THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

cannot help but be expressed through material

forms and representations, in what Keane calls

a "semiotic ideology". All worship, even the

worship "in spirit and in truth" of a God so tran-

scendent he cannot be named or represented in

images, has to be materialized through human,

and therefore social, media of expression, even

where the medium is language (creeds, sacred

texts) rather than material objects. This means it

can never attain a condition sufficiently abstract

or "spiritual" to preclude corruption, nor can it

be wholly spontaneous and sincere because

even inner contemplation involves socially

constructed consciousness. Consequently, most

faiths, particularly those that emphasize divine

transcendence, are prone to recurrent bouts of

This is an idea that has found its time. There

has been a recent spate of publications in

the sociology of religion and religious studies

dealing with religious dress, liturgical language,

the choreography of ritual, religious architecture,

"purification".

ancestor cult.

discloses a beautifully simple idea.

Religious faith in the transcendent

JUNE 8 2007



www.the-tls.co.uk

## Mission statements

BERNICE MARTIN

## Webb Keane

CHRISTIAN MODERNS Freedom and fetish in the mission encounter 336pp. University of California Press. Paperback, \$21.95; distributed in the UK by Wiley. £13.95. 978 0 520 24652 2

Christian Moderns is not an ethnography, though it deploys illustrations from historical and contemporary ethnographic work. Rather, it is a theoretical exploration of the way the paradox of transcendence works itself out in a missionary encounter between the most abstract and morally rigorous form of European "puritan" Christianity, and indigenous practices in which the materialization involved in ancestor cults, marapu, is elaborate, taken for granted and woven into the moral construction of the Sumbanese. Keane seeks to show that the drive to devalue the material, which the missionaries introduced, has had consequences beyond the immediate practice of religion, and ultimately alters the constitution of Sumbanese "subjects".

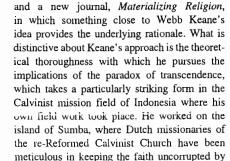
He draws on structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language and of representation, but remains flexible and eclectic, particularly in avoiding overdetermined models of symbolic action or language use. He takes his basic cues, however, from Bruno Latour, particularly Latour's use of the term "purification". The

argument is that human beings are chronically prone to displace their own agency on to objects - images, natural phenomena, animals, and so on, understood as the vehicles of invisible forces - in what is commonly known as "fetishism". "Purification" is essentially a classification exercise, sorting out persons (with agency) from things (without agency). The ideal of human agency, "freedom", "emancipation", at the heart of the moral project of modernity, is itself derived, via the secularization of the Enlightenment, from just this purification drive in Protestantism, from which it passed into European politics and science alike.

other than the classic sociological conundrum: if humans are the product of interaction with other humans, in the context of cultural forms they themselves did not create, how can they have pure agency without stripping themselves (an impossibility in any case) of all the things that went into making them human?' Keane attributes this perception to Marx, but it goes back at least as far as the Enlightenment origins of the social scientific enterprise: it underlies Montesquieu's dilemma over assigning moral responsibility for the "climatically determined" institutions of slavery and polygamy, and Locke's attempt to devise a purely "objective" language as the vehicle for unbiased empirical observation. At all events it is, as Keane stresses, built deep into the project of modernity, and finds apparently secular or "cultural" expression in the drive to extend the distinction

between persons and things, good spirits and bad ones, to distinctions among objects and what they imply for the persons who possess, exchange or use them.

Webb Keane provides subtle and sympathetic analyses of the two-way adjustments and mutual incorporations that can occur where the Calvinist "representational economy" encounters that of the indigenous Sumbanese. Early in the colonial enterprise Dutch administrators and anthropologists, as well as missionaries, found it necessary to make an (inevitably) arbitrary distinction between what constituted "religion" and "culture" respectively, in order to protect local custom and define the legitimate field of mission activity. Its long-term consequences run through all the concrete instances of the mission encounter discussed in the book. The powerfully performative mode of The problem Webb Keane addresses is none ritual language spills over from the ancestor cult into the newly minted ritual of a convert announcing his imminent Christian baptism. Conceptions of bride-wealth mutate from the ritual and material goods that connect the families in a marriage exchange into a Christianinflected valuation where they are dematerialized as symbols of the inherent value of an individual bride. Keane's final discussions of how the traditional description of the house is turned from a powerful ritual of communication with ancestors into an inert poetic text, and how the introduction of state-backed money articulates with the Sumbanese ritual exchange system. are rich demonstrations of the explanatory and interpretive purchase his theoretical tools have in concrete instances of modernization. He concludes we should never assume that, just because we use the same words, we fully know what even the modern Other means.



syncretistic influences from the indigenous

