

The Living Dead: Ancestors as Presence, Not Past



The Seat That Is Never Empty

At a gathering in the village square, a chair is left open at the head of the table. A plate is set before it - not for the living. At the start of the meeting, a name is spoken aloud before any business begins. It is not an act of ceremony. It is not sentiment. It is ordinary.

This essay picks up the thread Essay 1 opened. The circle placed the ancestors one turn away, not behind us. It bent time so that the past remained reachable, still speaking. Now the question shifts: if they are near, how do we live with them? Not to remember them fondly. Not to mourn them. But to answer to them. To seat them at the table, pour for them, let their nearness shape how a community governs itself.

Words matter. In the West, we say “the departed,” “the late,” “passed on.” Each of these phrases points away - toward absence, loss, distance. They tell us the dead are gone. The tradition points the other way - toward presence. The ancestors are not departed. They are elsewhere but reachable. They hold a seat no absence can vacate.

This essay is not a study of grief or funeral custom. It is an argument that ancestor consciousness functions as governance - a structure of counsel and accountability that shapes how a community decides, gathers, and holds itself responsible. For the organizer who opens a meeting with the names of those who came before, for the advocate carrying a movement’s dead into a present fight, this is not abstract. The empty seat is not sentiment. It is structure.

The Living Dead: A Language of Presence

To call an ancestor “the departed” is to speak a language the tradition would not recognize. Across much of African thought, the dead remain active members of the community - consulted, honored, answerable. In *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969), John Mbiti coined the phrase “the living-dead” to name those who have died but remain present in the memory and relationships of the living. They are still named. Still counted as kin. Still part of the body that makes decisions together.

Mbiti distinguishes between two thresholds of presence. So long as someone alive can still remember the ancestor’s name and face, that person remains among the living-dead, dwelling in the realm Mbiti calls *Sasa* - the present-facing now. Only when the last rememberer dies does the ancestor pass fully into *Zamani*, the deep past, where events settle into history rather than relationship. Presence, then, is sustained by memory and by the bonds of kinship that hold it. When memory lives, the presence remains. When it fades, the presence recedes - not because the ancestor has gone, but because the thread between them has grown thin.

This is not mere remembrance. In *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (1987), Kwame Gyekye refines the concept, insisting that ancestors hold genuine relational standing - addressable, answerable, still kin. They are not simply “kept in mind.” They are consulted. They are accountable. The distinction changes who belongs to the community. If the dead remain answerable members, then every decision is made in the presence of witnesses who outrank the living by virtue of having lived before.

Kwasi Wiredu adds philosophical discipline that the essay requires. In *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (1996), he warns against importing Western categories – “religion,” “worship,” “the supernatural” - onto African conceptions of ancestral presence, which he reads as continuous with the living community rather than sealed off in a separate sacred realm. Ancestor presence is not belief in the dead. It is kinship extended across the boundary of death - a relationship that death relocates but does not end.

Where Western vocabulary says “gone,” this language says “elsewhere but reachable.” The difference is not decorative. It changes the size of the community, the source of authority, and the scope of accountability. The ancestor is not absent. They are present in a mode the living must learn to recognize and address.

If the dead remain present, communities need ways to make that presence visible, addressable, and shared. The next three sections show how.

Egúngún: When the Ancestors Walk

Among the Yoruba people of West Africa, the ancestors return to walk among the living during festival and ceremony. This is the *egúngún* tradition - a masquerade in which ancestral spirits,

clothed in layered, sweeping fabric, arrive to greet the community. The dense panels spin and rise. The figure moving through the crowd is neither only human nor only spirit. It is both, and the community gathered around it knows the difference matters.

Margaret Thompson Drewal and Henry John Drewal, whose scholarship on Yoruba ritual performance stands among the most careful in the field, describe the sensory reality of the masquerade with precision. The costume conceals the performer but reveals the presence. The draped cloth sweeps outward in a gesture that draws in the entire community. The gathering is not an audience watching spectacle. It is kin receiving a visit.

This is not private mourning. It is public governance. The *egúngún* returns to counsel, to bless, and to hold the living to account. Lineage is affirmed. Disputes may be addressed. Blessings are distributed. The moral authority of those who came before becomes tangible before the whole community. The ancestors do not remain in memory alone. They arrive. They are greeted. They speak through the motion of the cloth and the weight of their return.

In *The Gèlèdè Spectacle* (1996), Babatunde Lawal reads Yoruba masquerade traditions not as performance but as instruments of social order and moral instruction - enacted philosophy, not theater. The *egúngún* makes a claim visible: the ancestors are not confined to memory or the private grief of the household. They participate in the public life of the community. John Pemberton III and Funso S. Afọlayan, in *Yoruba Sacred Kingship* (1996), situate the tradition within the wider Yoruba world of lineage, authority, and ancestral presence in communal decision-making - confirming what the masquerade itself argues: that governance and ancestral consciousness are not separate concerns.

The *egúngún* is governance made visible. The ancestors return to counsel, to bless, and to hold the living to account in full view of the community that answers to them.

Kalunga: The Horizon That Joins

Essay 1 mapped the Kongo cosmogram - the circle divided by a cross, the four moments of the sun and the soul. This section dwells on a single feature of that map: the *Kalunga* line, the horizon where the world of the living meets the world of the ancestors.

In *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kôngo* (2001), Kimbwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau explains *Kalunga* from within the tradition rather than about it. The horizon is not a wall separating the living from the dead. It is a meeting place where the visible and the invisible remain in unbroken relation. Death is not an exit. It is relocation across a threshold that both divides and joins - the same move the circle has always made.

Wyatt MacGaffey's scholarship on the BaKongo, gathered in *Religion and Society in Central Africa* (1986), deepens this understanding. The *Kalunga* line, he shows, is permeable - crossed by prayer, by libation, and by memory. The living and the dead remain in unbroken relation across it. MacGaffey is careful where the tradition demands care: this permeability is not vague

sentiment. It is a structured relationship, sustained by deliberate practice and communal intention.

In *Flash of the Spirit* (1983), Robert Farris Thompson follows *Kalunga* into the diaspora, reading it as water - a surface that reflects and a passage that carries. That thread is planted here and will be harvested when the collection reaches the ocean of the crossing.

Water is the essay's guiding image throughout. *Kalunga* as water both separates and connects. The dead are on the far shore, but the shore is reachable. Prayer crosses. Libation crosses. Memory crosses. The horizon joins rather than divides.

If the two worlds remain in relation, then the living are never acting alone. Every decision is made within sight of the far shore - witnessed, weighed, answerable. The community gathers in the presence of witnesses who outrank the living by having lived before. This is the same horizon Essay 1 mapped. Here it becomes relational rather than only cosmological: the cosmogram shows the structure; *Kalunga* shows how that structure shapes the daily life of a community. The ocean comes later.

Libation: The Grammar of Relationship

The most widespread and everyday practice of ancestral presence is libation - the pouring of water, palm wine, or other drink onto the earth while the names of those who came before are called aloud.

Libation is not ritual gesture. It is language. It is how a community speaks to the ancestors: an address, a request, a thanksgiving, an accounting. In *West African Traditional Religion* (1978), Kofi Asare Opoku offers close, grounded description of libation practice among West African peoples - the drink chosen, the order of naming, the formal address to those who came before. The structure of the act carries its meaning. To pour before the assembled community is to make the relationship public. To name in sequence is to affirm lineage. To call the earliest and eldest first is to honor the unbroken chain that led to this present moment.

Writing from Akan cultural values, Gyekye reads libation as coherent address and thanksgiving, not superstition (*African Cultural Values*, 1996). The act only makes sense if someone is present to receive it. To pour for the absent is nonsense. To pour for the present is grammar - a language with its own rules, its own syntax, its own dignity.

You do not pour for someone you believe is gone. You pour for someone you believe is here. The opening image of this essay - water poured onto the ground as though received - finds its scholarly home in this understanding.

For the organizer who opens a gathering by speaking the names of those who built the movement, libation is not foreign custom. It is the same instinct, kept in different language: to begin work in the presence of those it belongs to, and to be accountable to them before a word of

business is spoken. Specificity matters here. Libation takes particular forms among particular peoples. The Akan have their ordering of names. The Yoruba have theirs. The BaKongo have theirs. Each tradition is coherent, disciplined, and meaningful on its own terms. Name the people. Name the practice. Do not flatten what took generations to build into a generic “African custom.”

Ancestors as Governance: Counsel, Not Mourning

The threads converge here. The living-dead remain present, sustained by memory and relationship. *Egúngún* makes that presence visible and communal. *Kalunga* keeps the two worlds in unbroken relation. Libation is the grammar that keeps the conversation open. Together, they establish ancestor consciousness not as a season of grief, but as a form of governance - and governance has three distinct dimensions.

Counsel. The ancestors are consulted, not merely remembered. They inform decisions, arbitrate disputes, and lend weight to communal judgment. Mbiti’s living-dead framework establishes that the ancestors remain answerable members of the community - not spectators watching from a distance, but participants with standing in the ongoing life of those who follow them.

Authority. Their nearness legitimizes leadership and roots present decisions in a lineage older than any single leader. To act with the ancestors’ blessing is to act with more than personal authority - it is to act in the name of everything that came before. Gyekye grounds this within Akan cultural values, reading the ancestors as a moral and communal structure that connects the living to what endures beyond any individual tenure.

Accountability in both directions. The living answer to those who came before and to those not yet born. In *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* (1999), Mogobe B. Ramose articulates *ubuntu* - personhood-through-relationship - as a bond that stretches across generations, binding the community into a chain of obligation that reaches in both directions across time. Igor Kopytoff’s landmark essay “Ancestors as Elders in Africa” (*Africa*, 1971) provides the essay’s sharpest scholarly framing: ancestors are best understood as a continuation of the authority of living elders, not as objects of a separate cult. This is governance quite literally - an extension of eldership that death relocates but does not dissolve.

Nostalgia looks back and sighs. Governance looks back and asks: what are we obligated to carry forward? One is passive. The other is a discipline. For a community rebuilding what displacement scattered, ancestral accountability offers a source of moral direction that no funding cycle or external timeline can supply - a way of measuring every decision against the long line of those who sacrificed and those not yet born who will inherit what we choose.

This is knowledge for working hands: the ancestors as a living structure of belonging and responsibility, not an artifact sealed behind glass.

The Community That Includes Its Dead

The threads gather here into the essay's central conviction. The living-dead remain present, sustained by memory and relationship. *Egúngún* makes that presence visible and communal. *Kalunga* keeps the two worlds in unbroken relation. Libation is the grammar that keeps the conversation alive. Together, they do not describe a burial rite. They describe a form of governance.

A community, understood this way, is not only the living. It includes its dead as active members and its unborn as those it answers to - a body far larger than any room can hold, far older than any present gathering. Ramose's *ubuntu* supplies the culminating claim: personhood-through-relationship binds the community into a chain of obligation stretching across the generations. Cheikh Anta Diop, in *The African Origin of Civilization* (1974), reframes rupture as interruption of a continuous whole - a thread pulled taut but never cleanly severed. If the community includes its dead, then the crossing obscured a presence it could not erase. To restore the community is to restore the conversation.

The rupture did not empty the room. It obscured a presence that was never actually gone.

If the ancestors are members rather than memories, the task shifts. The next essay asks how that presence is kept and transmitted across generations - how ritual itself becomes a rigorous way of knowing, and how the griot becomes the trained keeper of a thread too important to let fall.

The Table, Reconsidered

Come back to the open seat. The set-aside plate. The name spoken before the first word of business. What looked like a tender custom is revealed, on closer reading, as a claim: someone is present enough to be included, and the community is accountable to them.

Having moved from the ancestors' nearness - established in Essay 1 - into their active presence as counsel, authority, and moral witness, the reader can now see ancestor consciousness as a working structure. It is not ceremony added to the real business of a community. It is the architecture of how communities hold themselves together across time.

For the organizer opening a meeting with the names of those who came before, for the advocate carrying a movement's dead into a present fight: the names you speak before the work begins are the work. The act of gathering your witnesses before you decide is the act of deciding well.

Begin wherever you are standing. The circle always returns. And when you stand, you do not stand alone.

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