry quietly, but wailing loudly enough for every one in the coach to hear – the person he was with had gone to the buffet bar, apparently. As the boy had been crying for about 10 minutes eventually I intervened. I moved from my seat to sit with him, talking with him as he calmed down until his parent came back. When I returned to my seat a woman sitting not too far from me leaned over and said, in an emphatically complimentary tone: “That’s very Japanese, what you just did.” But I was the only non-Japanese person in the coach. I suspect the woman was seized by a sense of guilt for not having reached out to the distraught child, and feelings of nostalgia, bemoaning a lost era and culture, a Japan that existed until perhaps the 1980s.

It is worth noting that as with the US and most of Western Europe Japan was also shaken up by the upheavals of the youth counter culture of the 1960s, itself a product of advanced capitalism, which sought to negate traditional culture, and subvert bourgeois culture by its libertarian aspirations and new forms of consciousness (Clarke et al., 1967: 57-67).

Polanyi (1957: 33) makes the point that, “such household truths of traditional statesmanship, often merely reflecting the teachings of social philosophy

inherited from the ancients, were in the nineteenth century erased from the thoughts of the educated by the corrosive of crude utilitarianism combined with an uncritical reliance on the alleged self-healing virtues of unconscious growth”, as is evident in contemporary Japan, and would be in China sooner or later if it is not already. And the affluent middle class among the Akan show evidence of it.

When Michel Foucault (1986: 41) referred to the ancient societies as “societies of promiscuity” he meant that “broadly speaking, the ancient societies remained societies . . . where existence was led ‘in public’”, as opposed to the upsurge of individualism and its accompanying political and social processes that detached individuals from their traditional affiliations. The ancient societies – the Greek societies – as Foucault (1986:42) further notes were “societies in which everyone was situated with strong systems of local relationships, family ties, economic dependencies, and relations of patronage and friendship”. He further informs us that “the doctrines that were most attached to austerity of conduct – and the Stoics can be placed at the head of the list – were also those which insisted the most on the need to fulfil one’s obligations to mankind, to one’s fellow-citizens and to one’s family, and which were quickest to denounce an attitude of laxity and self-satisfaction in practices of social withdrawal”. These are values that Confucianism, Akan philosophy and Abrahamic ethics all extolled in abundance.

If our inferences are not fundamentally in error then we could say that “Confucianism”, better still the values that it embodies, is a perennality, and exemplifies a commonality, in human thinking. It epitomizes the conservative values that transcend our national borders and cultures. The difference between the application of these values in ancient China on the one hand, and their supreme relevance to the Akan social system on the other, is that in the former they were minutely codified into a form of governing principles. Assessed in terms of their practical relevance to contemporary Akan and Japanese society, for example, it is tempting to conclude that the former is conceivably be more ‘Confucian’ than the latter. One might add that rather than treating these values as exclusively East Asian, what we need to focus on is the variegated manner in which different societies express them. We should, for example, consider the East Asian principle referred to here as filial piety, 孝行, *kōkō* in Japanese, and the Judea–Christian teaching to “honour thy father and mother” (Exodus 20: 1-21), and assess how these moral precepts have played out in their respective societies, over time.

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