

BORDER FETISHISMS: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces

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Calvin in the Tropics: Objects and Subjects at the Religious Frontier

Webb Keane

It is common to treat the various ideas grouped under the word “fetishism” as fundamentally concerned with material objects. Thus William Pietz begins his history of the concept by distinguishing the fetish in its “irreducible materiality” from the idol, which is the iconic image of some immaterial original (1985: 7). But the allure that the supposed fetish holds for some and the anxiety it provokes in others have less to do with objects than with the problems that objects pose for subjects. For example, Marx’s (1967) commodity fetish is not simply a way of misunderstanding goods but a way humans misunderstand themselves. In the process of attributing life to things, they lose some of their own humanity and come to treat themselves as objects in turn.

The imputation of fetishism carries a strong charge: more than mere error is at stake. Indeed, something of the original religious character of the concept of fetishism seems to remain amidst its subsequent, more secular, exfoliations. In its secular uses, talk about fetishism may hint at dangers; in the religious context, the danger becomes

apparent. Consider the Dutch missionary D.K. Wielenga's account of the ancestral ritualists on the eastern Indonesian island of Sumba: "The primitives confound that which is a fruit of the imagination with the reality, the objective with the subjective, the outer phenomena with their own spirit life" (1909: 332).¹ As a missionary, Wielenga has the task not simply of education and correction but, above all, salvation. This mission makes evident that the confounding of the objective and subjective has dire, even eternal, consequences.

But talk about fetishism often seems to harbor a sense of thrill and anxiety as well, as if the danger threatens not only the fetishist but also the outsider who, it would seem, should not taken in by the error. For some of the approaches that have been developed since Freud, this may be because the fetish remains a temptation even to those whose knowledge would deny the existence of that which they desire (see Apter and Pietz 1993; Ivy 1995). In the case of some traditions of Protestantism, it may have to do with the way in which other people's illusions threaten the very autonomy of the subject, for the autonomy of the human subject is not unproblematic even for the Protestants themselves. In this essay I explore these ramifications of the idea of fetishism by looking at the encounter between Dutch Calvinists and the practitioners of ancestral ritual on Sumba. I suggest that the difficulties posed for Calvinists by Sumbarinese understandings of the relations among subjects and objects go well beyond the theological niceties beloved of colonial missionaries. They may reveal certain problems endemic to efforts to stabilize the boundaries between persons and things, or to determine the status of language in human activities. To see this means listening to how Calvinists articulate some of the core concerns of the West's self-understood modernity.

THE FETISH AS HISTORICAL ENCOUNTER

Despite its isolated, even pastoral, surroundings, the twentieth-century colonial mission on Sumba was inseparable from the larger background of Dutch industry and commerce.² Since Weber (1958), of course, the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism has been common disputational coin. Leaving aside the Weberian question of historical causality, it is apparent that when Protestants on Sumba draw on the discourse of fetishism, several aspects of their relationship to their context come to the fore. One is the missionaries' own ambivalence, torn as they are between economic rationality and spiritual commitment. As I have discussed elsewhere (Keane 1996),

the Dutch saw Sumbarinese ancestor ritualists as both excessively materialistic and as believing in too many spirits, as too calculating and as irrationally blinded to economics by their moral commitments.

The island of Sumba came under Dutch rule during the final period of the expansion and consolidation of the East Indies early in this century.³ Having little to offer those with more worldly ambitions, the island was left almost entirely in the hands of a small band of missionaries. Official policy sought to prevent competition between rival missions by distributing them among discrete territories; most of Sumba was placed under the tutelage of a conservative sect of the Reformed (or Orthodox Calvinist) Church (Gereformeerde Kerken). In 1947, not long before Sumba entered the independent Republic of Indonesia, the tiny Indigenous congregation formed the autonomous Sumbarinese Christian Church (Gereja Kristen Sumba), which continues to have close ties to the Dutch church to this day. Despite the efforts of several generations of missionaries and indigenous evangelists, and increasing pressure from the Indonesian state, however, at the time of my first visit to the district of Anakalang in 1985, the unconverted *marapu* (ancestral spirit) followers formed the majority of the population of West Sumba and remained a strong presence in East Sumba.⁴ Although it was becoming increasingly apparent that Christians would soon be dominant, resistance by *marapu* followers could be quite vociferous.

Despite the important changes that have transpired over this century's colonial and post-colonial periods, the encounter between Christians and *marapu* followers has produced recurrent discourses about their differences. The themes to which these discourses return again and again can be made apparent in two quotations. One is from the early years of the Dutch mission, the other from a conversion I had with a Sumbarinese gospel teacher in 1993.

The first quotation comes from D.K. Wielenga. He was the first missionary to spend a long period on Sumba, persevering despite having been wounded in a spear attack and twice seeing his house destroyed by arson. In 1909, not long after his arrival, he described the religion of the Sumbarinese in this way:

The two constituents of the nature religion . . . [are] the dogma that everything has a soul, that is, *fetishism*, the worship of sensual perceptible objects, as having souls . . . [and] the dogma that the soul is free in its movement and not bound to a fixed body, *spiritualism*, the worshipping of the souls of the dead and of the invisible spirits in the air (1909: 332; emphases in the original).

He wrote this passage while still fairly new to Sumba, and thus relied more heavily on the comparative religion of the day than in his later, more ethnographically precise, writing. But this passage is useful precisely in its generality, for it shows in broad outlines what was at stake for the Protestant. The errors of paganism do not lie, for example, in immorality, cruelty, or absence of faith. Rather, the fundamental problem is the pagan's confusion about what kinds of beings inhabit the world, and how animated material things really are. Their confusion is twofold: first, taking what is really inanimate (matter) to be animate, and second, mistaking the attributes of the visible (that is, material) and invisible. Fetishistic error revolves around questions of animacy or agency, and visibility or materiality.

The second quotation comes from Bapak U.S. Kadiwangu. His father had been a powerful *ratu* (ritual specialist), and his brother had succeeded to the office. He himself had been among the small number of children of the nobility to be selected by the Dutch for a formal education, and was eventually ordained as a minister. When I knew him, he was an elderly man with the bitterness of someone who had spent a lifetime with little evangelical success, only now in retirement, to witness the emergence of a Protestant majority. With quiet pride he told me in 1993 how he preached in the 1940s and 1950s:

I'd ask them, why are they afraid of the *marapu*? "Because they created us, and if we don't respect them, we'll get sick." I'd tell them, "Yes, that's true, we must be afraid. We're afraid because we can't see Him. So the ancestors used gold, gongs, spears, those humans [i.e. the spirits of earlier, now deceased, ancestors]—they became signs that Lord God is there—like a king or a *ratu*—people fear them because of their power. So now we don't need to pray. God doesn't want us to bring chickens anymore. God sent me so you can return to God—not that wood, not that rock [i.e. traditional altars]. What saves us isn't wood, rock, cattle, but Lord Jesus."

Like Wielenga, Pak Kadiwangu stresses the error of using objects in ritual, attacking their use in *marapu* ritual, as well as the fallacy of ascribing divinity to ancestors who were mere humans. He sees this in terms of substitution, the material taking the place of the spiritual.

Both men mention the difference between the visible and invisible, which raises the fundamental religious problem of presence. *Marapu* follower and Christian alike must in some way contend with the fact that the deity is invisible and (usually) silent. *Marapu* followers are quite explicit about this. Many have told me that they have

little understanding of the spirits, since they cannot be seen, and ritual speech often asks whether the spirits are present. Although the ubiquity of God might make presence less problematic for Protestants, the question persists in somewhat different form. Calvinists (already, in some sects, uncertain about their personal salvation) cannot be sure if their sermons and prayers have truly been inspired by the Holy Spirit (see Peacock and Tyson 1989). For both religions, the effort to encounter and interact with an otherwise inaudible and invisible world creates unavoidable dilemmas.

The problem of presence gives rise to another theme mentioned by both men. According to Wielenga, the invisibility of the spirit world explains the fear that permeates pagan life. The source of this fear is twofold, the human's imputation of agency to external agents (see also Dijkstra 1902), and the invisibility of those agents. Pak Kadiwangu's remarks pick up the theme of fear and, extending the point, hint at the temptation that fetishism might hold for people. Faced with invisibility, *marapu* followers turn to material objects. These objects stand for immaterial entities that should be present but whose immateriality puts this presence at any given moment into doubt. Thus, according to Pak Kadiwangu, the objects used in *marapu* ritual are in truth only signs and thus not actually fetishes—except for those *marapu* followers who do not recognize their semiotic function.

Moreover, according to Pak Kadiwangu, the use of material signs makes up for something that seems to be missing. But once people become aware that that something is not really missing, they can abandon those signs in favor of the real thing, Jesus Christ. The passage from material signs to full acceptance of the invisible is something that transpires over historical time. Material things seem to have the status of temporary stopgap measures that are now no longer necessary.⁵ Once one can call them "fetishes," one is in a position to abandon them.

The historicizing view has two further implications worth noting. According to this view, the proper way to understand the material forms of religion is as signs of invisible spiritual presences. But this ultimately leaves the solution of the problem of presence to the inner faith of the beholder. For the weaker members of the congregation, the appeal of some external guarantee of divine presence is likely to persist. Protestants themselves are occasionally made aware of this temptation when they perceive the small Catholic mission to be poaching on their converts by means of the sensuous forms of masses, idolatrous statues, and priestly robes.⁶ In addition, if the historicizing view is carried to its logical conclusion, it also means that the conversion to Christianity implicates the convert in more than just a new set of religious beliefs

and practices. The new religion tends to be identified with an entire historical epoch; as even persistent ancestral ritualists were prone to say in the 1980s, the hallmark of the "modern era" (*masa modern*) is that "the foreign *marapu* has won" (*taluneka na marapu jawa*). This new era involves transformations in political economy and social organization, which may be difficult for the missionary to keep distinct from spiritual transformation in the eyes of the convert.⁷

AMBIGUOUS ANIMACY

The fetishism that missionaries ascribed to the Sumbanese takes several forms, the most apparent ones being sacralla, offerings, and the distribution of sacrifices. What I here call sacralla are objects known as "the *marapu*'s portion" (*tagu marapu*; see discussion in Keane 1997a, chapter 8). Among them are bits of rare imported cloth, metal statuettes, spears, swords, gongs, old Chinese and Vietnamese trade ceramics, and, most commonly, gold ornaments of the type normally used in ceremonial exchanges. Every clan and its major divisions should possess at least one of its own *marapu* portion, which is carefully preserved out of sight in a designated house. Sumbanese often speak of these sacralla as the true inhabitants of the house, for which the human residents are only caretakers. Sacralla impose on their inhabitants specific ritual prerogatives and obligations. If the rituals are regularly performed, the sacralla remain silent guarantors of the well-being of the living. Should the rituals lapse, however, the living will be reminded of their presence by means of drought, fires, the illness of children, lightning strikes, and infertility. On the rare occasions when they have been transferred to another owner, people say, they have resisted. One such valuable was given away to someone who kept it in a wooden chest. But it banged around so vigorously in there that the new owners returned it to its house of origin.

Such objects have many of the characteristics of the religious fetish. They are material things to which people attribute animacy. They are treated as if they were the ancestor and normally they bear that ancestor's name. But in what exactly their personhood lies seems to be a matter of ambiguity even to the Sumbanese. The missionary Lambooy (1930: 281) reported that although they were usually identified for foreigners as the *marapu* itself,

sometimes I ask of a Sumbanese, "is that now really the Marapoe.." Then he looks at me indignantly, for that is not the Marapoe, only the

Tangoe Marapoe, the possession of the Marapoe. "But what is the Marapoe then?" "We ourselves do not know the Marapoe, who for us is concealed."

In my own time, some people told me that the ancestral body was physically transformed into sacralla; others saw the objects as conventional symbols that stand for the ancestor (see also Kapita 1976: 90). When accused by Christians of idolatry, contemporary *marapu* followers sometimes respond that the valuables are merely a meeting place (like the altar), a mat of honor on which the spirit sits, or a horse for, or a reminder of, the ancestor.

In conversations with me, people most often said that the object is the "replacement" (*na hepanya*) of the ancestral body or its "sign, mark, trace" (*tada*). This suggests that the ancestor is, at best, ambiguently present in it, since both expressions presuppose an absence. For example, the son of a *ratu* "replaces" his father upon the latter's death by taking over his office. The word *tada* can refer to the owner's mark on a household possession that has been loaned to someone else, or to the token given as a promissory note in lieu of an exchange valuable. Similarly, it is only because the *marapu* are gone that the living hold onto these objects. The sacralla thus index the absence of the *marapu* at the same time that they make them present.

The various accounts of sacralla turn on the problem of invisibility and the accompanying uncertainty. One reason these accounts vary is that, since the invisible subject is unknowable, there is no way of knowing exactly how it is present in or connected to the object. Moreover, most *marapu* followers agree that it would be arrogant to say otherwise. Herein lies one of the central accusations that *marapu* followers make against Christians: that they are shamelessly brazen in pretending to know God as well as they do. More specifically, *marapu* followers often express astonishment that Christians claim to be able to speak to God without the mediation of material things and, as will become apparent below, formal speech. What Christians see as fetishistic displacements are also forms of mediation that contend not just with invisibility, but with respect for the divine.

THE TEMPTATIONS OF FLESH

Even though sacralla come closer to the classic definition of the fetish than does the sacrificial offering, in practice the latter has posed more of a problem for Christian efforts to stabilize the distinction between

subjects and objects. Sacralia are easy for converts to ignore, since they remain hidden in the houses and are only rarely drawn into ritual activity. When they are brought out, they are so dangerous that only specialists are permitted to see or handle them, and the convert can avoid them. Offerings are only slightly more problematic. The problems they pose are due to the ubiquity of ritual speech events. In general, no speech is valid without the material "base" (*lata*) on which it rests. The principle extends beyond ancestral ritual, since all formal exchanges between living humans, such as those for marriages, also require that speech be grounded in objects and objects in turn be given direction by speech (Keane 1994). Thus when Christians perform ritual speech for such occasions as baptisms and thanksgivings, without making offerings, they can feel vulnerable to the accusations of impropriety laid against them by *marapu* followers (Keane 1995). This sense of impropriety turns on how one interprets the status of objects. The official Christian view of the combination of words with offerings in *marapu* ritual is expressed by a song, composed by an early Sumbanese minister, meant to ridicule pagan practices. One line ran "What good is prayer, the *marapu* words? They just use up chickens." His argument was taken up by many Christians, who justify their conversion by appeal to economics: Offerings and sacrifices are wasteful. This argument, by stressing rational calculation, also aligns the church with the contemporary Indonesian state's discourse of economic development. But in the process, *marapu* followers are quick to point out, Christians betray themselves to be vulgar and self-interested materialists. Probably the single most common argument I have heard against them is that they are greedy and lacking in the respect for ancestors and (here people turn Christian expressions against them) for the spiritual. Non-Christians never eat meat except when compelled to make offerings, and they never slaughter animals without verbally expressing to them the purpose for which the killing takes place. In contrast, Christians simply eat meat because they are hungry, driven by their own desires. In acknowledging nothing beyond the value of the animals as meat, it is Christians who are the true materialists.

In varying degrees, sacralia and offerings are relatively straightforward matters for the church. Since they usually come into play in events that are unambiguously ritual, converts could eschew the entire event. But since arriving on Sumba, the church has faced great problems with sacrifices. This is due to the inseparability of ritual from the whole range of exchange and feasting around which the bulk of Sumbanese public life is constructed. The problem of how to deal with the problem of the meat distribution after sacrifice has

given rise to some of the most contentious and persistent debates both between Christians and *marapu* ritualists, and among Christians themselves (see Keane 1996).

Meat is a problem not only because of the exchange system, but because of the difficulty of establishing its semiotic character. The sacralia are easy to interpret as symbolic: Even some *marapu* ritualists speak of them as signs of the spirits, and some Christians are willing to accept them by treating them as "signs of social unity" (Keane 1997a: 199–201). As for offerings, if one does not believe in their spirit recipients, or if one does not think they actually consume the offerings, it is easy to treat offerings as signs of human intentions. But once the offering has been transformed into meat to be eaten by humans, the question becomes more complex. Unlike the token portions of the Christians' Holy Communion, sacrificial meat is conceptually hard to categorize as lacking immediate practicality and thus as purely symbolic. As a central medium by which social relations are tested and reproduced, the sharing of sacrificial meat is difficult for the convert to avoid.

Large-scale sacrifice and feasting occupy an important part of Sumbanese ritual and social life (see Hoskins 1993). Even events whose religious affiliation is ambiguous or overtly Christian, such as funerals and thanksgiving ceremonies, can involve the slaughter of scores of buffalo, pigs, or, occasionally, horses. The meat is then distributed among those in attendance. Some is cooked and consumed there. The rest of the raw meat is brought home and redistributed to people who did not attend. As a result, some meat from a large feast may end up in the hands of a substantial percentage of the households in the area.

The problem is that when the sponsors of the event are *marapu* followers or even sympathetic Christians, they offer the animals to the spirits with ritual speech before the killing. To kill animals without prayer incurs several sanctions. The spirits of the victims, uninformed of their destinations, will be lost, which may affect the fertility of the herds. Those who feast without displaying the fact that they are compelled by ritual obligations imposed on them from external sources (the ancestors) will appear to be both arrogantly willful and shamefully under the sway of their desires.

Even a Christian who does not attend the original feast might not elude the distribution of meat, and strong social pressures make it hard to reject the gift (and the debt it entails). To insist that converts refuse sacrificial meat would be to condemn them to social isolation. But to consume that meat runs against the injunction in

1 Corinthians 8 and 10 in which Paul warns against eating sacrifices as tantamount to "fellowship with devils." The issue gave rise to a series of sharp debates, evident early in this century and persisting in the 1990s. Some missionaries insisted on the letter of the scripture, some on a more liberal practicality, and a third group found a middle position, forbidding the eating of meat at the sacrificial feast but not that delivered to the house.

Some of the antiprohibitionists pointed out that the prohibitionist position carried a theological as well as social danger, since it risked crediting the power of material things. If meat really is only symbolic, it should have no effects on the souls of those who consume it: The next logical step, then, would be to work towards reinterpreting feasts as symbolic activities. This led to proposals that Sumbanese practices might take on new functions:

The giving of food to the dead and the dead-feasts can be renewed in a commemoration speech on New Year's Eve. Harvest feasts become thanksgiving days. . . . In funerals, animals may rightly be killed but only those which are necessary to provide food for those in attendance. The custom among the Sumbanese, to bring home the meat given to the spirits, is transposed into support for the poor. (Lambooy 1932: 342)

In other words, what is required is that the outer forms of tradition be retained, but that they be endowed with new functions both expressive and practical. In order to bring this about, those functions should be portrayed in terms of the intentions of the participants. By placing a functional interpretation on the meat, Christians find themselves stressing its materiality at the expense of the spiritual dimension, something the *marapu* followers are quick to point out. But by stressing intentions, Protestants suppress the materiality of things in favor of their symbolic character, treating them as objectified expressions of immaterial meanings.

The most direct way to effect the latter transformation, the one that best eludes the threat of materialism posed by the former, is through the use of speech. As Lois Orville put it, writing of the proposed harvest ceremonies, the Christian should stress the disinterested character of the event: "The feast then is no longer a necessity but a gift. Not in order to influence but to thank; not 'supaja' (in order) but 'sebab' (because)" (1973a: 156-57). That is, Christians should not see the performance as *marapu* followers do, an externally imposed obligation to the ancestors, but as the outcome of choices made by persons

who possess free will. In order for the will to be properly located in the person, it must be clearly distinguished from the material objects that serve as its media. This can be done by restructuring the actions performed by ritual. What had been an action anterior to an outcome ("in order" to obtain a harvest from the ancestors) must become the response to a prior action ("thank you" for the harvest conferred by God). But the physical activities of killing and butchering animals remain the same for *marapu* followers and Christians. The meat that results, as a material substance, remains silent about its possible meanings and purposes, and inherently subject to mistaken interpretations. The reconfiguration of the relation between material things and immaterial meanings, therefore, must be effected through speech.

THE SPIRIT OF THE WORD

When flesh and other material objects have been banned from the intercourse with God, what remains? How can divine presence be ascertained and what mediates between the humans in the visible world and the agents of the invisible? For one ritual specialist of my acquaintance these were serious questions. Umbu Paji had converted to Christianity, but after his wife died suddenly, while they were both still young, he returned to the *marapu* and eventually became a *ratu*. In our many conversations over the years, he continually returned to the problem of presence. Once, for example, he explained to me how he responds to Christian polemics:

Christians say we make stones into God, but that's not so. The stone altar is where we meet. It's like if I promise to meet you, we need to have someplace to meet, right? How can we meet if there's no sign? . . . The Psalm says God exists everywhere—in the house, on the veranda, in the forest. Well, if this is so, how come when we pray [in these places] they tell us it's Satan?

By my understanding of *marapu* ritual, Umbu Paji is correct in saying that Christians misrepresent the role of stone altars. Still, Umbu Paji's experience with the Christians, who form the majority in his village, has made him a skilled casuist, and his words should not be taken to represent the views of all *marapu* followers. But he does touch on a central problem for adherents to both sides of the debate.

As the problem of meat shows, material objects, especially those subject to ordinary uses like eating, cannot unambiguously determine

and delimit their semiotic and practical functions (see Keane 1997a, chapter 3). Thus such objects cannot in themselves either guarantee the autonomy of the subject or resolve the problems posed by the invisibility of the deity. They are available for too many conflicting uses and interpretations, and offer the temptations of fetishism. If the possible meanings of objects are to be constrained, they must be subjected to the reflexive powers of language, with its capacity to speak from within the act itself about what is being done and what is intended.

Language can seem to promise a way to stabilize the distinction between subject and object. This is both because of what it can say, by virtue of its own reflexivity (see Lucy 1993), and because of the intimate nature of its relationship to the speaker. For many strands of the Christian tradition, the chief mediator between material and immaterial, visible and invisible, and interior and exterior is speech (see Keane 1997b). Words, which arise from the true, spiritual locus of the will, are the spirit made manifest (Niesel 1956: 212–26). Central to the origins of the Protestant tradition was the question of the status of language. Translation of the Bible into vernaculars was to make the scriptures available to the lay reader, without the mediation of clerics. In contrast to doctrines that hold sacred words to be untranslatable (as in some understandings of the Qur'an, for example, or of Vedic mantra), the emphasis on scriptural translation tends to presuppose the transparency of language. This transparency means that it is not its sound shape, for example, that grants scriptural language its divinity, but its semantic content. Translation tends to place greater value on meaning than linguistic form.

One of the classic accounts of linguistic meaning from medieval theology (Asad 1993) through contemporary linguistic pragmatics (Grice 1957) is that words give outward expression to the inner intentions of persons. If those intentions are truly the speaker's own, and if speech truly arises from the speaker's own interiority, then that speech would be sincere. In many Protestant sects, the sincerity of prayer is the necessary condition for true communication with God. But language is in some ways exterior to its speaker. Therefore even it does not entirely unproblematically guarantee the autonomy of the subject and its separation from objects. Some Protestants discover that language presents its own temptations to fetishism. There seem to be two reasons for this; its material embodiment, and its social character. This holds not just for writing but even for the spoken word. Thus utterances, however spiritual might be their place of origin in the soul, are inescapably material. The sounds of speech are produced by mechanical action, are received by means of physical ef-

fects on the listener, are governed by linguistic conventions about form, and, what is theologically most at issue, have some degree of existence outside both speaker and listener. After all, since we can hear ourselves speak, our words once uttered come to us much as the words of others.

Our words also come to us from others ontogenically; we learn a language that exists prior to our own utterances. In speaking we display the extent to which others have entered into our own words (Bakhtin 1981). These aspects of language thus seem to pose obstacles to sincere prayer, if, as in many Protestant views, it is defined by its origin in the individual subject. If we could guarantee the divinity of the words that come from others, this might not present a problem for religious practice. But to the extent that language is social in origin, it reveals the incipient insincerity that threatens to intervene between speaker and the divine addressee.

Both the materiality of utterances and the social character of language threaten the word's association with the intentions and interiority of the individual speaker. This has led some Protestant denominations to reject liturgical speech and others to seek its radical transformation. For all their differences, for example, the silence of Quakers and joyful noise of Pentecostals share a suspicion of both ordinary and liturgical speech. Quakers seek to eliminate any but the most spontaneous speech in religious service, which should otherwise remain in silence. The marks of sincerity include austerity, often linguistically marked by a rhetorically "unadorned" style.⁸ In contrast, Pentecostal services typically involve emotional display and noise, as participants try to achieve glossolalia (speaking in tongues). This is language whose very unintelligibility is the guarantee of its divine source and the sincerity of the inspired speaker.⁹

In Sumba, the parallels between the exteriority of language and that of the fetishistic object are evident in the Calvinist critiques of *marapu* ritual speech. *Marapu* ritual has two inseparable components, the offering and the speech that must accompany it. The authority of ritual speech remains very strong, even for Sumbanese Christians. Indeed, the more that ritual speech is invested without the "base" of material offerings, the more authority is invested in the speech itself. Nonetheless, the "*marapu* words" (*li marapu*), have three defining features that, for Christians, implicate them with the general threat of fetishism. For one thing, the words, by definition, do not come from the speaker but from the ancestors themselves. In addition, this origin is marked by the form the words take, for ritual speech must follow strict poetic rules and is composed of a fixed canon of couplets.

Finally, not only do the words and their formal properties come from others, the performance too is normally delegated to specialists, who speak on behalf of sponsors or other beneficiaries who themselves remain silent during the performance.¹⁰

Marapu ritual speech takes advantage of the material and social exteriority of language to respond to the problems of presence posed by communication with invisible addressees. By using only canonical couplets with their strict poetic form, ritual speakers return to their addressees the very words that those addressees had provided to their speakers. Although there is no certainty that the ancestors can hear these words, at least in this way ritual speech establishes its appropriateness for spanning the semiotic gap that intervenes between speaker and listener (see Keane 1995). In contrast, the linguistic forms of Protestant prayer resemble those of everyday speech. Thus, at least for the unconvinced, Protestant prayer displays no manifest evidence of its capacity to communicate to the invisible world.¹¹

On the other hand, although *marapu* speech has a clear relationship to its addressee, it leaves some doubt about the relationship between words and their speaker. Since they originate with the ancestors, the words are clearly distinct from the speaker in at least some respects. Ritual speakers neither claim to be the origin of their words, nor, unlike practitioners in some religions, do they go into trance or states of possession, and thereby lend their bodies to invisible speakers. They must use offerings and verbal self-reference to establish their identities and their rights to address the spirits.

The response to *marapu* speech by contemporary Sumbanese Protestants is exemplified in their insistence on the importance of shutting one's eyes while praying. This puzzles *marapu* followers, one of whom asked me, "What are they afraid of?" adding sardonically, "Maybe they're afraid their sins are visible!" For Protestants, shut eyes help the speaker avoid the temptation of the fetishized word. They mark off the boundary between interior and exterior. One church warden explained to me that you close your eyes so that your speech will verge on idolatry by worshipping statues of the Virgin, they also pray with their eyes open. That is, unlike Calvinists, they read from the Prayer Book. Note here the explicit association between the fetishizing displacement of idol worship and that of reciting the written word.

In a 1993 sermon, one young minister criticized his main competitors in this way:

Yes, as for Catholicism, there are often formulae. Can't go skip over or go contrary to the way of praying. Have to follow exactly. . . . Like in

Islam, for example, it has to be so many times.¹² We (on the other hand) are not taught like this. It's not enough, just five times. Breathing goes on and on, doesn't it?

By comparing sincere prayer to breath, this minister rhetorically endows it with the authority of natural processes. If Catholic liturgy, Islamic prayer, and *marapu* words take their authority from the distinctiveness that sets them apart from ordinary conversation, the appeal here is the reverse. The authority of Calvinist prayer lies in its sincerity, and its sincerity is marked by its ordinariness. In this way, it is identified with the full presence of the everyday, physical locus of the individuated self.¹³

The Calvinist criticisms of inauthentic prayer view it as like the fetishized object. Like the spirits inauthentic prayer addressees, it stands outside the subject, and to it the speaking subject surrenders its own capacity to act. These become apparent as the linguist and Bible translator Lois Onvlee ponders the difficulty of rendering the meaning of "prayer" in a Sumbanese language:

I think of the word with which we render our "to prayer," viz. *parengena li'i*, which literally means to make someone hear the word, direct the word to. . . . After my use of the word in a religious service was rejected by one of the elders, we thereafter intended to be on "safe" terrain. But this "safe terrain" did not exist. Once I went along when summoned for the killing of the chicken, one of the officiants was told to *parengeni li'i na manu*, in other words, make the chicken hear the word, in order that by and by the chicken intestine should then speak what the forefathers mean to say, to be able to serve as oracle. And in another context, regarding what was "hot", and thus perilous, and to be cooled, they said *parengenge li'i ne we'e*, make the water hear the word. . . . And thus I am here in the neighborhood of the magical word, which confers coercive power onto that over which the word is spoken. And now we use this word in another connection and say *parengeni li'i Mjori*, to make the Lord hear the word. Shall this word continually be clear for those who hear it? (1973b: 202)

Notice here the way in which the problem of translation leads irrevocably from speech practices to mistaken views of agency and of the kinds of beings that inhabit the world. By addressing the chicken, *marapu* speech treats as an agent that which ontologically lacks agency, and in cooling that which is hot, it falsely attributes efficacy to words.

From a Calvinist perspective, *Marapu* words are like the fetishized object in that the speaker attributes to words and their forms powers

that properly lie in persons and their intentions. *Marapu* words seek to have effects on material things when, for Protestants, words can only express meanings emanating from the speaker's immaterial spirit. By contrast, the authentic prayer of the Protestant must originate within the speaker, be guided by intentions, and, since its efficacy depends on the meanings of its words and not just their forms, refer to a world beyond itself. According to this opposition, authentic speech is primarily a form of symbolic expression. The forms it takes are relatively arbitrary, in the Saussurean sense, in contrast to the canonical couplets of *marapu* speech.

CONCLUSION

As Quaker silence and Pentecostal glossolalia suggest, speech cannot be fully relied on to determine the boundaries between external objects and the interiority of subjects. In Sumba, Dutch Calvinists counterpose the sincerity of expressions arising from individual and internal sources against what they take to be *marapu* ritual's fetishistic displacement of agency onto objectified verbal formulae. A mistaken view of language is inseparable from mistaken understanding of the human subject. Wrong speech thus forms an obstacle on the way to achieving an interior state of grace. As Wielenga writes,

whenever one has a bad understanding of "redemption," then it is also given that one has a bad understanding of "thankfulness." He shall answer the question: how shall I be thankful to God for such redemption?—thank and love God. Words and nothing but words. . . . And it turns out that the thankfulness stands in acknowledging that he says thanks. Only seldom shall he convert it into a deed both saying and doing: I am your servant and will do work for you. His heathen religion has cost him much, many pecuniary and material sacrifices. . . . [In *marapu* ritual] a removal of guilt must "be purchased," for all must be "paid for." But a Christian "asks" forgiveness, receives it, and "says" his thankfulness. (1923: 223)

The lack of interiority is mutually implicated with the misuse of words. If words are deeds, a view Wielenga imputes to *marapu* followers, they would be sufficient in themselves. But if words are only supplementary to deeds, something closer to Wielenga's own view, they lie external to the subject, and so in themselves remain unbound to the subject's condition and acts. Inauthentic speech is then insepara-

ble from materialism, going hand in hand with the corruption that conflates economic exchange (the purchase of an indulgence) with spiritual effects (forgiveness). Wielenga's view of speech, in its very appeal to interiority, recognizes the supplementary and ambiguously external character of language, which needs some additional resources if it is to be bound to inner states and outer works.

This opens up a possibility that finds some echoes in the *marapu* followers' response to Christian criticism. *Marapu* followers frequently assert that Christians display overwhelming hubris in seeking to address the deity directly.¹⁴ In contrast to the forms of direct address to which Protestant prayer aspires, *marapu* followers see their ritual forms not as insincere but as deferential. It is respectful modesty on the part of speakers to insist that the words they utter are not their own, an insistence displayed in the canonical forms of the poetic couplet. In contrast, *marapu* followers commonly attribute to the isolated speaker of Christian prayer an excessive willfulness that is at once dangerous and ineffective. For *marapu* followers, Christians are suspect precisely because they take the warrants of sacred speech to lie in persons rather than in the exteriority of words. That is, through its efforts at sincerity and spontaneity, Christian prayer seeks to deny that language and its powers do not originate in the individual speaker. To *marapu* followers, this means an illegitimate transfer of responsibility from the invisible world of spirits to the fleshly domain of the living. If the ultimate agents are divine, from the *marapu* followers' point of view it is as if Christians fetishize themselves.

As I have suggested, however, both sides have to contend with the problems of ambiguous presence. Their concrete practices reveal a lingering doubt: For *marapu* followers, it is about the presence of the invisible spirits; for Christians, the presence of the sincere intentions in the worshipper. What both sides share is evidence that *neither* takes the subject to be fully autonomous and self-present. Neither, then, is in an unassailable position to portray the other as the real fetishist. This may even lend force to the charges each lays against the other, since each may in turn find tempting some of the displacements and assurances offered by the other's "fetishism."

NOTES

1. All translations from the Dutch are my own. Twenty-four months of fieldwork in Anakalang (1985, 1986–1987, and 1993) and research in the Netherlands (1988) were generously funded by the Department of Education

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2. In addition to the axiomatic point, there is a more specific one to make as well. The Gereformeerde Kerken, the Dutch Calvinist sect that missionized Sumba, split off from the mainstream Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk in the mid-nineteenth century in part as a reaction against the latter's liberalizing tendencies. A small minority (some 8.18 percent of the Dutch population in 1899), this sect appealed to the small farmers, artisans, and small tradesmen, whose were likely to see themselves at the margins of industrial mass society (Wintle 1987).

3. Sumba is about the size of Jamaica, with a population of some 350,000. The economy is predominantly subsistence agriculture, with some trade in cattle and horses. What is most relevant to this article is the thriving and in some places hugely expensive system of ceremonial exchange (involving cloth, gold, silver, buffalo, horses, and pigs) that mediates most social relations (for details see Keane 1997a). Sumba is home to speakers of some half-dozen closely related languages, identified with distinct territories which they inhabit. These territories vary greatly in social organization, ritual, and economic structure. Nonetheless, there is enough basic similarity among them—which Sumbanese themselves recognize—that for purposes of this article, the ethnographic differences can be glossed over. Indeed, the missionary writings with which I work frequently do not specify what part of Sumba is in question. When I draw on my own fieldwork and the language used there, I am referring to the domain of Anakalang, located in the west-central part of the island.

4. The word *marapu* properly refers to the most ancient and powerful of the ancestral spirits, and the chief interlocutors in ritual. In Sumba, the word is also used to refer to the religion and its practitioners. "Marapu follower" is a somewhat infelicitous shorthand; one does not "follow" the *marapu* as one might a cult leader or savior. But people do say that to perform the rituals is to "follow" (*ker*) the tracks left by the ancestors. This is a better solution than to call them "marapu worshippers," which inaccurately assimilates the ritual relationship with *marapu* to very different sorts of religious practice.

5. Pak Kadiwang's historicizing version of the relation between *marapu* and Christian religions shows interesting parallels (whether intentional or not I cannot say) to the typological reading of the Bible. In this hermeneu-

tic tradition, the New Testament reveals the truth which was only immanent in the Old Testament.

6. Many of the debates between Dutch Calvinists and *marapu* followers not only replay the original conflict between Protestants and Catholics, they seem at times to contain a subtext about their present-day rivalry as well. Catholic missions historically have been a much smaller presence on Sumba than those of the Dutch Calvinists (see Haripranata 1984). In recent years, however, as both missions begin to proselytize the final and most stubborn holdouts among the unconverted, their rivalry has intensified. In particular, *marapu* followers often find Catholicism far the less onerous choice. One *ratu* told me that if he were forced to enter a church, he would choose the Catholics both because they have the older faith (next only to *marapu* ritual), and because their ritualism has some resemblance to his own. On the latter point Protestants would gleefully concur.

7. A good example of the relationship between their traditionalism and the problem of fetishism can be found in the following passage by Lois On'lee, describing what he sees as a noble but vanishing world. After showing how people and their possessions exist in an intimate relationship, he writes: "Possessions on Sumba . . . must be seen in terms of broad social and religious relationships. These relationships are now breaking down. . . . As the Sumbanese come increasingly to regard their possessions in an economic sense, I can only hope that they will view these goods in the proper context, without which these possessions could become a dangerous and threatening power. I can only hope that the Sumbanese people will find a new control over their possessions—one that will provide a new context and a new respect" (1980: 206–207). Here a native fetishism is counterposed favorably to something very like the fetishism of the commodity (see also Keane 1996).

8. As one Quaker has pointed out to me, not every form of spontaneous speech is acceptable in meeting. What counts as spontaneous speech is subject to strict conventions, which will vary from congregation to congregation. These conventions, however, are likely to be largely tacit, and possibly unconscious. For Quaker views of language in their formative period, see Bauman 1983.

9. Pentecostals cite the Biblical gift of tongues as the precedent for their practices, but different sects vary in how they view the words of glossolalia. Some take them to be part of some ordinary human language that happens to be unknown to the speaker; others believe they are a divine language. In addition, sects differ on whether these words can be interpreted (see Goodman 1972; Samarin 1972). For a comparison of Quaker and Pentecostal treatments of language, see Maltz 1985. For language in other religions, see Keane 1997b.

10. This brief sketch is meant only to draw out the points relevant to the encounter with Calvinism. The complex topic of Sumbanese ritual speech

has been addressed at length elsewhere; see especially Kuipers 1990; Keane 1997a.

11. The Lord's Prayer was indeed taught to its speakers by its addressee, by way of Jesus Christ. Its divine origin is known, however, only by virtue of the surrounding narrative, not through its linguistic form.

12. He is referring to the Islamic obligation to pray at five specified times over the course of the day.

13. In *marapu* ritual, the apparent displacements of the intending and acting subject by ritual objects and the external word are also echoed in its participation structure and by continual reference to its obligatory character. Speaking of the delegation of *marapu* words to specialists, one Protestant put it this way: "As for *marapu* people, they don't even pay attention during the prayers, as long as they have their *ratu* doing the job for them. They don't concentrate like we do, but just chat away." As fulfillment of an obligation, the performers of *marapu* words insist that their words are not the expressions of personal intentions and vocation.

14. In doing so, *marapu* followers often overlook such theological nuances as the mediation of Christ and the role of Grace in the production of sincere speech. But then so do many of the local Christians, who in this respect are perhaps more modernist than the theologians.

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2

From Brooms to Obeah and Back: Fetish Conversion and Border Crossings in Nineteenth-Century Suriname

Susan Legêne

In museums we see only the dead bodies of fetishes, "*die toten Hille . . . , ihre Kadaver*." The museum catalogue accompanying the Frankfurt 1986 exhibition on African fetishes leaves us with no illusion about the change the exhibited objects underwent before reaching their current resting place in the collections of Western museums. Gone are their spiritual inner powers—their supposed inner energies. What remains are ritual objects, composed of vegetal, mineral, and man-made elements, each with a unique form.¹ To those who made them, who lived with them, the artifact and its spiritual powers are supposed to have been one and the same. As a rule, however, the Europeans—obtaining them by accident, by force, through bargaining or theft—neither understood nor accepted the communicating powers attributed to such objects in the communities within which they functioned.² While crossing cultural and geographical borders on their way to Europe, they underwent complex changes in meaning. But why were these objects brought to Europe in the first place to end up in its museums? Did their fetish power indeed stop there, as the Frankfurt catalogue seems