

CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF DELINEATED ASPECTS OF URHOB0 AND JUDEO-CHRISTIAN COSMOLOGIES**Authors & Affiliations****Emusi, Samson Ikuvweariegb**

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Abstract

This study attempts to compare and contrast the following aspects of Urhobo cosmology (UC) and Judeo-Christian Cosmology (JCC): origin, abode of the dead, apocalypse, morality, and ancestor veneration. The adopted theoretical framework is the Culture and Identity theory as propounded by Collier and Thomas (1988). Data for the Judeo-Christian worldview was drawn from the Bible, while the data for the Urhobo worldview was extracted from Urhobo tradition. Findings are: on the subject of origin, both cultures attribute the origin of all things to a Supreme Being, God (JCC) or *Oghene* (UC). In JCC, God relates with man through Jesus; in UC, He does so through divinities. With reference to the realm of the dead, JCC and UC conceive of the dead as leading a conscious existence either of two places; assigned to a place of rest (paradise, JCC; *urhoro*, UC) or consigned to a region of suffering (hell, JCC; *orho-igbɛvwɛrhɛ*-literally, 'land of suffering', UC). In JCC, once the departed is assigned to either of these two places, their fate is sealed; in UC, where the appropriate sacrifices are made, the spirit that was confined to the land of regret can then gain access to *urhoro*, the place of rest.

Keywords: *Urhobo Cosmology, Western Cosmology, Cross Cultural, Judeo-Christian and Christian Doctrine.*

Introduction

Contrary to prevailing sentiments among many western scholars, Africa has a well-defined cosmology. Africans have both scientific and natural acumen of things surround them. It is a point that most of Urhobo cosmologies, one of the ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, are yet to be documented. That did not deny them civilization. Their cosmology is real and superb and relevance in the modern world.

Cosmology is the total world-view of a group of people; in short, it literally means the study or science of the universe (Emusi, 2012). As the science of the universe, cosmology covers different areas of life, such as philosophy answering question about the ultimate nature of life and universe, esotericism and religion. Westerners see their cosmology as being superior because of advancement in technology and education. In spite of all their advancements, there are issues of climate change, epidemics, earthquakes, and so on, that are left unsolved in the world today. The paper argues, on the basis of empirical evidence

that both Urhobo and Western cosmologies are similar to some extent and differ slightly in a few areas. A thorough study of both cosmologies in the following sub-headings will make a clear cross-cultural balance.

Statement of the Problem

It is disgusting that both the early missionaries and some western scholars refer to African's cosmology and cultural heritage as 'paganism'. Permit me to note, that the early converts who participated in their cultural festivals and worshipped God in their culture were punished, nicknaming them as 'church goers'. Today most of the African Christians have abandoned their cultural beliefs and practices and this has led to the fading away of Urhobo classical ideas of cosmology and theology.

As a result of this, most of the youths and many of the new generation of the Urhobo are unacquainted with their own culture, especially the Urhobo origin, abode of the dead, apocalypse, morality, and ancestor veneration etc. This lack of acquaintance with the culture has manifested socially and psychologically in a value system that essentially dismisses Urhobo culture as 'primitive'. In the perception of the younger generation, they regard the value system enshrined in the culture on morality, theology and social relationships, is inferior to the so-call civilized culture of the western world. More so, exhaustive research has not been carried out on the anthropological study of Urhobo cosmology and theology. **Objectives of the study**

The general objective of this research is to compare the Urhobo and Western cosmologies.

The specific objectives are:

- To examine some aspects of Urhobo culture and beliefs to highlight Urhobo theology and cosmology.
- To analyze the Urhobo cosmology to expose their social-cultural and religious benefits to the society and compare it to the Western cosmology and
- To establish a balance between Urhobo and Western cosmologies.

Research Questions

1. What aspects of Urhobo culture and beliefs can be examined to highlight Urhobo theology and cosmology?
2. How can Urhobo cosmology be analyzed to reveal its socio-cultural and religious benefits to the society, and compare with Western cosmology?
3. How can a balance be established between Urhobo and Western cosmologies?

Significance of study

This study is of great significance for the reasons below:

- It has enabled the whole World understand the concept of Urhobo cosmology in Urhobo culture;
- It has also exposed the social-cultural and religious benefits of Urhobo to the Western World;
- It has activated the interest of the Urhobo people and Africans to their cosmology; and
- Finally, it has re-kindled the desire to identify with the Urhobo culture.

Scope of the study

The study is limited to some aspects of both Urhobo and Western cosmologies. This include: origin, abode of the dead, apocalypse, morality, and ancestor veneration.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this work is the Culture and Identity theory as propounded by Collier and Thomas (1988). Culture is understood as the values, beliefs, thought patterns and behaviour learnt and shared by a group of people which serves as an identity to that group, ensures their socio-political survival, and enhances a feeling of belonging. The theory suggests a relationship between inter-cultural competence and cultural identity. It analyzes how individuals communicate, construct, and negotiate their cultural group identities and relationship in particular contexts. The theory argues that an individual's message during social interaction contains a lot of variables such as nationalist, racist, ethnic, class related, sex, gender based, political and religious cultural identities.

The theory deals with the meaning and usefulness of culture which the researcher applied to the study and interpretation of Urhobo cosmology as an embodiment of religion and culture of Urhobo with the objective of identifying the enshrined cosmology compared to the Western cosmologies to stake a balance. The study will explore individual expression of Urhobo culture and views of an individual's ways of life; identify modes of expression of Urhobo core symbols of cultural beliefs and theories of the world around them; examine how individuals interpret Urhobo culture, theology and cosmology, how they interact with one another and speak about their shared identity; examine the changes that have occurred as a result of their political and socio-economic life, the various changes in their characters and behavioural patterns, as well as their interaction with one another on a daily basis, and so on.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a comparative and analytical approach, to examine the delineated aspects of Urhobo and Judeo-Christian cosmologies. The qualitative method is apt for this study because the study deals with beliefs, values, myths, and symbolic interpretations rather than numerical data.

Area of Study

The study focuses on Urhobo communities in Delta State, Nigeria, and the Judeo-Christian worldview as reflected in biblical traditions and Christian theologies.

Sources of Data

The study relies on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are oral interviews with Urhobo elders, traditional priests, cultural custodians, and personal observations of cultural practices, rituals, and religious expressions.

The secondary sources are textbooks, journal articles, and scholarly publications on African traditional religion, the Bible (Old and New Testaments) as the primary Judeo-Christian text and previous research works on cosmology, religion, and cultural studies. These sources will give the research a solid base for analysis.

Method of Data Collection

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted to gather in-depth information about Urhobo cosmological beliefs.

Document Analysis: Relevant texts, scriptures, and academic materials will be critically analyzed.

Observation: Where possible, participation in or observation of cultural practices will be employed.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique will be used to select knowledgeable respondents such as community elders, traditional religious leaders, and scholars of Urhobo culture. This is to ensure that only individuals with relevant knowledge contribute to the study.

Method of Data Analysis

Data will be analyzed using descriptive and comparative analysis. Themes such as creation, divinity, morality, afterlife, and spiritual hierarchy will be identified. Similarities and differences between Urhobo and Judeo-Christian cosmologies will be compared and interpreted.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent will be obtained from participants. Respect for cultural beliefs and practices will be maintained. Also, participants' identities will be kept confidential where necessary.

Urhobo Ethnic Nationality in Nigeria

The Urhobo people trace their origins to ancient migrations from various parts of present-day Nigeria. Oral tradition suggests that they migrated from diverse regions, including the Benin Kingdom, Igbo hinterlands, and areas further north. These migrations likely occurred over several centuries, with groups settling in the fertile lands along the Niger River and its tributaries (Otite, 2003). Upon arrival in the Niger Delta region, the Urhobo people established settlements and communities organized around kinship ties, clan affiliations, and shared cultural practices (Ekeh, 2008).

Urhoboland is located in southern Nigeria, near the North Western Niger Delta (www.britannica.com. Retrieved 3 May 2022), with a population of about seven million (<https://joshuaproject.net/people/-groups/>). Urhoboland is situated on Latitude 6° and 5°, 15° North and Longitudes 5°, 40° and 6°, 25° East in the Delta State and the Bayelsa State of Nigeria. They live contiguously with the Isoko on the South-East, the Itsekiri on the West, Bini on the North, the Ijaw on the South, and Ukwuni on the North-East (Otite, 2011; 'Nigeria News - Nigeria World News' *The Guardian*, 2017-01-02. Retrieved 30 March 2022).

According to Ekeh (2006), Urhoboland is currently made up of twenty-four kingdoms, namely: Agbarha-Ame (Agbassa), Agbarha-Otor, Agbarho, Agbon; Arhavwarien, Avwraka-Orhurivie, Avwraka-Umiaghwa, Eghwu; Ephron-Otor, Ewreni, Idjerhe, Mosogar; Oghara, Ogor, Okere-Urhobo, Okparebe; Okpe, Olomu, Orogun, Udu; Ughelli, Ughievwen, Ughwerun and Uvwie.

Igun (2014), Urhobo is governed by a council of elders and chiefs, and youth's forum, with leadership titles such as the *Ovie* (King) *Ilorogun* (Chiefs) and *Oghwuvwie* (Youths Leader). These leaders played crucial roles in maintaining social order, resolving disputes, and preserving cultural traditions. Agriculture, fishing, hunting, and trade formed the economic backbone of early Urhobo society. Urhobo Traditional Religion is characterized by the veneration of ancestral spirits, deities, and natural forces, played a central role in daily life. Despite the influence of Christianity, Islam, globalization and the dominance of English as Nigeria's official language, efforts to promote and preserve the Urhobo language remain essential for safeguarding cultural heritage and fostering intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

Ceremonies and festivals hold a special place in Urhobo cultural heritage, serving as occasions for communal celebration, storytelling, and ritual expression. Festivals such as the Urhobo Cultural Festival ; Ogbarhien of Ughievwien, Igboze of Olomu and Oghwoghwa Masquerade Festival of Ughelli, showcase traditional music, dance, attire, and cuisine, reaffirming cultural identity and fostering social cohesion among Urhobo communities. These festivals also provide opportunities for cultural exchange and tourism, contributing to the promotion and preservation of Urhobo cultural heritage (Olokunefor, 2016). Urhobo artistic traditions encompass a wide range of forms, including sculpture, pottery, weaving, beadwork, and decorative arts. Traditional crafts such as ukodo (clay pots), *ikaki* (woven baskets), and *ikwere* (beaded jewelry) reflect the skill, creativity, and aesthetic sensibility of Urhobo artisans. Artistic motifs and symbols drawn from nature, mythology, and everyday life are incorporated into decorative objects, clothing, and architectural elements, serving as visual expressions of cultural identity and heritage (Onoghuvwu, interviewed, (2025).

Different studies of the Urhobo have classified their language into various groups, but in general, it belongs to the Niger-Congo language. Within this family, Urhobo language is classified as a South Western Edoid language. This therefore links them with the Yoruba and other Kwa group of language (Oyovwi, 2003).

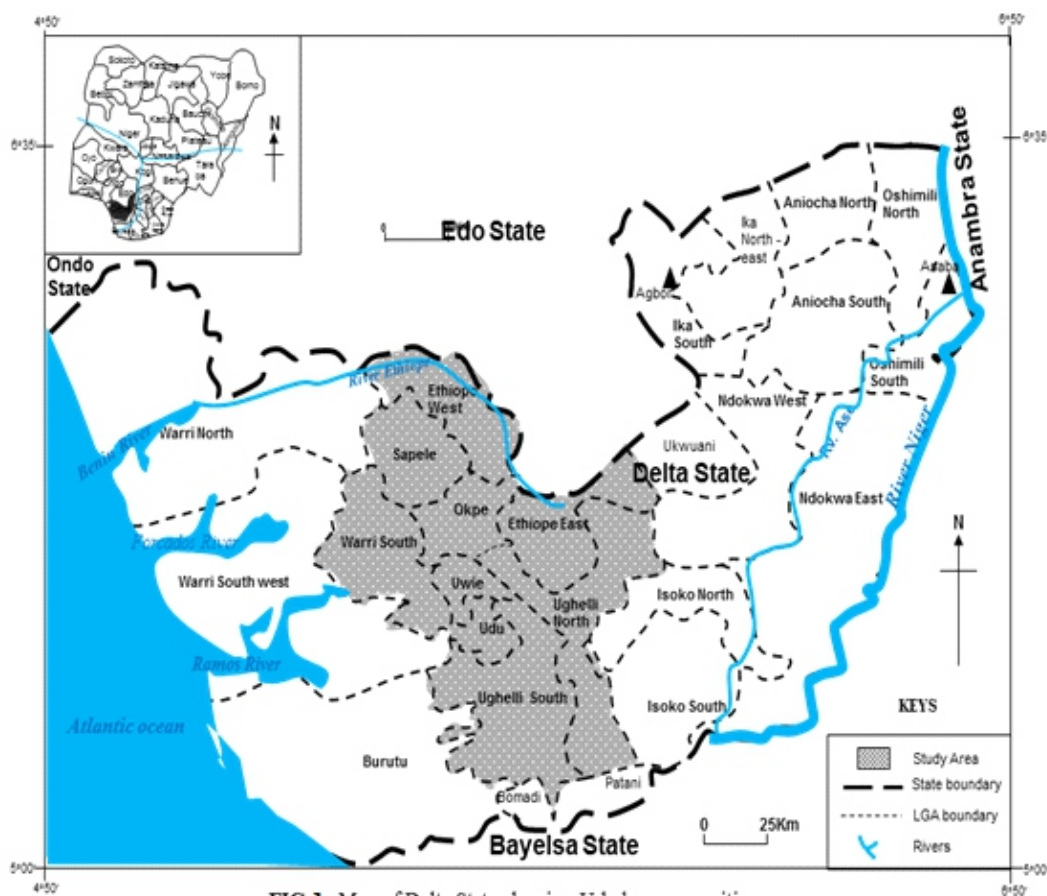


FIG.1: Map of Delta State showing Urhobo communities
Source: Modified After Ministry of Lands, Survey and Urban Development, Asaba, 2008

Urhobo Belief System

The Urhobo believe that the physical world is very highly influenced by the supernatural, which embraces evil and good forces. Happiness or wellbeing which they refer to as *ufuoma* can only be guaranteed by seeking out what the unknown holds, exorcising the forces of evil and aligning one's life, as it were. Since the Urhobo believe that the affairs of man are controlled by spiritual beings, divination among them is first and foremost concerned with finding out the plans of these beings for man. They divine to ensure that the good plans are not changed while the evil ones are reversed or cancelled. Once this is achieved man will be assured of a state of total well-being (*ufuoma*). Without *Ufuoma*, of course, there can be no happiness (Ofuafo, 2013).

Creator God

Urhobo and Western cosmologies believe in a creator God. However, Western cosmology envisions the creative act as a concluded event which terminated on the six day (of the Biblical account of creation) on the account of which the creator (God) rested on the seventh day; Urhobo cosmology envisions the creative act as being continuous: God still creates humans whom he regularly sends to the earth to be born as babies. A seeming contradiction here, however, is that some babies are reincarnate of departed souls. Still the contradiction may be resolved if one views the creative act as originating from but with a possibility of some kind of soul-recycling process - reincarnation. It should also be observed that western cosmology in this regard is not without some contradictions. The Genesis chronicler portrays the creative event as terminating on the sixth day of creation (Genesis 1) but Jesus seemed to have taken a somewhat contrary view when He said in the Gospel of John chapter five, verses seventeen (John 5:17) "My father works, and I too must work." Of course, since he did not elucidate on the kind of 'work' the father has been engaged in outside the terminal creative act we assume that it is other creative acts of a continuous nature not fully accounted for in the Genesis account of Creation. If this is so, the Urhobo and western cosmologies are of the same view or very similar views on creation being a continuous process.

Further, in Urhobo cosmology, the divine creator is communicated with. Communication with the divine is a fundamental aspect of many religious traditions, and art often plays a significant role in facilitating religious icons, paintings, and sculptures depict divine beings, saints, and spiritual figures in a visually accessible form (Omotoye, 2015). Through these representations, believers can meditate on the qualities, virtues, and teachings of the divine, fostering a sense of intimacy and connection with the sacred. Icons serve as focal points for prayer, contemplation, and devotion, inviting believers to enter into a deeper relationship with the divine presence they represent. Temples, mosques, churches, and other places of worship are designed to evoke a sense of awe, reverence, and transcendence. Architectural features such as domes, spires, and altars create sacred spaces where believers can commune with the divine through prayer, meditation, and ritual.

The Place of the Dead

Conventional western cosmology as presented by Christ in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 16:19-31), asserted that when a man dies, he goes to one of two places: the bosom of 'Abraham' or 'paradise' for those who lived a good life and a place of torment or hell for those who lived a depraved life. In this regard, Urhobo cosmology bears a striking resemblance. The worthy dead cross 'Urhoro' (the gate of Hades) into 'erivwi' where they take their place among the ancestors -comparable to the patriarchal ancestor, Abraham, of the

Western cosmology. On the other hand, those adjudged unworthy to enter '*erivwi*' on account of their evil life or circumstance of death are turned back at '*Urhoro*'; they become vagrant spirits, tormented by their rejection, and haunting their relations (Kpomah, interviewed (2025). Thus, they remain in '*Orere* or '*OrhoIgbephrere*' hell, comparable to the 'hell' (cf. Luke 16:19-31.)

The Urhobo believe, however, that the situation of such unfortunate souls is not beyond redemption if the appropriate '*Izobo*' sacrifices are made '*eruere*' by his surviving relations, the departed one may be accepted by the ancestors into the fold. This is similar to the once popular doctrine (but not acceptable to all western cosmological thought) of purgatory. Peculiar to the Roman Catholic denomination, the doctrine of purgatory holds that the Roman Catholic priest could, with the performance of certain rituals, transfer the unworthy dead from purgatory (a sort of torture transit-realm) to paradise. We should again, however, emphasize that the purgatorial position does not represent the view of conventional western cosmology (cf. Hebrew 9:27) where it is written: 'It is given to man once to die, and after that the judgment', implying a finality of position at death: One is either in paradise or in hell, without the possibility of changing from one realm to the other.

Another difference between the two cosmologies is that whereas in Urhobo cosmology, the dead can reincarnate, in western cosmology there is no possibility of return, as the rich man learnt to his consternation in the Gospel of Luke chapter sixteen verses nineteen to thirty one (Luke 16:19-31.) However, one can postulate that the calling up of the spirit of Prophet Samuel at Endor (1 Sam. 28:8-19) and the transfiguration of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 17:1-13) are instances of reincarnation. This position, however, is open to challenge. Reincarnation involves the return of the departed, not as an adult (as in the case of 1 Samuel 28:8–19 and Matthew 17:1–13) but a child. Reincarnation, according to Echekwube (1987), is the mysterious transfer of a spark of the ego of the deceased to his progeny. In Urhobo cosmology, reincarnation is an aspect of the dead person that appears in as many children in the family. Thus, we may safely say (having made due allowance for the unique incarnation of the 'Logos' Jesus Christ) that western cosmology does not recognize reincarnation.

Apocalyptic End

Western cosmology maintains that the world will one day come to an end, at which time God will judge the living and the dead. Admittedly, there are those of the scientific community who propose a mathematical model of a universe having no beginning and no end (Borde-Guth-Vilenkin, 2024). This position is again not acceptable to the generality of the scientific community who believe that the universe has a beginning and will definitely have an end, as encapsulated in the 'Big Bang' theory propounded by a Roman Catholic Priest, Georges Lemaitre, a Mathematician and Astronomer in the 1927 (Chuck Lorre & Bill Prady (2007-2019). The Urhobo do not believe that the world will one day come to an end; they believe the world has always been, and will always be.

Time and Space

The Urhobo, like western cosmologists, believe in the three realms of conscious existence: '*akpo*' (the world), '*erivwi*' (hades or paradise, the realm of the dead and unborn children), and '*odjuvwu*' (heaven, the abode of God and the angels). While, however, western cosmology sees God and the angels as having a direct influence on human affairs as recorded in the book of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 12:6–19) where Peter was

rescued from his jailers by an angel, Urhobo cosmology believes that God as the Supreme King cannot be approached directly; rather, he is indirectly approached through the divinities (*edjo*). The role they play is somewhat similar to that of chiefs who attend to the subjects of the King and act as the intermediaries between the King and the people. This, however, does not justify the allegation that the African God is a 'high God' remote in influence and operation from the western cosmology if we consider Jesus' statement that He is the Way to the father in the Gospel of John chapter fourteen verse 6 (John 14:6) implying that God cannot be directly approached, a view equally shared by Urhobo cosmologists. One may point out, however, that there are basic differences: Jesus is the Way - unique, exclusive -whereas the '*edjo*' of the Urhobo are many and (as in the case of war divinities) often in opposition to each other. But the point perhaps should not be pushed: if we liken the good angels and the fallen angels (satan and the demons) to the divinities of Urhobo cosmology, then this opposition and conflict between the spirit beings (cf. Revelation 12:7) is a characteristic which the two cosmologies have in common.

With reference to time reckoning, whereas western cosmology relies on the three- hundred and sixty day solar cycle (giving rise to a total of twelve calendar months) the Urhobo reckon time using the lunar cycle of twenty eight days, thus giving rise to a thirteen month lunar cycle. We should also want point out that the Urhobo week consists of four days rather than the seven days of the western calendar (Odafe, interviewed (2025)).

Morality

Urhobo morality revolves around the concept of '*evuerherhe*'. In practical terms, '*evuerherhe*' consists of a series of taboos, which should be avoided if the person wishes to be accepted into the fold of the ancestors at death. Such taboos include killing through witchcraft, murder, stealing from family members, adultery, incest, and so on. These things are also condemned in western cosmology. However, there are certain taboos which are alien to western cosmology, and which (if the argument is granted) makes Urhobo morality more elaborate than western cosmology. Such taboos include: having physical relations with a woman in the bush or in water; a girl committing fornication while wearing her mother's clothes; having physical relations with a woman on the bed of one's father or mother; suicide, and burying someone who died in the bush in the village or town, and so on.

In Urhobo moral laws, values, and duties to one's neighbours are unwritten but are found in all aspect of Urhobo society. This is the only reason why the concept of sin reigns supreme in Urhobo nation. Urhobo religious teachings categorize the concept of sin into three divisions, namely: *umuemu*, *okon* and *orukuruku*, which correspond to sin, wickedness, and iniquity (Erivwo, 2005). *Umuemu* is the acts of stealing, adultery, removing boundary marks, killing of fellow human being, and so on; *okon* is the act of wickedness, unwilling to render help to people in times of need, while *Orukuruku* speaks of atrocities. The combination of *umuemu* and *okon* is *orukuruku*. The person involved is certified for abomination; s/he is known as *ohwoumuemu* (Oguori, interviewed (2025)).

The only morality which parallels Urhobo morality in this regard is the Deuteronomy injunctions (e.g. Deuteronomy 5:6 - 21) of Judaism. In a sense, therefore, we may say that Urhobo morality is superior to the western morality with regard to outward observances or actions. This point may, however, not go unchallenged if we consider the position of the New Testament which maintains that the very thought of evil makes one as guilty as when the act of evil is committed (see, for instance, Matthew 5:27–28, where Jesus says

that looking at a woman lustfully is equivalent to adultery).

Ancestor Veneration

The Urhobo venerate the dead and this is often referred to as ancestor-veneration (*ega-esemo* and *ega-iniemo*). This veneration serves as a link between the living and the dead (Ubrurhe, 2005). The living offer sacrifices regularly to their dead (ancestors) while the ancestors, on their part, watch over their progeny and shield them from all forms of ill. There is a close parallel to this in the Roman Catholic practice of veneration of Christian saints: The saints are offered sacrifices and prayers in the same way that the Urhobo appease their ancestors and seek their intervention. These sacrifices are done in the shrine or family *ogwan* (ancestor's cult).

Shrines and altars are dedicated spaces where the Urhobo people communicate with ancestral spirits, gods, and other supernatural beings. They serve as focal points for religious rituals, ceremonies, and offerings, facilitating a connection between the physical world and the spiritual realm. Shrines and altars vary in size and complexity, ranging from small household shrines to larger community or village shrines. They are typically constructed from natural materials such as wood, clay, stones, and thatch, and may be adorned with symbolic objects, carvings, and decorations that reflect the spiritual beliefs and cultural heritage of the community (Ajayi, 2018).

Taylor, cited in Obi (2011) submits that shrines and altars are often dedicated to specific deities, ancestral spirits, or natural forces that hold significance in Urhobo religious cosmology. Each shrine or altar may have its own rituals, prayers, and offerings associated with it, reflecting the unique relationship between the worshipper and the divine entity being honored. Offerings of food, drink, and other items are commonly placed on shrines and altars as a sign of respect and devotion to the spirits. These offerings may include traditional foods, palm wine, kola nuts, animal sacrifices, and symbolic objects representing prosperity, fertility, and protection.

Figurative Sculpture

This is another prominent form of religious art in Urhobo culture. These sculptures depict various figures, including ancestral spirits, gods, and mythological beings, and they serve as conduits for spiritual communication and reverence (Barnes, 2009)



Figure 1: The Ovughere Shrine Assemblage
Wood, Pigment and Cloth, Ovu Inland,
Agbon Clan 1875. COURTESY OF
Perkins Foss; Where Gods and Mortals
meet continuity and renewal in Urhobo
Art.

Source: Anthony, U., Tejuoso P. E. and
Amererhoro, F. (2024)



Figure 2: A Sculpture among the Urhobo People. Statues: Representing deities and used in various rituals to invoke their presence and blessings.

Source : Anthony, U., Tejuoso P. E. and Amererhoro, F. (2024).

Odokuma (2013), asserts that “The structure of Urhobo wood statuarities vary in form as well as function. For instance, the figure of the “hand altar” (Obo) is not depicted like the figure of “aggression” (*Iphri*) or are the founding Father assemblages (*edjorakare*) like the “hand altar” (Obo) is sometimes part of the paraphernalia of the shrine.” She went on further to explaining their various traits that “each of these divinities possesses their unique compositional traits as well as their functions in the entire layout of the Urhobo culture.” Sculptures representing ancestors are highly revered in Urhobo culture. These figures often depict individuals who played significant roles in the community during their lifetime or who are believed to continue to exert influence from the spirit world. Ancestral sculptures serve as reminders of familial lineage, wisdom, and the interconnectedness of past and present generations. Urhobo religious beliefs encompass a pantheon of deities and spirits, each with its own domain of influence and significance. Figurative sculptures are crafted to represent these divine entities, embodying their attributes, characteristics, and mythological narratives. These sculptures are revered as embodiments of divine presence and power, and they often play central roles in religious rituals and ceremonies. Urhobo mythology is rich with stories of mythical beings and creatures that inhabit the spirit world. Figurative sculptures may depict these mythological beings, such as spirits of the forest, water, or sky, as well as legendary heroes and heroines whose exploits are celebrated in oral tradition (Otite, 2008).

Adesanya (2012) opines that these sculptures serve as visual manifestations of cultural myths and legends, inspiring awe, wonder, and reverence among the community. Figurative sculptures are sometimes used as ritual objects in Urhobo religious ceremonies and rites of passage. These sculptures may be placed on altars, shrines, or sacred spaces as offerings to appease spirits, seek blessings, or commemorate important life events. They are believed to possess spiritual potency and are treated with great respect and reverence by the community. Urhobo figurative sculpture is characterized by its artistic craftsmanship and attention to detail. Sculptors employ traditional techniques and materials, such as wood carving, metal casting, and clay modeling, to create lifelike representations of divine and mythical beings. These sculptures showcase the creativity, skill, and cultural heritage of Urhobo artists, preserving and perpetuating their artistic traditions for future generations.

Predestination

The Urhobo believe in predestination (*otarhe*), a concept totally alien to western cosmology. According to Emusi (2008), the Urhobo '*otarhe*' revolves around the human soul choosing from a set of alternatives of: children or barrenness; wealth or poverty; long-life or untimely death prior to birth. The choice made by the unborn soul shapes the life the child will live when it is born, and it is rare (if ever) that a man's '*otarhe*' can be changed. By contrast, western cosmology posits that life begins at conception and a man's lots in life are dependent on his abilities, activities as well as chance factors, rather than some mystical choices freely made by the soul before conception and birth (Berkhof, 2000).

Use of Magic and Amulets

Urhobo also believe in mystical forces (*egbeleke*), which permeate the world. Admittedly, secularists, Christians, Muslims and other religions adherents are of the views that witchcraft, sorcery and magic are realities. At the occurrence of any misfortune, we are tempted to believe that it is caused by sorcery or witchcraft. As the case maybe, if one takes ill and is suspected to be connected with sorcery, magic and herbal portions through sacrifice, charm and divination could be used to cure such a person (Ojo and Emusi, 2020). It is beyond every reasonable doubt that Western cosmology is the same as Urhobo cosmology, though the Bible did not support the use of magic but it was clearly demonstrated in the British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC) sponsored film *The Adventures of Merlin* 2010, in which the practice of magic featured in their culture. Just as magic is used in *The Adventure of Merlin*, amulets and charms are used by the Urhobos, as means of protection.



Figure 3: An Amulet

Source: Anthony, U., Tejuoso P. E. and Amererhor, F. (2024)

Amulets and charms often used for protection during shrine dedications and initiation ceremonies. Healing staff and sacred beads are tools of healers, symbolizing authority and spiritual power. Each ritual is described to provide context on how the symbols are used. This includes processions, offerings, prayers, and chants, which are integral parts of the rituals. Events like festivals and initiation ceremonies see wide participation from the community, indicating the collective importance of these symbols. Shrine dedication ceremonies involve religious leaders and some community members, showing focused but significant engagement. Healing rituals typically involve specific participants like healers and patients, reflecting specialized use of symbols.

Religious Art and Symbolism

The concept of religious art and symbolism refers to the use of visual imagery, symbols, and artistic expressions to convey spiritual beliefs, religious narratives, and sacred meanings within a particular religious tradition or cultural context. Through symbolic representation, art conveys complex theological ideas, cosmological concepts, and moral principles in a visual and accessible form (Oghenekome, 2017).

Artifacts and ritual objects play a central role in religious ceremonies, rites, and rituals. These objects may include ritual implements, ceremonial garments, sacred vessels, and ritualistic tools adorned with symbolic motifs and designs. Through their materiality and symbolism, these artifacts facilitate spiritual experiences, mediate divine presence, and enact religious rituals that affirm and reinforce spiritual beliefs and practices. Omokhodion (2016) opines that Art provides individuals with a means of expressing their personal spiritual experiences, beliefs, and insights. Whether through painting, sculpture, poetry, music, or dance, individuals use artistic expression as a form of spiritual exploration, self-discovery, and creative engagement with the divine. Artistic creation becomes a spiritual practice in itself, fostering a deeper sense of connection, meaning, and transcendence in the lives of individuals who engage with it.

Divination

Divination and sacrifice almost invariably go together, whether in gratitude (for success in life or an existing state of happiness), or in prayer (to have evil plans or revelations or situations reversed), the Urhobo must sacrifice to the power of the divine world. This fact has led some observers to charge that diviners always insist on sacrifice only as a selfish means of feeding themselves (Foss, P. 2005). Nevertheless, the people still believe that divination can reveal the fault and psychologically prepare the sufferer's mind for the solution, while sacrifice administers, so to say, the medicine which effects the cure. Unless sacrificial rites are performed the devotee will not have the peace of mind which is mostly required for a permanent cure. I would like to state here that, not every sacrifice is as a result of having consulted the *epha* priest. In Urhobo land, a sacrifice can follow an unsolicited fortune-telling of some kind at a chance meeting by a person who is not even known to have such powers of clairvoyance and who may not be a practicing professional diviner of any kind. Furthermore, a strange message delivered by a devotee of some cult or the other, or even a warning to a close relation of the affected person can lead to sacrificial rites. Such practices abound in Urhoboland: *Igbe* priests and devotees are fond of delivering such messages even without being consulted. (Ofuafo, 2014)

Secondly, not all consultations of the *epha* priest necessitate subsequent sacrifice. The diviner may say that the relevant problem has been predestined as such it has no remedy; its course is inevitable therefore the victim should accept his fate calmly. The *Obuepha* may also advise that only a "cleansing" ritual is called for.

This can take the form of bathing in a particular stream, or a special exorcising ritual in a specific cult in which the client is a member, or some special incision of some kind. The possibilities are quite numerous. Notwithstanding the above opinion, it is a common belief among the Urhobo that most instances of sacrifices result from divination, and in several instances of divination one form of sacrificial rites or the other is prescribed. Whatever rituals that are prescribed, the ultimate aim is to establish and maintain *ufuoma* (Fregene, interviewed (2025)). The most popular device which the Urhobo uses to ascertain the wishes of the divine is known as *epha*, while the process of divining by *epha* is referred to as *ephaebo* which means consulting *epha*." The cultic functionary is known as *obo r'epha* or *obuepha*, which means "doctor of *epha*" that is, the diviner.

In Judeo-Christian Cosmologies, such practices resonate as with divining to know the cause of the shipwreck in *Jonah* 1:1. In the biblical account of Jonah, the prophet was identified as the cause of the shipwreck through the practice of casting lots. Facing a violent divinely sent storm that threatened to break their ship, the sailors, who were not Israelites, believed that one person on board must have angered their gods. After throwing the cargo overboard in a futile attempt to lighten the ship, they decided to use a form of divination to pinpoint the guilty individual.

The sailors agreed to cast lots to learn on whose account the calamity had struck them. This ancient practice involved using objects like marked stones or sticks, the outcome of which was widely believed to reveal the will of the divine. They proceeded with the ritual, and the lot fell upon Jonah. The sailors then questioned Jonah, who admitted that he was a Hebrew worshipping the Lord, the God of heaven, and that he was fleeing from God's command to go to Nineveh. The outcome was seen as a direct intervention by God, confirming Jonah's disobedience as the cause of the storm. Following this revelation, and at Jonah's own instruction, the reluctant sailors threw him into the sea, upon which the storm immediately subsided.

Suffice to say, this is a testament of the synergy between Urhobo cosmological belief system and Judeo-Christian cosmological belief system as regards divination.

The Altar of Hand (*Obo*)

Theologically the *Obo* is a cultic symbol, on which an individual expresses his emotions of joy and frustration. It is also a place where forces of dynamism and individualism, which characterize the Urhobo love to struggle for success in life, are expressed. *Obo* is associated with riches and wealth, individual achievement, and progress. Hence prosperous person is described as someone whose hand loves him (*omamo obo*) or my hand has done it for me (*Obo me rukvwe*). It is also believed that it is one's *Obo* that supplies all the things that one needs in life. Thus, *Obo* occupies an important place in the life of the Urhobo and that explains why the object is propitiated and venerated. According to Nabofa (1994), the Urhobo altar of hand takes one common singular form; which is the human hand from the wrist upwards, in most cases showing the five fingers or a sculpt mortal with the hand inside. This singular artwork which is sculpted after consultation with the *Oboepha* (diviner) is placed at the corner of the house and worship by the owner. This iconic symbol referred to as *Obo* (Altar of hand), among the Urhobo is also found in the neighboring communities with whom they share a common boundary such as, the Igbo, Benin, Urhobo, Igala, Ijo, Ishan and Isoko who are mostly occupants of this area. While in Igbo land the most common type is a figure of a man with two ram born-like projections on his head. From investigation, the Urhobo beliefs that the cult of *obo* is closely connected or

associated with ancestral worship and so many successful men have obo in their homes.



The Altar of Obo in Urhobo land



Ikenga of Igbo land

Figure 4: The Altar of Obo in Urhobo land and Ikenga of Igbo land

Source: Philomina Uyovwirume Ofuafo (2020)

This cultic object is known by different names among these people. It is known as *Ikenga* among the Igbo people, while the Edo calls it *Ikegobo* and the Urhobo *Obo*. According to Bradbury (1973), the Edo associated the hand or arms (the right arm is frequently specified) with the prowess, strength, and enterprise of the individual worshipper. It is a positive symbol of wealth and social achievement. Thus its worship, in most cases, symbolizes the overt expression and dramatization of self-congratulation and self-glorification.

Bruce Onobrakpeya (1995) gave two different renditions on the concepts of *Obo*; the first is a white wide plate with a horsetail called *ujo* in it and some cowries (*ibigho*) cast in plastocast to represent the concept of obo and the second is an installation made up of a very wide bronze plate, a horsetail and cowries. *Obo* is a personalized deity, associated with *Oma* creator divinity. It is also associated with the spiritual hand which guide and guard the physical hand to succeed. It is a symbol of individual achievement and advancement; an act of prowess which is usually rigid and complex (Onobrakpeya, 1995).

This is because *Obo* occupies an important position in Urhobo cosmology. Success in business and all achievements in life are associated with *Obo*. *Obo vweyoma* (your hand is good). *Obo me ruro* (my hand have done it) (Etarinaki, interviewed (2025)). A person who has been very successful in most of his ventures is usually advised by a diviner or through dreams to set up his altar of hand and venerate it to ensure the continuity of his success. If willing, he would consult an artist to sculpt the symbol he wanted for him for a fee. No one is allowed to sculpt his own *obo*. One basic difference between the Urhobo's *Obo* and Igbo's *Ikenga* is that in Igbo, especially among the Nri religious practice, once the owner of *Ikenga* dies, his *Ikenga* would be smashed and thrown away as Onwuejeogwu (1992) once observed: "When a man dies his *Ikenga* is split into two and thrown outside during his mortuary rites. It then becomes an ordinary wood. The owner has ceased to

exist in human form. He has played his role when he was alive. Now he has ceased to have human personality.”

The Judeo-Christian cosmology also practices such cult system where the prophet of Baal was consulted to challenge the God of Elijah in 1 Kings 18. The contest between [Elijah](#) and the prophets of Baal, detailed in 1 Kings 18, was a dramatic showdown on [Mount Carmel](#) to prove who was the true God: Yahweh or Baal, during a severe drought under King Ahab. Elijah challenged 450 Baal prophets to prepare two bulls on separate altars; the one whose god sent fire to consume the sacrifice would be declared God. The Baal prophets failed despite frantic efforts (even self-mutilation). Elijah then doused his altar with water three times, prayed, and Yahweh sent fire, consuming the offering and proving His power, leading to the execution of the Baal prophets. Just like the *Obo*, the prophet of Baal hold significant position in the Judeo-Christian cosmology. They were believed to possess powers that can suppress any power. They are called upon in time of trouble, when there is a challenge to be made to mention a few.

Summary of the Study

This study is focus on both Urbobo and Western cosmologies. It enables the whole World understand the concept of Urhobo cosmology in Urhobo culture; exposes the social-cultural and religious benefits of Urhobo to the Western World; activates the interest of the Urhobo people and Africans to their cosmology and finally, re-kindles the desire to identify with the Urhobo culture.

Findings

The following were the major findings of the study:

1. The study discovered that, Urhobo belief on creator God, the place of the dead, ancestors' veneration, predestination, time and space and apocalyptic end highlight Urhobo theology and cosmology.
2. The paper emphasized that, Urhobo themes such as *obo*, *otarhe*, *urhievwe*, *oboepha*, *epha* reveal its socio-cultural and religious benefits to the society and compare with Western cosmology.
3. The paper revealed that, both Urhobo and Western cosmologies are almost the same, none is superior to the other.

Conclusion

This brief survey shows that Urhobo cosmology is not inferior to western cosmology. The belief in the power of symbols to connect with ancestors and deities highlights their function as mediators between the physical and spiritual realms just as Judeo-Christians use statues and other ornamentals to communicate with God. These symbols are considered vital for invoking spiritual presence and influence, making them indispensable in religious practices. The perception of changes in the use of religious symbols reflects the dynamic and adaptive nature of Urhobo cultural practices. These changes ensure that symbols remain relevant and meaningful in contemporary contexts, allowing the culture to evolve while maintaining its core values. This study talks about the similarities and dissimilarities of the Urhobo and Western cosmologies. It draws a parallel between the two cosmologies with reference to creation, place of the dead, apocalyptic end, morality, ancestor veneration and predestination. The study reveals that while there are areas of dissimilarities both cosmologies share affinity in creation, place of the dead, morality and ancestor veneration.

Recommendations

In concluding this study, the researcher proffers the following recommendations:

1. That the Western World should accept and recognize the Urhobo cosmology as superb among other cosmologies in the universe.
2. That Christianity should not relegate African Traditional Religion to background in terms of doctrinal issues.

Contributions to Knowledge

The study has contributed to knowledge in the following ways:

1. The study has provided a research on the anthropological study of Urhobo cosmology and theology.
2. The study has discovered a model of positive interaction between Urhobo cosmology and Western cosmology.

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Oral Interviews

S/No	Name	Sex	Age	Place	Interviewed Status	Date
1	John Onoghuvwu	M	92	Oghior	Sir	15/05 /2025
2	Oresiri Kpomah	M	96	Otor -Udu	Chief	28/05/2025
3	Miller O. E. Fregene	M	71	Idjerhe	Reverend	10/06 /202 5
4	Veronica Odafe	F	81	Oghior	Mrs.	28/06/2025
5	Richard Etariniki	M	90	Orogun	Chief	10/10/2025
6	Anthony Oguori	M	100	Ughelli	Reverend	20/11/2025