

THE MORALITY OF ANCESTOR VENERATION IN AFRICAN THOUGHT; AN ETHICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Ancestor veneration remains a central feature of African moral and religious life, yet it is often misinterpreted as a uniform ritual practice that accords equal moral status to all deceased persons. This study seeks to address this misconception by examining the ethical foundations of ancestor veneration within African philosophical thought. The research is motivated by the need to clarify whether ancestorhood is an automatic consequence of death or a morally selective status grounded in ethical excellence and communal contribution. Employing a qualitative, philosophical methodology, the paper engages in critical textual analysis of major African philosophers alongside relevant ethnographic and religious studies. The analysis draws on indigenous moral concepts, communitarian ethics, and comparative ethical theories, including virtue ethics and deontological perspectives, to evaluate the moral criteria underlying ancestral recognition. The findings reveal that ancestorhood in African thought is fundamentally an earned moral status, reserved for individuals whose lives exemplified integrity, social responsibility, and sustained commitment to the common good. Ancestor veneration functions not merely as a religious observance but as a moral institution that preserves ethical exemplars, transmits communal values across generations, and reinforces intergenerational justice. The study further finds that, despite egalitarian and theological critiques, African societies have demonstrated a capacity to reinterpret ancestral practices in ways that maintain their ethical core while adapting to contemporary religious and social contexts. The paper concludes that a virtue-based, selective conception of ancestorhood is consistent with African moral traditions and offers valuable insights for contemporary ethical discourse. Its application extends to debates on moral memory, personhood, communal responsibility, and the philosophy of religion, highlighting ancestor veneration as a living ethical framework that continues to shape moral reasoning and social life in Africa.

Introduction

Ancestor veneration occupies a foundational place in African moral, religious, and philosophical thought. Far from being a mere ritual response to death, it constitutes a structured moral institution through which African societies articulate ideals of character, responsibility, and communal flourishing. Within many African worldviews, the relationship between the living and the dead is understood as a morally continuous one, in which the departed remain ethically relevant to the community. However, a persistent misconception, both within and outside African scholarship is the assumption that ancestorhood is automatically conferred upon all deceased persons. This paper challenges that assumption by arguing that ancestorhood, in African thought, is a morally selective status grounded in ethical excellence rather than biological death alone.¹

The motivation for this study arises from the need to clarify the ethical logic underlying ancestor veneration in African philosophy. While anthropological and theological studies have often focused on ritual practices, less attention has been paid to the moral criteria that govern ancestral recognition. Yet African philosophical traditions consistently maintain that not every deceased individual qualifies as an ancestor. Instead, ancestorhood is reserved for those whose lives embodied moral integrity, fulfilled communal obligations, and contributed meaningfully to social harmony.² This selective conception reflects a broader African ethical orientation in which moral worth is evaluated relationally and achieved through sustained participation in communal life rather than inherited as an abstract right.³

African philosophers such as Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye have articulated this moral framework through their analyses of personhood and community. Menkiti's normative conception of personhood emphasizes moral achievement and social responsibility as the basis of full personhood, suggesting that ethical excellence is a prerequisite for elevated moral status.⁴ Gyekye, while advancing a more moderate communitarianism, similarly affirms that moral character and personal agency play decisive roles in communal recognition.⁵ When applied to ancestor veneration, these perspectives reveal that ancestral status functions as a posthumous moral judgment - one that affirms lives lived in accordance with communal values.

At the same time, the practice of ancestor veneration has generated significant ethical and theological debates. Egalitarian critics question whether selective ancestorhood risks reinforcing moral hierarchies that conflict with contemporary ideals of equality and universal human dignity.⁶ Religious critiques, particularly from Christian and Islamic traditions, raise concerns about the compatibility of ancestral rituals with monotheistic commitments.⁷ These objections underscore the need for a careful ethical analysis that distinguishes moral remembrance from metaphysical elevation or worship, and that situates ancestor veneration within broader moral theory rather than reducing it to ritual practice.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative, philosophical approach grounded in critical textual analysis. It engages major works in African philosophy alongside ethnographic studies of Akan, Yoruba, Igala, and other African traditions. By bringing African communitarian ethics into dialogue with virtue ethics, deontological reasoning, and contemporary debates on intergenerational justice, the paper clarifies the moral principles that distinguish an ancestor from the merely deceased. The analysis is not aimed at defending all ritual expressions of ancestor veneration but at elucidating its ethical core.

This paper argues that ancestor veneration, when properly understood, represents a virtue-based moral framework that preserves ethical exemplars, sustains communal memory, and reinforces intergenerational moral responsibility. By grounding ancestral honor in character and service to the common good, African traditions offer a philosophically robust account of moral legacy, one that speaks not only to African societies but also to global discussions on personhood, moral memory, and the enduring significance of a life well lived.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within African moral philosophy and is conceptually informed by communitarian ethics, virtue-based moral evaluation, and the normative conception of personhood. Together, these perspectives provide a coherent lens for interpreting ancestor veneration not merely as a cultural or religious practice but as a morally structured institution through which African societies evaluate character, recognize ethical achievement, and preserve communal values across generations.

African communitarian ethics forms the foundational orientation of this framework. Within this moral worldview, individual identity and moral worth are constituted through social relationships and communal responsibility rather than conceived as purely autonomous or self-contained. Moral agency is expressed in the fulfillment of obligations to others, commitment to social harmony, and contribution to collective well-being.⁸ This relational conception of moral life explains why recognition, both during life and after death, is dependent on communal judgment. Ancestorhood, within this framework, functions as a form of moral acknowledgment conferred by the community upon those whose lives embodied shared ethical norms and advanced the common good.

Closely connected to this communitarian outlook is the African philosophical conception of personhood as a normative moral achievement rather than a biological given. Personhood, on this view, is progressively realized through ethical conduct, social participation, and demonstrated responsibility.⁹ This conception has direct implications for ancestor veneration, as it allows ancestral status to be understood as the culmination of a morally successful life. Ancestorhood thus represents a posthumous affirmation of achieved moral personhood, signifying that the individual lived in ways that strengthened communal identity, stability, and moral continuity. Importantly, this evaluation is context-sensitive and attentive to intention and fidelity to obligation rather than moral perfection.

The framework is further shaped by a virtue-ethical orientation that places character at the center of moral evaluation. African moral traditions emphasize stable moral dispositions such as integrity, generosity, courage, and respect for others, often articulated through indigenous moral concepts such as *suban pa* and *iwa rere*.¹⁰ Within this perspective, ancestorhood operates as a judgment about character rather than social status or material success. Ancestors are remembered as moral exemplars whose lives provide concrete models of ethical conduct, thereby reinforcing communal norms and guiding future behavior.

Finally, the framework incorporates the idea of moral memory and intergenerational responsibility. In African thought, remembrance is not a neutral act but a morally significant practice through which communities selectively preserve lives and values deemed worthy of continuity.¹¹ Ancestor veneration institutionalizes this moral memory, linking past,

present, and future within a shared ethical narrative. The living are thus accountable not only to contemporary moral expectations but also to the legacy of past moral exemplars and the moral horizon of future generations.

Taken together, these conceptual commitments establish a robust ethical foundation for analyzing ancestor veneration as a selective, virtue-based institution of moral recognition. By integrating communitarian ethics, normative personhood, virtue theory, and moral memory, this framework demonstrates that ancestor veneration embodies a philosophically sophisticated moral logic, one that affirms character, communal responsibility, and enduring moral legacy as the true grounds of ancestral honor without leaving out entrepreneurial spirit and respect for human dignity.¹²

Ethical Foundations of Ancestorhood in African Thought

The ethical foundations of ancestorhood in African thought are rooted in the conviction that moral excellence, rather than biological death or genealogical proximity, constitutes the basis for posthumous recognition. Across African philosophical and cultural traditions, ancestorhood is understood as an honorific moral status conferred upon individuals whose lives exemplified virtues deemed essential for communal flourishing. This ethical orientation distinguishes ancestors from the merely deceased and situates ancestor veneration within a normative moral framework rather than a purely ritual or metaphysical domain.¹³

Central to this framework is the evaluation of moral character. African moral systems place considerable emphasis on how individuals conduct themselves within the web of social relationships that define communal life. Ethical worth is measured by fidelity to obligations, consistency of moral conduct, and commitment to the common good.¹⁴ Individuals who habitually undermine social harmony, violate communal norms, or act in ways that damage collective well-being are typically excluded from ancestral recognition, regardless of age, status, or lineage.¹⁵ Ancestorhood, therefore, reflects a moral judgment about the quality and impact of a person's life rather than a neutral acknowledgment of death.

Virtue plays a decisive role in this moral evaluation. Indigenous moral concepts such as *suban pa* (good character) and *iwa rere* (good character) express the belief that ethical life is defined by stable dispositions toward right action rather than isolated moral acts. Within this virtue-centered outlook, ancestors are remembered as individuals whose lives demonstrated integrity, generosity, wisdom, courage, and concern for others.¹⁶ These virtues are not abstract ideals but practical qualities manifested in everyday interactions and social responsibilities. By elevating such individuals to ancestral status, communities affirm the moral standards they seek to uphold and transmit.

Another ethical dimension of ancestorhood lies in its relationship to communal responsibility. African moral thought generally regards individuals as morally embedded beings whose actions acquire meaning within a social context. The ethical assessment of a life, therefore, extends beyond personal achievement to include the individual's contribution to social stability, conflict resolution, and intergenerational continuity. Those who nurtured family bonds, upheld justice, mediated disputes, and promoted collective welfare are more likely to be regarded as worthy of ancestral honor.¹⁷ Ancestorhood thus serves as a moral endorsement of lives that strengthened, rather than fractured, the moral fabric of the community.

Importantly, the ethical foundations of ancestorhood also incorporate a contextual and humane understanding of moral responsibility. African traditions rarely demand moral perfection as a condition for ancestral recognition. Instead, moral evaluation is sensitive to circumstance, intention, and effort. Individuals are assessed in light of the opportunities and constraints they faced, allowing for a compassionate and realistic appraisal of human moral life. This ethical flexibility counters the claim that ancestor veneration promotes rigid moral elitism and instead reveals a virtue ethic attentive to lived experience.

Finally, ancestorhood derives ethical significance from its forward-looking function. The recognition of ancestors is not primarily about rewarding the dead but about guiding the living. Ancestors function as moral reference points whose remembered lives inform present conduct and future aspiration. By honoring those who embodied communal virtues, African societies reinforce the idea that moral integrity has enduring value and that ethical actions resonate beyond one's lifetime.¹⁸ In this way, ancestorhood operates as a bridge between moral memory and moral aspiration, anchoring ethical life in both historical example and future responsibility.

In sum, the ethical foundations of ancestorhood in African thought rest on character, communal responsibility, contextual moral judgment, and the enduring moral influence of exemplary lives. Ancestor veneration, when viewed through this ethical lens, emerges as a sophisticated moral institution - one that affirms the belief that the highest form of remembrance is reserved for those who lived in ways that advanced the collective good and enriched the moral life of the community.

Ancestor Veneration, Moral Memory, and Intergenerational Justice

Ancestor veneration in African thought derives much of its ethical force from its role as a practice of moral memory. Memory, within this context, is not a passive recollection of the past but an active moral exercise through which communities preserve, interpret, and transmit values across generations. By selectively remembering those whose lives embodied communal virtues, African societies transform memory into a normative resource that shapes ethical expectations in the present and moral aspirations for the future. Ancestor veneration thus functions as an institutionalized form of moral remembrance, grounded in ethical judgment rather than sentimental attachment.

Moral memory operates through narrative, ritual, and symbolic representation. Stories told about ancestors at funerals, festivals, and family gatherings are not morally neutral biographies; they are evaluative accounts that highlight virtues such as courage, integrity, wisdom, and selflessness. Through these narratives, communities reaffirm what they regard as morally admirable and worthy of emulation. Individuals remembered as ancestors are therefore not only honored but also interpreted as moral texts, lives whose meanings are continuously re-read to guide conduct and sustain communal norms.¹⁹

This moral function of remembrance establishes a strong link between ancestor veneration and intergenerational justice. African moral thought conceives human life as embedded within a temporal continuum connecting the dead, the living, and the unborn. Ethical responsibility is therefore not limited to present social relations but extends backward to the moral legacy of predecessors and forward to the well-being of future generations. Ancestors symbolize the enduring moral consequences of action, reminding the living that ethical conduct leaves traces that shape communal life long after individual existence has ended.²⁰

Within this framework, ancestor veneration reinforces a sense of accountability that transcends individual lifespan. The aspiration to be remembered well, to merit ancestral recognition, functions as a moral incentive that encourages responsible conduct, social commitment, and long-term thinking. Individuals are called to act in ways that will not only satisfy immediate interests but also sustain communal values and social harmony over time. In this sense, ancestor veneration cultivates a forward-looking ethical orientation grounded in concern for moral legacy rather than personal reward.

The intergenerational dimension of ancestor veneration also affirms a reciprocal moral relationship between generations. The living inherit moral traditions shaped by the exemplary lives of the past, while simultaneously bearing responsibility for preserving and refining those traditions for the future. Ancestors, as moral elders, symbolize continuity rather than authority imposed from above. Their relevance lies not in coercive power but in the persuasive force of example. This relational model of moral authority aligns with African communitarian ethics, where influence is earned through character and service rather than imposed through hierarchy.

Importantly, the selective nature of moral memory does not imply historical exclusion or erasure. Rather, it reflects the ethical necessity of discernment in remembrance. By choosing which lives to elevate as moral reference points, communities make explicit judgments about the values they wish to sustain. Ancestor veneration thus becomes an exercise in ethical self-definition, allowing societies to affirm continuity while remaining open to moral reflection and transformation.²¹

In this way, ancestor veneration emerges as a practice that integrates memory, justice, and moral aspiration into a single ethical framework. It anchors moral life in historical example while orienting it toward future responsibility. Far from being backward-looking or conservative, the practice embodies a dynamic moral vision in which the past serves as a guide rather than a constraint, and remembrance becomes a tool for ethical renewal.

Critical Objections and Contemporary Reinterpretations

Despite its ethical depth and cultural significance, ancestor veneration has been subject to sustained criticism, particularly from egalitarian and theological perspectives. These critiques challenge both the moral selectivity and metaphysical implications of ancestral recognition, raising important questions about equality, dignity, and religious compatibility. Addressing these objections is essential for assessing whether ancestor veneration can be ethically justified as a contemporary moral institution rather than defended solely on the basis of tradition.

One prominent objection arises from egalitarian moral theory. Critics argue that restricting ancestral recognition to a select group of morally exemplary individuals risk reinforcing hierarchical distinctions that may conflict with modern commitments to equal moral worth. From this perspective, selective ancestorhood appears to privilege certain lives over others, potentially marginalizing individuals whose social conditions limited their capacity to meet communal expectations.²² This critique raises a legitimate ethical concern: whether moral recognition based on virtue can be reconciled with compassion for human vulnerability and structural inequality.

African moral traditions respond to this concern by adopting a contextual and relational understanding of moral evaluation. Moral excellence is not assessed through abstract or universal standards detached from lived realities, but through context-sensitive judgments attentive to intention, effort, and circumstance. Virtue, in this sense, is measured relative to one's social position and available opportunities rather than by perfectionist ideals. Ancestor veneration therefore does not deny equal human dignity; instead, it differentiates between moral status and moral recognition. While all persons possess inherent worth, ancestral honor represents an additional moral distinction grounded in exemplary contribution rather than basic humanity.

A second major set of objections emerges from religious, particularly Christian and Islamic critiques. These perspectives often express concern that ancestor veneration may blur the line between moral remembrance and worship, thereby conflicting with monotheistic commitments.²³ From this viewpoint, ancestral rituals risk attributing spiritual power or mediatory roles to the dead that properly belong to the divine. Such concerns have led some religious thinkers to reject ancestor veneration outright as incompatible with doctrinal orthodoxy.

However, contemporary African religious practice reveals a more nuanced engagement with ancestral traditions. Rather than abandoning ancestral remembrance, many African Christians and Muslims reinterpret it in ethical rather than metaphysical terms. Ancestral practices are reframed as expressions of gratitude, identity, and moral continuity rather than acts of spiritual mediation. In this reinterpretation, ancestors are honored as moral exemplars and cultural forebears, not as objects of worship or sources of supernatural authority.²⁴ This shift preserves the ethical core of ancestor veneration while aligning it with monotheistic religious commitments.

Beyond these critiques, ancestor veneration also faces challenges arising from modernization, urbanization, and globalization. Changing social structures have weakened traditional communal bonds and altered patterns of moral authority. Yet these transformations have not rendered ancestor veneration obsolete. Instead, they have prompted its ethical reinterpretation. In urban and diasporic contexts, ancestral remembrance often takes symbolic rather than ritual form, emphasizing moral legacy over ritual obligation. This adaptability suggests that ancestor veneration possesses an ethical resilience that allows it to remain relevant even as social forms evolve.

Crucially, these contemporary reinterpretations do not undermine the moral foundations of ancestor veneration. Rather, they reaffirm its core ethical insight: that remembrance should be guided by moral discernment, and that communities have a responsibility to preserve the memory of lives that exemplify virtue and service. By distinguishing moral recognition from metaphysical authority, African societies demonstrate that ancestor veneration can function as an ethical institution without conflicting with commitments to equality, compassion, or religious pluralism.²⁵ In addressing egalitarian and theological objections, ancestor veneration thus emerges not as a rigid or exclusionary practice but as a dynamic moral tradition capable of ethical self-reflection and renewal. Its continued relevance lies precisely in this capacity to adapt while remaining anchored in the moral evaluation of character, responsibility, and communal contribution.

Findings

This study yields several interconnected findings that clarify the moral structure and contemporary relevance of ancestor veneration in African thought. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that ancestor veneration functions

as a coherent ethical institution grounded in moral evaluation, communal responsibility, and intergenerational continuity rather than as an uncritical ritual response to death.

First, the analysis confirms that ancestorhood in African moral philosophy is an earned ethical status rather than an automatic consequence of dying. Across philosophical and ethnographic traditions, communities consistently distinguish between the merely deceased and those deemed worthy of ancestral recognition. Ancestorhood is reserved for individuals whose lives exhibited moral integrity, fulfilled communal obligations, and contributed positively to social harmony.²⁶ This finding directly challenges interpretations that treat ancestor veneration as indiscriminate or genealogically determined, revealing instead a selective moral logic rooted in character assessment.

Second, the study finds that ancestor veneration operates as a structured system of moral memory. Through narrative, ritual, and symbolic representation, African societies preserve the lives of morally exemplary individuals as ethical reference points for the living. These remembered lives function pedagogically, shaping moral imagination and reinforcing communal values across generations.²⁷ Ancestor veneration thus serves not only to honor the past but also to educate the present, embedding ethical instruction within cultural memory.

Third, the findings reveal that ancestor veneration embodies a distinct African conception of intergenerational justice. Moral responsibility is understood as temporally extended, connecting the actions of the living to the legacy of the past and the well-being of future generations. The aspiration to merit positive remembrance functions as a moral incentive, encouraging individuals to act with long-term communal consequences in view.²⁸ In this respect, ancestorhood symbolizes the enduring moral impact of a life lived in service to others.

Fourth, the study finds that the ethical framework of ancestor veneration is context-sensitive and humane rather than perfectionist. Moral evaluation within African traditions accounts for intention, effort, and circumstance, allowing communities to balance ethical discernment with compassion. This counters egalitarian critiques that portray ancestral recognition as rigidly exclusionary, showing instead that African moral reasoning differentiates between inherent human dignity and honorific moral distinction.²⁹

Fifth, the analysis demonstrates that ancestor veneration possesses significant adaptive capacity. Despite theological objections and social transformation driven by modernity, African societies continue to reinterpret ancestral practices in ways that preserve their ethical core while accommodating religious pluralism and changing social structures.³⁰ This adaptability confirms that ancestor veneration is not a static relic of tradition but a living moral framework capable of ethical renewal. Individuals are constantly reminded that through social effort and commitment in their locality especially when feel marginalised, external allocations either from the government or NGOs and who struggle to see their communities work are regarded as living ancestor.³¹

Overall, these findings establish that ancestor veneration in African thought is a philosophically robust moral institution. It integrates virtue ethics, communitarian responsibility, moral memory, and intergenerational accountability into a coherent system of ethical recognition. Far from undermining contemporary moral concerns, ancestor veneration offers valuable resources for understanding moral legacy, social responsibility, and the enduring significance of character in human life.

Conclusion

This study has undertaken a critical ethical analysis of ancestor veneration in African thought, challenging reductive interpretations that treat the practice as a uniform ritual response to death or a mere expression of cultural sentiment. By situating ancestor veneration within African communitarian ethics, virtue-based moral evaluation, and the normative conception of personhood, the paper has demonstrated that ancestorhood is fundamentally a morally selective status grounded in ethical excellence rather than biological death or lineage alone.

The analysis has shown that ancestor veneration functions as a moral institution through which African societies articulate, preserve, and transmit ideals of character and communal responsibility. Ancestorhood emerges as a posthumous affirmation of a life lived in service to the common good, one marked by integrity, relational accountability, and sustained contribution to social harmony. In this respect, ancestor veneration reflects a sophisticated ethical judgment that distinguishes moral recognition from mere existence, affirming that not all lives are remembered in the same way, but that all lives are evaluated within a shared moral horizon.

Beyond its evaluative function, the study has highlighted the role of ancestor veneration as a system of moral memory and intergenerational justice, ancestors help also when consulted in matters regarding to curses, communal health and traditional healing remedies in African cosmology.³² By selectively honoring moral exemplars, African societies anchor ethical life in historical example while orienting it toward future responsibility. The living are reminded that their actions resonate beyond their lifetimes, shaping communal identity and moral expectation across generations. Ancestors, therefore, do not function as objects of worship or metaphysical intermediaries, but as moral reference points whose remembered lives guide ethical reflection and conduct.

The paper has also addressed egalitarian and theological critiques, showing that ancestor veneration is neither inherently exclusionary nor irreconcilable with contemporary religious commitments. African moral traditions evaluate character contextually and humanely, balancing ethical discernment with compassion for lived circumstance. Moreover, contemporary reinterpretations of ancestral practices demonstrate their ethical resilience and adaptability in pluralistic and modern contexts. Rather than undermining the practice, these reinterpretations reaffirm its moral core by distinguishing ethical remembrance from metaphysical authority.

Ultimately, this study argues that ancestor veneration represents a distinctive African contribution to global ethical discourse. By grounding moral recognition in character, communal responsibility, and moral legacy, African thought offers a compelling account of what it means to live a life worthy of enduring remembrance. Ancestor veneration affirms a profound moral insight: that the true measure of a life lies not in its duration or status, but in the positive ethical imprint it leaves on others. In this sense, the institution stands as both a mirror of communal values and a moral compass for future generations, underscoring the enduring relevance of African ethical philosophy in contemporary moral inquiry.

Endnotes

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