

## The Role of Ancestors in Iban Traditional Religion

Kyle J. Clark<sup>1</sup> & Riki Rikando<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Evansville

<sup>2</sup>Yayasan Riak Bumi

\*Corresponding author: kc441@evansville.edu

### ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural studies of religion have consistently treated ancestor worship as a specific, narrow practice that is found in many traditional societies but far from all of them. In contrast, Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley (1996) have proclaimed that ancestor worship was a universal behavior in traditional, small-scale societies and that the practice is found in societies where it was previously thought to be absent. In this paper, we describe one such society, the Iban, whose religious practices are often claimed to not include the worship of ancestors, despite ancestors being central to their religion. We demonstrate that many of the gods and spirits of the Iban supernatural pantheon are most clearly understood as ancestors. Furthermore, we argue that the Iban example may not be an outlier, and that ancestor worship may be prevalent in many more societies than previously claimed. We end by describing the weaknesses of some of the common reasons used to downplay the ubiquity of the practice in previous ethnographic treatments and cross-cultural studies.

*Keywords: ancestor worship; Iban; supernatural beings; religion*

### INTRODUCTION

The universal, or, at the very least, near universal, supernatural claims of ancestors in societies all over the world has only been appreciated by a few scholars (e.g. Clark & Coe, 2021; Crespi & Summers, 2014; Lahti, 2009; Steadman & Palmer, 2008; Steadman, Palmer, & Tilley, 1996), despite the practice enjoying the attention of numerous studies (e.g., Coe & Begley, 2016; Couderc & Sillander, 2012; Fortes, 1961; Glowacki & Malpass, 2003; Hu, 2016; Kopytoff, 1971; Luwayi, 1988; Middleton, 1960). Most researchers who have studied ancestor worship in depth have tended to break up ancestor worship into differing levels of veneration by descendants and/or influence of ancestors on descendant's behavior, arguing that ancestor worship is too broad of a category to be meaningful for study. Instead, they argue that ancestor worship takes specific forms in each society with only a loose association with them as a general category of ancestor worship. The worship of ancestors, in this line of thinking, should be treated on a case-by-case basis rather than be lumped into the practice of 'ancestor worship' (Sheils, 1975).

Treating ancestor worship on a case-by-case basis, although essential for ethnographic insights into the variances between peoples, may lead to overly narrow definitions of the practice (Steadman, Palmer, & Tilley, 1996). Confusion over how widespread ancestor worship is may be due to many previous researchers having defined ancestor worship based on specific cases to particular cultures or specific ideas. Bloch (1996), for example, notes that ancestor worship concerns beliefs about dead ancestors influencing the living. While a respectable definition of the practice, we have two primary concerns with Bloch's approach. The first is the assumption that belief is a primary aspect of ancestor worship. We

make no such assumptions due to beliefs being unverifiable (Rappaport, 1999; Steadman & Palmer, 1995, 2008). Second, and most importantly for our purposes here, Bloch limits ancestor worship to the dead influencing the living, leaving out claims of the living being able to influence the dead. Many anthropologists have described claims of ancestors being upset with their descendants, such as when Turner (1967) points out that any Ndembu displaying conduct that an ancestor would disapprove of would anger that ancestor. Being able to influence the mood of ancestors is one way in which the living can influence the dead, and, hence, needs to be included in any definition of ancestor worship.

Given the shortcomings of Bloch's (1996) and other definitions of ancestor worship, we follow Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley (1996) and Clark and Palmer (2016) in describing the defining features of ancestor worship as the claim that ancestors influence the living and can be influenced by the living. This definition is specific enough to promote an understanding of the practice of ancestor worship, yet general enough to apply cross-culturally. A more general and nuanced approach to ancestor worship elucidates the widespread claims of ancestors in cultures all over the world and is broad enough to be conducive to different forms of analysis. Most importantly, we argue that this definition most accurately depicts what peoples and ethnographers mean when they refer to ancestor worship (e.g., claims that ancestors care about your behavior after they have died).

In this paper, we demonstrate the utility of a broad approach to ancestor worship with examples from the Iban of Borneo. Using data drawn from the ethnographic literature on the Iban, supplemented with ethnographic insights drawn from fieldwork in Kapuas Hulu, West Kalimantan, Indonesia, we argue that the Iban, whom have been cited as or implied to not practice ancestor worship (e.g., Freeman, 1970; Swanson, 1960), do worship their ancestors. Indeed, ancestors are a central feature of Iban religion from their creation stories to modern religious rituals (Sather, 2012). Again, following Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley (1996) we argue that the Iban are likely not the only culture whose practices of ancestor worship have previously gone unrecognized, and end by giving a few examples of other cultures and cross-cultural studies that have overlooked, misidentified, or deemphasized ancestor worship in the ethnographic record.

## THE IBAN

One of the Dayak groups of northwestern Borneo, the Iban traditionally inhabit the rivers and tributaries of Sarawak, Malaysia, where they are the largest Dayak group, and West Kalimantan, Indonesia (King, 1993). Most of the Iban live on the Malaysian side of the border (Barrett & Lucas, 1989). Individuals on the Indonesian side of the border will often travel back and forth between the two countries for work, and many of these individuals may have dual citizenship. The Iban individuals working in the cities or abroad will often send back remittances to their family in their natal homes or, traditionally, return with prized items such as Chinese gongs (Kedit, 1991; Mashman, 1991).

The Iban subsist primarily on swidden hill and wet rice horticulture (Cramb, 1989). The Iban traditionally reside in longhouses, but some households have more recently adopted single-family homes. Freeman (1970) termed the pattern of Iban household composition as the *bilik*-family to represent the basic unit of economic organization (*bilik* being the Iban word for household). Thus, when Iban refer to members of or situations pertaining to members of their household, they use the phrase *kitai sabilik* (we of one household). Beyond the household, kinship is reckoned bilaterally, with equal recognition of an individual's father's and mother's kin (Davison & Sutlive, 1991). Freeman (1970) equates the Iban term *kaban* with what anthropologists refer to as the kindred, an outward extension of genealogical relatives from Ego.

To keep track of their vast network of kin, the Iban traditionally memorize the genealogical links to their forebears; the recitations of which are called *tusut*. *Tusut* are common when strangers visit an area or longhouse unfamiliar to them. When this occurs, individuals will “tie up the fishnet” until they find a common genealogical link (Sutlive, 1978). According to Sutlive (1978), most often Iban individuals are able to find a kinship link and thus find hospitality anywhere they travel within Iban territory. *Tusut* recitation rituals effectively make it so that an Iban “rarely meets a “nonkinsmen”” (Sutlive, 1978 p. 57). As Clark and Coe (2021) have argued, this extensive form of kin recognition may have been a crucial feature supporting Iban ancestor worship by providing a means of linking extended kinspersons with altruism. While some behaviors have changed or completely ceased from ordinary life, other behaviors remain traditional, such as their labor exchange system (*bedurok*), and customary laws (*adat*) (Clark, 2021).

## IBAN RELIGION

The religion of the Iban spans a wide gamut of claims, rituals, and practices referencing the supernatural (Motey, Senang, & Tugang, 2018). Iban religion also involves various religious personnel, such as shamans (*manang*), bards (*lemambang*), and soul guides (*tukang sabak*), and locations within and outside of the longhouse (Sather, 1993, 2001). The focus of this paper, however, is on who is being referenced during such rituals and in daily religious claims, no matter where they occur. This is because there is a discrepancy between our observations of Iban religious behavior and what has been previously described by some ethnographers. Nearly all of the early literature on Iban religion does not recognize the importance of ancestors, although some authors have recognized the role of ancestors more recently (e.g., Béguet, 2012; Sather, 2012; Wadley, 1999).

This may occur in part because, as has been pointed out elsewhere, the Iban have no word directly translating as ancestor (Sather, 2012; Wadley, 1999). Thus, the Iban refer to their ancestors as *aki' ini'*, which literally translates as ‘grandfather-grandmother’, but is also used to denote ancestors beyond them (Sather, 2012; Wadley, 1999). This is pattern of using grandfather-grandmother to reference ancestors is common in Borneo societies (Sillander, 2012). Thus, the term *aki' ini'* may be the clearest representation of ancestors in the Iban vocabulary. Previous research has illuminated the connection between the *aki' ini'* and Iban ancestors (Béguet, 2012; Sather, 2012; Wadley, 1999) but it is worth further emphasizing here.

Wadley (1999) points out that the Iban rarely reference their ancestors as *aki' ini'* in their prayers or rituals but prefer the term *betara* (often translated as gods; see *Betara* section below) in these circumstances. Making the connection clearer, they may use *betara aki' ini'* to denote distant ancestors during ceremonies (Sather, 2003), especially during rice ceremonies (Sather, 1980; 2012).

Beyond *aki' ini'*, the Iban religious pantheon includes references to cultural mythic heroes, gods, and spirits, but ancestors are often relegated to a miniscule role, if any, in the Iban spiritual pantheon. Béguet (2012), describes a pantheon of power differences for the supernatural beings that are claimed by the Iban. First, are the *betara* (gods), and, more specifically, the great *betara*. Second, are the mythic heroes (*Orang Panggau*) of Iban lore. And third, are the *antu* (spirits) of the deceased. Béguet (2012) notes a hierarchical structure with *betara* at the top, and argues that this reflects their removed nature compared to their counterparts, but other researchers point out the contrary (see *betara* section below). Here we describe how gods, mythic heroes, and spirits are better represented as ancestors, following the work of Wadley (1999), Sather (2012), and Béguet (2012). But first we briefly summarize Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley’s (1996) original claim that the Iban make supernatural claims about one of the lesser-known ancestors, the *ngarong*.

## **Ngarong**

In Steadman, Palmer and Tilley's (1996) brief treatment of Iban religion, the authors focus on the *ngarong* (secret helper), as cited in Hose and McDougall's (1912) classic work. The *ngarong* "seems to be usually the spirit ancestor or dead relative . . . [who] becomes the special protector of some individual Iban" (Hose & McDougall, 1912 cf. Steadman, Palmer, & Tilley, 1996 p. 67). Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley (1996) go on to describe an Iban man who refused to kill a gibbon because his grandfather's *ngarong* was a gibbon. These authors note the implied possibility that, through claims of *ngarong*, the living can influence the lives of the dead and thus conform to their definition of ancestor worship. Although this is an example of the Iban claiming a descent connection with their *ngarong*, and therefore an example of ancestor worship, there are more direct paths to connect Iban religion with the worship of their ancestors which we explain below.

## **Orang Panggau**

The *Orang Panggau* are the mythic culture heroes of the Iban. The stories of *Orang Panggau* are passed down through oral myths and are of great importance to Iban culture. Rituals and everyday activities, such as weaving and rice farming, either trace their origins to or involve the of *Orang Panggau* (Sandin, 1994). Particularly important rituals involving the *Orang Panggau* are the reading and interpreting of bird omens (Freeman, 1960; King, 1977, 1980; Metcalf, 1976; Sandin, 1980), and *gawai* (rituals) (Sandin, 1994; Sather, 1994). Sather (1994) emphasizes their importance to *gawai* rituals when he states that the *Orang Panggau*, "are invisible intermediaries, who, for example, during major Gawai festivals, welcome and entertain the gods and goddesses whom the human bards have called down from the sky to bless the ritual sponsors and to participate, unseen, in the ritual work of the Gawai" (p. 31). Much of Iban behavior can trace their beginnings to the directives of the *Orang Panggau* through various myths of the original Iban culture heroes.

Given their mythic importance, ethnographers have been split on whether the *Orang Panggau* are best described as ancestors or some other kind of deity. Sather (1994), for example, notes that ancestors are central to Iban myths of the past, and that they shared "a common world with *Orang Panggau*" (p. 32). This statement implies that, although the two supernatural entities are close in proximity, they are entirely different entities. This continues a pattern that draws sharp distinctions between ancestors and deities, and treats them as separate categories of supernatural beings (see also Sandin, 1968).

Making a direct connection between the Iban *Orang Panggau* and ancestors, Jensen (1974) reveals that Sera Gunting, also referred to as Surong Gunting, is the original Iban ancestor. Sera Gunting, according to Iban myths, is the grandson of one of the most important of the Iban mythic heroes, Sengalang Burong (whose full name is Lang Sengalang Burong). To briefly summarize the myth, a mortal man named Menggin unknowingly marries the daughter of the Sengalang Burong and they have a son (Jensen, 1974; Sandin, 1994; Sather, 2012). The son, Sera Gunting, later appeals to his grandfather for recognition of being part spirit due to his ancestry with Sengalang Burong, and is put through many trials to prove it (Sandin, 1994). Eventually, Sera Gunting successfully proves his spirit ancestry to his grandfather, whom formally recognizes their kinship and eventually grows to like his grandson (Sandin, 1994).

As the origin story of Sera Gunting demonstrates, Sera Gunting is considered an ancestor, and, by extension of being his grandfather, so is Sengalang Burong. Sather (1994) alludes to this genealogical link by recording that "many present-day Saribas Iban trace their genealogies to Sera Gunting and to other early ancestors and so, through them, to the gods themselves" (p. 119). Sather's quote emphasizes the specific connection of the Iban claims of ancestry to Sera Gunting, which he notes gives the Iban a claimed link to the gods. Jensen (1974) further elaborates by stating "[i]n all the myths which relate to Sengalang Burong and his relatives, he shows himself well disposed toward the Iban. But the spirits are not simply benevolent, superior beings, able and willing to guide the Iban. They are actually kin (*kaban*)" (p. 92). Furthermore, Jensen (1974) Sera Gunting "stands at the head not only of the Iban spirit

pedigree but also of their physical ancestry” (p. 84) Thus, the Iban explicitly claim their traditional gods are ancestors by claiming that they are their descendants.

### **Betara**

*Betara* (also called *petara*; we will use *betara* except when directly quoting other researchers) are most often referred to as gods (e.g., Davison, 1987; Freeman, 1970; Jensen, 1974; Sutlive, 1978). *Betara* are often portrayed by scholars of Iban culture as supernatural beings who behave kindly towards the living. Exemplifying their kindness, Sather (1994) notes that “[e]ssentially, the term *petara* refers to all supernatural beings who have benevolent intensions toward humankind” (p. 30) In early accounts of Iban religion, *betara* were often lumped into a single monotheistic deity (Jensen, 1974). These accounts suggested that the Iban practice monotheism, and their creator god was ‘Batara’ (Low, 1848). This would suggest a lack of ancestor worship.

Béguet (2012) describes *betara* as “transformed ancestors” that represent all of the dead, including “historical figures with remembered pedigrees” (p. 247). These historical figures include the *Orang Panggau* outlined above. Similarly, Jensen (1974) notes that “[a]mong the Iban, *petara* is used as an honorific for important spirits, in particular as a general title for Sengalong Burong, Pulang Gana, and other prominent members of the spirit hierarchy” (pp. 100-101). As is argued here, the supernatural beings of that make up the *Orang Panggau* and *betara* share an important connection of being identified as ancestors by the Iban.

Furthermore, Sather (2012) also notes that *betara* are ancestors, but also continues to use the term to refer to gods, but further notes that the Iban will use *aki’ ini’ betara* (grandfather-grandmother gods). This usage may continue create confusion regarding the nature of the *betara*, especially in reference the ancestral nature of *betara*. In contrast, Wadley (1999) states that “*betara* are most commonly the spirits of distant ancestors” (p. 599). *Betara*, according to Wadley, are most often invoked during religious rituals and are the named ancestors in the *tusut* genealogical recitations.

### **Antu**

In contrast to *betara*, *Antu* are generally referred to as spirits, and, as mentioned above, often have negative associations (Masing, 1997). Giving examples of the negative connotations that *antu* possess for the Iban, Tugang and Kiyai (2022), Sutlive (1978), and Sather (2001) list the different *antu* spirits and their associated negative impacts on individuals and communities. Such spirits include *antu* gerasi, *antu* tinggi, and *antu* Kamba, while *antu* are associated with hiding children, dilapidated longhouses, and bringing misfortune generally (Sather, 2001; Sutlive, 1978; Tugang & Kiyai, 2022). Further contrasting the differences in *betara* and *antu*, Sutlive (1978) states that “the *antu* are negative influences and things to be avoided” (p. 101). Geddes (1957), studying the Land Dayaks, noticed a similar usage by referring the *antu* as demons.

Despite apparently seeking to avoid *antu*, *antu* form the theme of many *gawai* (rituals) (Hasegawa, 2018), especially the *Gawai Antu*, which is festival that honors the dead (Jensen, 1974). According to Hasegawa (2018), *Gawai Antu* marks the official end of the mourning period. In the context of *Gawai Antu*, the most important of all the *gawai* rituals (Uchibori, 1978), it suggests the importance of *antu*, and the dead in general, to Iban religious behavior.

Demonstrating the ancestral nature of *antu*, Sather (2012) and Béguet (2012) point out that the distinction between *betara* and *antu* are often blurred by being used interchangeably, but reiterate the that *betara* and *antu* are often used to distinguish good versus malevolent spirits Thus, *antu* and *betara* are two words describing the same beings, depending on the negative or positive associations with the situation. *Antu* and *betara* are therefore claimed to be ancestors of the Iban. There is no assertion in our approach of ancestor worship that ancestors must only be benevolent. In the Iban case, ancestors are referred to by different words depending on the good-natured or foul-natured supernatural being in



question. Wadley (1999) makes the case of *antu* being ancestors more directly, by stating that “the dead are generally referred to as *antu*” (p. 599). Clearly, *antu* are Iban ancestors, whether directly referred to as the dead or through their associations of being malevolent *betara* (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Summarizes how the common claims of supernatural beings in the Iban religious pantheon have ancestral qualities.

Supernatural Being	Common Translation	Connection to Ancestors
<i>Ngarong</i>	Secret helper	Claimed to be spirits of dead relatives
<i>Orang Panggau</i>	Mythic heroes	Claimed to be atop the Iban genealogical pedigrees
<i>Betara</i>	Gods	Claimed to be distant ancestors
<i>Antu</i>	Spirits	Claimed to be the spirits of the dead

### ANCESTOR WORSHIP CROSS-CULTURALLY

Previous research obscures the importance of ancestors because some cultures may not explicitly have a term for ‘ancestor.’ In fact, many cultures indeed lack a word for ancestor(s), calling them spirits, shades, totems, or other names not translating directly as ‘ancestors’ (Steadman & Palmer, 2008). For instance, Turner (1967) clarifies that what he calls ‘shades’ are actually “the spirits of deceased relatives” (p. 9). Referring to deceased ancestors as ‘shades’, Turner explains, is due in part to the association of ancestors with more distant or remote relatives. For the Ndembu, the shades that are most salient to daily life are those ancestors that played prominent roles in the lives of the living. Changing the term from ancestors to shades allows Turner to emphasize the recency of the deceased spirit. Despite the use of a different term for ancestors, ancestors are clearly integral to Ndembu religion.

The Yanomamö provide a similar example. As also exemplified by Steadman and Palmer (2008), Yanomamö, religion is centered on ingestion of hallucinogenic drugs and spirits called *hekura* (Chagnon, 1997). The true concept of *hekura* lies in the other claims that the Yanomamö make about their origins. Chagnon (1997) reports that “when the original people died [the *no badabö*], they turned into spirits: *hekura*... In the context of myth and stories of the cosmos, it [the term *no badabö*] means the original humans...” (102). Thus claims about *hekura* refer to the spirits of the original people, otherwise known as ancestors (Steadman & Palmer, 2008). In the Yanomamö case, as well as the Ndembu, ancestors are central to the lives of the living despite being referred to by a different term.

Regardless of what they are referred to as in cultures throughout the ethnographic literature, talk about dead ancestors was, and in many cases still is, prevalent in traditional societies. While peoples throughout the world and the anthropologists who studied them have used other words to refer to ancestors for various reasons, deceased ancestors are important in all, or at least nearly all, human societies. Others have realized the importance of cross-cultural analysis of ancestor worship, and have set out to further define the subject. Once again, variation in claims and practice concerning ancestors have led to dividing ancestor worship into differing levels of veneration based on the claims of each society (e.g. Sheils, 1975, 1980). This has primarily taken the form of the level of interest that ancestors are claimed to have in the lives of the living.

Swanson (1960) provides an example in his classic work, *The Birth of the Gods*. In his book, Swanson codes the claims of the level of ancestor’s interests of activity in the lives of their descendants. The Active Ancestral Spirits section of the cross-cultural study codes ancestors as absent (0) or present (1-3), with further specifications for the present spirits. When ancestors are present, they are further divided

into three more categories: (1) nature of activity unspecified; (2) aid or punish living humans; or (3) are invoked by the living to assist in earthly affairs (Swanson, 1960, pp. 210-11).

According to Swanson's (1960) cross-cultural analysis, many societies either lack ancestor worship all together (coded 0), or the nature of ancestor's is unclear or unspecified (coded 1). Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley (1996) reanalyzed the data presented in Swanson's study and found that each society coded as 0 or 1 does indeed make claims about ancestors. Because each society previously coded as 0 or 1 was shown to worship ancestors, albeit in their own ways, Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley, declared ancestor worship to a human universal in traditional societies.

Another study followed up on the work of Swanson, and similarly breaks down the variations in ancestor worship. Tatje and Hsu (1969) take the initial four categories of ancestor involvement in the lives of descendants and add three more categories, for a total of seven levels of variation. Tatje and Hsu's (1969) define the varieties of ancestor worship as; (1) absence of spirits; (2) neutral spirits; (3) undifferentiated spirits; (4) malicious or capricious spirits; (5) punishing spirits; (6) rewarding-punishing spirits; (7) benevolent-rewarding spirits (pp. 156-157).

The primary difference between Swanson's schematic and that of Tatje and Hsu is that the latter further differentiate the claimed behavior of the ancestors. Tatje and Hsu regard ancestors that are claimed to be malicious or punishing towards the living differently from those who are rewarding and punishing, and further split those ancestors that are claimed to be only rewarding towards the living. Arguing that it is also important to differentiate ancestors who are neutral from those who are undifferentiated, Tatje and Hsu hope to include any claims that peoples make about ancestors. Both Swanson and Tatje and Hsu recognize the importance of ancestor worship and kinship systems.

A more recent approach to by Peoples, Duda, and Marlowe (2016) recognizes that ancestor worship takes many forms, but splits the practice into sub-categories. Following the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (Murdock & White, 1980), Peoples, Duda, and Marlowe code ancestor worship as (1) absent or (2) present but ancestors are inactive in human affairs, (3), active in human affairs but may not be influenced by the living, and (4) active in human affairs and may be influenced by the living (p. 266). The second broad category coded by Peoples, Duda, and Marlowe is 'Active Ancestor Worship' where the spirits of the dead are active in human affairs whether or nor they can be influenced by the living (p. 267). It is unclear how their 'Active Ancestor Worship' category differs from category 4 within the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample. Regardless of how active ancestors are claimed to be within a society, the fact that they are claimed to exist beyond death will still influence the behavior the living—making the claim itself serve as one piece of evidence.

Despite the differences in attitudes, ancestors are still claimed to influence and/or be influence by the lives of their descendants, and therefore ancestors still play a role in the lives of the living. Thus, differentiating more categories within the broad category of ancestor worship does not imply that ancestor worship is not universal. Tatje and Hsu's (1969) argument is theoretical and they do not use a dataset to support their hypotheses, so it is not possible to test their claim that ancestors do not play a role in some societies in the same way that Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley (1996) checked the work of Swanson (1960). Peoples, Duda, and Marlowe (2016) similarly fail to recognize that ancestors still influence the behavior of their descendants regardless of the specific claims made by individuals in different cultures.

## DISCUSSION

As we have outlined in this article, many supernatural beings of the Iban are best understood as ancestors. The *Orang Panggau*, *betara*, and *antu*, are all manifestations of ancestors in that they are claimed to be the dead forebears of the Iban. Through myths and rituals, ancestors influence the behavior of the Iban, especially in acting cooperatively and altruistically towards in each other (Clark & Coe, 2021). Given the ancestral claims of the *Orang Panggau*, *betara* and *antu*, and the influence that these claims have on the behavior of their descendants, the Iban display every facet of the definition of ancestor worship that we have described above and analyzed here.

Although we have argued that the traditional Iban religion is best described as a cult of the ancestors, there has been considerable change in the religious claims that the Iban make over the years. With the introduction of Christianity by missionaries in the mid-1800s (Pringle, 1970), the religious behavior of the Iban began to shift toward a syncretization of their traditional ancestor worship with the Christian faith. The Iban of Wong Garai, West Kalimantan, Indonesia (a pseudonym), for example, would claim that their rituals were aimed at both the Christian God and ancestors. Common rituals such as *biau* (a fowl-waving ritual) would be for God and ancestors alike. This ritual was described to one of the authors as being a traditional version of a prayer that now involves God (Clark, 2021). Therefore, ancestors are not the sole supernatural entities in the Iban pantheon in the modern context.

This pattern has taken place in other societies all over the world (e.g., Turdieva, 2022), including in the societies we outlined above. We do not expect ancestor worship, therefore, to be as prevalent in modern societies as they likely were when before the spread of world religions. Ancestor worship is a product of traditional, kinship-based societies (Clark & Coe, 2021), and may be the oldest religion (Steadman & Palmer, 2008). The case for ancestor worship in Iban culture stems from the traditional nature of the practice, but many of the supernatural claims about ancestors are still made today at Wong Garai, and likely elsewhere (see Béguet, 2012; Sather, 2012). If the future generations of Iban discontinue the traditional religious behaviors of their forebears, then the practice will continue to fade until it ultimately ceased to exist.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have argued that much of the previous research on Iban religion has downplayed or disregarded the importance of ancestors. We have shown that the Iban religious pantheon, although extensive in terminology, is filled with ancestors at various levels. We claim that the *ngarong*, *Orang Panggau*, *betara*, and *antu* are all variations of Iban ancestors, and hence the Iban practice ancestor worship. Furthermore, we go beyond what Motey, Senang, and Tugang (2018) claim, and argue that there is a direct connection between modern Iban communities and the claims about their ancestors (whether *Orang Panggau*, *betara*, or otherwise). We have also described some of the reasons that ethnographers and researchers conducting cross-cultural studies may misinterpret the religious claims of other cultures while arguing that ancestor worship is more prevalent than the ethnographic record suggests.

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