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ARCHAEOLOGY FOR EDUCATION

Communities and the Dead in Africa and Ancient Ethiopia (50–800 CE)

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Abstract In the Global North, death is often treated as the departure of a person. However, across Africa, families and communities often include living and dead members, usually called "ancestors." In this article, we use archaeology to support educators in communicating key aspects of deathways and the study of ancestors in Africa. We do this through an example drawn from the ancient kingdom of Aksum in Ethiopia (50–800 CE). Archaeologist Dilpreet Singh Basanti previously analyzed human remains from Aksum and reconstructed an ancient community's burial and ongoing engagement with a young woman. Artist Naomi Mekonen has created a surrealist lens to present this woman's story of death in this article's figures. Surrealism is a rising perspective in modern art from the Tigray region and is used here to shift the tone from death as a grim tale of loss to death as a love story. We show how ongoing actions around the young woman's tomb relate to her continued role in her family and community. Our example illustrates that ancestors are elements of healthy community life. Ancestors provide a guiding voice that helps to define people's values and experiences of the world. In this way, ancestors are inseparable from "culture," and exploring these themes helps us to appreciate the role of culture as a guiding way that connects generations of loved ones, living and dead.

Résumé Dans l'hémisphère nord, la mort est souvent assimilée au départ d'une personne. Cependant, en Afrique, les familles et les communautés continuent à inclure des membres vivants et des morts, appelés « ancêtres ». Dans cet article, nous utilisons l'archéologie pour aider les éducateurs à communiquer les aspects essentiels des voies de mort et l'étude des ancêtres en Afrique. À travers un exemple tiré de l'ancien royaume d'Axoum en Ethiopie (50-400 CE), l'archéologue Dilpreet Singh Basanti a analysé les restes humains d'Axoum et reconstitué l'enterrement d'une jeune femme par la communauté et l'engagement continu avec la défunte. L'artiste Naomi Mekonen a présenté son histoire de mort par le surréalisme. Le surréalisme est de plus en plus présenté l'art moderne de la région du Tigré. L'artiste l'utilise pour transformer la manière de voir la mort comme la perte totale et obscure en une histoire d'amour. Nous démontrons comment les actions autour de la tombe de la jeune femme sont liées à son rôle continu dans sa famille et sa communauté. Cet exemple illustre que les ancêtres sont des éléments d'une vie communautaire saine. Les ancêtres fournissent une voix directrice qui aide à définir les valeurs et les expériences des gens dans le monde. De cette façon, les ancêtres sont indissociables de la « culture ». L'exploration de ces thèmes aide à apprécier le rôle de

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la culture comme guide qui relie des générations d'êtres chers, vivants et morts.

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In a memory, a young woman passes away from a short illness. She lived a healthy life and was loved by her family (Fig. 1).

In a memory, a family carves a stone house underground with many rooms. They build a long stairway into the house. They place dog skulls at the door to every chamber. They plaster its inside bright white with chips of a sparkling stone so the room will glitter whenever they come back.

In a memory, the family buries the young woman in the house. They lavish the inside with red pottery, with weapons and knives, with ivory furniture, with metal plaques and ornaments, with jewelry boxes gilded in brass and iron, with tinctures of perfume. They place a small human-headed jar in her grave. It looks something like her. They carve a large gravestone, fashioning it with symbols that make it also like a house, and raise it with the help of elephants. It glitters in the sunlight. They place bowls before the great stone and pour wine and food. They call on all they know from Aksum to come honor her. They carve a doorway into the stone.

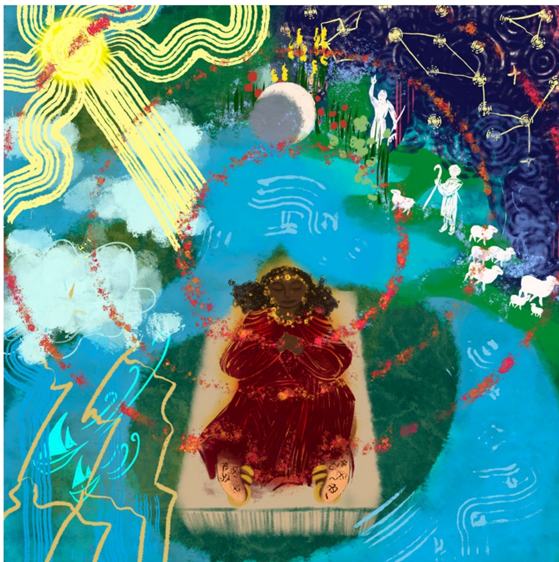

Fig. 1 Memory of a young woman buried. Original artwork by Naomi Mekonen

In a memory, the young woman rests in the stone house. A year passes. Water flows through the tomb again and again. Her parents talk to her in their dreams.

In a memory, the family enters the tomb. They find the young woman. They clean her bones with knives. They carry her back to the surface and hold a ceremony. All her friends and anyone she knows must come, or they will not be forgiven. They return the young woman to the stone house after everyone has a chance to meet her again.

In a memory, the young woman is visited again and again. She spends much time with her family and those who love her long after she is buried.

Bending Death through Art

In archaeology, every story about death is secretly a love story—it is about a person someone did not want to let go. For the dead, people built Taj Mahals, arranged megalithic stones, held festivals, left roses, buried sweets at lighted fires, and carried out a range of other rites. Sometimes these rites involved the bones of the dead so that the feeling of touch in people's lives did not dissipate. These attachments to the dead may seem confusing for people who do not do such things and for whom "dead" means "gone." But in many places worldwide, and for what appears to be much of history, dead rarely meant gone. Dead often simply meant "dead but still here."

These realities of death have solidified over long histories. Passing from our reality to another person's is probably impossible. Yet we can try to understand why our realities differ, or at least the values and experiences our differing realities revolve around. Artist Naomi Mekonen helps us to see "dead but still here" through her art. In the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia, a person may be considered dead but is still honored and cared for long after. Naomi shows us the "after story" of a young woman buried in the ancient kingdom of Aksum around 300–400 CE (Figs. 1–5). Naomi's reality comes from exploring the archaeology of ancient Aksum and working with archaeologist Dilpreet Singh Basanti to reconstruct the ancient community's death rites. Naomi's reality is not the ancient reality but her own, mixed between

Tewahedo Orthodox motifs and the fauvist, surrealist, and magical realist art movements that inspire her and other northern Ethiopian artists as they bend dominant realities into other ones entirely—realities that may capture the important ways life may feel different to someone, but that others may not always see. The realities here form around the memories passed down in the heritage of Tigray by the ancient Aksumite community and the love stories they wished not to die.

Death and Ancestors in Africa

Across Africa, the dead often become what we call "ancestors." Ancestors refer to "those who came before." People use the word ancestors to talk about various kinds of dead who remain present in people's lives. Sometimes they are leaders who govern or guide others from beyond. They could also be more nebulous entities in the invisible world of cause, movement, potential action, and effect.

Communities may have different words for ancestors recently deceased and those who died long ago. While the recently dead may keep their personalities and be otherwise regular family members, those beyond often merge together and become timeless. These are the ancestors of entire communities. People may not always distinguish between "our culture" and "our ancestors." People may speak about their culture as a guiding force made by those who came before, whose voices merge and set down all the important ways a community functions. This is the way, these ancestors have taught, to hold a wedding or give a gift, to eat together or begin a safe and productive archaeological dig, to be someone who is fair to others, or conduct oneself in struggle, to bury a beloved daughter, and to love her long after.

The dead across Africa then take many different forms. The common thread is that they are rarely ever gone completely (Fig. 2):

In some places, a person dies, and they only become older. Some elders accumulated much wisdom throughout their lives and became beacons to guide others. At death, the beacons only become brighter. The body is not always the person, and some cultures see the slow shedding of the body as the wiping away of dirt around a jewel.

Fig. 2 Memory of a return to the grave. Original artwork by Naomi Mekonen

In some places, a person dies, and they slowly melt into the landscape. Ancestors often nurture sacred orchards and groves. Ancestors need to do this because no one else could outlast the lifetimes required for their growth. Nothing in life is random, of course, and different pieces of the world need to be moved and grown by someone's hand. The dead took on these duties for the ease of the living. In many places, ancestors are inseparable from the land. They reside as mere presences, condensing into form at times of need or anger but normally content to go about their quiet work.

In many places, a person dies and then guards the welfare of their community. In Southern Africa, the dead often guide people to medicinal herbs, while in Zambia, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, they commanded revolutionaries to develop stronger healthcare systems as they battled colonizers across the region. In Kenya, Tanzania, and many other places, ancestors guide people to the proper clays for making pots or iron-smelting furnaces. Straying from these clays may result in cracks in the furnace and an inability to create hoes and tools for daily use. However, this also meant that living with the dead is not always a happy or peaceful existence. People are often filled with anxiety about displeasing their ancestors. For some communities, ancestors can be forces of fear

who act as cruel judges. But more often, the danger is not that the ancestor acts upon a person but that they instead withdraw protection from the existing harms of the world. As an ancestor leaves, so too do the eyes watching you, looking to catch you when you fall.

In some places, a person died and warred against colonials in dream worlds before the waking world followed. In Cameroon, sleeping could be a half-death or world-in-between, and it was here that revolutionaries living and dead congregated. One leader—Ruben Um Nyobè—was assassinated while holding a briefcase three years before independence. In his papers were written records of his dreams with scribbled notes: of faceless white beings, of dead comrades trying to communicate that he will need to hide, of days where sorrow and triumph folded into each other, of defiance, as the ground quaked and the winds swirled around him, for Cameroon to be free.

In some places, a person dies but does not become an ancestor. Sometimes it is only the rich and powerful, and sometimes only men, or sometimes people who reached a certain age before death, or accomplished an honorable feat, or that died close to home, and did not die from terrible disease. Ancestors do not exist apart from the social interactions of their community, and communities may have different criteria on who continues to play a role in their lives after that person has died.

In many places, a person dies, and their body is buried. But in other places, it is not. It is instead cleaned with knives, dried by fires, or laid outside on wooden platforms. Bones, once prepared, may be hung from roofs or drilled and worn as necklaces and passed down as family heirlooms. In Madagascar, ancestors are visited, wrapped, rewrapped, and cared for long after their deaths. Over time, their bodies fall apart, and the ancestors slowly combine to become one people, just as the community understood themselves.

In other places there were no ancestors. The dead were buried, the people moved on.

In Africa and other parts of the world, people die in many different ways, and there are a variety of actions people take with the dead. Historical events, beliefs, politics, and social needs follow the general pattern. It may even be difficult for people performing their accustomed rites to decode every symbol or explain the purpose behind every practice because sometimes the language is in the action and not in any lost words. We may argue that the world is molded through a grand architecture of reasons and beliefs, but in doing so, we deny ourselves from seeing the quiet actions that recreate it at every second. Sitting and conversing with the dead and leaving them small bright oranges they may never taste may hold no conceptualized reason to its practice, no secret truth or elided function as a symbol—and still, it will be done. For even if there is no secret meaning to what we do, the world the oranges create is a world where the care between the two does not evaporate.

Ancestors and the World of Ancient Aksum (50–800 CE)

The dead are present in every community. Each custom, tradition, or common ideal shared by a community or nation is often strongly influenced by the actions of those before. Each position taken in debates and on possible futures is a negotiation with the dead. Many of the buildings and monuments we run around today were made by people now dead. Even structures that have since crumbled may fill with people wishing to see that past rearrange the present and see living places where there are now ruined stones. In this way, we live in a world governed by the dead.

In Aksum, in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia, the dead are indeed dead but become part of the culture people live by. People in Tigray often hold strong identities as families and communities. In their daily life, families may build houses with only a few rooms as they prefer not to be divided by walls. Community members often adjust their daily routines to spend more time with others or to attend numerous special events viewed as social "musts." People also often eat together from a large single plate. Close families may also feed each other rather than only themselves (Fig. 3). If a person dies in Aksum, they do not stop being family or community. They are still honored. Groups likes families and communities often understand their togetherness through shared ancestors and the traditions they set down. Many of the biggest structures and ceremonies in Aksum are therefore devoted to the dead. And people often see these signs of heritage as signs of their togetherness.

In ancient times, Aksum was the capital of a large polity in the northern Horn of Africa (50–800 CE).

Fig. 3 Memory of family reunited. Original artwork by Naomi Mekonen

Fig. 4 Memory of explorers of the monsoon winds. Original artwork by Naomi Mekonen

The most cherished cultural symbols of Aksum are towering obelisk-like gravestones called stelae or *hawelti*, raised from around 50–400 CE during the ancient Aksumite kingdom. Hundreds of stelae exist, but the six largest were made to look like houses with rows of carved timber frames, windows, and doorways. The stelae stood 15–32 m tall and weighed about 520 tons. The stone is nepheline syenite of an uncommon blue-gray color that contains small phenocrysts (crystals) that sparkle when freshly cut. Beneath the stelae is a maze of chambered tombs that also mimic the design of Aksumite houses. Colored by memories of past, the *hawelti* remain glittering stones where people gather. People do not always think about death when they see these monuments. Instead, they feature in music videos, on political flyers, in the backgrounds of wedding and graduation photos, or as the seemingly inanimate but unyielding mascot for the local football team. Even as members of the Tigray diaspora travel the globe and face challenges adjusting to new countries or leaving loved ones behind, there is a "togetherness" to the community of Aksum that people celebrate, and traditions passed down to always make it anew. The *hawelti* are the ancient creations of this togetherness.

Life in Aksum then features the dead because of traditions continuously readapted to ensure people do not become strangers and that death does not make strangers of them. Death grows when the practices to the dead are abandoned. The separation between living and dead widens. And ancestors themselves cannot then grant sights of reality. The living cannot then see in stretched time and cannot see the dead as familiar through the collective memories that arrange the present. They cannot then see the laws of Earth animated by the people they love. And so are they unfleshed of senses, left with only ruined buildings and worlds of loss.

Yet here in Aksum, the ancestors have granted other sights, and reveal a world beyond the world of loss:

In a memory, the ancestors were great explorers of the monsoon winds—detailed in Greek trading manuals, honored in Arabic poetry for their fleets whose "prows cut through the foam of the water like a gambler divides the dusts with their hand." They traveled far on the Red Sea and then far again on the Indian Ocean to the markets of Sri Lanka and the west coasts of India, where their coins and goods are still found (Fig. 4). Han Dynasty explorers from China landed at the Aksumite port city of Adulis from where Roman travelers would later depart. Syrian missionaries crashed on their shores and became tutors for the king's son, Ezana, who also

converted to Christianity. The Byzantine emperor sent letters asking for Aksum's aid in the great wars over silk.

In a memory, the ancestors lived as great cosmopolitans, though they were also farmers, diplomats, merchants, priests, soldiers, and artists along the Silk Road routes. They drank wine imported from their allies in Rome and traded in spice from India. They battled the pyramid city of Meroe over iron and power and sent gifts of live rhinoceroses to rival dynasties of Han China. They hunted elephants—possibly to near extinction in their home region of Tigray—and carved ivory into grand furniture and elegant statuettes. On the island of Socotra close by, where the dragon-blooded trees grow, merchants and travelers gathered and left behind writing carved into the walls of a cave in the languages of Aksum (Ge'ez) and Israel (Aramaic), in a script of India (Brahmi), in the language of sailors (Greek), and more. Their homes were filled with green faience from Central Asia, white amphora from Roman Jordan, red glossy plates from Tunisia, and glass vessels from China. Today, archaeologists find shipwrecks of Roman wine amphorae at the bottom of the Red Sea once headed to Aksum.

In a memory, the ancestors saw themselves as tied to great power in their land. The monsoon winds came with violence. They spurred lightning. They spun off small tornadoes. They made the land dark and pale red. But they also carried people off to foreign markets and brought them back home. The monsoon rains filled the Aksumite springs and wells. The water soaked into the earth here. The people saved it until the rains came again. The winds scraped the sandstone mountains to the east. They blew red sand that spread over the region. Mountain spires tower above these red lands and also become places of power. The Aksumites carved their ancient monasteries here in caves of the midnight birds and painted the inside with religious stories of the past before them. They farmed the land of the countryside and built pockets of cities around small flat-topped hills called *ambas*. They traveled to lands of acid pools and lava lakes for salt to spice their food and volcanic glass for their knives. The wells and springs, the mountains and spires, the red lands, the monsoon winds that brought their people home—they knew this place to be Aksum. They later knew it as Tigray.

In a memory, the ancestors built stone houses underground. They raised a large stone platform like a stage between two hills. The water gathers here. And so does the light. A beam of morning sun shines through a dip in the hills while the surroundings remain dark. They buried their families in tombs of multiple chambers and passages winding like labyrinths. The imports the ancestors indulged in when they were alive—the vases of wine from Rome, the precious glass from China and Persia—are all missing from the tombs. There are no fragments. They were never buried. Instead, the ancestors placed the dead with goods made by their community—red pots and carved ivory, metal plaques and ornaments, jewelry boxes gilded with brass and iron, and tinctures of perfume. They also left small human-headed jars that all look a little different. They spread layers of red, white, and black colors over each grave. Sometimes, they plastered the inside of the tombs with white lime and small chips of glittering stone. They built gateway arches to pass through and constructed long stairways into each tomb. They carved out and hauled giant blocks of glittering gray-blue rock from a few kilometers away and raised them at the cemetery. They carved these stones to look like houses. They carved symbolic doorways into the stones. They imbued the doorways with power.

In a memory, a place was made. That place lives today. There is a new town of hotels, appliance shops, and university students meeting at cafés. There is here an old town of rounded houses with thatch and metal roofs, where ruins of palaces are scattered with fragments of overturned but barely noticed white amphorae that came from Rome in centuries past. Some people huddle under old roofs to escape the rush of the monsoon rains. There are streets made from stones of pink, white, gray, and blue hues. Children play football in front of the towering stelae. There is a large and ancient church—they say from the time of Ezana. There is a great and mighty tree—they call it *Dearo Ihya*. Elders gather here to discuss points of philosophy and culture. The children stray and their ball skirts by the old philosophers. The men yell and shoo the kids off and discuss the philosophy of children, the philosophy of morality, the philosophy of footballs and Stokes-drag on parabolic paths of trajectory, and

the philosophy of how respect is lost these days. At night there is a *ts'abel* where the people gather for food, prayer, celebration, or simply because someone may be annoyed if they do not. An old-woman hosts the *ts'abel* and everyone who knows her must come. She will say she is rich in people between laughs and swigs of millet beer.

Meanwhile, people walk under multi-hued lights on the streets or sit at outdoor restaurants watching Premier League games. A small tuk-tuk car drives by with a giant speaker to announce a funeral, telling all the community that they must come. Afterward, when the town sleeps, someone dreams of their father and mother who passed but are visiting them now. They will speak to their family in their dreams. The church bells will ring atop a red spire for burials and worship. The living will arrive at funerals or make donations at the church, like their dead parents commanded. Priests will conduct requiems called *fithats*. Some people will load into minivan taxis to make the trip to a great *tazkar,* where a family will drive themselves into debt bringing people together to love and honor someone dead twenty years with a feast. Others will prepare *ts'abels* for the yearly anniversaries of their beloveds. The day will grow long, and students, visiting family, pilgrims, and tourists will gather beneath ancient once-glittering stones. The people will describe memories of the dead to the visiting strangers. They will tell stories of empires and silk roads. They will tell stories of battles across the Red Sea. They will tell stories of the survivors of Christian shipwrecks tutoring a young prince. They will descend the gateways to an ancient tomb. They will one day become philosophers who sit at trees and relate memories of old places. But they begin now in a tomb with one of the oldest memories they know.

In a memory, a young woman is buried. Her skull will be found in the tomb almost 1700 years later in Aksum, together with the bones of her family—we know of at least nine buried together. Her bones show that she died around 25–30 years of age from an undeciphered cause. Her teeth show that she ate very hard and sugary foods as a child but changed to a softer diet when she was about nine years old. Isotopes in her bones say she ate breads from a local grain called teff and meat from wild antelopes. She probably began working with her parents before she was 13, as many of the bones show that the arm and leg muscles grew quite strong, though she seemed wealthy by the size of her tomb and the extravagant goods buried with her. In a memory, someone came to take her skull—likely not more than a year after she died. They cleaned this skull with a sharp knife leaving nicks behind. She spent some time with the living after she died—probably her family, but a bigger community may have joined in ceremonies above her grave (Fig. 5). Eventually they brought her back to her new home. They opened and closed the tomb multiple times. They visited her often.

And like those who came before, people return to her again now. As memories arrange the present and realities are made and unmade—but always in a course guided by history beneath—that this is the way, the ancestors have taught, to hold a wedding or give a gift, to eat together, to meet at the *dearo*, to touch red earth and water, to be someone that is fair to others, to hear a song that will play on the day you leave for far away, and the food in your belly when elders and youngers draw tears behind you. To go far for family, to go far for duty, to go far across the globe for markets elsewhere. To go far as

Fig. 5 Memory of glittering stones. Original artwork by Naomi Mekonen

the world changes against you, and leaves no pause, no quiet, as it then takes pieces away. To go as far as the winds blow, and then bring you back home. To go far. And then far again. And to know for every moment made together what all the dead have given to you, and that they are not done giving, too.

As the ancestors also learned and passed down in glittering stones: a memory of when they buried a beloved daughter, and loved her long after.

And taught those that came after them to love her too.

Prompts for Students

1. Can you think of things that you or your families do that your grandparents or ancestors did? How did you learn to do those things? How did they learn those things?
2. How do the ancestors appear in the art? What is the "love story" told? What is important about the glittering stones?
3. How did the artist and author describe Aksum? What is the picture in your mind? What can you hear, taste, see, feel, and/or smell?
4. What would it be like to be an explorer from Africa on the ancient Silk Road? Where would you be most excited to travel to and why?
5. Why is it important to understand the different traditions and practices of different communities? How do you think the customs of modern and ancient Aksum are valuable to the community?

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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