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BOOK REVIEW

A review and response to ‘From Mortality to Memory: Death and Ancestorhood in African Spiritual Systems’ by Dr Amos Chewachong

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Dr Amos Chewachong in an article ‘From Mortality to Memory: Death and Ancestorhood in African Spiritual Systems’ in *Global Missiology* for January 2026 contrasts the dimensions of death in African thought with dominant Western paradigms which see death solely as the purely biological end of life. His study investigates how in the African worldview death functions as a transition to ancestorhood and how the dead remain active agents in communal life providing guidance and ethical norms. Such ancestorhood is sustained by rituals, memory and social ethics.

He critiques Western secularism for limiting personhood and identity to living rational beings. It also cloaks the reality of death to the extent of practically ignoring it. He notes that Western Christian understanding is sometimes infected by this Western secular view.

Dr Chewachong does an important job in explaining the rationale that underlies the African view of ancestors and the rituals related to death. He highlights the role that becoming an ancestor plays in encouraging moral behaviour; the memory of the departed is preserved in myths and rituals to set examples and ethical norms for the living.

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Such a role for the departed is not totally absent in Western culture, however, as Dr Amos appears to suggest. Westerners remember the examples of people who have gone before - whether of our parents or praiseworthy people. And, to reflect on both cultures in the light of the scripture, the writer to the Hebrew Christians spends a whole chapter setting out the examples of those who have died in faith. Could not Hebrews 13 be cited as a biblical framework for evaluating the role of forebears on our lives in the present? But, in the light of the Bible also I cannot see how Christians could affirm a claim that dead should have a major role in the life of the living. Surely the biblical view is that our accountability is to God and that we should be sensitive to the movements and prompting of His Spirit.

A second area where his thinking can be reflected on in the light of biblical faith is to reflect on the nature of the afterlife in Christian thought. We look for and expect the resurrection of the dead at the return of Christ and the coming of his kingdom in fulness. Till then those who have died 'sleep'. In 1 Corinthians 15:51 Paul affirms that "we shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed". I take that to mean that in their own experience the next awareness Christian people have after their death is that they are with Jesus and that it is resurrection day. It is like going to sleep at 10.30 and the next thing we know it is 7.30. From the view of those alive on earth they have ceased to have activity or agency. But they continue to have personhood and identity in relation to God and will have a future existence in his new heaven and earth. This and other aspects of addressing Christian view of death in Western culture are explored here in <https://talkingaboutdying.org/>

A dimension that could be explored further is how to engage missiologically with the African worldview. Some aspects can be affirmed in the light of the Bible - that death is not the end, and that people who have died serve as an example - or a warning, and can in many cases be remembered with love and respect. The African worldview provides a starting place for sharing the gospel - not by cancelling and displacing it - but by building on it and modifying it in the light of Jesus' resurrection. Thus the desire that there is more to existence than this earthly life is fulfilled in the final kingdom of God; the desire that personhood and identity is not finished at death but is affirmed by the resurrection of the dead. However the negative aspect that the life of the living is now subject to the power of the ancestors or their spirits is at an end. Hebrews 2.14-15 is perhaps apposite here Jesus "too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death".

A parallel with how that view can be built on and modified in the light of the Christian faith is how Christians developed the European festival of Winterval with its themes of light in darkness to be a celebration of the birth of Jesus the light of the world.

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