The evidence of the senses and the materiality of religion

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Religious practices are commonly treated as evidence for something else, such as beliefs. There are a number of problems with privileging beliefs or ideas when trying to define religion. An alternative is to rethink the relationship between the materiality of religious activity and the ideas that have sometimes been taken to define 'religion'. This approach may also be a productive way to look at religious practices across widely differing contexts without eliminating their fundamentally historical character.

When does evidence seem necessary? Certainly not in every instance. But questions of evidence haunt both anthropology and religions. At least this is so to the extent that they place something imperceptible at the heart of their work. The spirit that possesses a medium, that element of the sacrifice which is received by the god, or the faith that speaks through prayer share this with social order, cultural logic, or hegemonic power: they cannot be directly perceived. One need not insist on any particular ontological dichotomy between matter and spirit, or indeed any universal definition of religion, to recognize the ubiquity of the question posed by the words of Berawan prayer: 'Where are you spirits?' (Metcalf 1989). To find this a question in need of an answer is to seek evidence in experience for something that, on the face of it, is not to be found there but somewhere else.

Yet placing the imperceptible at the heart of religion may obscure certain dimensions of that which we want to understand. To begin, instead, with the materiality of the phenomena in question may set the very demand for evidence on a different footing. This paper will suggest how an anthropology of 'religion' might benefit from an approach to materiality that does not always expect it to provide evidence of something hidden, such as belief.

In the history of social and cultural anthropology, the category of 'religion' has long stood for the general problem of apparently strange beliefs. Since the beginnings of European expansion, the encounter with the strangeness of other people's beliefs has been an instigation to cross-cultural study. Montaigne's 'On cannibals' (1958 [1578-80]) is an early *locus classicus* of relativistic argument based on such encounters.[1] And the

Pitt-Rivers museum, that wonderful Victorian curiosity cabinet in Oxford, is a trove of voodoo dolls, amulets, hex signs, shrunken heads, sacrificial offerings, that have been brought together primarily because they seem to be the material traces of what were obviously (for its European visitors) strange beliefs.

Indeed, the problem of strange beliefs was one motive for formulating the very idea of 'culture' in its anthropological sense. When anthropologists attempted to explain shamanism, witchcraft, or human sacrifice, they seemed to need an idea like culture, for strange beliefs might turn out not to be so strange if viewed in the context of a background constellation of meanings more or less tacitly accepted by those people who were then held to share that culture. In that context, beliefs should not only make sense, they should also be evidence of the very existence of the culture that sustains them. But then the category of religion begins to slip – if we define it in terms of strange beliefs, then explain why, when properly understood, those beliefs are not strange, what remains of the category?[2] I shall return to this in a moment.

Other difficulties have presented themselves. One arises from the claim that there simply is not conceptual consistency or consensus across any given social group. The claim has become commonplace in portrayals of nation-states, diasporas, and so forth. But even in so-called 'small-scale societies', there can be non-trivial differences in what people know about the local ritual system. (As Knight and Astuti argue out in this volume, internal differences are only one problem raised by anthropological practices of belief ascription.) In the ritual system of the Baktaman of Papua New Guinea famously described by Frederik Barth (1975), women are largely excluded from the cult, about which, it seems, they may be quite dubious or indifferent. Men are inducted into its secrets by stages. With each new stage, the previous revelation is exposed as deceptive. So what one knows and what one accepts depend directly on one's gender and how far into the series one is at any moment – the majority of men, perhaps, never quite make it to the end of the series. Such a ritual system not only produces highly unevenly distributed knowledge, it also, according to Barth, is likely to foster considerable scepticism about any given understanding of the cult, since one never knows what might be exposed next.

The problem of unevenly distributed knowledge is vastly compounded in larger and more diverse groups. Claims about uniform or cohesive cultural systems turn in part on how far into the tacit background the analyst needs to go before finding a shared conceptual or moral framework. On the one hand, some arguments against strong views that culture is shared are superficial: from today's perspective, for example, the very ability of the English Victorians to debate the truth of religion depended on a host of shared assumptions. Similarly, it is commonly observed by outsiders that the American insistence on individual uniqueness is something a very large percentage of Americans seem to share. On the other hand, the more you have to appeal to deep background assumptions in order to defend the claim that culture is shared, the more you risk circularity. So what exactly is the background in terms of which any particular cultural phenomenon is to be explained? Or, put another way, what is the proper context for a context-sensitive analysis of the phenomenon? What would the entity to be explained count as evidence *for*?

Another difficulty concerns the concept of culture itself. When most social and cultural anthropologists were concerned with supposedly small, traditional societies, it was fairly easy to identify a religion with a culture, treated as an entity, and both the religion and the culture in turn could be located within a social group. In my own

fieldwork on Sumba, in eastern Indonesia (Keane 1997*a*), with people whose rituals are addressed to specific clan ancestors, I heard a version of a home-grown relativism in the face of universal truth-claims. After patiently listening to the missionary's sermon, the people tell him, 'Your god is good for you, our gods are good for us'. Among other things, such a statement seems to depend upon a close identification of religion with social group. Similar stories have been reported from across the ethnographic spectrum. But those religions that most dominate our view today are a very different matter. Proselytizing religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism are predicated on at least one shared assumption: since their truth-claims are universal, it follows that, at least in principle, all humans are potential converts. Unlike local cults and ancestral rituals, these religions are highly portable: their scriptures and liturgies, creeds and modes of pedagogy are constructed to circulate (see Keane 2007, chap. 1). Their forms make them relatively easy to extract from and re-insert into almost any possible context. The 'local knowledge' model of religion is not well suited to cope with this (on Christianity, see Cannell 2006; Robbins 2004; Whitehouse 2006).

And yet another difficulty is a more general analytical problem of which the previous one is, in a sense, the empirical manifestation. Is the very category of 'religion' itself coherent across cases? This question is one version of the more general disciplinary difficulty that has been troubling anthropology since the 1970s, if not longer, the tension between its particularist and comparative projects (Keane 2003*a*). For some time now, anthropologists have been energetically casting doubt on the categories by which their comparisons had been made: tribe, kinship, culture, society, have by turns been rendered suspect. The general line of argument can be summarized this way: conceptual categories take their meanings from their place within larger constellations of concepts. The category cannot make sense independent of that context. This is, of course, one common definition of culture. To the extent that anthropologists have assumed that context forms a pattern, as Engelke observes in this volume, the evidentiary claims for their observations typically depend on showing their fit to that pattern. Such constellations are historically and socially specific formations. Since any conceptual world we want to understand involves its own such constellation of assumptions, any concept taken from one such context cannot be applied to others without doing violence to their internal coherence. (And, as the argument frequently continues, this epistemic violence is often coupled with the other forms of violence perpetrated by empires, states, and other political forces.) At the very least, the categories that were supposed to make comparison possible turn out to be irredeemably ethnocentric.

One response, famously articulated by Clifford Geertz (1983) has been to insist that what anthropologists do best is to grasp 'local knowledge'. And some have taken this assertion to mean that we should abandon explicit comparison in favour of rich, complex, highly particularized ethnographic descriptions. There are a number of well-known problems with this solution. One concerns the incoherence of any claim to be working *only* at the level of particulars, for even the most modest attempts at description are surely in some sense translations across conceptual schemes and thus incorrigibly comparative. If that is the case, then the disclaimers amount to a refusal to take responsibility for the conceptual apparatus that makes the translation possible. With this in mind, I want to turn to the problem of studying religion across cases.

Can there be an anthropology of religion? (I) The cognitive approach

There are two things anthropologists have usually claimed they can do well. One is to expand our empirical range *across contexts* in order to counteract a natural propensity to provincialism. The second is to situate empirical findings *within contexts*, an ambition at least once talked about in terms of understanding 'the native point of view'. The effort to do both at once seems to invite paradox, and most anthropologists have tended towards one or the other side. A glance at two recent discussions about 'religion' will illustrate the problem.

One recent attempt to develop a theory of religion as a universal phenomenon is that of Pascal Boyer (2001). Boyer makes the interesting (if hard to substantiate) claim that out of all possible ideas about the supernatural, only a relatively limited number actually appear on the ethnographic record, and many of these ideas seem to have been reinvented in unrelated societies. Applying the ideas of Dan Sperber (1996), he explains this by asserting that although people may come up with any number of ideas about the supernatural, only some of them will be interesting and memorable enough to circulate from person to person, and to be perpetuated over time. These will be ideas that are based on certain cognitive templates (such as the category of the 'PERSON') that are violated, but only in limited ways (a god is not visible and not mortal, but is like a person in every other way). This allows people to draw inferences that are not explicit in anything they have been taught about the supernatural.

I find two aspects of this theory useful. First, although Boyer tends towards functionalistic explanation in his particulars, he wisely avoids the pitfall of most universal theories of religion and does not claim that religion has any one purpose overall. Second, by giving an important place to inferences, the explanation frees up cultural phenomena from an excessive dependence on something like rote transmission from generation to generation.

In this one respect, at least, Boyer is in accord with other tendencies in cultural anthropology, for if there is anything anthropologists have come to stress in recent years, it is that cultures are creative projects as much as they are conservative traditions. Indeed, one of the more useful ways to think of culture is not in terms of sharing or persistence, but rather in terms of a capacity for innovation. Let us take the example of possible inferences in a society in which people tend to think of themselves as highly conservative. People in Anakalang, on the eastern Indonesian island of Sumba, perform rituals directed towards ancestral spirits. Most Sumbanese, including Christians, accept that those rituals were transmitted without any subsequent additions from the time of the earliest ancestors. But most Sumbanese have only the dimmest ideas about those spirits. Where they are located, what they are up to when you're not making offerings to them, how they actually carry out acts like making it rain, are simply not of interest. But because ancestor spirits are quasi-persons, it is possible to speculate beyond what tradition tells you, and every once in a while, someone like the man whom I will call Umbu Haingu, will do so. He was very happy to stay up all night with me, huddled around the hearth, pursuing the most arcane philosophical questions. The rest of the family tended to snicker at us: this was a harmless enough occupation, as long as it did not interfere in his ability to get the harvest in on time. But speculations like Umbu Haingu's just might eventually add something new to the cultural materials available to Sumbanese more widely. Indeed, as I will show below, there is clear evidence of innovation in Sumbanese ritual: nothing about ritual *per se* or even ritualists' assertions of their own conservatism rules out this possibility.

There are, however, at least two limitations to the usefulness of the sort of cognitive explanation Boyer lays out. One is the role of universal properties of the mind in explaining cultural phenomena; the other has to do with the category 'religion'. It is perhaps unremarkable to say, as Boyer and Sperber do, that culture depends on the properties of human cognition. How could it be otherwise? But then we might also say that marching, mountain-climbing, football, and dancing depend on bipedalism. They impose constraints on what is possible, but we might not be satisfied that we now have an explanation. Let me suggest a couple of things that the analysis of cultural phenomena, including religions, should attempt to deal with. One is their publicness, another concerns their historical character. Consider first the public character of cultural phenomena. William James (1902) famously attempted to derive religion from certain universally available subjective experiences. Suppose one day I am strolling home from the office and I encounter the Virgin Mary, or at night I dream I have been granted powers by a jaguar spirit, or suddenly start to speak fluently in a voice and a language that are not my own. Certainly people have such experiences, and we may even grant that each involves identifiable cognitive processes. But what makes these respectively a vision, a prophetic experience, and a case of spirit possession rather than, say, fantasies, dreams, psychotic episodes, the effects of drugs, or a sudden head injury? They are instances of categories that are recognizable *to other people*. This is not an automatic business: even in places where shamanism or spirit possession are well accepted, *in any given instance* local communities have to decide whether they now have a case of possession or, say, madness, fraud, or error. Ethnographers who have seen this decision-making in progress tell us it is not at all a foregone conclusion how the decisions will go (Irvine 1982; Wolf 1990). Cognition may provide some raw materials, but the socially relevant outcome results from the irreducible conjunction of a potentially open-ended set of things such as micro-politics, recent precedents, kinship ties, currently available concepts, and so forth. And these outcomes become the context within which subsequent actions and decisions are made.

Beyond this matter of social dynamics, the issue gets to the very nature of social categories themselves. Even unique cases such as, say, the star over Bethlehem or Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus must become recognizable as instances of something that is potentially repeatable (if only in the discursive form of a report) if they are to count as religious, or, more generally, if they are to have a potential for social existence. In order to be recognizable as instances of something knowable, they must take semiotic form. They must, that is, have some material manifestation that makes them available to, interpretable by, and, in most cases, replicable by other people: bodily actions, speech, the treatment of objects, and so forth. This is not simply an issue for remarkable events or the experiences of virtuosi. A similar point holds for spontaneous and commonplace cognitive phenomena, such as the child's invisible friends, or, say, the overwhelming urge to avoid stepping on sidewalk cracks lest irreparable harm befall one's maternal parent. It is apparent that what circulate are not ideas or experiences but rather semiotic forms. I do not have access to your ideas except insofar as they are mediated by signs such as words or movements. Signs have forms and material properties (see Urban 1996). They are also repeatable, but there is nothing to guarantee that they will produce identical interpretations or experiences across time or between persons.

Semiotic forms are public entities. That is, they are available as objects for the senses and not confined to inner or subjective experience.[3] As such, they have distinctive

temporal dimensions. Because they are repeatable, they have the potential to persist over time and across social contexts. One result is they can enter into projects that people work on. Semiotic forms accumulate new features over time, contributed by different people, with different projects, in different contexts. The speculations of Umbu Haingu start from certain publicly available givens; most authoritatively, what in his youth he saw and heard the old men do when they were communicating with spirits. One of the things they do is make offerings of metal. A century ago, these were small pieces of metal. As money entered into the economy, over the last fifty years, it has become common to use a small denomination coin for this purpose. But if you do not have a coin, you can substitute paper money. Notice the quiet innovation, shifting the categorical identity of the offering from its physical properties (there is comparative evidence in this region that metal has long been associated with strengthening spiritual boundaries) to its association with value. That is, the relative salience or relevance of coexisting properties of the offering (a phenomenon I call *bundling*; see Keane 2003*b*) has been altered, but not the public identity of the offering itself. More generally, the work people put into cultural phenomena draws not just on ideas but on the properties of the semiotic forms. These properties characteristically form clusters with those of other phenomena: rituals develop multiple parts, scriptures acquire liturgies, gods acquire apotheoses, sacrifices acquire temples. Thus they are historical in character. One aspect of this historical character is simply path dependency: for instance, no writing, no scriptures. However much any *particular* component of the phenomenon may rest on some universal feature of human minds, the *assemblage* is the outcome of contingent factors of historical context.

Can there be an anthropology of religion? (II) The very category itself

Boyer never defines religion, or addresses the important criticisms that have been made of the category (e.g. Asad 1993; Saler 1993; J.Z. Smith 1982; see also Masuzawa 2005), but treats it as intuitively obvious. He assumes that religion forms a naturally existing category centred on beliefs in the supernatural. But can you define supernatural in a non-circular way? Recall the problem I posed at the beginning. What are strange beliefs? Beliefs you do not claim yourself. But if viewed in the context of other people's beliefs, then they should not appear strange. It is a truism (as Boyer himself acknowledges) that if you live in a world in which everyone accepts the existence of witches, witches will seem natural. And can people have a category of the supernatural if they have no category of the natural? One way is to say the supernatural is not subject to experience and is counterintuitive. But nothing in my experience warrants my belief in subatomic particles, and the fact that the earth revolves around the sun is counterintuitive; critics of String Theory say its assertions lie far beyond even the specialized empirical verification available to physics. So how does science, or any other expert knowledge, differ from religion? They differ in many ways, certainly, but not in the presence or absence of strange and counterintuitive beliefs. In sum, there are two difficulties here: defining religion in terms of belief, and defining the relevant beliefs through the category of the supernatural.

This criticism can be merely corrosive if it does no more than lead us back to hyper-particularism. But we might take it in another, more fruitful, direction, away from beliefs and towards practices as the unifying focus of analysis. To start in this direction, I first want to discuss an alternative, markedly historicist, approach to an anthropology of religion. Talal Asad (1993; see also 2003) has criticized efforts to define

religion as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon in the first place. His argument has two distinct aspects, which I think can be treated separately. The first is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion because any such definition is itself a historical and parochial product. More specifically, the effort to define religion as a universal arises, he says, from certain problems within *Christianity*. Faced with competing creeds and the rise of natural science, the goal of such universal definitions was to find an underlying common essence that could be abstracted from concrete but divergent practices. According to Asad, the first efforts to produce a universal definition of religion appeared in the seventeenth century, after the fragmentation of Reformation, the wars of religion, and the first serious encounters with Asian religions. Taking Lord Herbert's account of Natural Religion as paradigmatic, he says its 'emphasis on beliefs meant that henceforth religion could be conceived as a set of propositions to which believers gave assent' (1993: 41).

The criticism of the category 'religion' as having a parochial origin is in itself problematic if we take it only to mean that we cannot make use of analytic categories, since they necessarily arise out of particular contexts. One approach is to claim we can find 'natural kinds'; another is to grant ourselves the heuristic device of ideal types. But Asad has something more specific in mind. This has to do with the way universalizing definitions of religion have tended to privilege *belief* as a cognitive and ultimately private or subjective phenomenon. Many familiar objections and alternatives have been posed against this privileging of belief (within anthropology, see, e.g., Douglas 1982; Needham 1972; Rappaport 1999; W.R. Smith 1969 [1927]). Asad raises two challenges in particular. The first is that the emphasis on belief had tended to fold into a further claim that those beliefs concern ultimate meanings – what is the purpose of life, what happens after death, how did it all begin, what are the foundations of morality? But by those terms, many of the things people do that we might want to count as religious – including Umbu Haingu's ancestral rituals – are simply ruled out of court. The apparently neutral description turns out, on examination, to be normative. For the Victorians, those who lack religion as understood in these terms occupy a low place on the evolutionary scale. Those whose religion is merely ritualistic or instrumental are only slightly higher (here the Victorians show themselves to be heirs of the anti-ritualism characteristic of the Protestant Reformation). More recently, for evangelists and, in places like contemporary Indonesia, the state, people who lack 'religion' under such definitions *require* missionization.

Taking practices to be primarily the evidence of inner states (or their lack) can, in some circumstances, reproduce the authority of those who would judge the condition of others. The demand for evidence, after all, is hardly confined to the sciences (a point elaborated from different angles by both Good and Pinney in this volume). In the courtroom and religious gathering, the demand for evidence can be the prerogative of power. Asad's argument, arising in the context of religious politics in the contemporary world, bears a sharp political edge.

In addition, any definition of religion that privileges particular subjective experiences or beliefs risks being circular. To avoid this, the category of religion must be capable of including not just the ardently faithful but the bored schoolboy who has memorized a credo which he recites by rote. To say the latter is not really 'religious' is to make the definition of religion, as a matter of genuine, wholehearted faith, self-confirming. I would argue that we need that schoolboy.[4] With the possible exception of divine revelation unmediated by any prior practices, institutions, or discourses (but

even then, it must take semiotic form if it is to go further), belief ontogenically follows on practice.[5] The child learns a prayer, or listens to scripture in a foreign language like Latin or Arabic, or sees her grandmother go into trance, or helps the priest by holding a sacrificial chicken. She may develop beliefs as a result, but in most cases, at least, they depend on the prior existence of the practices.[6] This does not mean that beliefs are *determined* by practices. Quite the contrary, as the bored schoolboy should tell us. But even the most spiritualized of scriptural religions teach doctrines through concrete activities, such as catechisms, sermons, scripture-reading, exegesis. Even Saul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus had to become communicable in some form that made it recognizable to others.

Asad's second objection to universal definitions of religion in terms of propositions and meanings is this: if we ignore the processes by which meanings are constructed, then we separate religion from the domain of power. Yet even within Christianity, the power of disciplines to construct dispositions to believe was a central concern for, say, Saint Augustine. It is only with the rise of modern science and states, and the privatization of religion, Asad argues, that it makes sense to see religion as a state of *mind* rather than as practical knowledge of institutions and rules that orientates effective *activity*. It is a historically peculiar matter to see religion as a sphere quite apart from where the action is at.

There are therefore several reasons to start with material practices and not beliefs. One is that many religious traditions have little interest in either individual belief or public statements of doctrine. They may accept differences of interpretation as long as practices themselves remain consistent. What *is* of recurring significance is the question 'What can or must we do?' Moreover, even religions that *do* stress belief may still object to the subordination of material practices to inner states. For instance, Blaise Pascal insisted,

> The external must be joined to the internal to obtain anything from God, that is to say, we must kneel to pray with the lips, etc., in order that proud man, who would not submit himself to God, may be now subject to the creature ... [To] refuse to join [externals] to the internal is pride (1958 [1669]: 250).

The very existence of a practice may be the basis for moral judgement (see Rappaport 1999), and its semiotic form a component of its morality (Keane 2008; see Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005).

Towards a comparative category: 'religious language'

Can we define religion in a way that takes seriously the perspective of its practitioners and can still guide research across contexts without inviting paradox? Can we do so in a way that respects the historicity of the phenomena, without returning to full-fledged particularism? It might be more productive to start not with 'religion' as a totality but with more limited domains of activity, bearing in mind the heterogeneous character of any particular conjunction of such domains. Here I will focus on linguistic activity. Although this is a selective focus, it is not arbitrary. For one thing, religions very often focus on language as a source of difficulty or of power – Quaker silence, Pentecostal speaking in tongues, Hindu and Buddhist mantras, Sumbanese couplets, and the use of opaque liturgical languages such as Arabic in Indonesia and Latin in colonial Africa can all be seen as responses to the properties of language (Keane 1997*b*).[7] Linguistic practices are especially interesting in the context of questions of belief, of course, because

they so often seem to point us in the direction of thoughts. But this is a conclusion about which we should be very cautious. Instead, an examination of religious language may be more useful as a guide to how we might understand religious practices more generally, attending to their forms, pragmatics, and the semiotic ideologies they presuppose.

Let me start with a rather unorganized list. Reviewing ethnographic descriptions of ritual speech, the linguist John Du Bois (1986) identified some recurrent features:

- archaistic elements;
- use of a special register;
- elements borrowed from other languages;
- euphemism and metaphor;
- semantic opacity;
- semantic-grammatical parallelism;
- marked voice quality;
- stylized and restricted intonation contours;
- unusual fluency of speech;
- gestalt knowledge;
- personal volition disclaimers;
- avoidance of first- and second-person pronouns;
- speech style attributed to ancestors;
- use of mediating speakers.

This is a rather heterogeneous collection. As a first step towards organizing this list, we might observe that some of these items seem to be mutually determined. Fluent speaking style and gestalt knowledge, for instance, can both result from learning entire texts as seamless, and sometimes semantically opaque, wholes. Overall, however, these features must be understood as bearing family resemblances, insofar as they do not constitute necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in a set, but form linked clusters such that no single member of the family need possess every feature. But viewing this cluster in terms of pragmatic functions and semiotic characteristics may offer a way of widening our scope from ritual speech to religious language practices more generally.

These features seem to impose on ritual speech some markedness relative to other ways of speaking, a sense of being unusual. Moreover, to the practitioners, they seem either to involve some sort of difficulty of achievement or, simply, to make language itself the object of some kind of work. Ritual speech – in fact, religious language more generally – may demand extra control or aim to release language from control, to become more spontaneous; it may aim to make language more elaborate, or to simplify it. So, as an initial minimalist definition, let us suggest that 'religious language' concerns linguistic practices that are taken *by practitioners themselves* to be marked or unusual in some respect.

The background against which they are marked, however, is not necessarily a universal set of conversational norms. It may be nothing more than the assumptions of more specific ideologies of language. Language ideology refers to the ways in which language uses are always mediated by some prevailing local assumptions about what language is and how it functions (see Kroskrity 2000). Is the prototypical speech-act referring to objects and the making of predications about them, or is it a promise

between two individuals, or a command between two hierarchical statuses? Is language a set of arbitrary signs established by social convention or is it a divine emanation expressing the true, if hidden, essence of the world? How you use words will depend in part on such assumptions.

The definition of religious language I have offered cannot claim to cover all activities that have been called religious. Nor, of course, are all marked forms of language taken by their users to be 'religious'. Languages of law, science, and poetry, for instance, may share many of these features. So this definition can only be a starting-point. But it does aim to satisfy the two opposed demands on the anthropologist: *to take practitioners' own perceptions as a guide, without foreclosing the possibility of comparison and generalization.* This approach presupposes that people have some intuitions, or language ideologies, about distinctions of markedness among different linguistic forms and practices. Since religious language practices may involve people's heightened awareness of language (among other things), they offer analysts insight into that awareness and its linguistic and, by extension, conceptual and social consequences. The intuitions or experiences to which I refer, however, are not the source of these practices so much as possible consequences. Beliefs can be understood as parasitic on activities, rather than activities as expressing – or as evidence for – prior beliefs.

Making strange interaction presupposable

Is there something that motivates the recurrence across the ethnographic spectrum of those features of ritual speech identified by Du Bois? The first obvious point to make is that these are instances of the framing function that can, in principle, be achieved by any linguistic property, such as esoteric vocabulary or unusual intonation that marks off a stretch of discourse from its surround. As such, a frame is indexical, that is, it points out something in the immediate context – indicating, for instance, 'this, now' is a ritual. But although indexes point, in themselves they do not furnish any information about what they are pointing to. Some further guidance is required. To the extent that what is being indexed is an instance of a publicly recognized speech genre, the frame is 'metapragmatic', that is, it says something about the kind of linguistic act being undertaken (see Silverstein 1993; 2003). As such, this specification is achieved by local language ideologies. But these can vary and change in partial independence of the linguistic forms they concern.

By emphasizing the formal properties of religious language, and their markedness, we can start to go beyond imputing the experiential effects of ritual to convention or belief. Rather, we can ask how those experiential effects derive from ritual forms as they unfold in real time. For example, Sumbanese rituals commonly display increasing depersonalization and decontextualization over the course of the event (Kuipers 1990). Indexes of the present time, place, or participants such as personal pronouns may be progressively eliminated; poetic formulae, prosodic regularity, and other regimentations of discourse becoming more stringent, such that the participants come increasingly to speak not as individuated, complex, politically interested, and temporally finite parties, but as more abstract, disinterested, and timeless elders or spirits. The outcome is due not wholly to convention or conscious intention but to subliminal effects of linguistic and pragmatic forms, regardless of any particular beliefs held by participants. This does not mean that belief plays no part in any given instance. But what those particular beliefs are and what role they play may vary enormously. It is likely to be the

formal properties that remain consistent across contexts, a point to whose implications I return below.

I want to suggest that the semiotic properties of religious language commonly help make present what would otherwise, in the course of ordinary experience, be absent or imperceptible, or make that absence presupposable by virtue of the special means used to overcome it. In pragmatic terms, ritual often counteracts any assumption that one's interlocutors can see and hear one, that they share one's language, and that the relevant shared context and conversational goals are unproblematic. Ritual pragmatics, in effect, can provide intuitive evidence of the experiential absence they confront, that starting-point which is made explicit in the Berawan question I have already quoted, 'Where are you spirits?' As Holbraad suggests in this volume, evidence may be an offer less of truth than of a relationship.

The peculiar or marked forms and uses of language I am calling religious are constructed in such as way as to suggest, often in only the most implicit ways, that they involve entities or modes of agency which are considered by those practitioners to be consequentially distinct from more 'ordinary' experience or situated across some sort of ontological divide from something understood as a more everyday 'here and now'. By 'ontological divide' I mean that practitioners understand the difference to be a qualitative one, as between kinds of things, rather than, say, simple spatial distance. The distinction is not, of course, always clear – the lines separating elders, ancestors, and deities, or otherworlds and distant places, may be quite blurred indeed. But there is another point to stress. We should not assume that the ontological divide is given in advance by belief. In some religious contexts, it may be precisely the function of language to raise questions like 'what's going on here?' and 'who's speaking now?' The practice is just as likely to provoke such questions, as it is merely to express or respond to them. There may be no particular answer.

Context and text

Forms that decontextualize discourse help create a perception that certain chunks of speech are self-contained, belong together, and could be reproduced in different contexts without substantive consequences for the discourse itself. This results in what has been called a 'decentring of discourse' through what the linguistic anthropologists Michael Silverstein, Greg Urban (Silverstein & Urban 1996), and their colleagues have dubbed entextualization, the process of foregrounding the text-like and therefore context-independent properties of discourse. The words will seem to come from some source beyond the present situation in which they are being spoken and heard. Often the speakers seem to others or even themselves to have relatively little volition in producing their speech. They may be supposed, for instance, to be speaking exactly as the ancestors did, as the spirits who possess them dictate, or as has been written. Compelling examples of the dialectic of recontextualization are found in the use of scriptures among contemporary Christians. Certain parts of scripture, such as Christ's Sermon on the Mount or the Lord's Prayer, are taken by many believers to reproduce words that were originally spoken in a particular context. Circulating in textual form, the words are now available for broad dissemination. Indeed, some believers take a capacity for wide circulation, found, for example, in videotaped sermons, as evidence of the divinity of words even when they are not themselves sacred scripture (Coleman 2000).

Effects of linguistic form are likely to seem especially persuasive and realistic because they are not derived from explicit doctrines, which one might doubt or deny, but seem to come directly from experience. The decentring of discourse is one moment in a larger set of dialectical processes. These processes also include the centring or contextualizing of discourses which stress the relatively subjective experiences of language, such as the experience of inner speech and speaker's intentionality. The material properties of discourse, then, are relatively autonomous of anything they might be taken as evidence for. This permits them to function across contexts and to function independent of any particular evidentiary questions at all.

Since the experience of linguistic form is relatively independent of any particular intentions of or interpretations by language-users, people's responses to that experience will be historically variable. Suspicions of language in some religious traditions, such as Quakerism (Bauman 1983) or the Masowe apostolics (Engelke 2007), focus on the very same linguistic and pragmatic properties that other traditions may seek to exploit. To the extent that religious practices respond to or contribute to the perception of an ontological gap contrary to the assumptions of ordinary interaction, they may be prone to draw on the decentring and recentring possibilities of entextualization processes. For religions 'of the book', the very existence of a written scripture is often taken as evidence for claims to an authority that transcends any particular context, and provides semiotic grounds for their intuitive verification. But the same decontextualizing objectivity may become the target of reformers and critics who seek more direct access to divinity.

Voice and agency

Ways of reporting speech commonly express aspects of the relations among participants in a speech event or text (Vološinov 1973 [1930]). Responsibility for words can range from a sharp hierarchical distinction between what Erving Goffman (1981) called the author and the animator, to some degree of co-authorship or ambiguity. Differences in linguistic form can serve, under socially specified conditions, as evidence for differences in responsibility for what claims the words make, or actions they carry out (Hill & Irvine 1993). According to William Graham (1977; 1987), early Islam did not differentiate between the authority of words spoken by God and those spoken by the Prophet Muhammad. In the Qur'an, God's words appear as reported speech, and so are also the Prophet's words, as he is their animator. But Muhammad also animates prophetic speech of which he is the author – although its principal remains the divine source of his inspiration. Eventually, however, it became theologically important to distinguish prophetic speech from direct revelation, sharpening the boundary between reported speech and its frame, and thus between animator and author. This placed the original prophecy and its divine author at a greater remove from historical events, in order to accentuate the otherworldliness of the divinity and prevent the deification of the prophet.

One of the stakes in the precise distinction between author and animator is the degree of agency, authority, and responsibility a performer is willing or permitted to assume. Sumbanese ritualists insist that the most powerful words are those that come from absent authors. The forms of reported speech they deploy help make such distance (or its reverse) presupposable. In the US, evangelical Protestants often describe their conversion as a call to witness, testify, or preach to others (Harding 2000). Often

this does not involve any particular change in *belief*, if we mean the doctrines to which they subscribe. Rather, in such cases, full conversion consists in becoming enabled to speak scriptural language with authority.

Such examples show imputed authorship to have creative effects, by making available to speakers an identity or a relationship to some special agent. This is an instance of the broader point, that one widespread effect of religious language is the creation or extension of agents and forms of agency beyond what is commonly available in unmarked interaction. Many of the effects of religious language can be better understood as expanding the presumptive speaker *above* the level of the individual (as I have argued is the case in Sumbanese ritual, see Keane 1997*a*). But the reverse may also occur, distinguishing among different voices *below* that level, emanating from a single body. As American folk preachers come to be 'filled with the spirit', their performances display emergent features such as highly rhythmical, repetitive utterances, marked vocabulary, gasping, and shouting (Titon 1988). These are taken to index the individual's loss of personal control in favour of a divine agent. More generally, spirit possession and glossolalia involve both a deity and human being using the same body but speaking in different voices, marked by contrasting prosodic and paralinguistic features, and sometimes distinct linguistic codes. The formal properties of highly ritualized performances often play down the agency of the living human participants in favour of powers ascribed to other entities. Conversely, modernist or reformist movements may place a great emphasis on cultivating sincere speaker intentionality, as in the demand that prayer be spontaneous.

The emphasis on sincere intentions usually manifests language ideology that privileges individual interiority. The encounter between this ideology and actual linguistic activities can have interesting consequences. For example, Swedish Evangelicals expect conscious individual intentions to be the source of human linguistic expressions. Therefore, when under stress they utter words they did not intend, they see the hand of divine agency (Stromberg 1993). Similarly, Catholic Charismatics tell rounds of stories that, like many group conversations, tend to develop a thematic unity over time. In light of their assumption that speech derives from individual volition, they find in the unplanned emergence of this collective unity evidence of God's intervention (Szuchewycz 1994). Language ideology is crucial to the interpretation of discursive forms. Religious language practices exploit a wide range of the ubiquitous formal and pragmatic features of everyday language in ways that help make available to experience and thought the very ontological divides to which they offer themselves as a response. These practices can assist the construction of forms of agency that are expanded, displaced, distributed, or otherwise different from – but clearly related to – what are already available.

Creed and belief

Creeds are part of a larger set of genres, including sermons, scripture-reading, and some kinds of prayer, that re-contextualize certain texts into liturgical and everyday practice. The creed, an explicit statement of religious tenets and norms for its verbal performance, is unique to the evangelizing, scripture-based religions (Christianity and Islam). The creed does a number of things that contribute to the global circulation of evangelical religion: it gives doctrine an explicit form; it places the primary locus of religion in the believer, not institutions; it dwells on differences among religions; and by taking textual form, it makes religion highly portable across contexts. The circulation of

modular forms such as creeds works against the localizing forces on which anthropologists of global religions have tended to focus. This lack of location is part of their practical power.

A creed normally looks like a series of propositions about the world. But they are peculiar in certain respects. First, usually they are formulaic, condensing complex arguments about doctrine into a readily learned and reproduced form. Moreover, the propositions are attached to a performative of assent. The creed states an objective claim (it is the case that 'Jesus is the Son of God'). As such it appears to be merely a proposition. But it has performative force; the Nicene creed begins 'We believe'. It asserts the speaker's alignment with the claims ('Jesus is the Son of God' is true about the world, and I hold that it is true). Moreover, it publicly reports this alignment ('Jesus is the Son of God' is true about the world, and I hold that it is true, and I hereby state so – that is, I take responsibility for the match between my words and the world itself).

The creed takes the publicly circulating form of an assertion. It represents the speaker as taking responsibility for her own thoughts. To be sure, the schoolboy may memorize a creed as mere rote, and certainly many ritualized public recitations of the creed do not seem to demand much personal responsibility. But the persistent recurrence of religious reform movements suggests that the semiotic form of the creed entails a normative tilt towards taking responsibility for those words, making them one's own. Since they are supposed to be transparent to one's inner thoughts, this stance towards one's own words is a model for both sincerity and responsibility. The practice of speaking a creed helps convey a norm of being able to objectify thoughts as words, and, by avowing them in this way, taking responsibility for them. It thus encourages a distinction between the abstraction of thought and the materiality of its expressions, mediated by the norm of sincerity (see Keane 2007 for further discussion). The centrality of creeds to the conventional understanding of 'religion' in Western society reinforces the assumption that religions are, above all, about ideas.

Materiality, comparison, and history

There has been a strong divide between those who take history seriously and find that it makes comparison impossible, and those whose comparative projects lead them to treat the historicity of their object as inessential, mere noise. I have suggested that both positions at the extreme are untenable. By focusing on semiotic forms and the entailments of their materiality, we may start to develop an alternative to the particularist and universalizing extremes.

Innovators like Umbu Haingu tend to respond to the forms – the prayers, the procedures, the offerings – that experience has made available to them. That is, practices are not merely expressions or enactments of concepts, they are objects within experience to which people respond with intuitions and interpretations. They can thus become sources of new intuitions, habits, and concepts. An important element of the history of scriptural religions is the various struggles between correct dogma and practical deviations, purification and accretion. A recurrent theme in these struggles concerns the tension between abstract or immaterial entities and semiotic form, the indescribable god of the mystic or negative theologian and the physicality of the amulet, universal ethical norms and particular bodily habits, high doctrine and ritual sounds and smells. The Protestant Reformation is defined, in part, by the moment

when the very same Roman Catholic liturgy that could have been experienced in terms of divine immanence becomes instead, in Martin Luther's words, so much 'babbling and bellowing' (quoted in Pelikan 2003: 165).

To the extent that semiotic form is an unavoidable component of any cultural phenomena, including those held to lie beyond representation, and involves an irreducibly public dimension, then reformist purifications cannot fully and permanently establish themselves. If religions continually produce material entities, those entities can never be reduced only to the status of evidence for something else, such as beliefs or other cognitive phenomena. As material things, they are enmeshed in causality, registered in and induced by their forms. As forms, they remain objects of experience. As objects, they persist across contexts and beyond any particular intentions and projects. To these objects, people may respond in new ways. To the extent that those responses become materialized in altered or new semiotic forms, those responses build on and are additive to responses of other people in other contexts. These materializations bear the marks of their temporality.

I have focused here on language, but the argument should hold for any semiotic form. Semiotic practices can therefore both furnish evidence of something that is not directly found in experience, and, as components of experience, give rise to new inferences and serve as evidence in new ways. But in their materiality, they are relatively autonomous of those inferences. Even the semiotic ideologies that mediate their place in social life respond to the prior existence of some material forms. One basis for anthropological comparison, then, might be to start by attending to the implications of the materiality of practices and objects, rather than those immaterial things we might take them as evidence for.

Religions may not always demand beliefs, but they will always involve material forms. It is in that materiality that they are part of experience and provoke responses, that they have public lives and enter into ongoing chains of causes and consequences. A few things follow from the relative autonomy of semiotic forms. First, material forms do not only permit new inferences, but, as objects that endure across time, they can, in principle, acquire features unrelated to the intentions of previous users or the inferences to which they have given rise in the past. This is in part because as material things they are prone to enter into new contexts. This is also the result of accumulation: the history of any set of cultural practices is in part a matter of accretion and of stripping away. To revelation is added commentary. Liturgies produce architectures; both require officers. Oral testimony comes to be inscribed; written texts can be kissed, enshrouded, worn about the neck as a talisman, rendered into ashes to be swallowed, inscribed as unreadable but gorgeous calligraphy, appreciated for their literary beauty. Offerings expect altars, altars support images, images enter art markets, art objects develop auras. Rituals provoke anti-ritualist purifiers. Purified religions develop heterodox rites. By virtue of their relative autonomy of particular uses and inferences, their capacity to circulate across social contexts, and their materially enduring character over time, practices are inherently prone to impurity and heterogeneity. Their very materiality gives them a historical character. In their materiality, they properly serve as evidence for something immaterial, such as beliefs, only under particular circumstances. To try to eliminate the materiality of religion by treating it as, above all, evidence for something immaterial, such as beliefs or prior experiences, risks denying the very conditions of sociality, and even time itself.

NOTES

[1] Although Montaigne's essay concerns practices, one could argue that their strangeness lies in the beliefs (e.g. a lack of moral repugnance where it ought to be found) for which the practices can be taken as evidence.

[2] To be sure, some recent polemics, such as those of Richard Dawkins (2006) or Daniel Dennett (2006), define 'religion' by its very irrationality. But most observers would probably accept that not *all* elements of a particular religion, for example an injunction against murder, are equally irrational. Conversely, not all forms of irrationality – passions for music, gambling, or sex, for example – necessarily fall within their definitions of 'religion'.

[3] As Bloch points out in this volume, the particular modality by which these forms are made available to the senses can play a crucial role in how they are taken as evidence (in his example, 'seeing is believing'). I am not convinced, however, that these epistemic roles are universal. For instance, under certain conditions, hearing is believing, even in the face of worries about lying, a point I develop below. Whether one stresses the one or the other, or neither, is a matter of the particular semiotic ideologies that prevail in any given instance (see Keane 2007).

[4] Even to understand religious systems that do privilege meaning requires attention to situations marked by the apparent absence of meaning (see Engelke & Tomlinson 2006).

[5] This claim is different from William Robertson Smith's (1969) view that belief *historically* follows on practice, which has been taken to imply that creedal religions are more advanced than more ritualistic ones. Some such invidious comparison is consistent with Smith's assumption that early ritual was followed blindly, 'in the same unconscious way in which men fall into any habitual practice of the society in which they live' (1969 [1927]: 21). By contrast, as I argue below, one consequence of the materiality of practices is that people can respond to them in innovative ways.

[6] As Charles Hirschkind (2006) and Saba Mahmood (2005) have argued, material disciplines are essential to the production of pious subjectivity in certain versions of Islam. What is crucial to observe in these accounts is that piety is not, in the end, something wholly internal or immaterial that can eventually be detached from material practices, such that the latter come to be extraneous to it.

[7] Roy Rappaport goes so far as to say 'religion emerged with language' (1999: 16). Although I do not follow his strong evolutionary-functionalist approach, or his use of the category of 'the sacred', much of what follows here is, I think, consistent with his emphasis on the specific effects that language makes available, and on the formal properties of ritual practices more generally.

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Preuves des sens et matérialité de la religion

Résumé

Les pratiques religieuses sont habituellement envisagées comme des preuves d'autre chose, par exemple de croyances. Or le fait de privilégier les croyances ou les idées pour tenter de définir la religion pose plusieurs problèmes. Une autre approche consiste à repenser la relation entre la matérialité de l'activité religieuse et les idées qui ont parfois été employées pour définir la « religion ». Cette approche peut être un moyen productif d'examiner les pratiques religieuses à travers des contextes très différents, sans éliminer leur caractère fondamentalement historique.

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