

The wisdom of the African Christian practice of reverencing the dead

What would the global church look like if we all honored our ancestors as members of the communion of saints?

by [Ross Kane](#) in the [April 11, 2018](#) issue



Ancestor figure jar from Cameroon or Nigeria, first half of 20th century, ceramic

In northern Cameroon, many people keep a jar representing their ancestors in a prominent place in the household. The *pra* indicates the continuing life of those who have gone before—the deceased members of the family and the wider community whose lives are still being expressed in and through the living.

When people in Cameroon converted to Christianity, many Christian clergy called on converts to shatter their *pras* as an expression of faith. Like most Western Christians, the missionaries did not associate reverence for ancestors with Christianity, and many regarded the practice as a superstition that should be left behind. But some Cameroonians wondered—could they be Christians *without* their ancestors?

Regardless of that history of suspicion, reverence for ancestors has a place within Christianity of any place. The practice can enlarge our understanding of the communion of saints and of the body of Christ through time. It can challenge the individualistic approach of Western Christianity by recognizing the corporate nature of salvation.

The Christian case for reverencing ancestors has been forcefully made by two theologians, Kwame Bediako and Jean-Marc Ela.

Bediako is a Presbyterian from Ghana who knows about the revering of ancestors by the practice of his own people, the Akan. For the Akan, ancestors act as binding agents within and between communities, living and dead. Ancestors are those whose lives shape the moral community of those who come after them. After death, they go to the house of God, where they continue to act: they reward the upright, punish wrongdoers, assist with harvests, and assure the continuity of the people by bestowing children.

Bediako recognizes that these ancestors were believed by the Akan to have special powers to affect harvests and fertility. He suggests that these powers have been disarmed by Jesus, but their positive dimensions remain. Following imagery from Pauline epistles, he sees Jesus entering the realm of ancestors to make it his own. Not unlike Jesus' role in a *Christus Victor* version of the atonement, Jesus defeats their power to terrorize while summing up and embodying their positive powers. Ancestors lose their mediating functions—or more precisely, any mediating function they now have is realized through their participation in Jesus' salvific work. Instead of mediating the divine by way of bringing harvests or children, ancestors are now in union with Christ and participate in mediating Christ's gifts of salvation and grace.

According to Bediako, these ancestors passed along teachings similar to Jesus long before the gospel was proclaimed among the Akan and thereby laid the groundwork for the eventual reception of the gospel. Jesus has transfigured the ancestors'

virtues, turning them into the path that led to himself. By entering and redeeming the realm of ancestors, Jesus becomes the chief ancestor—the chief mediator who links the realms of God and of humanity. Jesus sums up not only the ancestors of the Akan, but all human ancestors.

Ela, a Catholic from Cameroon, argues that we should regard ancestors as members of the communion of saints. Like Bediako, he sees ancestors as those who pave the way for the gospel and are thereby part of God’s salvific work. In fact, for Ela, the practice of reverencing ancestors is latent within the logic of Christian doctrine.

As Ela points out, Vatican II acknowledged that “those who have not yet received the fullness of revelation and faith are to no lesser degree a part of the church, but in a way that is not historically visible.” And the church on All Saints’ Day prays for those who “searched for God uprightly” and who were taken into Jesus’ embrace through his descent among the dead (1 Pet. 3:19–20). These affirmations proclaim that God’s work extends beyond the explicit channels of the church. In the vision in Revelation about the gathering of a “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes” (Rev. 7:9), Ela would include his ancestors and the great African sages whose presence he regards as an element in his own Christian faith.

Catholic mission efforts often transferred the role of revered ancestors onto existing saints. Ela says that move did an injustice to ancestors. Instead of imposing Western saints on Christians in Africa, the church should simply recognize African ancestors as members of Christ’s body.

For both theologians, ancestors play a role similar to that of revered figures in the Old Testament without displacing them or the role of the covenant people of Israel. Bediako notes how figures like Jacob were means of God’s work through both their virtues and flaws. Ela compares ancestors with the Old Testament prophets who did not fear speaking truth amid political corruption and violence. Ancestors were those who stood alongside the vulnerable and marginalized.

The people of Israel continually harkened back to God’s work among their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and among Samuel, David, and the prophets. In the words of the psalmist, “the righteous will be kept in everlasting remembrance” (Ps. 112:6). Remembering ancestors reminded Israel of God’s work across history and of their own dependence upon the moral communities that preceded them.

This way of thinking about ancestors can refresh our Christology by highlighting the connection between the work of the eternal Logos in history and the witness of saints and ancestors. There is a feedback loop of sorts between the eternal Logos, the ancestors, and ourselves. The wisdom of the ancestors was drawn from the eternal Logos, and that wisdom in turn paved the way for us to be drawn into the life of Jesus, the Logos made flesh. Saints and ancestors, as members of Christ's very body, have played a part in God's saving work. We would not know the salvific message of Jesus without them.

Reverencing of ancestors is not to be confused with the worship of ancestors.

Western Christians often portray salvation as a largely individual matter, an immaterial transaction between God and us made possible by Jesus—who in this narration is often understood in individualistic terms. But the saints and ancestors participate in Christ's own mediation between God and human beings. Contrary to what some Protestants might fear, the saints and ancestors are not seen by Bediako or Ela as mediators by themselves. Their mediation comes through their status as members of the mystical body of Christ.

Expanding the notion of the communion of saints to include "the communion of ancestors," in Ela's phrasing, expands the church's comprehension of the resurrection of the dead. Their resurrection is not limited to Jesus' second coming but pervades human life today. In the tradition of ancestors, people remain part of the ongoing community long after they die. They are not simply remembered but continue to constitute that community in a mystical sense.

"The dead are not dead!" Ela affirms, expressing what he considers a "central affirmation of African thought." Thus when northern Cameroonians heard the message that, in Jesus, Christians do not die but live, the theme was familiar: "death no longer has dominion" (Rom. 6:9); "in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22). Members of Jesus' body are not only raised on the last day, they continue to live on in human history through other Christians, themselves members of that body.

If the practice of revering ancestors seems remote or strange to Western Christians, we should remember that some central aspects of Christian faith began as seemingly foreign. When bishops in the early fourth century argued about creedal language to describe Jesus' relation with God the Father, they turned to the Greek

word *homoousios*, “of one substance.” It was a term foreign to the scriptures themselves and had been rejected by a church council in Antioch less than a century before, in part because it came into the church by way of a heretical Gnostic sect. The use of *homoousios* was once an act of syncretism. With the church’s continued growth in Latin America, Asia, and Africa more convergences of this sort will surely come to enrich the church.

The practice of ancestor reverencing can go wrong, however, as Bedieko and Ela would point out. In their contexts, as in ours, people may look to ancestors to endorse misguided human projects, such as those that perpetuate violence and dangerous nationalism. Having been raised in the American South, I am particularly reminded of the power that deceased Confederate leaders seem to play in perpetuating racial hatred in the United States. Such reverence is akin to revering false prophets. The true witness of the ancestors is determined by their place in Jesus’ mission.

Reverencing of ancestors is not to be confused with worship of ancestors. Reverence is simply an act of ascribing worth. People reverence all sorts of things, from elders to colleagues to government officials or national symbols. There are various levels of ascribing worth: some realities get only a passing acknowledgment, and some are acknowledged in ritual acts. Worship is given solely to God. (The word *worship* was not always exclusive to God, however. In the marriage rite in the 1552 Book of Common Prayer, couples say to each other, “with my body I thee worship.”) Ascribing worth to ancestors simply recognizes their role in one’s faith and their status as members of Christ’s mystical body.

How might Christians in the West incorporate the practice of ancestor reverencing into their own piety? It is not necessary to set up a *pra*. In fact, for Anglo households in the United States, setting up a *pra* would be an act of cultural appropriation. A better route is to build on existing practices. Contemporary liturgies in the United States, for example, increasingly include prayers for those who have died.

All Saints’ Day is the customary time for Christians to remember ancestors as part of the communion of saints. For that celebration, Christians in the United States might learn from Christian practices in regions that pay greater attention to this holy day. They might learn from an Anglican parish in Ghana, whose members take time long before All Saints’ Day to list their ancestors on an enormous banner, which decorates the church. By November 1, the church is filled with hundreds of names of

the faithful across time. The cloud of witnesses takes visible form. This parish on occasion also has Sundays of remembrance, with extended prayers for ancestors.

A congregation in the United States with a large West African population invites congregants to bring pictures of ancestors on All Saints' Sunday, placing them around the altar as a visual representation of the extended body of Christ.

Over time, such practices may recognize not only individuals' ancestors but ancestors of the universal church. Ancestors become saints not simply for their own locale but universally. Faithful Stoics, who reflected upon the nature of the Logos centuries before Jesus' ministry in Palestine, become Christian ancestors. As a writer in the United States with Celtic ancestry, should I not celebrate the sacramental imagination of pre-Christian Celtic spirituality that shaped that region's Christianity? These ancestors belong not only to modern descendants of Celts but to the whole church.

So also African ancestors become ancestors for all Christians. Through the work of Ela and Bediako, in the communion of Christ, I have come to have fellowship with their ancestors.

Humans are, in Augustine's words, "but a little piece of God's creation," deeply dependent upon others. Ancestors remind us of such interconnection. They help us to see the pervasiveness of the eternal Logos among all peoples and in all times.

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