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# **Is ancestor veneration the most universal of all world religions?**

## **A critique of modernist cosmological bias**

THOMAS REUTER

### ABSTRACT

Research by anthropologists engaged with the Comparative Austronesia Project (Australian National University) has amassed an enormous data set for ethnological comparison between the religions of Austronesian-speaking societies, a language group to which nearly all Indonesian societies also belong. Comparative analysis reveals that ancestor veneration is a key-shared feature among Austronesian religious cosmologies; a feature that also resonates strongly with the ancestor-focused religions characteristic of East Asia. Characteristically, the religions of Austronesian-speaking societies focus on the core idea of a sacred time and place of ancestral origin and the continuous flow of life that is issuing forth from this source. Present-day individuals connect with the place and time of origin though ritual acts of retracing a historical path of migration to its source. What can this seemingly exotic notion of a flow of life reveal about the human condition writ large? Is it merely a curiosity of the ethnographic record of this region, a traditional religious insight forgotten even by many of the people whose traditional religion this is, but who have come under the influence of so-called world religions? Or is there something of great importance to be learnt from the Austronesian approach to life? Such questions have remained unasked until now, I argue, because a systematic cosmological bias within western thought has largely prevented us from taking Ancestor Religion and other forms of “traditional knowledge” seriously as an alternative truth claim. While I have discussed elsewhere the significance of Ancestor Religion in reference to my own research in highland Bali, I will attempt in this paper to remove this bias by its roots. I do so by contrasting two modes of thought: the “incremental dualism” of precedence characteristic of Austronesian cultures and their Ancestor Religions, and the “transcendental dualism” of mind and matter that has been a central theme within the cultural history of Western European thought. I argue for a

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deeper appreciation of Ancestor Religion as the oldest and most pervasive of all world religions.

#### KEYWORDS

Ancestor Religion, monotheism, dualism, liberal individualism, choice, precedence, monism, intent, freedom.

#### INTRODUCTION

Ancestor Religion is a system of cosmological thought and spiritual practice that has shaped countless human societies for many millennia and continues to do so today. Studies by anthropologists and other scholars have provided descriptions of hundreds of societies around the world that feature a dominant or subsidiary tradition of Ancestor Religion, and yet we seem to have failed to grasp the reasons for its intrinsic and enduring value. A survey of the “religion and spirituality” shelves of bookshops will quickly confirm that we have failed to describe this vast tradition in a manner comparable to accounts of other non-western world religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, or Islam (particularly Sufism) – accounts that have inspired many western scholars and general readers to adopt key tenets of these religions into their own world view.<sup>1</sup> Such lack of appreciation has led to the active “disappearing” of the oldest and most pervasive of all world religions from our purview.

The lack of theological appreciation for Ancestor Religion among the western public and scholars alike will be traced back in this paper to a curious modernist bias and logical flaw in the most basic western cosmological assumptions about the world. Only after uncovering this bias will it be productive to present a synopsis of the profound insights Ancestor Religion has to offer to the world in the second part of this paper. My aim is thus to present a critical reflection on how western scholarship, and particularly western scholarship on non-western religions, has evolved historically, before offering a more appreciative perspective on the world’s oldest and most widely distributed form of religion. My aim is to provoke discussion rather than to provide an unassailable historical or philosophical argument for my case, which would be beyond the scope of an article. I encourage readers to explore key ideas through further reading of some of the sources cited.

#### ON THE ANCESTRAL BAGGAGE OF WESTERN COSMOLOGY

As anthropologists and as scholars in general we are as much embedded in social fields as are the subjects of our research. We are each embedded in a very particular and specific manner, on account of our personal associations with the particular teachers, colleagues and students we encounter in our academic life. The many other people we encounter during field research and throughout our lives, of course, also have an impact on our trajectory and even those

<sup>1</sup> For an example of how eastern religions have influenced the private cosmologies of countless western people, without any overt process of conversion, see Walter and Waterhouse (1999).

we never meet or communicate with will impact on our lives indirectly. The particularity of personhood is simply a matter of what is experientially near and salient to one's position and trajectory. Different persons thus embody the unique histories of their personal encounters, impressions and ontological interdependencies. From a relative perspective, it is thus very important to understand the dynamics within particular networks of relations because they literally make us who we are, in an utterly physical sense.

We also must consider the other, much broader social and natural environment in which scholars and everyone else are embedded – a total societal and cosmological whole that knows no boundaries of interrelation but only variations in the degree of proximity and the immediacy of relatedness. In truth, we should therefore not speak of any individual achievements in scholarship at all, or in life more generally. Everything we appear to be has arisen from somewhere else, all our works are ultimately a coproduction in which everyone and everything has participated. This notion may not seem so odd to Asian audiences, but it runs counter to the ideology of individualism characteristic of western scholarship.

The notion of there being an "inside" and an "outside" is based on the essentialist and arbitrary imposition of a dualistic conceptual distinction upon nature. Ecology has taught us that such a distinction is not called for. For example, we should rather look at "our" genes as the accumulated and already embodied sum of the effects of the past exposure of "others" – namely our biological ancestors (both human and non-human) – to selective external influences in past environments. Or we can look at "our" personality and acquired knowledge as the result of the sum of all external influences we have experienced from the moment of conception onward, through exposure to human others and otherness writ large. We then discover that all that appears to be internal to any particular human being now was once external, and that what is internal can become external as we in turn influence our environments. The cosmos, material and social alike, does not feature any radical lines of separation, no fundamental break between nature and nurture,<sup>2</sup> inside and outside, only differentiation within an interconnected whole. This ought to be obvious to scholars, given that scientific progress is evidently based on mutual exchange of knowledge within learning communities.

Mental acts of conceptual separation have their place, insofar as they can provide an account of the phenomenon of differentiation within Being (or *Dasein* in Heidegger's terminology). Contrasting concepts allow human beings to discriminate with regard to differences that matter to us from the *relative*

<sup>2</sup> Recent path-breaking discoveries in the field of epigenetics show that post-conception experiences of an organism affect the way genes are expressed, sometimes also in future generations (Jablonka, Lamb, and Lachmann 1992: 245-268). These functionally relevant modifications to the genome do not involve a change in the nucleotide sequence but nevertheless can serve to encode and convey information from the somatic experience of our biological predecessors. The main role of these processes, however, is to adjust genetic expression in response to environment. The "epigenetic code" could be said to represent the total state of all cells in a phenotype.

perspective of the temporary array of intersecting forces that we like to think of as “I”, and in reference to which we develop specific interests. All living organisms must be sentient enough to be able to discriminate – between food and poison, for example – though some organisms may do so in ways that do not involve thinking or talking, or even a nervous system.

There is no cause to make an issue of the basic discriminating needs and capacities of organisms or of the discriminating awareness of human beings, because all organisms must find appropriate responses to an environment that is itself differentiated and continually changing as a condition for remaining alive. Differentiation and discrimination are life-affirming principles. The issue I have is with the harmful effects of a human tendency to make too much of the life-supporting tool of mundane consciousness by using it also as the foundation for postulating the separate existence of an *Ego* (Lat. ‘I’). The somatic fact of mentation is interpreted as the action of a mysterious mental subject or “doer”, a ghost in the machine. The characteristic feature of the self-concept I am referring to is that it creates the illusion of an “external” world through a universal act of externalization so radical, it does not stop short even at objectifying the very body that is being conscious– as reflected in expressions such as “my body”, “my brain”, “my genes”, and so forth.

Such a fundamental categorical split between a mental inside and a material outside has no basis in reality. Human consciousness is itself a modality of Being, of a seamless dynamic cosmos that leaves nothing outside by definition other than nothingness itself, and hence leaves no room for transcendental subjects, human or divine. Our evident capacity to discriminate is not something that requires us to postulate an actual transcendental subject to serve as the seat of motivation, though it may leave us with a propensity to imagine such metaphysical entities. If anything, the fact that discriminating consciousness does happen to exist is a matter that concerns the body and the entire realm of Being to which it belongs, because the cosmos is the “Self” (with a capital “S”) that has produced organisms and consciousness in the first place, out of its dynamic, self-generating and self-differentiating capacity.

The illusionary understanding we have of ourselves as a transcendental Ego identity or mental “self” (with a lower case “s”) is of course a “real” phenomenon. Indeed, it is so incredibly pervasive as to be entirely beyond questioning most of the time. It is a universal human affliction and is by no means the prerogative of modern people or western culture. This mind-based self-concept has also been described as a delusion in all cultural traditions, including those of the west, by small minorities of people with contra-indicative mystical experiences. Cultural differences do matter nonetheless, in that some cosmologies actively discourage belief in the idea of a separate Ego (for instance the Buddhist concept of *anatma*) while others encourage it. That is why cross-cultural study of cosmologies has the potential to emancipate, providing anthropology and related disciplines can lift the heavy anchor that has kept them moored to western cultural shores.

## ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE TRANSCENDENTALIST BIAS OF WESTERN COSMOLOGY

Unlike in many eastern traditions, the idea of a separate Egoic mind has been so highly valued in the tradition of western thought as to become the very bedrock of our cosmologies for many centuries—from the cosmology of Christian monotheist religion, to the secular philosophy of the European Enlightenment, and the dominant liberal-individualist political and economic theories of our times. This cultural cosmological bias can be detected even in the natural sciences, where natural laws have long been assumed to enjoy a transcendent existence outside and independent of their material instantiations in space-time.<sup>3</sup>

In proposing an alternative, monistic cosmological perspective, I am not merely inviting the reader to engage in an intellectual exercise, which would have little consequence. Rather, I am proposing an alternative approach to life, a radical departure from familiar shores. In doing so, I am unashamedly taking things personally, and asking readers to do the same. Leaving out the person means leaving out any possibility of critiquing the transcendentalist concept of personhood that I have been describing and that has been such an impediment to many western studies of other cultures. Natural science, anthropology and philosophy all need to be potentially self-transformative experiences or risk remaining a mere “glass bead game” – as my compatriot, Herman Hesse, so aptly put it in his famous Nobel Prize-winning satire of scholarly life.<sup>4</sup> The transcendental subject is, of course, the *sine qua non* of all glass bead games, and the aim of glass-bead games is to open everything to examination except the one thing that really matters – the examining subject, the ghostly core of our mentalist cosmology.

Indigenous Austronesian religion has until now been treated as an object, a specimen to be examined from a distance, without permitting or even contemplating the possibility of a “contamination” of the examining subject and its cosmology by the cosmologies studied, as I am suggesting.<sup>5</sup> This attitude may have arisen out of loyalty to cosmological principles deeply instilled in most western scholars by their immersion in liberal individualist

<sup>3</sup> Natural science may seem to espouse materialism and reject transcendental entities, but this may be rather deceptive. For example, much of western physics has been based on the idea that natural laws exist – in the image of the Christian deity – outside and independent of the instances of the material manifestation of such laws. While science does not openly claim God-status for these laws and while post-Newtonian scientists have criticized this way of thinking about natural laws, the example shows how traditional cosmological assumptions operate unconsciously in modern science as an intellectual “habitus” in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense.

<sup>4</sup> Hermann Hesse 1943, *Das Glasperlenspiel* [The glass bead game], published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, has received a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1946.

<sup>5</sup> The profession of anthropology as a whole still tends to refer to departures from this objectifying transcendentalism disparagingly as “going native”, and tends to excommunicate those who – like Carlos Castaneda, for example – adopt elements of native cosmology as alternative truths. This does not stop us from allowing our lives to be affected by ethnographic experiences, but the code is to treat this as a “personal matter” and to refrain from speaking “subjectively” in public.

education systems and reinforced by exposure to resonating theories that hail the importance of individual freedom and choice in the making of culture and history.

Rational choice and individual freedom are highly popular and cherished cosmological ideas among western academics, as a social group prominently involved in reproducing the cosmological narratives of western culture, and – as we shall discover – these narratives clash fundamentally with the cosmology of Ancestor Religion. Academics are a kind of modern day priesthood vis-à-vis the dominant scientific cosmologies of contemporary society. For many of us, rational individualism seems to function as a kind of humanistic Ersatz-religion. The myth of the transcendental subject is retained, however, and quietly used as a substitute for the Christian (or Islamic) doctrine of the personal soul, while the presumably time-invulnerable products of the human mind we produce through our writing serve as substitute immortality projects.

I am of course not alone in my critique of modernist cosmologies. A cosmology based on the idea of individual separateness has never been an easy fit with the basic premises of social science, which sees human beings as interactive and embedded. The systemic tension between the inherent collectivist outlook of western social science and its moorings in liberal individualist atomism (referring especially to Anglophone social science) has thus been palpable from the beginning. Counter propositions depicting human beings as “dividuals” rather than “individuals” have a rather long pedigree,<sup>6</sup> particular in the discipline of anthropology, which routinely exposes researchers to the alternative cosmologies of other cultures. Unfortunately, these alien cosmologies are often treated more as curiosities and objects of study rather than transforming these researchers’ personal worldviews.

Other sciences have tried to pin down the legendary “individual” of western transcendentalist cosmology by pursuing it all the way “down” to its material base – the brain. This natural science approach has the effect of bringing the presumably privileged transcendental “subject” right down to the level of the world of “objects” that normally is assumed to lie at its feet. But to many academics in the humanities and social sciences such ideas are still heresies, an assault on the cosmological supremacy of reason in humanist philosophy and on the popular cult of the supposedly disembodied human mind. Many modern, secular academics’ sense of security in life is still hinged on the ill-founded belief that the human mind partakes in a separate plane of existence, in a timeless world of ideas, of beautiful minds, and of immutable laws of nature existing outside of nature, in short, in a transcendental realm, modelled on Judaeo-Christian-Islamic concepts of the sacred.

This paper is an attempt to share some insights I have gained about the fallacies of transcendental dualism and individualism from my experience of unreserved personal immersion in the cosmological thinking and doing of Austronesian peoples over a period of some twenty years. So long as western

<sup>6</sup> On the concept of dividual personhood, see Macpherson (1963); Strathern (1988); and Wagner (1991: 159–73).

researchers of other cultures maintain an unconscious personal commitment to western cosmological thinking (which of course has also shaped scientific thought in non-western countries), we can only appreciate other cosmologies at an intellectual level, as an idea, but never fully. I argue that we have failed, in the case of the ancestor- and origin-focused cosmology of the Austronesian peoples, to appreciate it for what it really is: a world religion, a thoughtful interpretation of reality that fundamentally accords with natural science, and a viable approach to living one's life.

#### ANCESTORS, ORIGINS, AND PRECEDENCE; HOW TO KEEP AN ENTIRE WORLD RELIGION HIDDEN UNDER YOUR HAT?

The belief that ancestors are endowed with supernatural powers borders on idolatry. It is God, and God alone who is all-powerful while the ancestors are created by him. They can only be helpful to us by interceding for us. When we speak of ancestors or of saints, we should therefore use the phrase "pray for us" and not "do this for us". The first commandment forbids honouring gods other than the one Lord who has revealed himself to his people. It proscribes superstition and irreligion.<sup>7</sup>

Ancestor veneration is closer to being a human universal than almost any other social practice I can think of. All human societies honour their dead by treating the corpse of deceased persons in a ceremonial manner and by commemorating the person in some form or another, ranging from the building of pyramids to the memorizing of genealogies and the hanging of "ancestor" portraits or photos on living room walls. Along, and often in conjunction with veneration for the dynamic forces of nature (Animism), ancestor veneration counts among the most ancient forms of religion, originating in prehistoric times and strongly shaping the religious life of virtually all early civilization: Egyptian, Celtic, Greek and Roman, North, Central and South American, Indian, Chinese, and Austronesian (see Figures 1-2).

For ancestry to become the central pillar of the religious life of whole cultures and civilizations, rather than a mere reflection of basic personal emotions such as filial attachment, grief, and mourning, there had to be some notion of human relatedness across generations. In most cases, our sense of personal connection with particular ancestors is based on kinship. It can also draw on some form of voluntary or incidental association, such as being a resident in a village or even a nation that was founded by an ancestor who is not one's own lineal progenitor. Such notions of intergenerational connection and continuity are not just random cosmological assumptions but draw on actual chains of specific reproductive and social events.

<sup>7</sup> Pastoral Statement of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference. 11 August 2006.



Figure 1. A cremation tower in Bali (photograph by the author 1994).



Figure 2: Effigies of family ancestor (*adegan*) used during a post-mortuary rite (*matuun*) in highland Bali (photograph by the author 1994).

The notion of intergenerational continuity is also often, though not necessarily, augmented by ideas of an afterlife, in which the deceased may require the assistance of the living, and from which the ancestors also may be able to influence the fortunes of the latter.<sup>8</sup> It is this second cluster of ideas within Ancestor Religion that generally is picked up on, judged to be of a supernatural character and, in that sense, regarded as the “religious” (read: transcendental) component that explains ancestor veneration. It simultaneously provides the

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Gluckman (1937: 117-136).

excuse to pile scorn and ridicule upon such presumably superstitious beliefs, if they are not simply tolerated out of lip service to the anthropological ideal of cross-cultural respect. I regard this as one of several key misconceptions concerning Ancestor Religion, which have led us to exclude this major world religion from consideration in any serious cosmological discussion. I will return to the question of ancestor's active relationship with the living later, and offer a different interpretation.



Figure 3: Effigies (*capah*) of male and female village ancestors in highland Bali (photograph by the author 1994).

In view of its venerable origins, the rhetoric adopted by western transcendentalist competitor religions such as Christianity and Islam in describing Ancestor Religion has tended toward debasing other people's sense of veneration for ancestors, and making it appear like a primitive practice, never mind that the people we are dealing with here are our contemporaries and never mind our own ancestor practices. Ancestor Religion has often been dismissed as superseded, a mere prototype and not yet a proper religion, let alone a world religion. From the predominantly Christian and modernist perspective of western scholarship, ancestor and nature-focused religions (Animism) have been met with some interest only as supposed historical precursors in the long evolutionary march of world cultures from primitive savagery to the promised land of Christian (or Islamic) modernity, and hence as a window on our own past.<sup>9</sup> "Worshipping" ancestors has been depicted

<sup>9</sup> Ancestor Religion and Animism tend to coincide and often were discussed together in early ethnographic literature under the encompassing category of primitive religion (Tylor 1871). Of course there are also more open-minded and positive assessments of Ancestor Religion and Animism in the literature (see below). What I am referring to here are entrenched popular perceptions of these religions as primitive, inspired by the early ethnographic literature and by public opinion makers such as Christian churches. These attitudes are largely self-maintaining

as a folksy, rustic, and curious practice in today's disenchanted world, akin to a living dinosaur, or as a humble root on which to craft the nobler tree of some transcendental religion or, worse still, as dark idolatrous pageantry and primitivism of the kind that is best eradicated. Thus it came to pass that, by and large, the most ancient of the world's religions was barred from recognition as one among the modern world religions. Indeed, its very existence is concealed under the hat of other religions.

The vast majority of the billions of people who practice Ancestor Religion today are not acknowledged as such, and are classified instead in terms of their parallel lives as Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of the fact that ancestor veneration has been stripped of its status as a free-standing religion in its own right in many parts of the world, religious practices concerning the deceased continue to be extremely prevalent today. In Africa, for example, spirit possession and appeals to ancestors for healing are still common practice.<sup>11</sup>

In Africa and elsewhere, and as my opening quote illustrates, Christians and Muslims of many different denominations periodically choose to denounce Ancestor Religion. At other times they ignore it, having first reduced it to the status of a harmless "cultural practice", not out of charity so much as to avoid popular resentment and facilitate proselytizing.

The attitude of the Catholic Church, from which this quote stems, has in fact been overall relatively accommodating toward Ancestor Religion, compared to most Protestant denominations and most forms of Islam. It could even be argued that accommodation has been its dominant policy, interspersed with periods of active persecution such as the periodic witch-hunts in Europe and the banning of Ancestor Religion in Asia (1715-1939) and elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> In Europe such persecution reached its height during the period of religious wars in the seventeenth century, a time when Protestants were criticizing the Catholic Church for being overly syncretistic and tolerant toward pagan customs, thus inciting Rome to adopt a harsher attitude as well. This history is too complex to discuss here in detail, but it is important to reflect on the thousands of years of continuous struggle by Christians to eradicate or absorb

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and do not require further reinforcement. More positive attitudes nevertheless prevail in some sectors of the western community, especially within circles influenced by New Age thought or earlier proponents of a more romantic (affectionate) approach toward cultural others, from Rousseau onward.

<sup>10</sup> A Google Image search quickly shows that most world maps and charts on religion in circulation today do not mention Ancestor Religion at all, though some do make vague reference to it with terms such as "indigenous religion" or "traditional Chinese religion."

<sup>11</sup> See Fortes (1965: 122-142).

<sup>12</sup> Pope Clement XI in 1715 issued the papal bull *Ex illa die* which: "wishes to make the following facts permanently known to all the people in the world [...] No Chinese Catholics are allowed to worship ancestors in their familial temples V. Whether at home, in the cemetery, or during the time of a funeral, a Chinese Catholic is not allowed to perform the ritual of ancestor worship. He is not allowed to do so even if he is in company with non-Christians. Such a ritual is heathen in nature regardless of the circumstances." In 1939, shortly after his election, Pope Pius XII ordered the toning down of certain aspects of Clement XI's decrees. See Rule (2004).

earlier religions in Europe; religions that incorporated Animism and ancestor veneration.

Current Catholic doctrine reflects this experience and is a testimony to the incredible resilience of Ancestor Religion and also Animism. It permits ancestor veneration to a limited degree – as in the celebration of All Souls Day, which has pre-Christian roots in “pagan” Indo-European religions, and All Saints Day, which echoes the tendency toward special veneration for particularly heroic ancestor figures in those same Indo-European cultures.<sup>13</sup> Although such concessions to pagan religions have been successful from a socio-political perspective, in that they have kept the peace, an underlying tension between logically irreconcilable cosmological tenets cannot be finally reduced to the status of a socio-political issue.



Figure 4. Easter Lamb versus Easter Bunny- The Battle Continues

<sup>13</sup> See Campbell (1949).

<sup>14</sup> This image was taken from the front cover an advertisement brochure distributed by a Church-owned enterprise in Germany (*Vivat! Christliche Bücher & Geschenke*, Spring 2012 issue, Leipzig: St Benno Verlag). The brochure aims not only to promote Christianity but also to make money. The irony is that the pursuit of material wealth and the sentiment of adoration for wealthy and powerful heroic figures is – in my opinion – a key feature of resurgent pagan religion in Europe under the guise of secular materialism. The overall effect is thus one of ceding ground in the very act of trying to gain ground from paganism. This is no accident. Rather, it well illustrates the Don Quixotian position of transcendentalist religions and the different kind of heroism entailed in their attempts to find an escape from the material world, namely the self-deluded heroism so well characterized by Cervantes with his sympathetic caricature of a Christian knight.

Similar processes of mutual adjustment between ancestral and introduced religions have occurred in Austronesian societies, sometimes over centuries, with varying outcomes. Even if we were to consider just the Christianized Austronesian-speaking societies of Eastern Indonesian, we would need to admit that the relationship between Christianity and the unnamed indigenous world religion has a very long and complex history, with many ups and downs, which an entire book could hardly do justice too.<sup>15</sup> A question that must be addressed herein, however, is the question of the status of Ancestor Religion today.

#### ANCESTOR RELIGION TODAY; A REGIONAL CASE STUDY

The focus of my own research interest has been on the Asia-Pacific region, and it thus makes sense for me to look at how Ancestor Religion fares in this region as an example, to illustrate its contemporary status around the world. Of course, not all of the findings will be transferrable to other regions, but there are important parallels with the European and African experience.

When we examine the global prevalence of Ancestor Religion today, we discover that many of the societies wherein it still holds a very prominent public profile, as a proper, state-recognized religion, are in fact located in eastern Asia, including China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. More typically, however, strong and active contemporary traditions of Ancestor Religion are subsumed under another world religion and not given state recognition. A pertinent example, which I explore in this paper, are the 270 million speakers of more than one thousand related Austronesian languages, whose religious traditions are distantly related to those of continental East Asian societies.

Dispersed half way around the planet, from Madagascar to Easter Island, the Austronesian languages are believed to have originated in southern China and migrated via Taiwan to populate this vast area over a period of 5–6000 years.<sup>16</sup> The migrants most definitely had a religion already. Indeed, their religion must have been as sophisticated and useful as any other's religion. Its followers, after all, managed to thrive and spread halfway across the planet long before the advent of the Age of Discovery in Europe. And given that it has a great deal in common also with the religion of China and Japan and other parts of Asia, and ancestor-focused religions around the world, we are

<sup>15</sup> See Lewis (2009).

<sup>16</sup> Recent genetic research at the University of Oxford has challenged this model of Austronesian origins and dispersal, suggesting that the migration of languages does not always coincide with a mass migration of people. Earlier, local populations may have absorbed immigrant Austronesian speakers (no matter how many or how few they were) in population-genetic terms because of the greater adaptive value of locally evolved genes, even as the newcomers' language was adopted by them to become their sole language due to other, cultural or economic advantages or due to the political dominance of the immigrants. On the linguistic model see Bellwood, Fox, and Tryon (1995). On the genetic argument see Oppenheimer (1999) and Soares et al. (2008). There has not been enough time yet to reconsider how the new evidence can be reconciled with the earlier evidence from comparative linguistics and archaeological research. For a preliminary attempt to reconcile the evidence, see Donahue and Denham (2010: 223-256).

talking about a broader religious tradition that has affected billions of people and continues to do so.

What is this enormously influential religion anyway? The usage of the term "Ancestor Religion" itself is already problematic because this world religion has no general name by which it knows itself, nor any standard orthodoxy or orthopraxis, no holy book and prophet, no over-arching global hierarchy and leadership, nor a single "most sacred" ritual centre. Rather, in Austronesian-speaking societies alone it has a thousand local names, is practiced by lay people and priest of various types, at home and at tens of thousands of sacred sites, and comprises veneration of countless ancestral beings of different kind and significance in myriad ways determined by local traditions. Its followers often do not even evoke the abstract concept of "religion" to justify their practices, nor do they propose a transcendentalist god-concept in the sense of the Abrahamic religions. For most of the people involved, Ancestor Religion simply fulfils the function of accounting for the experience of life as it is.

Outsiders who have come to study them – generally western Christian researchers – have variously labelled this complex of ideas and practices with a host of somewhat vague technical terms, such as ancestor worship, animism, spirit belief, pantheism, or shamanism. The phenomena thereby designated overlap in practice to an embarrassing degree. Such labels thus have the effect of relegating a vast corpus of religious thought to the margins of the modern world; scattering, localizing and distancing it to such a point that it can no longer be recognized as a major religion.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, we may well ask: What is the practical reality of this ancient, and in another sense so universal, religion? What is its rightful place in today's world? Should we not seriously look at and learn to appreciate it for its content?

The last two questions are not commonly asked, but in search for an answer to the first question, anthropologists certainly have kept themselves very busy for more than a century. This ethnographic research effort has not been in vain. Concerning Ancestor Religion in the Austronesian-speaking societies of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, for example, we have faithfully compiled great masses of empirical data and have made considerable efforts, using a comparative method, to extract from this data a more general ethnological account of traditional Austronesian cosmology. The compilation of this comparative ethnology has been in large part the accomplishment of the interdisciplinary Comparative Austronesia Project established at the Australian National University in 1989, in which I have participated.<sup>18</sup> This

<sup>17</sup> Take for example the chapter on religion in a recent and otherwise well-balanced book on Indonesian cultures by Ian Chalmers (2006). Several of these labels are thrown about, but they explain little. They do however allow the author to dismiss the core of Indonesian religious tradition almost at the stroke of a brush. There is no need to say any more. Ancestor worship is not to be confused with real religion; it is merely a customary belief. It is not a viable approach to life or to the sacred. In short, and unsurprisingly, modernist western science reiterates the rhetoric as the modernist Indonesian state.

<sup>18</sup> See Fox (1996).

extensive research network includes dozens of scholars, and more than a few of them are native speakers of Austronesian languages. Several edited volumes summarize the main themes identified within the ancestry-based cosmologies of these societies.<sup>19</sup>

Among other findings, it was discovered that ancestor veneration is still a key feature in almost every Austronesian society today. As in Africa, however, the contemporary situation is complicated by the arrival of other religions on the scene. Indic religions, for example, arrived some two thousand years ago in western Indonesia, affecting the indigenous Ancestor Religion there, as they did in many other societies of East and Southeast Asia, and leading to the formation of numerous kingdoms based on Hindu or Buddhist ideas of kingship and statecraft.<sup>20</sup> Much later foreign traders, explorers, and empire builders brought two transcendentalist monotheistic religions, Christianity, and Islam to this region. Austronesian societies in Eastern Indonesia, the northern Philippines, and the Pacific, were exposed primarily or exclusively to Christianity. My own research has been in Bali and Java, both societies featuring a multiple overlay pattern; with a common layer of Hindu-Buddhist influence on both islands and subsequent Islamization on Java only.<sup>21</sup> Bali has retained intact much larger chunks of its indigenous religions than has Java, due to the greater tolerance Ancestor Religion receives from Hinduism compared to modernist Islam. Traditional Islam Jawa or Javanese Islam had been very tolerant, but modernist Islam has long been condemning ancestor veneration and is doing so today with increasing vitriol.<sup>22</sup>

The fate of a religion thus depends on global processes of conquest, or migration, or the exchange of ideas along trade routes. It also depends greatly on state policies, and modern nation states have tended to be biased in favour of what they regard to be modern religions. In Indonesia, for example, the nation state has adopted a modernist distinction of genuine religion versus customary or cultural practices and popular spiritual beliefs. While the latter are tolerated, they have been officially classed as non-religious and have been branded either as an obstacle to progress or as potentially heretical or subversive teachings. The pressure for the Indonesian government to take this course of action came mainly from the Islamic movement. The state has been and still is seeking to appease the political frustrations of modern Muslims with such concessions, brokered by the ministry of religion. Even in parts of Indonesia with Christian or Hindu majorities, local modernists have been keen to eliminate competition and distance themselves from the earlier religions of

<sup>19</sup> Most of these volumes are available online from the ANU e-Press, Canberra.

<sup>20</sup> For a classic account of this process see Geertz (1980).

<sup>21</sup> There has long been a small Muslim minority in Bali. More recently, however, the percentage of Muslims has been rising due to labor migration (Reuter 2011: 58–72).

<sup>22</sup> For example, it was a common practice until recently to present offerings of food, flowers, and incense to the spirits of ancestors in Muslim graveyards. Such practices remain widespread today among the many Javanese who reject modernist Islam, if not outwardly then inwardly. For a comprehensive account of the process of Islamization in Java see Ricklefs (2006, 2007).

the country.<sup>23</sup> The situation of Austronesian societies in the Pacific with regard to religion is in many ways similar, with Ancestor Religion continuing still, to greatly varying degrees, sometimes in peaceful non-reflexive coexistence and sometimes in an uneasy standoff with Christianity.<sup>24</sup> The marginalization of Ancestor Religion in the context of modern states and world religions is of course a complex and varied phenomenon, and I cannot explore it fully in this article.

So intricately is Ancestor Religion linked to social identity formation and to the basic social organization of Austronesian societies, however, that it has proven difficult to transform them into conquered societies without historical memory. While such history hijacking is still being attempted, anthropologists in the twentieth century have had ample opportunity still to study the earlier complex of Austronesian religions and associated social patterns in great depth, and such research continues. Despite a great range of internal variations, these related, home-grown religious traditions share a fairly coherent set of premises about the nature of life, which I will now attempt to sketch.

One of the most basic characteristics of Austronesian discourses of social identity is the notion that belonging to a group means sharing a common "origin" or "source" with other members of that group.<sup>25</sup> Sharing a common origin can mean rather different things in different cases, including descent from a common ancestor, emigration from a common place of origin, relationships to settlement founders through immigration, or common ethnic origin, or sharing a common source in an abstract cosmological sense. People's present-day identity is defined by their belonging within such origin groups, for example, as members of a particular *\*umah* (house-group of kin and affines) or as co-residents of a *\*banua*, *\*tanaq* (settlement) with complex and variable patterns of relations between house groups.<sup>26</sup>

Migrations, marriage alliances, and other socially formative events are said to have taken place in the past, and their significance is demonstrated by their historical effect on present-day social relations, as well as in collective ritual re-enactments of that past. Predecessors are venerated, whether they are one's living elders, recently deceased persons, or far distant mythical founders. Ancestral founders, represented by their most direct living descendants, occupy what E.D. Lewis first referred to as a position of "ritual precedence" over the more recently established branch houses or settlements of descendants or newcomers, a position which involves a ritual duty of care.<sup>27</sup> Certain

<sup>23</sup> On state religious policy in Indonesia see Hosen (2005: 419–440) and Hefner (1999). On modernist Hinduism, see Bakker (1993) and Ramstedt (2004).

<sup>24</sup> For an account of such tensions – in Fiji, for example – see Tomlinson (2009).

<sup>25</sup> "Origin" and "source" are approximate translations of the terms local people use themselves in these societies. In Balinese, for example, the local term for origin is *kemulan*. It is used, for example, to designate the shrine of origin where the ancestors of a house group are venerated (*sanggah kemulan*).

<sup>26</sup> The asterisk designates that these are reconstructions of proto-Austronesian terms of which there are numerous cognate terms within contemporary languages belonging to this family.

<sup>27</sup> See Lewis (1988).

individuals, houses, or settlements thus enjoy a superior ceremonial rank on account of being socially closer to the ancestors and the origin of life than other members of present day society. In the Austronesian botanic idiom frequently employed by these societies, the superior party represents the trunk of the tree of life, or a branch closer to the trunk end than other branches, or alternatively, they are thought to be located closer to a more abstract conception of the source of the “flow of life” and time.<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, there is a certain amount of contestation over how the value of origin is applied as a way of internally differentiating society, as there is contestation over the political and status implications of cultural values within all human societies.

My primary concern herein, however, is with Ancestor Religion as a cosmology. The meaning of the core value of origin is not easy to grasp, but clearly what is valued in Austronesian societies is not simply the past. Nor is it merely a matter of giving recognition to the socially unifying and at once differentiating power and significance of the past in shaping the social worlds of the living present. Rather, the core religious message has to do with the continuity of life and relationships through time, forming a stream of events and interactions that has no ultimate beginning and no end.

Ancestor Religion in these societies, therefore, is not so much a matter of “worshipping” ancestors, though there are countless rituals to commemorate, invite and ‘feed’ the recently deceased persons as well as more distant, deified ancestors in Austronesian societies. Rather, it is about valuing the (scientific) fact that our personal existence is not at all independent but has arisen from, and remains utterly embedded within, a continuous and profoundly interconnected flow of life. The special (“sacred”) feature of origins and of associated ancestors is that they have the capacity to unite more “branch” people in the present (through the enactment of shared ritual) the further back they are located in time and in the family tree. In short, their symbolic power lies in instilling a sense of social as well as spiritual unity and sense of duration. An ancestors’ distant position in time helps to commemorate intergenerational continuity, even a sense of all time collapsing into a “great Now”, during moments of ritual communion across different times and spaces. Communal rituals in Austronesian societies are specifically designed to convey a very vivid psychological experience of this connectedness and a sense of eternity and infinity, while also reinforcing awareness of social differentiation in terms of affiliation and rank.

In my own research on the people of the Balinese highlands, I strove to understand local cosmology by unpacking their notion of “precedence” and its peculiar logic. At the time, I did not fully appreciate where this might lead but I did discover some very interesting features.<sup>29</sup> Drawing on Gregory Bateson’s work on the Iatmul of Papua New Guinea, I adopted and refined

<sup>28</sup> The term “flow of life” was coined by James Fox (1980). The more abstract cosmological notion of flows of time or events has been first discussed in depth – to my knowledge – in the conclusion of my ethnography of Bali Aga society (Reuter 2002b).

<sup>29</sup> See Reuter (2002a: 230-235).

his thoughts on socio-cosmic dualism, most importantly the idea that there are two very basic and very different forms of logical operations with paired categories. Bateson referred to these forms as complementary dualism (for example parent::child, uphill::downhill; earlier::later) versus symmetrical dualism (for instance right::left; mind::matter).<sup>30</sup> Bateson has described his own terminology and definition of the two forms of dualism as “somewhat obscure” or, in other words, as a preliminary attempt to theorise an important difference. I therefore redefined the two forms of dualism anew, and referred to them as incremental dualism and categorical dualism respectively.

Incremental dualism, at least in Austronesian societies, is essentially about “precedence”, or predecessor-successor relationships (which need not imply ties of kinship). Categorical forms of dualism are also prevalent in this and other Austronesian societies (red::white, female::male, left::right) and have significance, for example, in relation to ceremonial moieties. However, such dual categories can be found all over the world and they are less definitive of these societies than is incremental dualism, or “precedence”. The essential difference between the two variants of dualism is that making incremental distinctions has a serialization, rather than a separating and categorizing effect. Multiple recursive distinctions form a continuum, with an infinite number of pairs of adjacent and causally related elements. The elements within these pairs cannot really be said to be separate from one another, much like chickens and eggs cannot ultimately be separated in general categorical terms. Categorical dualism entails more radical separation between categories that are perhaps not necessarily opposites but – at the very least – separate and mutually exclusive domains within a whole.<sup>31</sup>

The Ancestor Religion found in Austronesian-speaking societies contains some astute observations about nature, even by today’s scientific standards. The continuity of the life process is seen as a sacred principle and ritually celebrated as such. Ritual performance serves to constantly remind people of the common origin and destiny of all life, without losing sight of temporal differentiation as an equally fundamental and essential life principle. The core idea of holding life’s unity and continuity sacred is an exceedingly practical attitude and does not involve wild metaphysical claims. It harmonizes rather well with contemporary genetics and evolutionary science, certainly much better than supposedly more modern religions such as Christianity and Islam. The idea of a flow of time moving out from a state of greater unity and homogeneity toward an ever more dispersed and differentiated cosmos sits quite well, for example, with the currently dominant scientific cosmogony known as the “big bang” theory of cosmogony.

In short, Ancestor Religion stays fairly close to the empirical ground of human experience. It does not succumb to the temptation of transcendental absolutism, which presumes the ability to answer the key questions of life from

<sup>30</sup> Bateson (1958: 235, 237-244, 285). Note that Bateson at one time also uses the terms “direct” and “diagonal dualism” as synonyms of the terms above.

<sup>31</sup> A more detailed analysis of the logic of precedence is provided in Reuter (2009: 13-49).

the remote metaphysical position of a radically separate and all-powerful deity or, for that matter, from the metaphysical position of transcendental, rational human subject for whom life is but an object of study. Ancestor Religion locates the sacred squarely within the “source” of life and nature, which signifies its original and in one sense eternal unity, and simultaneously acknowledges the social and natural flows that account for differentiation, diversity and interdependency within the whole. It is not just a local naturalist philosophy, however. As a religion, its ambition and impact is inherently greater than that of conventional science.

At this point, we may well ask: What have we lost by relegating Ancestor Religion to the dustbin of the history of human thought, and what would we gain if we were to reinstate it to its rightful place among religions? Is it not easier to do away with the core concerns of religion altogether, and to rely instead on the cosmologies provided by modern science?

I would suggest, to begin with, that the core parameters of human existence do not change and that the accumulated insights of traditional societies are thus timelessly relevant. It is absolutely unavoidable and essential, however, to reclaim these insights for today’s world by experiencing them directly. This need to reclaim traditional knowledge in the present (to make it relevant to us) applies not only to anthropologists conducting ethnographic research in societies where Ancestor Religion is still strong. It also applies to younger generations within those societies themselves. Such personal experience is difficult to articulate and hence may be subject to limited transferability, but it is certainly possible to provide a glimpse.

Second, I would argue that modern western science provides only cosmologies of fact (COFs), and not cosmologies of human significance (COSs). While cosmologies of fact are solidly built on masses of factual empirical knowledge, their aim is descriptive rather than evaluative, and they are not meant to serve as a guide for living. Western science cannot take Ancestor Religion quite seriously because the latter is a COS and a COF at the same time, while in post-Enlightenment science COSs are separated from COFs. By the same token, scientists generally hesitate to present us with a COS that could serve as a substitute for religion, because they shy away from turning facts into values. With our transcendentalism, we have deeply separated religion from science, value from fact, the self of mentation from the world that is the ultimate Self. The question of the human significance of facts has been largely left aside by science, banished to the phantasy realm of “beliefs”, and left to religion and speculative philosophy to argue over. Ironically, even as they stoically deny their personal need for COSs, western scientists unconsciously adopt and defend a covert transcendentalist COS in order to uphold their objectifying stance, modelled on the very same religion they have sought to escape from for centuries. A genuinely ecological science, that is, a science that places itself within nature, is only beginning to emerge.

These issues do not only concern professional scientists but all those who have had some scientific education, which is the majority of people today.

Behind the cloak of an often half-hearted, nominal identification with the religion of their parents, many modern people are confused over the gaping value vacuum created by the advance of materialist science. Science has comprehensively shattered the authority of transcendentalist religions in their capacity as COFs, and of course, despite the smoke screen of dualism, that also largely undermines their status as COSs. Theories of value should not contradict observed facts, and when they do the “believers” become internally conflicted. This situation has left most people feeling stranded amongst the flotsam of science’s many “ONLYs” (humans are only apes, consist only of matter, and are only meaningless accidents). Disenchanted with transcendentalist religion as a source of meaning, and left stranded by the COFs of a value-shy scientific outlook, many are filling the value vacuum with unconscious value schemata and unnamed Gods. Within the context of modern consumer society, this most commonly has meant the tacit worship of power, pleasure and money. By teaching us that, as a matter of empirically proven fact, we all have sprung from the same source of life, evolutionary science unfortunately has not yet given us a sense of connectedness with, and respect for all life in the way that Ancestor Religion does. The facts of evolution, in the manner in which they are presented, have no moral or social consequence and are still an affront to persistent Christian or Islamic attitudes of transcendental superiority over nature. They are only appreciated intellectually as facts, but not felt and acted upon, let alone celebrated.

#### RECLAIMING ANCESTOR RELIGION FOR TODAY’S WORLD; HOW DOES IT WORK?

In order to understand and appreciate the value of any religion, it must be asked: What work does it do, what are its greatest achievements, and how are they accomplished? These are not questions that social science asks very often, or when it does, the kind of work religion is credited for doing tends to be social. This is where descriptive empiricism has failed us, at least in the context of comparative Austronesian studies. The first step therefore, is to learn how to ask the question, rather than to look directly for the answer.

The Canberra method of ethnological comparison was modelled after a concept developed by Dutch structuralist J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong, the so-called “ethnographic field of study”.<sup>32</sup> Critical of the haphazard universalism of nineteenth century butterfly collectors, De Jong had argued that within a regional culture area a comparison between societies can be pursued in a more meaningful manner because they feature: 1) differences that are not radical but mere variations on a theme, and 2) structural similarities that are not accidental but testimony to historical, cultural and linguistic relatedness. This is all very sensible, and the excellent results of the Comparative Austronesia Project are testimony to the power of this comparative method.

This approach falls short, however, once we consider it from the perspective

<sup>32</sup> See De Josselin de Jong (1977: 164-182).

of another, more anthropological than ethnological approach that can also be traced back to the nineteenth century, namely the hypothesis of the psychic unity of mankind put forward by humanist anthropologists such as my compatriot Adolf Bastian.<sup>33</sup> A creative tension between the diversity and unity of humanity has been a constant feature of anthropological theories. Indeed this tension, between Bastian's "psychic unity of mankind" on the one hand, and Sapir and Whorf's argument for cultural relativity and diversity on the other, runs right through the discipline, with the relativist stance dominating and causing much paralysis. This is why I insist on asking the question – does Austronesian Ancestor Religion, or more precisely, the key themes identified therein by the Canberra school, have any truth and relevance for the rest of humanity?

In my view the problem with Dutch structuralism and its derivatives is that it has lacked much of the sex-appeal of French structuralism, being incredibly descriptive and largely averse to theorizing, beyond the rather esoteric realm of kinship and alliance theory, and shying away from big-picture questions even in that arena. The Canberra school has followed this example and has been similarly shy of theoretical abstraction, in line with a firm dedication to meticulous empiricism in the British tradition – the virtues of which I learnt from my immersion in an Australian higher education system that has British roots. While that is all very well for what it is, the unfortunate consequence of focusing so much on empirical detail has been the restricted impact of this important body of work on anthropology as a whole. Mountains of fact have been given very little significance, because to attribute them with any value would have constituted – a lapse into religion!

This is not to say participants of the Canberra school have never attempted to evaluate cosmologies and thus treat them as serious truth claims. Elizabeth Traube, for example, in her ethnography of the Mambai, looks at the dualism of male and female and the flow of life and interprets this complex of ideas as exemplary of a "socio-cosmic dualism" in the somewhat old-fashioned Durkheimian sense, by virtue of which her book became quite popular for a while as an undergraduate textbook.<sup>34</sup> What led Traube in this direction was the fact that she focused not just on kinship and alliance but also very prominently on ritual, which she sees as a symbolic labour to make sense of reality, of life itself. I obviously sympathize with this, because my own work in highland Bali and Java has also focused on ritual and religion, and because this is the kind of question I wish to ask. You would never guess this from my early publications, however, which have overwhelmingly focused on the social organization (as it articulates itself through the symbolic means of ritual life), wherein you can see the same bias at work.

What does Traube discover? Comparing her own structural-hermeneutic interpretation of Mambai symbols to the Freudian method of unravelling psychological processes through "dream work" in the course of an analysis,

<sup>33</sup> See Koepping (1983).

<sup>34</sup> See Traube (1986).

she admits that: "collective symbolism has properties of its own, irreducible to the individual psychological process that it may engage and transform, as Durkheim never tired of reminding us."<sup>35</sup> Here she shows her debt to continental social science's collectivism and psychological structuralism, but oddly enough, she follows the theoretical model of Freud rather than Jung. This is odd because it was Jung (1980) who took up Durkheim's notion of collective representations in his theory of the symbolism of the archetypes and the collective unconscious, while Freud remained largely trapped within an individualist view of the unconscious as the repository of an individual's repressed content. This same adherence to liberal individualism also limits Traube, and therewith she takes her departure from Durkheim as well as from the Mambai.

In her conclusion Traube states that: "[I] came to see my Mambai friends as worried text-builders, obsessively insisting on the wholeness of life, constructing that wholeness over and over again in their discourse (1986: 243)," an attitude which – following Freud – she attributes to their human anxiety in the face of repressed unconscious content arising from "cosmic Eros", the force of desire that affirms life and fears death. Unspoken but all too evident in this assertion is Traube's own experience of life as a modern individual; finite and fractured, a separate individual mind suffering in its dependence on a mortal body. From the perspective of such identification with separate (small) self, Austronesian ideas about the continuous flow of life do indeed appear to constitute a denial of death, and of other, inevitable ruptures of physiological and social life. The Mambai, apparently, were not alienated liberal individualists.

I wholeheartedly disagree with this analysis as it pertains to the Mambai and, by extension, to other related cultures in this region, and yet it does provide me with a starting point. Ancestor Religion and its "flow of life" metaphors, for Traube, is not some quaint and archaic worldview we ought to examine only for its effect on social organization, but one that we should recognize as a serious religion attempting to address fundamental human questions.

Allow me now to consider a rather radically different interpretation of the same family of Ancestor Religions, an interpretation that takes as its point of departure the Jungian insight that we, as modern Western individuals, have completely lost touch with nature, that we lack a proper understanding of what life is.<sup>36</sup> Consequently we have been, until very recently, almost oblivious to the fact that our modern ways are life destroying on a global scale and also conducive to much unhappiness and disorientation at a personal, psychological level.

Jung attributes this malaise of modernity to a loss of religious symbols. With this loss of symbols comes a loss of direct experiential access to the

<sup>35</sup> Traube (1986: 239). See also Freud (1965: Chapter 6).

<sup>36</sup> The corpus of Jung's collected works is very large, but a concise summary of his thoughts on this point can be found in Jung (1933).

objective psyche, to our own nature and nature in general.<sup>37</sup> In other words, modern individuals celebrate and deify the Ego-centred subjective self-consciousness with which they are identified at the cost of utter separation from the Self, whose character is transpersonal, objective and continuous. The encounter with the Self, for Jung, is an experience of objective reality, or the totality of our Being. It is always and necessarily a direct personal experience. Symbolic representations and ritual performances, however, fulfil a function of mediation between a secondary self-concept and the primary objective Self to which it belongs. Symbols are a bridge into the unspeakable. This has been the work of religion, and these are the means by which it is accomplished.<sup>38</sup>



Figure 5. The mythical ancestors of a Balinese ceremonial domain ascend into the heavens at the conclusion of a temple festival (photograph by the author, 1995).

The shared symbols we find among Austronesian cultures, including representations of precedence and the flow of life through botanic metaphors, do not take us one single step closer to an experience of the Self – so long as they are considered with an externalizing mental attitude rather than used in practice, as all symbolic techniques should be used. While symbols do point in the direction of the Self, actual glimpses or more substantial “encounters” with the Self are the fountain of all religious experience for Jung.<sup>39</sup> Symbols and metaphors may serve as gateways into the unknown, but this unknown must be encountered personally. When it is thus encountered, it is experienced as numinous and breaking the narrow confines of the smaller self-concept. This may seem like an act of self-transcendence from an Ego perspective, but it is

<sup>37</sup> Carl G. Jung (1980).

<sup>38</sup> Jung thought that the decline of shared religious symbols and rituals in part explains the need for a modern psychology (see Jung 1984).

<sup>39</sup> Of course, from a universal perspective, what encounters the Self is none other than the Self.

in fact a return into an awareness of immanence in a greater, eternal whole. Self encounters Self. The only casualty is a delusion.

Jung, who was after all very much a modern man himself, saw the experience of Self as the crowning moment of a person's life, or of the process of individuation, to be more precise. For him the experience of separateness and fragmentation that accompanies the middle stages of individuation in adults, and that is so vehemently defended by Traube as a modern principle of realism and objectivity, is indeed necessary and unavoidable. But for Jung it is merely a stepping-stone on the path to the Self.<sup>40</sup>

#### RELIGIONS OF INTENT; HOW ANCESTORS ACT UPON THE LIVING?

Another aspect of psychoanalytic theory, and of psychology more generally, that can provide us with a better understanding of Ancestor Religion is the discovery that early childhood experiences exert a highly formative effect on a person's development and entire life trajectory. These are commonly the experiences we have within an immediate family and community context. Neuroses that afflict the parents (or other significant adults) impact on the child because they compromise those parent's child-rearing practices and also because the parents will set an inappropriate example for the child to emulate or rebel against.<sup>41</sup> This often leads to a similar or matching inverted neurosis in the child. Such transfer of destructive psychological traits can span many generations, and similarly there are positive inter-generational projects and aspirations within families and entire communities that are taken up again and again by certain members of that family or community in every generation. This continuity is really basic, obvious and psychologically holistic (resting on non-verbal as well as verbal pathways of communication).

What Austronesian societies know very well, through their prominent symbolic depictions of the logic of incremental dualism, and what modern people tend to deny, is that this process of transmission ultimately points at a common psychic origin and indeed a psychic unity of all sentient life, as an emergent objective reality continuous with the cosmos as a whole. Of course, as for the fate of particular persons, it is probably fair to say that the most relevant and influential component of this process is our most immediate ancestry, whether biological or social or, indeed, academic.

In much of Indonesia, certainly in highland Bali where I did my doctoral

<sup>40</sup> Based on my research experience, I cannot accept Jung's idea that the majority of individuals among so-called pre-modern peoples lack the necessary ego development and experience of separateness to have a conscious encounter with the Self. I see ego-based consciousness as a human universal. While there may be individual differences in line with processes of maturation and "individuation", equating all members of other cultures with earlier phylogenetic or ontogenetic stages of human development is misguided, ethnocentric and discriminatory. What does make the modern mind different is that it has made individual separateness into a political ideology as well as an Ersatz-religion. That does make a significant difference because it prevents us from seeing what is so central to Austronesian thought – that the Self as both our origin and our destiny.

<sup>41</sup> See Miller (1981).

research, people say that ancestors influence people and events in the present, and that maintaining good relations with them is therefore very important for ensuring our prosperity. My training as an anthropologist predisposed me to treat such local beliefs as objective social facts, as cultural phenomena to be recorded and explained and not to be judged. Unfortunately, this is quite impossible. Social scientists and people in general cannot help judging validity claims because, as embodied human beings, valid knowledge is highly relevant to our personal survival. If the scarcity of ancestor shrines in the homes of western anthropologists studying Austronesian societies is any indication, most anthropologists thus privately seem to have decided that, while claims about the influence of ancestors on the living may have a social or religious function, they are invalid as statements of fact. This has made it difficult to appreciate what Ancestor Religion has to contribute as a COF.

A strong argument in support of the claim that the ancestors do in fact influence the living in the here and now can nevertheless be found in modern psychology. Psychology acknowledges that human beings unconsciously enact tendencies shaped by salient personal childhood experiences, and also by the collective past experiences of entire societies and indeed our entire species. As I understand it, the power of the ancestors is connected to this. It is part of the complex, seamless, dynamic flow of interactive events within a society, reflecting the causal interdependence of all events and the utter impossibility of independently arising events or selves.<sup>42</sup>

There is no need for any dualism of mind and matter at this point, or even for a dualism of conscious and unconscious aspects of mind. The first dualism leads to the “independent self” illusion, as already discussed, and this illusion gives rise to a false philosophy of individualism which espouses rational choice as an explanation of human behaviour. Psychoanalysis as well as modern cognitive psychology acknowledges that conscious rational choice is the exception rather than the rule when it comes to human behaviour, but cognitive psychology especially still retains the notion that rational choices are possible and are being made by individuals.<sup>43</sup> Such a suggestion immediately creates a temptation to once again postulate a transcendental metaphysics, a ghost in the machine. There is no justification for that and no need at all.

Instead of evoking subjects, I shall refer to the dynamic aspect of reality that leads to all forms of action as “intent”. No matter who or what is acting, and no matter whether consciousness is involved or not, intent is the spontaneous expression of the dynamic nature or “inherent tension” of some part of the cosmos or of the cosmos as a whole. My usage of this term is inspired by the local concept of *karsa*, which has great significance in indigenous Javanese religious philosophy. This concept of “intent” recognizes the interactive and

<sup>42</sup> There are of course social events that do not arise from the causal flow of a particular society but come from another society, such as the unexpected arrival of immigrants. This does not contradict the argument, it merely suggests that what may seem causally far removed can come very close.

<sup>43</sup> For a detailed account of the cognitivist perspective see Hunt (1982).

dynamic nature of everything – including living human beings, ancestors, trees, land, and so on – without recourse to any claim of external intervention by transcendental subjects, and hence without metaphysical constructs such as “choice”. This does not mean that consciousness is irrelevant, but it does locate events affected by consciousness squarely within the same monistic reality of seamless interdependence populated by all manner of other events.

The ancestors and the entire past, from this perspective, act upon or within the present not in some metaphysical but in a very straightforward, physical way. Their influence is by way of intent. Intent can be ascribed to a person, dead or alive, because a person is part of the same dynamic universe as is everything else, and cannot be “removed” from this universe by the passage of time or the event of death. Importantly, intent flows into us as much as it flows out of us, to such an extent that it is ultimately wrong to draw a circle around a person and refer to the inside as an intending individual. There are no independent, chance events in a monistic world, nor any independent subjects who can “choose” in ways that are contrary to the precise facticity of their own complex condition as living beings, which includes language and thought.

Intent, thus defined, also accounts for the influence of the whole of non-human nature on human affairs. This means that the preceding argument also supports the fundamental premise of Animism, which is an equally maligned religion and often so closely intermeshed with Ancestor Religion that they have been treated as part of the same complex. They are both religions of intent, as opposed to transcendentalist religions of choice.<sup>44</sup> Just as Ancestor Religion finds no reason to separate radically the living from the dead, Animism does not split off living beings from the rest of nature, which Christian or Islamic-influenced science considers “dead matter”.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, some natural scientists have begun to recognize the scientific merit of rigorously applying such a pan-psychoic philosophy of nature, though they still do so at the risk of excommunication.<sup>46</sup>

Many Austronesian societies employ ritual in order to bring the past

<sup>44</sup> One interesting difference between religions of intent and religions of choice is that the former seek justice in compensation, seeing little point in quarreling about issues of guilt or sin, while the latter seek justice by attributing fault and administering punishment to individuals who have made a wrong “choice”. It should not be assumed that demands for compensation are a lesser disincentive to crime or immorality or plain carelessness than guilt-based punishment is. For victims of crimes and accidents alike, compensation is a more reliable way to reestablish a state of balance, which is the essential nature of justice.

<sup>45</sup> Descola, for example, still speaks of Animism as a projection of human sociality onto “natural beings” (Descola 1996: 87–88). Viveiros de Castro comes closer to my own position, by suggesting that Animism – at least within Amazonian cultures – is based on the notion of a shared “soul” or consciousness across all of nature that is differentiated through the different bodies (human or other) through which it articulates itself (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 469–488, especially 470–479). It is much better, however, to omit western notions of the soul (*anima*) from the analysis and instead say that all “bodies” (animate or inanimate) are imbued in with intent, each in its own unique way and yet subject to constant encounter with other sources of intent through their condition of radical interdependence with reality as a whole.

<sup>46</sup> For example: Sheldrake (2012).

into the present, that is, into consciousness. These are symbolic means the likes of which we have largely lost in the west, often forcing us to reinvent the symbolic “wheel” at a personal level (as has been illustrated by Jung’s exploration of spontaneous dream symbols). The people of Bali, for example, have countless different rituals available for personal use and for collectives of varying sizes that provide a road map to direct experiences of the objective psyche. The availability of such cultural resources has an impact on the kinds of awareness that are normal, or possible, in a given society.

While many scientists may agree that the past and future are residually or latently present in, or coherent with, the present moment, it is another matter to have a direct sense of communion with the past by accessing the timeless realm of the Self. The religious aim of ancestor ritual is to demonstrate experientially the radical equality of every moment – past, present, or future – from the perspective of the Self. Such experiences have the power to introduce a sense of eternity and immortality into the lives of those who have them, without need for any metaphysical speculations or any supernatural beliefs whatsoever.

This may very well be the point where reason starts to struggle to follow, and where one simply needs to experience such rituals in the right frame of mind, or undertake a dream analysis, or practice *yoga* (Sanskrit “union”) or undertake some other practice in order to be able to appreciate the point fully. Mere talk is not enough when it comes to religion, it is a practical process, certainly so in the societies I have studied.

Natural science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has gradually revealed to us beyond reasonable doubt the unity and common origin of all life, including human life, emerging out of a process of evolution that involves natural “selection” and the transmission of genetic information between generations.<sup>47</sup> The flow of life is not a fancy of Austronesian mythology but an objective reality, a reality they appreciate much more than we do, quite despite the fact that we may know a lot more about its biochemical and ecological mechanics. That is why we fail to recognize the significance of our oneness with the stream of life and nature at the level of social practice. We would rather fight to extricate ourselves from nature in keeping with our transcendentalist cultural baggage than acknowledge ourselves as part of the dynamic of intent. It is our unwillingness to sacrifice our holiest of holy cows – the rational choice individual – that is preventing us from doing so. No amount of scientific argumentation will change that so long as we remain entrapped by our identification with the small self and by an excessive concern with its individual survival. What may change our modern outlook in the end, however, is the deadly feedback we receive concerning our transcendentalist way of life, confronting us on all sides now in the form of multiple global ecosystem failures.

<sup>47</sup> The term “selection” is again misleading in that it implies agency or choice where there is none. What we are really dealing with when it comes to processes of organism-environment interaction is intent or, in other words, the dynamic aspect of Being.

What is distinct about Austronesian societies is the amount of attention and expertise they allocate to gaining a sense of unified reality or Self-awareness in their lives, and the richness of the symbolic representations and socio-ritual procedures they have developed to engender experiences of integration.<sup>48</sup> The sociological perspective from which we have studied them has not recognized these achievements because it is itself imbued with the same blinding metaphysics that is allowing us to wreak environmental destruction around the world. At the heart of this metaphysics lies a transcendentalism that permeates everything a modern western person does and thinks, from philosophy to politics, from economics to theology.<sup>49</sup>

This point was brought home to me in the context of my own early fieldwork, as I discussed my emerging theories about local "belief systems" with people who were considered wise and knowledgeable men and women in their own society. These people told me again and again that what they felt was central to their way of life, and especially their ritual life, were not ideas or beliefs but experiences; numinous experiences of unity wherein the flow of life is no longer looked at just as an idea or metaphor but becomes a lived reality, a space wherein what is initially a mental reflection on time, on an endless succession of ancestors and descendants, leads one on to a sense of connectedness beyond time. Gaining conscious access to this experience of connectedness is a tremendous discovery.<sup>50</sup>

Of course, like Traube, I raised objections against these notions of unity, pointing at the prevalence of individual and group competition, the fact that a religion based on ancestor veneration and precedence can also create divisions in society, whereby ancestry and alliance become matters of status and politics. Nevertheless, I was a good enough participant to eventually get some grasp of what these persons were pointing at, to allow my growing familiarity with their ritual and symbolic processes to direct my attention away from my extremely and sometimes arrogantly individualistic consciousness towards a bigger truth, beyond symbols and metaphors, let alone mere words. From

<sup>48</sup> Austronesian peoples – not unlike many other traditional societies – have attempted to manipulate the flow of life through their at least partially prescriptive marriage systems. We have not even begun to appreciate the possible consequences of such a systematic manipulation from an objective, genetic perspective, interpreting it instead almost entirely from a sociological perspective.

<sup>49</sup> There are and always will be exceptions, of course, like the German mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) who was tried by Pope John XXII as a heretic. Conversely, there are many people who are fully identified with the self-image arising naturally as a consequence of consciousness, even though they have been socialized from birth into non-transcendentalist, intent-based cosmological traditions that encourage them to refrain from doing so, at least occasionally. My argument that culture makes a difference in this regard is thus statistical. It has also been a difficult claim to prove because it has been very difficult to measure inner states, but neuro-science is now gradually overcoming that obstacle.

<sup>50</sup> As William James put it: "There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God. In this state of mind, what we most dreaded has become the habitation of our safety, and the hour of our moral death has turned into our spiritual birthday" (James 2008: 40).

this it became evident to me that, contrary to Traube's assertions, the people I was learning to understand were not in any denial of reality or in denial of mortality, nor were they oblivious to the problem of competition for status and other resources. Yet they were able to get in touch with an objective reality wherein birth and death do not mark the boundaries of life but the timeless rhythm of its unfolding. It was I, with my academic pretensions, my Cartesian baggage, who was in denial of death, foolishly thinking that it was away from the body, in a realm of mind, ideas, theories, where some semblance of immortality could be achieved. I was wrong, and I owe this realization to a considerable degree to my coming to understand the Austronesian way of looking at life. On account of the psychic unity of mankind, or the unity of the objective psyche in Jung's terms, the insights of the Austronesians are relevant also to outsiders, such as myself, though such a transfer requires much effort and entails certain costs, as I have discussed elsewhere.

#### CLOSING REMARKS

To conclude I would like to return to the initial question of the relevance of Ancestor Religion. An analysis of major themes in Austronesian cultures is clearly relevant to a better understanding of this oldest, most prevalent, most neglected of all world religions, which I have referred to as Ancestor Religion.

Even within the Austronesian context, what I am referring to is in fact an immensely heterogeneous complex of ideas and practices, but I have treated it as a single world religion in order to highlight some of its fundamental features. Most importantly, I have argued that Ancestor Religion is a religion of intent, and therefore quite fundamentally irreconcilable with the cosmology of transcendental religions like Christianity or Islam, which stress the idea of humans as independent agents. Finally, I have suggested that the historical failure to appreciate the enduring value of Ancestor Religions, even within anthropology, is a direct consequence of a transcendental bias among western scholars that echoes the transcendentalism of Christian cosmology.

With Jung and with James I would argue that numinous experiences arising from the encounter with the objective psyche or Self are a universal potential in humans, and that these religious experiences are therefore comparable beyond the confines of any particular culture area or tradition of religious thought.<sup>51</sup> It is difficult for western anthropologists to appreciate this because our own empirical training does not provide us with the means to measure the objective significance of intangible human experiences. This may change with the addition of new techniques. For example, there is now growing evidence that people in altered states of consciousness – induced by religious practices – show uncommon but cross-culturally consistent and characteristic patterns of brain activity.<sup>52</sup> Until we have developed these techniques, we had better take seriously the experiences of others, lest we dismiss our own.

<sup>51</sup> See James (2008: 26).

<sup>52</sup> See Austin (1998).

At the level of mere cosmology, that is, away from direct numinous experiences, comparison becomes more difficult still because of the cognitive dissonance radical encounters with other cosmologies causes in the minds of people who engage in such boundary crossings.<sup>53</sup> The lack of resolvability of arguments among religious zealots and the persistence of religious wars and persecution around the world provide ample testimony to this problem. It requires courage to let go of cherished assumptions about life because of the sense of security they convey, and it requires openness to explore an unfamiliar cosmology that seems to unhinge our own worldviews. Why should we bother to take upon us such hardships? In the end, it comes down to this simple question: What if our cherished assumptions about life keep us from having numinous experiences, what if they are patently untrue, and what if they threaten our survival or make us unhappy? In my opinion, comparative religion and cosmology is worthwhile, even necessary, because it provides us with the opportunity to question and surpass the assumptions that limit our vision.

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<sup>53</sup> See Reuter (2006: 220–232).

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