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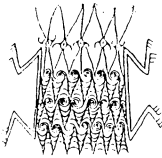
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THE UNIVERSALITY OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP

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A “professional malpractice of anthropologists to exaggerate the exotic character of other cultures” (Bloch 1977:285) has been detrimental to the study of cultural universals. This is highly regrettable because “universals not only exist but are important to any broad conception of the task of anthropology” (Brown 1991:5). Further, in the anthropological study of indigenous religions, a focus on differences has caused an apparently universal aspect of religion to be overlooked: the claim that ancestors influence the living and/or are influenced by the living. We argue here that such claims of communication between the dead and their descendants are universal and may be the key to understanding the universality of religious belief.

Claims of ancestor interaction with the living have not been recognized as universal because the anthropologists’ stress on differences has caused them to be overly narrow in their definitions of both “ancestor” and “worship.” Hence, they have tended to overlook the fundamental similarities between religions that have ancestor worship and those that are said to lack it. This division is theoretically significant because even when ancestor worship is found in a majority of the cultures used in a study (e.g., Swanson 1964), its nonuniversality requires it to be explained in terms of unique aspects of certain cultures (see Swanson 1964:97-108). If ancestor worship were recognized as a universal aspect of religion, its explanation would offer a deeper understanding of religious behavior.

One reason for the inability to recognize the universality of ancestor worship is that the term is often reserved for those societies where the dead are explicitly called by a term that is translated as ancestor, thus excluding societies whose religious practices concern ghosts, shades, spirits, souls, totemic plants and animals, or merely the dead. For example, Lehmann and Myers (1993:284) state that

[a] major problem with Spencer’s argument [that ancestor worship was the first religion] is that many societies at the hunting-and-gathering level do not practice ancestor worship. The Arunta of Australia, for example, worshiped their totemic plants and animals, but not their human ancestors.

Distinguishing between ancestors and totemic plants and animals is questionable since totems are clearly ancestral in that they identify a person with a line of ancestors

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(e.g., one's father, father's father, etc.). Indeed, Harris (1989:405) points out that the Australian form of totemism "is a form of diffuse ancestor worship . . . [because by] taking the name of an animal such as kangaroo . . . people express a communal obligation to the founders of their kinship group."

The role of ancestors is also obscured in many descriptions of societies whose religions are based on more general, and hence, supposedly nonancestral, spirits or gods. An example of this is the hunters and gatherers living in the Kalahari who are often referred to as the !Kung. Although Lee (1984:103) does state that the !Kung's "religious universe is inhabited by a high god, a lesser god, and a host of minor animal spirits," he also states that "the main actors in [the !Kung's religious] world are the //gangwasi, the ghosts of recently deceased !Kung" (Lee 1984:103).

The failure to see the connection between ancestors and spirits or gods often causes societies to be excluded from the ancestor worship category. For example, Lehmann and Myers (1993:284) state that

[w]hen the living dead are forgotten in the memory of their group and dropped from the genealogy as a result of the passing of time (four or five generations), they are believed to be transformed into "nameless spirits," non-ancestors. . . .

Similarly, Tonkinson (1978:52) claims that the Mardu lack ancestor worship because they cannot remember the names of specific distant ancestors, despite the fact that their religious rituals focus on "Ancestral Beings." The Yanomamo provide a similar example because their religion is said to be shamanic and concerned with spirits instead of ancestors. Although it is true that Yanomamo religion centers on shamans ingesting hallucinogenic drugs and controlling spirits, Chagnon (1983:92) reports that "when the original people [the *no badabo*] died, they turned into spirits: *hekura*." Since the *no badabo* were clearly the original Yanomamo, ancestors are actually central to Yanomamo religion (see Steadman and Palmer 1994). Indeed, it is crucial to realize that whenever there is reference to ghosts, spirits, or the dead in a society's religion, ancestors will be present, if not predominant, in this category.

An overly narrow definition of the term, worship, is also often used to claim that certain societies lack ancestor worship. Many societies indeed do if the meaning of worship is restricted to elaborate ceremonies involving ritualized sacrifices. If, however, the term worship is used in its broader sense of reverence or respect, the claim that ancestor worship is not universal is open to question. Further, several anthropologists have pointed out that worship may not be the most accurate term to describe even those societies unquestionably assumed to have ancestor worship. For example, in a discussion of some of the classic ancestral cults of Africa, Abraham (1966:63) states that the rituals associated with ancestors "are not rites of worship but methods of communication."

If the essence of ancestor worship is the claim that there is communication between ancestors and the living, then this behavior should be tested as a possible universal aspect of religion. Hence, we re-examined the ethnographic material used in what is perhaps the most famous cross-cultural study of religion (Swanson 1964)

to determine if there is evidence of claims that ancestors can influence or be influenced by the living, even in those societies coded in the study as lacking ancestor worship.

METHODOLOGY

The societies coded in Swanson's (1964) sample were selected for two reasons. First, the study is well respected, often cited, and adequately deals with many of the problems involved in cross-cultural research (see Naroll 1970; Palmer 1989a). Second, the question relevant to the issue of communication between ancestors and the living (column 29 in Swanson 1964) is worded in a way nearly perfect for the purposes of the present study:

Active Ancestral Spirits:

0. Absent—dead ancestors do not influence the living
1. Present—nature of activity unspecified
2. Present—aid or punish living humans
3. Present—are invoked by the living to assist in earthly affairs (Swanson 1964:210-11)

Category 2 clearly indicates the presence of the claim that ancestors influence the living, and category 3 implies the claim that the dead can be influenced by the living. Hence, this study will examine the sixteen societies (32 per cent of the sample) coded as "0" (Absent—ancestors do not influence the living) and the eight societies (16 per cent of the sample) coded as "1" (Present—nature of activity unspecified). The purpose of this re-examination is not to discredit Swanson's valuable work, but to determine if a universal aspect of religious behavior lies undiscovered within the ethnographic data he surveyed.

RESULTS

The Sixteen Cultures Coded: "Ancestors Absent"

Azande. The Azande represented the geographical region of Africa-Equatoria. Zande life is filled with references to witches, ghosts, and other supernatural phenomena, and descriptions by Evans-Pritchard make it clear that these include ancestors who are claimed to both influence and be influenced by the living. For example, Evans-Pritchard (1937:39) states:

We may ask whether the distinction between witches, *aboro mangu*, and those who are not witches, *amokundu*, is maintained beyond the grave? I have never been given a spontaneous statement to this effect, but in answer to direct and leading questions I have on one or two occasions been told that when witches die they become evil ghosts (*agirisa*). [These evil ghosts contrast with] *Atoro*, the ordinary ghosts, [who] are benevolent beings, at least as benevolent as a Zande father of the family, and their

occasional participation in the world they have left behind them is on the whole orderly and conducive to the welfare of their children.

The passage indicates that the Azande did sometimes claim that ancestors influence the living. Evans-Pritchard (1974:101) also describes a plea from the living to the dead that demonstrates that the Azande also claimed that ancestors can be influenced by the living:

O Deleakowe are not the ghosts with God? If you favour me as you favoured me in your lifetime! Since you died leaving your son, your son has been very unhappy, for his kinsmen dislike him. O our father, our husband, give us fortune together with your son so we may praise the ghosts and say that the ghosts judge well. Since you died things have gone ill with your offspring, he has not begotten children. It would seem that the ghosts refuse him a child. May he beget a child after this blessing with which we have come today to bless him.

Aztec. The Aztecs represented the geographical region of Mexico. Although Vaillant (1944) claims that the Aztecs lacked ancestor worship, he makes several statements demonstrating that the living were claimed to be able to influence ancestors; e.g., "The rest of the dead passed to Mictlan, the underworld. They had to overcome several hazards before they could take up their life there, so they were equipped [by the living] with charms and gifts for the journey" (Vaillant 1944:179). Another example of the living being claimed to influence the dead is the statement that "[t]hen he [the deceased person] reached a broad river which he crossed on the back of a little red dog, sometimes included in the grave furniture for the purpose" (Vaillant 1944:179). Further, Conrad and Demarest (1984:152) state that the Aztec had "a dividing line between life and death so blurred that living people conversed and partied with the dead."

Blackfoot. The Blackfoot represented the North America-Plains region. McClintock's (1910) description of their ghost stories clearly indicates that the Blackfoot claimed that the dead could influence the living: "She [a woman named Mistina], like many others, had been deeply impressed by the fact that many well-known Indians had died during the summer and their spirits had been appearing to the living, bringing fear and sometimes even death" (McClintock 1910:139-40). That these dead include ancestors is demonstrated in the ghost story of Two Strikes and Running Rabbit: "[S]he beheld the spirit of her father, Running Rabbit, who had touched her. Not long afterwards Two Strikes died very suddenly and her family believe that Running Rabbit took her with him to the spirit world" (McClintock 1910:141). The fact that the Blackfoot took elaborate care of their dead, sometimes carrying a skeleton "in a raw hide bag for many years" (McClintock 1910:150), also suggests that the dead could be influenced by kindly treatment.

Cuna. The Cuna represented the South America-Circum-Caribbean region. Stout (1947:40-42) makes numerous references to living Cuna making offerings to dead

relatives, whose “souls” or “spirits” sometimes appear to them and cause “illness, misfortune, and death.”

Iban. The Iban represented the Oceania-Indonesia region. Their conception of the *ngarong* (secret helper) indicates that they sometimes claimed that ancestors could influence the living. Although the *ngarong* is not always claimed to be an ancestor, Hose and McDougall (1912:92) state that it “seems to be usually the spirit of some ancestor or dead relative . . . [who] becomes the special protector of some individual Iban.” Iban discourse about *ngarong* also suggests that the living can influence the dead. For example, an informant stated that “[h]e himself has none [ngarong], but he will not kill the gibbon because the *ngarong* of his grandfather, who died twenty years ago, was a gibbon” (Hose and McDougall 1912:91). Although the man may have avoided killing gibbons solely out of respect for his grandfather, this statement suggests that killing the gibbon would have negatively affected his dead grandfather.

Lengua. The Lengua represented the South American-Gran Chaco region. Their description is full of examples of claims both that the living could influence the dead and that ancestors could influence the living.

There is a general belief that ghosts linger around a camp and are dangerous, or at least unpleasant to meet. . . . The near relatives of the deceased or, if he were a chief, the members of the extended family, took a new name hoping to deceive the ghost, who might have been tempted to return and drag his fellow tribesmen with him to the afterworld. (Metraux 1963:333)

Metraux (1963:334) also states that “Lengua mourners, fearful of ghosts, often sought the hospitality of some other band. These Indians believed that the chilly spirit of the departed man would return to his deserted camp looking for a fire.” Finally, the Lengua “did not like to leave this world without atoning for wrongs done to a fellow member of the band, lest the quarrel be continued in the hereafter” (Metraux 1963:334).

Lepcha. The Lepcha represented the Eurasia-Central Asia region. They appear to represent a case similar to that of the Yanomamo in that the ancestral nature of their deities and spirits has been overlooked by anthropologists. For example, von Furer-Haimendorf (1987:327) describes their religion as “based on the worship of local deities and a variety of nature spirits, whose cult is in the hands of shamans.” The ancestral nature of these deities and spirits, however, becomes clear in the subsequent description:

In the old Lepcha religion the ability to act as priest depends on possession by a spirit attached to a lineage of priestly character. The chief function of a priest is to ward off the misfortunes and afflictions caused by malevolent spirits; this can be achieved by animal sacrifices as well as by direct communication with supernatural powers. On certain occasions, priests become possessed by their tutelary spirit, to whom they owe the gift of prophecy. At funerary ceremonies the priest summons the

soul of the deceased to speak his last words through the priest's mouth, and then conducts it into the sphere of the gods. (von Furer-Haimendorf 1987:327)

This statement indicates that Lepcha priests were claimed to assist the dead and be influenced by the dead, and evidence suggests that the spirits in Lepcha religion were not just vague spirits, but the spirits of deceased Lepcha:

On some occasions of great importance a Lepcha shaman, who may be male or female, becomes possessed by the spirit of a semilegendary Lepcha chieftain believed to have ruled the Lepcha country when the first Tibetan settlers arrived in Sikkim. (von Furer-Haimendorf 1987:327)

Gorer (1938:231) also states that the "Mun worship two supernaturals, *Hit rum* and *De num*, who are considered to be ancestral gods who look after all dead Lephchas."

Nez Perces. The Nez Perces represented the North America-Plateau region. Beal (1966) makes it clear that the "Guardian Spirit," *Wyakin*, who forms the center of Nez Perces religion, was closely associated with the spirits of the dead, which presumably included ancestors:

[T]he Nez Perces believed in immortality of all life. The individual's relationship to the spirits (powers and principalities) might be intimate indeed. He could invoke them to serve in the role of guide and protector. The key to this relationship was known as *Wyakin*. (Beal 1966:12)

Pomo. The Pomo Indians represent the North America-California region.¹ Bean and Theodoratus (1978:297) describe a "ghost impersonating ceremony [that] was traditionally performed as an act of atonement for offenses against the dead." The Pomo also made offerings to dead relatives: "A second burning took place one year later, at which time friends and relatives brought additional gifts for offering to the deceased" (Bean and Theodoratus 1978:297).

Romans. The Romans represent the Eurasia-Europe region. Fustel de Coulanges (1956) indicates that ancestor worship was a vital part of Roman life, and there are clear examples of claims that ancestors influence the living and are influenced by the living even in the descriptions of Roman religion given by authors who say that the Romans did not practice ancestor worship. For example, Bailey (1932:39-40) argues that the Romans lacked ancestor worship because the "evil spirits" involved in religious rituals "are thought of vaguely and collectively: in no case are they in any sense individualized." But he states that the Lemuria festival "represents a very primitive attitude towards the family dead, in which they are regarded as tiresome ghosts" (Bailey 1932:98-99), and describes the festival:

The father of the house rises at midnight and after purification by washing of hands, takes black beans and casts them over his shoulder without looking back, saying at the time "with these beans I redeem myself and my family." Nine times he repeats the spell and the charm, and the ghosts come behind him and gather up the beans. He washes once more and clangs brass vessels. Nine times he repeats the formula "Ghosts of my fathers, depart," and then the purification is complete. (Bailey 1932:39)

Samoyed. The Samoyed, specifically the Ostyak Samoyed, represented the Eurasia-Arctic Eurasia region. Czaplicka (1951:176) states that, “[w]ith the exception of the Ostyak Samoyed, the Samoyedic tribes are much more given to ancestor- and hero-worship than to animal worship.” But even with the animal worship of the Ostyak Samoyed, ancestors are claimed to influence, and be influenced by, the living. “Kai Donner found that along the river Tym the Ostyak Samoyed consider their highest god the ‘grandfather of the clan,’ who is worshipped under various names, while the Ostyak Samoyed along the river Ket symbolize him by a living bear” (Czaplicka 1951:175). The claim that the Ostyak Samoyed practice animal worship instead of ancestor worship is another instance of failing to realize that the totem animal is simply a symbol for the ancestor. Indeed, not only does Czaplicka (1951:175) report that these people “believe in the transformation of man into an animal, and vice versa,” he states that

Itte, the hero of the epic of the Ostyak Samoyed recorded by Kai Donner, had by one of his wives, the daughter of Massullozi, “Forest-Spirit,” a son, “Bear-spirit” (*Pargai-kuorgai lozi* or *Pargai* meaning “bear-spirit”); from this son the Samoyed of the Ket river derive their descent. For this reason they call themselves *Kuorgai-Tamder*, “race of bears.” (Czaplicka 1951:177)

Finally, Czaplicka contradicts his original exclusion of the Ostyak Samoyed from the category of societies possessing ancestor worship when he states that “[t]he worshipping of a tribal ancestor is common to all the Samoyed, and endowing him with the form of a bear may merely indicate his unusual origin” (Czaplicka 1951:177).

Donner (1954) reports that “[t]he most important deity in the religious life of the Samoyed and the one who has the most decisive significance is undoubtedly *Kuodar-gup* or the tribal father of each individual tribe” (Donner 1954:71). He also describes offerings to the dead and says that “[t]he spirits of powerful shamans, who have been dead for a long time, can bewitch people for years to come” (Donner 1954:75).

Shoshoni. The Shoshoni represented the North America-Great Basin region. Hints of ancestors are found in Trenholm’s and Carley’s (1964:8) statement that the Shoshoni’s “‘vague imaginings for religion’ amounted to a simple faith dependent upon the spirit, the *mugua*, and the ghost, the *tsoap*.” More explicit references are found in Shoshoni origin mythology concerning Coyote: “The Northern Shoshonis accept the fact that Coyote and his unnamed sorceress were their ancestors” (Trenholm and Carley 1964:35). Coyote was often referred to as “father,” and sometimes took human form: “I had seen the Father. He was a handsome Indian” (Trenholm and Carley 1964:35). That the Shosoni were careful not to “displease Coyote” (Trenholm and Carley 1964:36) suggests that Shosoni claimed ancestors could be influenced by the living.

Todas. The Todas represented the Eurasia-Greater India region. Rivers (1906) asserts that the Todas do not practice ancestor worship, evidently on the basis that

the Todas worship certain hills that are the residences of gods. These gods, however, were linked to known persons: "In the case of Kwoten, the account of his life is so circumstantial as to leave little doubt that he was a real man who was deified after a mysterious disappearance" (Rivers 1906:446). It is also clear that these deified Todas, who were regularly claimed to be influenced by the living, were often explicitly associated with ancestors: "Thus, when Teitnir gave a buffalo after the death of his wife, some said it was given to the gods, while others said it was given to Teitnir's grandfather, and when I tried to inquire more definitely into this point the two things were said to be the same" (Rivers 1906:446-47).

Trumai. The Trumai represented the Mato-Grosso region of South America. It is clear that ancestors played a major role in Trumai religion because Murphy and Quain (1955:72) refer to the Trumai's anthropomorphic creator deities who existed "in the dim past of the 'grandfathers of all the Trumai.'" Although they state that "the day-to-day world of the Trumai was little influenced by extra-corporeal forces or personages" (Murphy and Quain 1955:72), they make several statements indicating that the ancestral personages could be influenced by, and influence, the living (e.g., "offerings" were made during the *ole* ceremony to supernatural entities such as *Nukekerehe*, who was said to eat people who stayed up too late); and that "numerous cooking utensils . . . were buried with both male and female deceased" (Murphy and Quain 1955:90) suggests that the Trumai thought that such gifts could be used by their deceased kin.

Winnebago. The Winnebago represented the North America-Prairie region. Radin (1963) reports numerous instances of ancestors influencing the living similar to the following statement concerning ritual fasting: "Then another spirit would come and say, 'Well, grandson, I have taken pity upon you and I bless you with all the good things that the earth holds'" (Radin 1963:7).

Yurok. The Yurok represented the North America-Northwest Coast region. That the Yurok claimed to be able to influence the dead is clearly indicated by the fact that the Yurok man makes "a fire on the grave to keep his dead kinsman warm" (Hartland 1951:417). Meyer (1971:268) also states that Yurok religion teaches a man to "love his relatives even after death."

The Eight Cultures Coded: "Ancestors Present—Nature of Activity Unspecified"

Arunta. The Arunta represented the Australia region. Spencer and Gillen's (1968) description of the ancestral spirit, *Ulthana*, reveals claims of the dead influencing, and being influenced by, the living:

During the period of mourning . . . no person must mention the name of the deceased . . . for fear of disturbing and annoying the man's spirit, which in ghost form, or as they call it, *Ulthana*, walks about. If the *Ulthana* hears his name he comes to the conclusion that his relatives are not properly mourning

for him . . . and so he will come and trouble them in their sleep, to show them that he's not pleased. (Spencer and Gillen 1968:498; see also 494-97)

Carib. The Carib represented the Guiana geographic region. Rouse (1963) provides clear indications of interaction between ancestors and the living among the Carib when he reports that the people, probably family members, built fires around "the grave to purify it and to prevent the deceased from catching cold. . . . [I]n prehistoric times a slave or dog was killed and put in the grave to care for the dead person" (Rouse 1963:559). Each Carib took one of these spirits as his or her personal deity (*ichieri*), who was given offerings because such spirits could "insure good crops and safeguard crops" or, in the case of evil spirits (*maboya*) be blamed for "disagreeable and frightening occurrences" (Rouse 1963:562). The ancestral nature of these spirits is confirmed by Rouse's statement (1963:562) that "[s]ome shamans kept in their houses the hair or bones of their ancestors, which were supposed to contain *maboya*."

Carrier. The Carrier represented the Subarctic America region. Morice (1951) reports claims of the dead (presumably including ancestors) interacting with the living. Indeed, this may be the basis for their name:

When the ashes of the pyre had cooled down, she [the widow] would go, shedding many a dutiful tear, and pick up the few remnants of bones which had escaped the flames. These she placed in a small satchel, which thenceforth she had to carry on her person till the day—three or four years later—of her liberation from the unspeakably hard bondage into which she had entered. This custom, which seems to have no parallel among the American aborigines, is responsible for the distinctive name of the Carrier tribe. . . .

A further proof of the Carriers' belief in the immortality of the soul may be gathered from their dread of ghosts, which they declare to be very sensitive to the mention of the names they bore in their earthly existence; hence, mention of these names is carefully avoided. (Morice 1951:230)

Dobuans. The Dobuans represented Melanesia. Fortune (1932) provides clear evidence that talk about the spirits of ancestors interacting with the living played a large part in both their totemism and the elaborate magic for which the Dobuans are famous:

In Melanesia generally if misfortune is not attributed to the black art [magic] it is attributed to the spirits of the dead. . . . We have seen that a few spirits of the first ancestors of man are conceived as the familiars who do the magician's bidding. (Fortune 1932:178)

Further, "the first ancestors still exist, and exert the same influence that legend vouches for their having exerted some five generations ago" (Fortune 1932:99).

Iroquois. The Iroquois represented the eastern woodlands of North America. Burland (1985:64) states that the Iroquois have "a great number of ancestral spirits. Not only did the ancestors watch over men in their daily activities, but they could

also be visited in dreams.” According to St. John (1989:136), “Iroquois both respect and fear the dead and therefore conduct a number of feasts for them.”

Yagua. The Yagua represented Amazonia. Steward and Metraux’s (1963) summary of Fejos (1943) makes it clear that the Yagua claim that ancestors interact with the living:

The souls of the dead are thought to dwell on a hill and to have no interest in living people except when they return for a chicha feast, at which men wearing *Ficus* bast masks impersonate them and drink the chicha. Yagua belief assigns souls a place in the sky, where they do not eat or work but from which they occasionally return unseen to drink chicha and to play tricks on the living. (Steward and Metraux 1963:735-36)

Yahgan. The Yahgan represented Patagonia, and although Cooper (1963:102) claims that “no organized cult existed and the dead were not prayed to,” he also provides evidence that ancestors are claimed to interact with the living:

There was a distinct fear of the dead; . . . the souls of the dead shamans entered into the beliefs and practices of the medicine men. . . . There was a very definite belief in a Supreme Being called *Watauinewa* or *Watanuineiwa*, who was also called by other names meaning “The Powerful One,” “The Highest One,” and especially by the name of “My Father.” (Cooper 1963:102-03)

Yukots. The Yukots represented California. Wallace (1978) provides evidence for ancestors interacting with the living. First he states that “[a] totem symbol peculiar to his paternal line was transmitted by a father to all his children; it was an animal or bird that no member would kill or eat and that was dreamed of and prayed to” (Wallace 1978:453). He also states that “[v]arious personal effects of the deceased were interred with the body and a dog was sometimes sacrificed” (Wallace 1978:455). Kroeber (1925:509) also notes that “[t]o ward off danger of the dead person’s return, a short prayer was addressed to him. . . .”

DISCUSSION

Evidence of claims that ancestors influence the living and/or are influenced by the living have been found in all 24 of the societies coded by Swanson as lacking ancestor worship. This means that such claims about communication between ancestors and their living descendants are found in all of the societies in Swanson’s cross-cultural sample. This suggests that such behavior may be a universal aspect of religion.

This suggestion lies midway between the generally accepted views exemplified by the following statement: “Although the worship of ancestors is not universal, a belief in the immortality of the dead occurs in all cultures” (Lehmann and Myers 1993:283). That is, even if ancestor worship is not universal (which may be true if ancestor worship is defined in its most restrictive sense) all religions may have more in common than the mere assertion of the immortality of the dead.

This is important because the explanation of belief in an afterlife is that it fulfills the human need to reduce the anxiety felt when confronted with death. Although widely cited, this explanation, usually credited to Malinowski (1922, 1948) but owing more of its origin to Marrett (1914), has been subject to several criticisms (see Kroeber 1948; Radcliffe-Brown 1939; Evans-Pritchard 1965; Palmer 1989b). The anxiety reduction explanation also fails to account for the findings presented here. If anxiety reduction were the function of religious behavior, the claim of the continued existence of souls in an afterlife would be sufficient. Hence, the anxiety reduction hypothesis cannot account for the apparently universal additional claim of communication between the living and the dead.

To explain why claims of communication between the living and the dead appear to occur universally, we suggest that it is necessary to understand that the spirits of the dead are those of ancestors. This suggests that religions are closely linked to kinship relations in indigenous society because "[i]n such societies, it might not be an exaggeration to say that kinship relations are tantamount to social relations" (Ferraro 1992:175). Ancestors are particularly important to indigenous societies because they are the source of a society's traditions: "a system of information, support and guidance" (Hefner 1991:123) on how to relate to one's physical and social environment (Steadman and Palmer *In press*). The Lugbara of sub-Saharan Africa say that "the rules of social behavior are 'the words of our ancestors'" (Middleton 1960:27), and Rivers (1906:445) states that "[t]he Todas are the slaves of their traditions and the laws and regulations which have been handed down to them by their ancestors."

Religious rituals that focused on ancestors could strengthen kinship ties and the traditions on which they depend:

Evidently the family-cult in primitive times, must have greatly tended to maintain the family bond: alike by causing periodic assemblings for sacrifice, by repressing dissensions, and by producing conformity to the same injunctions. (Spencer 1972:218)

The claim that ancestors can influence the living and be influenced by them may have been a part of such rituals because it strengthened kin ties and the transmission of traditions in two ways. First, the reference to long-dead ancestors provided a means of involving many more co-descendants than the few who could trace their common ancestry through only a few generations. Second, as Rappaport (1979:262) points out, supernatural claims, such as that ancestors influence the living or are influenced by them, establish "the quality of unquestionable truthfulness." Such claims about ancestors promote the acceptance of traditions because, "although one can argue to a point with an elder, no one questions the wisdom and authority of an ancestor" (Lehmann and Myers 1993:285; see also Fortes 1976:2; Steadman and Palmer 1994, 1995).

In kinship-based societies the connection between religion and ancestors is fairly direct. Not only do their religious leaders communicate with ancestors (Steadman and Palmer 1994), they often memorize the genealogies of the people in their society.

Under such conditions the "ancestor" in "ancestor worship" can often be taken quite literally.

Finally, a comment about world religions. If ancestor worship really lies at the heart of religion, there should be evidence of this even in world religions. Although a discussion of world religions is beyond the scope of this article, we suggest that what distinguishes world religions is that they are not confined to groups of people who consider themselves kin. Hence, references to actual ancestors would not serve the function of creating close social bonds among the members of the religion. Such bonds would have to be only kinship-like. Perhaps this is why world religions often lack references to actual ancestors, but sometimes place great emphasis on metaphorical common ancestors, such as "God the Father," that can serve as a basis for co-operative relations among the members of a world religion (Steadman and Palmer 1995).

NOTE

1. Swanson (1964) specifies "northern groups" without further precision. For this re-examination, using Pomo may unintentionally misrepresent the practices of "northern groups" of Pomo. Also of note, the Pomo had participated in the Peyote Cult of 1889 and it is unclear what effect this movement may have had with respect to their talk about ghosts, spirits, etc.

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