An introduction to *Honouring our elders: Conversations with the Living-Dead* section

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In his famous critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of darkness*, Chinua Achebe begins with a warning on ignorance. He recalls a British historian, a professor, who once suggested that Africa had no history. Achebe admits that such ignorance might be excusable in a young man, but in a scholar, it becomes a moral failure.[1] For history is not just a record of events; it is proof that a people have lived and have mattered. Thus, to deny Africa her own history is to deny her humanity.

It is from this Achebean insight that I turn to John Mbiti's African philosophy and the notion of the *Living-Dead*.[2] At first glance, the phrase may seem to echo any American horror film, where the dead rise as empty souls, dragged by crumbs of memory, wandering back to old places, driven by hunger and decay. This Western concept of the living-dead terrifies because they are bodies without souls, or rather, memory without meaning.

But Mbiti's description of African beliefs offers optimism. Africa's Living-Dead come out as memory with breath and breadth, and a history

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1 Chinua Achebe, 'An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of darkness*', Montclair State University.

2 John S Mbiti, *Introduction to African religion*, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1975, 72

that does not die, as long as they are remembered.[3] The African living-dead are ancestors, those who have died in body but remain present *in memory, in names, in rituals, in speech, and in the wisdom they taught us*. They *are still* members of the community. They advise, they bless, they watch, but only die when they are forgotten.[4]

Perhaps because legal education in Kenya remains insular, my own ignorance of the term Living-Dead made my lecturer pause,[5] much as Achebe confronted colonial ignorance. We readily learn statutes and cite cases, yet forget our own intellectual inheritance. So when Mbiti's concept of the Living-Dead enters a law classroom, it sounds foreign, even though it is profoundly ours.

> Amadou Hampâté Bâ gives us the most haunting expression of this truth: 'In Africa, when an old man dies, a library burns'.[6]

He warned that while physical monuments like the Nubian stone structures might endure for decades, the last generation of oral scholars risked disappearing, and with them, their accumulated knowledge.[7] This, in simple terms, means 'memory burns'. The wisdom, stories, songs, proverbs, and praise-names of elders: the living archives of a people, are carried in speech and ritual. But it is through writing that they endure. Every word recorded is a life remembered, a library rescued from oblivion.

Mbiti teaches that the dead continue to live as long as they are named and remembered. But again, memory is fragile. Voices fade. Stories scatter. And in writing, we remember. Writing thus becomes a second ritual of remembrance. It preserves names, deeds, songs, and proverbs so that generations yet unborn may still encounter the ancestors.

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3 John S Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*, Praeger Publishers, 1969, 32.

4 Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*, 162.

5 This piece was propelled by conversations with Mwalimu Humphrey Sipalla.

6 Diélika Diallo, 'Hampâté Bâ, The Great Conciliator' The UNESCO Courier, January 1992.

7 Diélika Diallo, 'Hampâté Bâ, The great conciliator' The UNESCO Courier, January 1992.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o understood this deeply. While he insisted that African languages are the true vessels of culture, he also knew that writing itself is an act of resistance against forgetting. When he cautioned that 'ignorance of one's own language …should not become a thing for positive pride',[8] he was mourning silenced ancestors.

In conclusion, African literary giants like Achebe, Saro Wiwa, Biko, Soyinka, Ngũgĩ, and Hampâté Bâ have shown us that writing is not merely an art form but a ritual through which we preserve the memories of the living and the dead. Books, poems, and plays become 'living libraries', where ancestors continue to teach, correct, and inspire.

To write, then, is to refuse the second death.

To write is to say:

You are gone, but you are not silent.
You are dead, but you are not erased.

'In Africa, when an old person dies, a library burns'.[9] This thus becomes Mbiti in one sentence.

And every time we write, we save a shelf from the fire.

Every word written in tribute to those who came before us is a hand extended across time, and a sacred act: the living honouring the dead, the Living-Dead living in the pages we hold.

This is why this section of our journal is sacred. We rename it: *Honouring our elders: Conversations with the Living-Dead*

[8] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o , *Writers in politics*, Heinemann Educational Books, 1981, 55.

[9] UNESCO, 'Amadou Hampâté Bâ: Guardian of African heritage'.