Pascal Couderc and Kenneth Sillander (eds.)

This is a collection of papers on ancestors and ancestry by a group of ethnographers with considerable fieldwork experience in the study of contemporary Borneo societies. The authors and the societies they have studied are: (1) Kenneth Sillander on the Bentian, (2) Clifford Sather on the Saribas Iban, (3) Pascal Couderc on the Uut Danum, (4) Ann Appleton on the Melanau, (5) Véronique Béquet on the Iban, (6) Christian Oesterheld on the ‘Dayak’ of West and Central Borneo, (7) Richard Payne on the Benuaq, and (8) Christine Helliwell on the Gerai. The book covers quite a range of different societies in Borneo and perhaps the only notable Borneo ethnographer who is missing from this collection is Bernard Sellato who is at least partially responsible for initiating current interest in the topic of ancestors and ancestry.

Collections of this sort are often difficult to integrate and given the linguistic and cultural diversity of these Borneo societies, the coherence of this volume might—almost from the outset—be considered as unlikely.

However, the opposite is the case. The long introduction by Couderc and Sillander is a model of its kind: Clear, well-presented and well-argued. It is also admirably focused but does not attempt to minimise the diversity of the ethnographic evidence that the different papers present. It situates the discussion of ancestry within a broad anthropological literature on ancestors but very successfully identifies distinctive features of Borneo notions of ancestry. This identification of features has a wider purview for the region in general and could be applied more widely within the Austronesian-speaking world.

Each paper in the volume offers dense ethnographic analysis. All of the papers except that by Oesterheld focus on a specific society. Oesterheld’s paper examines the outbreak of violence that occurred—and spread—among Dayak groups against Madurese transmigrants. This paper is, in fact, particularly valuable because it shows the way ideas of ancestry were utilised by culturally different Dayak groups to create a common ‘Dayak ancestry’. The density and richness of each individual paper are not easy to summarise.

Kenneth Sillander’s paper, which is excellent, looks at the transformation that is said to occur to the soul/spirit after death and after the mortuary ceremonies, including secondary burial; the paper explores ideas about different categories of spirits and how they are invoked and includes photos of offerings and invocation. Sillander situates his discussion within a general Austronesian framework concerned with ideas of origin and in this connection, he explores
a notion of the creation of ‘eldership’, which links to ideas of precedence even after death.

For more than a decade, Clifford Sather has been producing outstanding ethnographic accounts of the Iban and his paper in this volume is no exception. Sather examines the transformations effected by the death rituals and discusses its spiritual outcomes: How ancestors are treated and revered by their putative descendants.

Pascal Couderc, the other editor with Sillander, examines ideas of death and ancestry among the Uut Danum. He develops a distinction between what he refers to and defines as ‘house ancestors’ and ‘apical/transformed ancestors’: The one close, transitory and associated with bone repositories and the other distant, immortal, animal, as well as human and a source of blessing. He supports this distinction with substantial ethnographic evidence.

Drawing on the excellent earlier ethnography by Stephen Morris, Ann Appleton looks at the genealogical basis for defining ancestors among the Melanau. (The editors examine this issue in their introduction since all Borneo societies are bilateral or cognatic and the reckoning of ancestry is different in such societies from that in lineal or lineage-based societies.) Again, like Sillander and Sather, Appleton looks at the conceptions about the spirits that are released at death and their transformation through the death rituals. Having used Morris to examine previous Melanau ideas about death, Appleton goes on to examine changes that have occurred now that most Melanau are either Muslim or Christian.

Véronique Béquet deals with the Iban and makes a specific argument: That the spiritual beings known as petara among the Iban are ancestors. The paper is an excellent translation from the French, which has been edited by Sillander. It is directed to the examination of a particular category of spirits but needs to distinguish these spirits from other spirit beings. Béquet thus develops what Sather has touched on briefly in his paper. In fact, she quotes some of Sather’s other writings to support her argument and these quotes are among the most salient features of her discussion. Béquet's paper presents a wider argument for a new ontological approach to animism. To make her argument, she draws on a great deal of non-Borneo (and even non-Austronesian) evidence.

Following on from Béquet’s ‘spiritological’ paper, Christian Oesterheld’s paper provides a change of pace: It examines incidents in a period of violent conflict between Dayak and Madurese in West and Central Kalimantan. The paper is intended to dispel some of the crude ‘media’ representations of what occurred at the time by attempting to provide an account of developments based on extensive interviews with local participants. The paper looks at the way larger Dayak identities were created through an elaboration of ancestral