

PART I

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REVISITING ANCESTORS  
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## Leveraging the Dead

### The Ethnography of Ancestors

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... the ancestors do not die, but only slowly fade away as they are replaced by their more numerous descendants.

David N. Keightley, "The Making of the Ancestors," 42

Since the late nineteenth century, American and European scholars in history, sociology, and anthropology have speculated on and debated the roles that the spirits of the dead play in societies both ancient and modern. Some—but not all—of those dead are ancestors. Why a select group of the deceased became ancestors, the ways those ancestors were honored and remembered, the ways that ancestors manifested in the lives of their descendants, and the identification of ancestors in archaeological contexts are the subjects of this book. In the simplest terms, an ancestor is a deceased forebear, a member of one's lineage, clan, or house who is no longer among the living. In some societies, ancestors are vital, powerful entities in the daily lives of those who fear, venerate, and propitiate them. These ancestors represent a select subset of the deceased—those kin who, for various reasons, remain part of the collective consciousness of their descendants. Such ancestors may demand sacrifices, offerings, and libations, provide protection and good health, or bring illness, grief, and disaster.

Ancestor veneration is not a religion per se; rather, it is one set of beliefs and practices within a larger cosmological system that explains origins, structures relationships, and conveys information about group membership. While the term "veneration" is used here, earlier scholars often described the worship of the deceased as an "ancestor cult" or a

“cult of the dead.” In its original sense, the term “cult” generally referred to the rites, beliefs, and *sacra* used to pay homage to supernatural or divine beings. Although ancestors may be perceived as divine in some ethnographic contexts, far more often they occupy ambivalent positions vis-à-vis their descendants. That ambivalence is negotiated through prayer, sacrifice, and other ritual acts that memorialize the deceased, affirm kin relations, and reinforce status, authority, and access to resources. Although anthropologists today understand ancestors as part of the fabric of social organization—as historically contingent and temporally variable—nineteenth-century scholars looked to ancestors in their reconstructions of the earliest forms of human religion and social structure.

Working within the paradigm of cultural evolution and firmly situated within the colonial enterprise, Edward B. Tylor sought the origins of human belief in African and Australian Aboriginal societies. These supposed primitives appeared to Tylor to be relics of an earlier stage of human cultural development. Through the study of their beliefs in animism, totemism, and ancestor worship, he hoped to reconstruct humanity’s earliest attempts to explain the world. While Tylor sought answers in Aboriginal beliefs, his contemporary, French historian Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, explored the classical world for clues on how religion influenced the social development of Greece and Rome. Despite temporal and spatial distance, “modern primitives” and ancient Greeks appeared to share a similar preoccupation with the ancestral dead, a subject pursued into the twentieth century by Émile Durkheim and James G. Frazer.

Although Victorian era cultural evolution has long since been abandoned as an organizational schema, ancestors and their veneration became firmly entrenched in anthropological understanding of the social and political organization of societies throughout Africa and East Asia during the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1980s and 1990s, the abandonment of structural-functionalist perspectives, with their emphasis on kinship, led to the marginalization of ancestors as a subject of anthropological study in Africa. In spite of this marginalization, ancestors stubbornly maintained their presence among peoples studied by ethnographers. Twenty-first-century cultural anthropology is seeing interest in ancestors emerge in new ways: in colonial and historical critiques, in studies of postcolonialism and modernity, and in transformations of gender roles.

In this chapter, we review the historiography of ancestors, beginning in the late nineteenth century with classical historians and sociologists. We

then highlight the work of twentieth-century ethnographers who more fully developed studies of ancestors, and we track the development of the concept through the influential ethnographic debates of the 1960s in which African ancestors became the prototypes for those in other world regions. Forays into China and, briefly, into Madagascar explore how research from these regions simultaneously expanded the breadth of material on ancestors and contributed to the establishment of two primary and distinct traditions of ancestor studies, African and East Asian.

We conclude with a list of ten key points we have derived from this comparative study of ancestors, including the common roles that ancestors fill and the cultural domains in which they operate. Ancestors do many things around the world, but they are consistently associated with agency, power, authority, descent, inheritance, resources, memory, and identity. Finally, we provide a brief overview of the chapters in this volume, which are divided into two parts: “Revisiting Ancestors” in the core areas where their study began (China, Greece, and Africa) and “Discovering Ancestors” in the archaeological records of Europe, Peru, and Mesoamerica.

## Defining Ancestors

One of the most influential definitions of “ancestor” to appear in the anthropological literature is that of Meyer Fortes:

a named, dead forbear [*sic*] who has living descendants of a designated genealogical class representing his continued structural relevance. . . . such an ancestor receives ritual service and tendance [by descendants] [Fortes 1965:124].

As Fortes’s definition makes clear, not everyone who dies is or can become an ancestor. “Death has no deifying virtue,” wrote Durkheim (1964:62 [1912]); it is a necessary “but not sufficient condition for the attainment of ancestorhood” (Fortes 1965:125). Creation of an ancestor requires the living to engage in some ritual act that separates some of the deceased from the “crowd of the profane” (Durkheim [1964:62 (1912)]). Such acts may be components of mortuary rites or completely separate, occurring months or years after death. Once select deceased have achieved ancestorhood, they remain active among the living. Some inspire fear and require constant propitiation through offerings; other, more benign ancestors are

the source of good fortune and lineage prosperity. They, too, require veneration. In contrast to funerary and mourning rites occasioned by death, relations between ancestors and their descendants are reciprocal and periodic; rituals intended to maintain good relations are celebrated at regular intervals on some quotidian or calendrical basis (1964:63 [1912]).

Following Durkheim, Fortes distinguished between ancestors and the dead more generally. He understood funerary rites as rites of passage—acts that resolved the disruption and assuaged the grief resulting from the death of a community member (1965:128). His perspective was similar to that of Max Gluckman[n] (1937:125), who differentiated between ancestor veneration and a more general concern with the spirits of the dead, noting that an “ancestral cult” involves “belief in the continued interference of ancestral ghosts in the affairs of their living kin and continual ritual behavior by the latter to the former.” Distinct rites were required to transform the deceased into an ancestor: “The dead has first to be ‘brought back home again,’ re-established in the family and lineage, by obsequial rites, and will even then not receive proper ritual service until he manifests himself in the life of his descendants and is enshrined” (Fortes 1965:129). From that point on, the deceased becomes “a regulative focus for . . . social relations and activities” (1965:129) through which lineages and other corporate groups are organized and constituted.

A broader definition of “ancestor” is provided by Newell (1976b:18–22) based on comparative work using East Asian materials. First, ancestors are named deceased who successfully undergo a rite of passage. Second, some form of continuity must exist between the ancestor and his former life, usually a family relationship, genealogy, or pedigree. This establishes for the ancestor living relations who may identify and worship him. Ritual, therefore, is an essential part of Newell’s definition (1976b:21). Finally, ancestors must be understood to have some existence separate from that of the body. Newell (1976b:20) finds Fortes’s definition too restricted; he charges that it reduces ancestor worship “to almost purely structural significance.”

A more diffuse definition is offered by John Middleton (1960:33), based on his work among the Lugbara of Uganda:

Ancestors thus include all the dead and living forebears of *ego’s* lineage. . . . They are both male and female. . . . The dead among them are important in ritual as the objects of sacrifice. They are thought

of as forming a collectivity, in which individual ancestors are not significant *qua* individuals. They send sickness to the living, but they send it collectively, and shrines are erected for them as collectivities also.

In contrast to the Tallensi ancestors described by Fortes, those among the Lugbara may be unnamed, collective, and even childless, though the childless are distinguished as a collectivity separate from that of the patri- or matriline. Despite the diversity of Lugbara ancestor types and their associated shrines, the most commonly recognized ancestors are those belonging to a select collectivity of the male deceased in ego's minimal lineage who have begotten children. Such ancestors are “‘just ancestors’ without qualification . . . [and] form a collectivity in which individual personality, responsibility, and kin relationship to living people are irrelevant” (Middleton 1960:52).

A component of these definitions critical to the archaeological understanding of ancestors is the fact that veneration is materialized through periodic ritual acts, that is, Fortes's (1965:124) “ritual service and tendance.” Middleton (1960:33) noted that the dead “are important in ritual as the objects of sacrifice,” while Durkheim (1964:63 [1912]) included periodicity in his definition of venerative rites. Similarly critical to identifying ancestors archaeologically is their link with corporate groups. In his study of Chinese kinship, Watson (1982a:594) identified ancestors as the “original founders of the corporation” and the basis for the “ritual unity” of the lineage celebrated in rites conducted in halls and shrines. He concisely identified those features that distinguish ancestors and their veneration from a concern with the dead more generally: death rituals tend to be *inclusive*; they involve non-kin; serve as rites of passage for the community, the mourners, and the soul or spirit of the deceased; and function as venues for competition and intergroup negotiation. In contrast, beliefs and rituals associated with ancestor veneration emphasize lineage unity, exclusivity, and resource control. This concern with lineage and resources is evident in Stephan Feuchtwang's (1974) succinct definition of ancestor worship as “the use of the biological fact of birth selectively for social classification and for claims on certain kinds of social relationships.”

In Ghana and Nigeria, ancestors and their shrines incorporate an additional conceptual component—they represent the domestication of space, their presence proof that the bush has been transformed and incorporated

(Kopytoff 1987; McCall 1995). Ancestors are those who came first, who cleared the land for farms, constructed the first shrines, and were interred beneath the floors of houses. McCall understands ancestors as the conceptual foundation of cultural space, their veneration and the maintenance of shrines as social and material acts that establish links between the living, the dead, and the land. Ancestors are also part of what makes one human; those who cannot claim kin and bear no responsibility to ancestors exist beyond the bounds of society (Middleton 1960). Thus remembering and propitiating ancestors are profoundly human acts; shrines, like houses, distinguish place from space, the village from the bush.

In sum, “ancestors” is a highly diverse category that includes some, but not all, of the deceased of a corporate group that is usually, but not always, unilineal. Ancestors may be named, as they are among the Tallensi of northern Ghana (Fortes 1965), or they may form part of a more nebulous collective presence, as do some long-dead Merina of Madagascar (Bloch 1971) and the most common Lugbara ancestors (Middleton 1960). Their remains may be curated individually for ritual use, or their bones may be deposited en masse in a lineage ossuary. Ancestors may be men or women; they may be fractious shades of elders or childless and dissatisfied. Beliefs about deceased kin are materialized through periodic rituals that seek to access the ancestors for the purposes of revering, propitiating, or gaining favor from them. Such rites tend to have spatial components and leave material residues that are commonly represented in the form of architecture and landscape modifications, curated or modified remains of the deceased, and structured deposits involving sacrifice, offerings, and libations.

## A History of Ancestors

### Early Ancestors

Ancestors have figured prominently in anthropological and historical literature since the late nineteenth century. Their Victorian era study was part of a larger intellectual project to understand the origins of human civilization and identify the evolutionary stages of its advancement. Religion was of particular interest, as the complexity and sophistication of a society’s belief system was thought to be indicative of its overall level of cultural progress. Through the study of funerary rituals and beliefs about