

BOOK REVIEW

Pascal Couderc and Kenneth Sillander, eds. *Ancestors in Borneo Societies: Death, Transformation and Social Immortality*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012.

Death, eschatology and mortuary practice in Borneo societies have long received considerable attention from anthropologists. Many of these studies in some way have been influenced by Robert Hertz's "collective representation of death" theory, especially since the appearance in 1960 of an English translation of this work (for example, Peter Metcalf's *A Borneo Journey into Death* in 1982). In contrast, studies focusing on ancestors in Borneo, particularly their religious and social importance, have long been an area of neglect. This oversight is even more surprising given that in Borneo, like most other Austronesian-speaking societies, the dead play a significant role in the ritual activities of the living.

This volume on *Ancestors in Borneo Societies*, not only takes an important stride in addressing this evident lacunae in studies on ancestors in Borneo, but also challenges the classic representations of ancestor worship in the wider academic world, largely derived from studies relating to Chinese and African societies. The book comprises of a substantial introduction followed by eight chapters, each of which focus on non-Malay indigenous groups in the Indonesian and Malaysian parts of the island. All chapters draw on extended primary research, written by recognised experts in their respective fields.

The impressive introductory chapter, co-authored by the two editors, presents a theoretical overview of ancestors, ancestry and ancestorship, a comprehensive review of the related ethnographic literature of Borneo, and a clear framework for the book as a whole. It also serves to locate the book in the wider "field" of ancestor studies and to set out its challenge to current and largely accepted interpretations of ancestor worship. The first three chapters following the introduction provide detailed accounts of ancestorship within a specific community. The following five each focus on a specific aspect of ancestorship within a given society.

In the first chapter on "Ancestors as sources of authority and potency among the Bentian of East Kalimantan," Kenneth Sillander begins by addressing Bernard Sellato's argument for a narrow definition of an ancestor: a few dead forbearers selected because of extraordinary deeds in life and for whom a special ancestor rite was performed. As Sillander demonstrates, while the Bentian do have such ancestors, a broader definition is needed in order to understand fully ancestorship among the

Bentian and the continuing role ancestors play in the present. He demonstrates the existence, importance and various manifestations of ancestors in this society, who are contacted regularly as sources of authority, not just through ritual but also through public and private speech.

In the following chapter, Clifford Sather discusses the numerous variations in ancestor manifestation in Saribas Iban society, and how this is connected to complex funerary rituals. The third chapter by Pascal Couderc discusses two contrasting forms of ancestorship among the Uut Danum of West Kalimantan. The first of these are ancestors created in mortuary rituals, while the second relates to the transformation of living people into animal-spirit ancestors. Couderc explores these contrasting processes and shows that while these two forms of ancestorship manifest in very different ways they nevertheless exist within a single ideological structure.

In Chapter Four, Ann Appleton focuses on Malanau "ancestorship as an existential concern." Most Malanau today follow Islam, a few Christianity, while only a small number of "very old" Melanau follow animistic beliefs. However, these older beliefs, as Appleton shows, remain prevalent among the Melanau, irrespective of the religion they follow, and continue to play an important role in religious practice in the present. She explores the sociological importance of *tipou* (the ancestor concept) and argues that it serves to facilitate and encourage genealogical connections among the Melanau, regardless of their religion, and functions as an integrating force for Melanau identity, which itself "takes precedence over other social and religious affiliations."

In the following chapter, Véronique Béguet challenges the established notion that the Iban *petara* are "gods." She argues that they should be correctly recognised as ancestors or more to the point, transformed ancestors that take animal and bird forms.

In Chapter Six, Christian Oesterheld uses the Dayak-Madurese "ethnic violence" of the 1990s and 2000s as a platform to re-examine Dayak ancestral possession and comradeship within modern Borneo. He shows how this is linked to the development of an inter-regional Dayak identity.

Chapter Seven by Richard Payne looks at spirit possession as a form of communicating with ancestors among the Benuaq of East Kalimantan. He looks specifically at three different types of ancestral spirit possession: spontaneous possession, induced possession, and formalised possession.

The final chapter of the book by Christine Helliwell discusses the "ritual hearth" of the Gerai of West Kalimantan. Ancestorship among the Gerai differs from that described in previous chapters as its focus is on establishing connections to a "ritual hearth," not through tracing, invoking or connecting with forbearers.

Ancestors in Borneo Societies makes a valuable contribution to understanding the religious and social significance of ancestors in the world's third largest island. Given the significance of ancestors in the societies discussed by the contributors, a book of this nature and focus is long overdue and it will no doubt stimulate further studies on ancestors in other Borneo societies and the Austronesian-speaking world as a whole. However, the book's importance is by no means confined to Austronesian societies. Its rich ethnographic data allows for much wider comparative studies on ancestorship with other parts of the world.

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