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From Fetishism to Sincerity: On Agency, the Speaking Subject, and their Historicity in the Context of Religious Conversion

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Central to much recent work in both anthropology and history is the concept of agency. This essay examines some problems with this concept that arise when we look for it across historical and ethnographic contexts. This study focuses on how agency is expressed in differences among the powers that people impute to spoken words and the kinds of subjects to which they attribute the authorship of words. In this article I want in particular to show how attention to the intersections between speech *practices* and speakers' beliefs *about* language can shed light on the historical and cultural worlds in which those speakers act.¹

The problem of agency is often raised by anthropologists and historians in the effort to be inclusive, to take account of "all the players in the game" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:9). Furthermore, the question of agency increasingly reflects an ethical imperative. As Talal Asad has recently remarked, "The doctrine of action has become essential to our recognition of other people's humanity" (1996:272). The anthropologist's quest for local agency is often portrayed as an antidote to earlier assumptions about tradition-bound natives and timeless structures or to triumphalist narratives of empire and modernity. For many scholars, then, to understand history or, indeed, simply to understand others requires us to think about agency. Moreover, to think

¹ Research on Sumba (1985–87, 1993) and in the Netherlands (1988) was funded by a U.S. Department of Education Fulbright-Hays Fellowship, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Joint Committee on Southeast Asia of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council, and the Southeast Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies, with the sponsorship of the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesian and the Universitas Nusa Cendana (Kupang). Earlier versions of this essay were presented to audiences at Columbia, Harvard, Yale, the University of Michigan, University of California—Santa Cruz, and New York University and at the 1995 Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association. I am grateful to those who participated in those discussions, to Sherry Ortner for her remarks as respondent at the AAA session and to Laura Ahern as organizer. Adela Pinch and Susan Blum provided very helpful comments.

about agency seems to demand an account of the conscious agent.² But in order to be truly conscious, one might surmise, that agent must be conscious of the fact of agency itself. An agent, by this view, would seem to be a subject that knows itself to possess agency. Such self-knowledge seems to be demanded, at least, by any description of action that would separate intended from unintended consequences and would take into consideration what actors themselves expect of *other* actors, as they guide their own actions.

Yet if the particular forms and objects of consciousness are historical and cultural products, so too must be the concept of agency that mediates the agent's self-consciousness.³ To seek out agency, then, includes looking for the historical construction of the idea of agency itself. In doing so, I want to suggest that we encounter a central dilemma for anthropology. However much we may want to take seriously other people's self-consciousness, we cannot assume in advance that it will coincide with what we might take to be a convincing account of their actions and the consequences that follow from them. This is a consequence of the inseparability of people's self-understanding from the historical specificity of the concrete practices and semiotic forms in which it is embedded. Moreover, as I will suggest, that this might pose dilemmas for us arises in part out of some half-acknowledged sources in European intellectual, moral, and even theological history. The quest for agency seems to be tacitly informed by the humanist assumption that self-transformation is not only a central fact of history (a view famously exemplified by the early Marx of the "Theses on Feuerbach" [Tucker 1978:143–5] and "German Ideology" [Tucker 1978:146–200]) but also a good that exceeds local systems of value.

My interest here is in how people understand agency, and I mean to ask to what kind of subject do they think that agency properly belongs.⁴ In particular,

² Most accounts of agency require the agent to be self-conscious. Giddens, drawing on phenomenology, describes agency as involving a moment of reflexivity. This is necessary because his definition of agency requires the possibility that one might have acted otherwise and thus entails some awareness of alternative possibilities (1979:55–56). One warrant for this seems to lie in the underlying premise of Weberian sociology, which delimits its object with reference to meaningful and interpretable events and, thus, by hypothesis, those things of which people are conscious (*e.g.* Weber 1978:7–8). Similarly, an assumption that the idea of intentional action properly applies to actions whose coherence over time is a function of the actor's self-awareness underlies the approaches of philosophers as different as Charles S. Peirce (*e.g.* 1960–1966, 5.421), Charles Taylor (1985), and Donald Davidson (1980).

³ Indeed, many psychological anthropologists have argued that the "self" in "self-consciousness" is itself a construct and thus culturally variable. However, the topic of "the self" as a psycho-social entity is too vast to entertain here. My concern in this essay is more limited, since I mean to sketch out some of the links between differences in the uses of and beliefs about language and in assumptions about the nature of its speakers.

⁴ By *subject* here, I mean historically and culturally specific, and semiotically mediated, constructions of the nature of the human and its capacities. In contrast to more psychologically oriented perspectives, this concept, perhaps most familiarly as portrayed by Foucault (*e.g.*, 1979), focuses on forms of self-understanding immanent in cultural discourses and associated practices (but for one effort to link these, see Butler 1997). On the historicity of the subject, see Cascardi

I will take language—both as a set of practices and as an object of reflection—to be an especially useful source of insight. There are both theoretical and ethnographically specific reasons to look at agency by way of language. For one thing, the semiotically and pragmatically complex character of language is such that speakers can refer to explicit beliefs about action, while their speech practices embody tacit, and possibly divergent, assumptions about the nature of action. In addition, as I will discuss further below, both the ancestral ritualists and Christians in the colonial encounter I describe here place special weight on the powers and forms of language. Since language is both intimately bound up with the subjectivity of its speakers and consists of linguistic forms and pragmatic conventions not fully of their own making, it is more than simply one medium of action among others. Although much of what I have to say applies to the speech of everyday conversation, the discussion here is restricted to words addressed to the spirit world. In the special but highly valued genre of prayer, different views of language and its speakers take some of their most sharply defined, and thus most visible, forms.

If I were to give a thorough discussion of agency and language, I would have to pay close attention to the tacit understandings embedded in everything from legal institutions to gossip to linguistic structure. In this article, however, my focus is narrower. I will look primarily at how people address invisible spirits, how they talk about the powers and value of the speech with which they do so, and what the implications are for the presumed nature of the persons who do the speaking. This essay focuses on the encounter between Dutch Calvinist missionaries, their converts, and unconverted ancestral ritualists on the Indonesian island of Sumba over the period from the arrival of the first Dutch residents at the beginning of this century to my most recent visit in 1993.⁵

My concern with missionization has several purposes. First, one might reasonably argue that the high value that Protestant conversion places on human powers of self-transformation contributes to, or shares in, a defining feature of Euro-American views of modernity. That is, modernity can be characterized in part as bearing “a vision of the world as potentially open to transformation from within” (Cascardi 1992:6; Habermans 1987). Historians may differ on the part Protestantism has played in the genesis of this vision, but certainly Protestant conversion provides a clear and influential model of

(1992) and Taylor (1989); on its historicity across cultural difference, see Ivy (1995). Of particular relevance to the particular historical case discussed in this article is Lionel Trilling’s discussion (1972) of the changing relations among the concepts of sincerity, self, and society, with attention to the early role of English Protestantism.

⁵ Sumba is an island the size of Jamaica, located half-way between Bali and Timor. Dry, sparsely inhabited, and unproductive by Southeast Asian standards, Sumba has held little to attract active intervention or exploitation. It was only absorbed into the Dutch colonial system as part of a final tying up of geopolitical loose ends in the first decades of this century and received little active attention from the Indonesian government until the oil boom of the 1970s made rudimentary development efforts possible. My field work since 1985 has been in Anakalang, one of some dozen distinct but closely related sociolinguistic groups (see Keane 1997a for an ethnographic overview, but the missionary sources concern the entire island).

the powers of transformation of both persons and society. More specifically, religious conversion was one of the chief problems worrying Sumbanese at the time of my field work. Their memories of colonialism, perceptions of what they call modernity (*masa moderen*), and interactions with the Indonesian state are dominated by the experience of religious change. Moreover, over the course of this century, missionary activity and religious conversion have been a constant inducement to self-revelation and reflection. Missionization demands an enormous amount of talk, as preachers, converts, and the unconverted are compelled to explain themselves to others, to explain others to themselves, and even to explain themselves to themselves.

THE MISSIONARY'S FETISHIST

The question of how correctly to understand and locate agency animates, I will argue, some of the most fraught debates of the missionary encounter. The possession of agency is a defining feature by which missionaries distinguish subjects from objects, an ontological distinction with practical entailments both for morality and political economy. In particular, in Dutch eyes it is the pagan's inappropriate ascription of agency to non-human subjects which underlies the dangerous errors known under the condemnatory label of *fetishism*. Moreover, I suggest that, although the theological supports behind the word fetishism may have faded from the academic scene, much of our contemporary talk about agency continues to incorporate some of the assumptions about authenticity and liberation found in Christian discourse about paganism.

As William Pietz (1985) has pointed out, talk about fetishism—whether religious, Marxist, or Freudian—arises in the encounter between an observer and some sort of Other. To impute fetishism to others is to set in motion a comparison, as an observer recognizes that someone else is attributing false value to objects. In Pietz's words, "The fetish is situated in the space of cultural revolution, as the place where the truth of the object as fetish is revealed" (1985:11). It is this view of fetishism that interests me here: To speak of fetishism is by implication to assert that one views the desires and acts of others with a clear eye. Moreover, it is with a historicized and historicizing eye, one from which the scales have fallen. It is thus no accident that fetish discourse commonly attends narratives of modernity.

The discourse of fetishism, in its several varieties, is concerned in part with the true distinction between subjects and objects.⁶ This is evident in the colonial and post-colonial encounter between Dutch Calvinists and ancestral

⁶ This study is concerned with the subject, but ultimately the construction of the subject is inseparable from that of the object in contradistinction to which it reveals its specific nature. For an examination of this dialectic with a focus on the material object, see Keane (1996). That essay follows discussions between ancestral ritualists and Protestants, as well as early debates among the Dutch missionaries themselves, about how to handle the role of material things in rituals and feasts. I argue that Sumbanese sacrifices, offerings, and sacred valuables provoke anxiety in Protestants because of the way in which they challenge the obviousness of the distinction between subject and object and awaken latent contradictions in the Europeans' own relationships to material things.

ritualists (whom I will call “*marapu* followers,” using the word for ancestral spirits) on Sumba. Over the course of this century, both historical circumstances and theological beliefs were such that the Dutch Calvinists were not in a position to force Sumbanese to convert and had to rely heavily on persuasion even in the heyday of Dutch colonial power. The unconverted were in turn increasingly prompted to talk back, something that has continually put me in the midst of long and animated discussions.⁷ Much of this talk—for which I draw here mostly on Dutch writings of the late colonial period, with some reference to my own more recent conversations—concerns the proper nature of the human subject. Viewed as a precipitate of the encounter itself, the discourse of fetishism provides a glimpse of the process by which the character of subject and object are constructed or challenged. For example, in 1909 the recently arrived Dutch missionary, D. K. Wielenga, wrote from his outpost in Sumba (then at the margins of the recently expanded Dutch East Indies): “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). Wielenga drew here on a commonplace distinction between inner and outer, immaterial and material. But the issue here is not simply a question of knowledge and error. Talk about fetishism is especially concerned about the misattribution of agency, responsibility, and desires to objects, to what the observer knows to be mere dead matter. Moreover, what seems to lend to the imputation of fetishism its extra charge is the sense that others are not only mistaken but that their error is both seductive and dangerous. By ascribing agency to things that in truth lack it, they thereby deny, perhaps even rob, the agency of those who properly possess it (whether these are humans, God, or both). For this reason, the missionary’s work of demystification entails liberation, restoring to natives the agency which they have given away. Bringing others to true consciousness, in this view, is a critical step in their real development as agents—a logic whose echoes we can still hear in the ethical concerns of contemporary anthropology.

In Sumba, the question of agency arose in the context of a brief colonial intervention in the first half of this century, an intervention that in practice was largely carried out as part of the project of missionaries, an ontological and moral reordering of the world. Despite the efforts of Wielenga and his colleagues, however, a significant majority of Sumbanese remained *marapu* followers until quite recently.⁸ At the time of my most recent conversations on

⁷ The kind of discourse with which I am concerned here is largely induced by cross-cultural encounters. Although reflexivity is an endemic feature of human discourse, not all matters are subject to explicit discussion in all circumstances. As I have argued elsewhere (Keane 1995a), cultural and cosmological matters are often tacitly understood—when people make them matters of talk, we need to ask what induces such reflection. Moreover, the fact of not being talked about can be an important part of the power and persuasiveness of certain aspects of a culture (see Urban 1996).

⁸ In the early 1980s, West Sumba was the last regency in Indonesia in which a majority of the population was not officially registered as adhering to a legally recognized religion (Hoskins

Sumba the debates between Christians and marapu followers were still being carried out with some heat.

ADDRESSING THE INVISIBLE

For reasons that will become apparent shortly, much of the debate about agency and fetishism dwells on the proper use of language in dealings with the spirit world. Although it is important in both marapu and Protestant worship, speech plays quite distinct roles in the two sets of religious practices, according to differing assumptions about the agency of speakers and hearers manifest in questions of authorship and voice. The words that should emanate from the sincere individual speaker in Protestant prayer contrast to the highly formal and supposedly fixed canon of couplets used in Sumbanese oratory and marapu ritual. Most Sumbanese place enormous value on ritual speech, which they accept as having been handed down unchanged from the ancestors. The value, efficacy, and authority of Sumbanese ritual speech lie to an important degree in its formal characteristics (see Keane 1997a). Many of these characteristics promote the textual dimension of language, those aspects of language that are most detachable from particular speakers and the immediate social, temporal, and physical context of speaking.⁹ By doing so, they help impart to speech and its speakers the authority of an ancestral medium that arises far from the here and now. To speak in this medium is to display one's detachment from personal and factional interests. Full command of ritual speech in performance indexes the speaker's legitimacy as someone who has received words by a series of links over the generations back to their primordial originators. Ultimately, ritual speech also enables its users to lay claim to a social identity that transcends the spatial and temporal limits of the individual, mortal body.

The value of these ritual couplets lies, to an important degree, in their

1987), and marapu ritual was thriving in many parts of the island. Nonetheless, Christianity is rapidly growing in strength, encouraged by direct government pressure on adults, religious education in the increasingly available elementary schools, and proselytizing by youth groups. The dominant sect on the island is the Sumbanese Christian Church (Gereja Kristen Sumba), affiliated with the conservative Calvinist Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands. Catholics form a much smaller group, and a tiny minority of ethnically Chinese townspeople adhere to the American-based evangelical Bethel Church. For the history of religious conversion on Sumba see Haripranata (1984), Kapita (1965), Keane (1995b, 1996), Luijendijk (1946), Meijering *et al.* (1927), van den End (1987), and Webb (1986).

⁹ The textual dimension of language is promoted by such devices as repetitiveness and highly formalized poetic structure. In terms of explicit belief, these devices display the fact that ritual speech follows unchanging forms mandated by the ancestors. In semiotic terms, these devices, along with the elaborate stylization and distribution of participant roles, emphasize the separation between words and the intentions of particular speakers, and can contribute to the sense that what they say is self-evident (Du Bois 1986). Another important way in which ritual speech is entextualized is by suppressing deictics, those elements of language whose reference is oriented to the specific speech context. These include the pronouns that indicate speaker and addressee, and words like *here* and *there*, and *now* and *then*, which presuppose knowledge of the time and place in which they are uttered. For discussion of entextualization in ritual speech, see Kuipers (1990), Bauman and Briggs (1990), Silverstein and Urban (1996), and Keane (1997c).

capacity to portray their speaker as someone who is *not* their author or the agent of the actions they perform. To the extent that the individual agency of the speaker does become apparent—when performance slips—the ancestral origins and thus effectiveness of this speech are in doubt. This model of language embodies a broader set of assumptions about the nature of authority and the practices of power. In the case of Sumbanese ritual speech, the signs of power are conceived to be generated by a source that remains distinct from the bodily individuals who wield them. It is part of the formal character of that speech to make that conception persuasive and available to the experience of both listeners and speakers. At the same time, this conception of power shapes the formal character of speech and forges it into the most effective means of acting in a world of invisible agents.

This view of language stands in contrast to certain elements of pervasive, common-sense Western understandings of how language works (sometimes called “language ideology,” see overview in Woolard 1992). The debate over speech practices in Sumba involves two aspects of Western language ideology in particular, namely the central role it accords speakers’ intentions and the kinds of functions it understands language to serve. The first of these, the intentionalistic model, was expressed at least as early as Saint Augustine (Asad 1993:154, n.28). An important modern formulation of the place of intentions in meaning was given by the philosopher, H. P. Grice (1957). In this view, linguistic signs work by virtue of the speaker’s intention to communicate and by virtue of their being understood by the hearer to reflect such an intention. That is, for you properly to communicate with me, I must impute to you not only an intention to communicate to me but also an intention to get me to recognize that intention. By implication, then, my communicative act is mediated by the recipient’s underlying assumptions about language. But as will become apparent, Sumbanese and many other ethnographic counterexamples suggest that, by privileging individual intentions, Grice has laid out a specifically Western language ideology.¹⁰

The second relevant aspect of Western language ideology provoked by Sumbanese practices concerns language function. Several linguists have argued that speakers of European languages tend to see the normal function of language as reference and predication (see Silverstein 1979). This common-sense view of language stresses the capacity of language to point to things in the world, to speak about them in ways that are essentially true or false; and this view locates that ability in the semantics of individual words. But contrasting language ideologies exist, as pointed out some time ago when Michelle Rosaldo (1982) argued that the Ilongot of the northern Philippines see language first and foremost as a means of uttering directives.

¹⁰ Not only is Grice’s model ethnocentric, it also does not accurately reflect the more complex realities even of Western speech use (see Duranti 1993; Hanks 1996).

EFFECTIVE SPEAKING

Implicit in the practices of Sumbanese ritual speech are assumptions about how language works that differ markedly from the notion that it is primarily a medium for the making of propositions. Sumbanese ritual speech is supposed to carry out efficacious actions.¹¹ The contrast was well-expressed by the missionary and linguist, Lois Onvlee. Puzzling over how best to translate the Dutch word *bidden* (to pray), he wrote (1973b:202):

I think of the word with which we render our "to pray," viz. *parengena li'i*, which literally means to make someone hear the word, direct the word to, a word that is indeed used in this sense in daily speech. . . . (But) once I went along when summoned for the killing of a 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 intestines should then speak what the forefathers mean to say, to be able to serve as oracle.¹² And in another context, regarding what was "hot," and thus (ritually) perilous, and ought to be cooled, they said *parengenge li'i ne we'e*, make the water hear the word, thus "talk about" the water so that it indeed shall be able "to cool." 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?

In this passage, Onvlee accurately described a central component of Sumbanese ritual speech practice—that it has the formal structure of dialogue—and, along with this, the implicit ideology that dialogue produces material effects. Onvlee raised the problem with reference to the possibility of mistranslation. The mistranslation of "to pray" is important because of the way it leads irrevocably from speech practices to mistaken views of agency, of the kinds of beings that inhabit the world, and, ultimately, of the morality of certain ways of interacting with the divine. The mistranslation of "to pray" arises from distinct views of the purposive uses of language. The errors immanent in Sumbanese *marapu* (prayer), according to Onvlee, are threefold. By addressing the chicken, *marapu* prayer treats as an agent that which ontologically lacks agency. In cooling that which is hot, it falsely attributes efficacy to words. Finally, it incites the speaker to coerce the listener. In doing so, *marapu* prayer tempts mere humans to *lèse majesté* with respect to the spirit world and, by implication, divinity.

¹¹ When discussing a given expression in ritual speech, Sumbanese rarely discuss reference or denotation, that is, "what does it say" (*gana wina*). Rather, they are interested in the appropriate circumstances for using it, and the possible social, material, or spiritual effects, asking "where does it strike?" (*beya na pinya pawannana?*). For the full argument to which this can only allude, see Keane (1997a).

¹² This refers to the fact that *marapu* prayers must always be spoken over some kind of material offering (see Keane 1997a). The words are directed at a living chicken, pig, horse, or buffalo, which is then sacrificed and cooked. A second set of prayers offers a portion of the meat to the spirit. Not only does the offering initiate material exchange with the spirit world, it also serves as a medium of communication. Spirits cannot speak with words but reply to those who address them with signs. These are found during the preparation of the sacrifice by inspecting the entrails of the chicken or the liver of larger animals.

Language ideologies are linked to concepts of the speaking subject and the nature of action. It is for this reason that Protestant theology is scandalized by marapu ritual practices—not simply because they differ in their commitments to particular theories of language but because of the wider implications, both ontological and moral. In the quotations to which I will now turn, we can see that when Dutch Calvinists look at marapu prayer, they counterpose the sincerity of Christian prayer as expressions that arise from individual and internal sources against what they take to be a fetishistic displacement of agency onto objectified forms. (This, by the way, is a two-way street: Marapu followers in turn attribute to the isolated speaker of Protestant prayer an excessive willfulness, a hubris that is at once dangerous and ineffective.)¹³ Over the course of these debates, which accompany changes in speech practices, each group expresses distinct concepts of language, action, and the nature of the speaking subject.

Missionary practice is often shaped by the referential model of language function. The initial task of a proselytizing religion is, after all, to preach the Gospel. For Dutch Calvinists, such preaching can work only by virtue of denotations.¹⁴ It must not seek to effect consequences directly, which would be magical. In its austerity and caution about syncretism, Calvinist preaching (whether undertaken by Dutch or Sumbanese Christians) does not even have recourse to the passions, as in the ecstasy of the evangelical camp meeting or what the missionaries see as the seductions of Catholic ritual. Preaching can only convey true statements about the world and hope thereby to persuade.

INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR

What are the implications of these contrasting language ideologies for their respective understandings of the speaking subject? In Protestant critiques, idolators (among whom they often include Catholics) confuse or conflate exterior and interior. This confusion underlies the terrible dread that is supposed to pervade heathen life because all evil arises from agents external to the human subject. As Wielenga explained, “The characteristic oppression of

¹³ As Lionel Trilling points out, the development of the concept of sincerity is linked to that of “society,” as something that is separate from, and can become a discursive object for, the free individual (Trilling 1972:26; for a remarkable discussion of the role of speech in displaying sincerity and personal autonomy in the political rhetoric in the eighteenth century, see Fliegelman 1993). Thus, the Sumbanese Protestant anxiety about the apparent insincerity of pagans seems to imply a linked concern with the apparent domination of the Sumbanese individual by the rules of society: note that the ancestral mandates that shape religious practice are inseparable from those that shape society. In European eyes, the marapu follower is subject not only to devils but also to the imperious dictates of inflexible traditional custom, such as marriage rules, forms of etiquette, and the system of ceremonial exchange.

¹⁴ Thus, the enormous amount of careful attention Dutch missionaries paid to questions of translation; see, for example, Lambooy (1930, 1937), Onvlee (1973a, 1973c), Pol (1931) compare Steedly (1996), Fabian (1991). Note that the question of translation tends to focus on the rendering of the discrete words, which Western language ideology often takes to be the primary locus of linguistic meaning (in contrast to sentences, grammatical structures, illocutionary effects, or larger discourse units). For an instructive comparison to the problem of translation in Catholic practice in the colonial Philippines, see Rafael (1988).

(the marapu-follower's) religious spirit- and soul- veneration is fear. . . . He feels himself always surrounded with threats" (Wielenga 1923:224). To counteract this, Wielenga continued, the preacher must explain that "the human's soul, the human's life principle, thus sits *in* the person . . . it is inner, invisible. The wise Creator has so placed the soul that there is no danger from external, material things" (Wielenga 1923:224–5, emphasis in original). This means that the sermonizer must present a model of interiority explicitly distinguished from the subject's investment in physical objects and other external agents.

Against the external agents so feared by pagans, Protestants often counterpose sincere speech. For them, speech arises from within and is itself immaterial. It thus manifests the presence of the real spiritual locus of the individual will (Niesel 1956:212–26), something carried to one logical conclusion in the Quaker institution of silent meeting, which rejects all but the most spontaneous words as inauthentic (Bauman 1983). Much as pagan fetishism embodies a profound misunderstanding of what attributes properly belong to—and what can be hoped from—material objects and what pertains to human subjects, so, too, with language. Thus, today Sumbanese Protestants insist on the importance of shutting one's eyes while praying, something that continued to puzzle marapu followers in some of our conversations in 1993. As one man asked me, "What are they afraid of?," answering his own question sardonically, "Maybe they're afraid their sins are visible!"

What is at stake for Sumbanese Calvinists? A church warden explained to me that you close your eyes so that your speech will come from the heart. He contrasted this to Catholics, who must keep their eyes open in order to read the Prayer Book. Pointedly he compared them to marapu followers, adding that Catholic practices verge on idolatry, with their statues of the Virgin. Note that, by including Catholicism in his remarks, he was making an explicit association between the fetishizing displacement of idol worship and that of reciting the written word. Another person put it to me this way: "As for marapu followers, they don't even pay attention during the prayers, as long as they have their priest doing the job for them. They don't concentrate as we do, but just chat away." In a sermon I recorded, the minister drew on some of Calvinism's other rivals to characterize sincere prayer, saying:

Yes, as for Catholicism, there are often formulae. Can't 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. We (on the other hand) are not taught like this. It's not enough, just five times. If we breathe, we don't just do it five times. Breathing goes on and on, doesn't it?

Notice here the rhetorical effects of the image of breath. This image denies the discreteness of the act of speaking and assimilates it to other constant bodily processes. Constant rather than framed, ordinary rather than elevated, intimate rather than detachable, the speech of Protestant faith is identified with the full presence of the everyday, physical locus of the individuated subject.

This view of formulae expresses another aspect implicit in Onvlee's criticism of marapu prayer, "to make someone hear the word", which I quoted above. It concerns the meaning of *li'i* (word), which denotes both the couplets used in ritual speech and, by metonymy, the original commitment between the ancestors and their descendants. The couplets are spoken in rites that fulfill the commitment, and in principle the less those couplets deviate from the original words of the ancestors, the better the fulfillment. The authority of any given performance rests precisely in the fact that the words do not originate with the speaker, nor do they display themselves as conveying a set of propositions.

As the minister's comments about the idolatry of the Virgin suggest, Calvinist criticisms of inauthentic prayer (whether marapu, Catholic, or Islamic) view it as similar to the fetishized object. Like the spirits it addresses, it stands outside the subject, and to it the subject surrenders the real capacity to act. By contrast, authentic speech must originate within the speaker, guided by intentions and referring to a world beyond itself. Onvlee insisted that the church must be careful not to destroy the moral fabric of society by dismantling its ritual practices. Instead, the forms of these practices should be preserved, but their performative *effects* reframed to strengthen their voluntaristic yet disinterested character. For example, the feast could be reinterpreted, in Onvlee's words, as "no longer a necessity but a gift. Not in order to influence but to thank; not 'supaja' (in order) but 'sebab' (because)" (1973d:156–7).

Notice three things about this brief quotation. First, agency is restored to humans, who previously had been in thrall to ancestral mandates. Second, the ritual activity that results is itself no longer agentive in any strong sense: It has lost its place in a world of causation and been reconfigured as a form of expression that refers to other sites of action. And third, even material practices such as the slaughtering of animals, distribution of meat, cooking and commensality, turn out to be displaced forms of speech, so many ways of saying "thank you." Thanks come after the fact, referring to outcomes brought about only by the speaker's bodily efforts and the autonomous workings of God. By insistently denying the powers of words, Calvinists thereby affirm that humans are endowed with a free will and are thus liberated from the tyranny of fetishes and capricious spirits. (In the process, of course, Calvinists also deny the agency of those marapu followers for whom the words are a source of, or point of access to, power.)

LANGUAGE AND ITS TEMPTATIONS

To this point, the missionaries and their converts tell us a familiar story: The progress of salvation is one of growing self-recognition, as humans cast off their attachment to false, external idols. In the process, they come to recognize their existing inner resources and capacities for self-transformation, which allows them actively to develop the individual conscience. This story ultimately pertains not only to Protestant conversion. It supports a common narrative of modernity, as a process of increasing individualization, interioriz-

ation, and, by many accounts, eventual secularization. But there is a complication in this narrative. This can be seen in another debate between marapu followers and Calvinists. In the eyes of missionaries, pagans manifest a double error, a confusion between the agency proper to humans and that proper to divinity. The marapu followers' view of human beings imputes to them both too much and too little agency. On the one hand, according to Wielenga, "The human ego is thus the center of his religion" because the pagan wants ritual to bring about material benefits. On the other hand, such is the pagan's fatalism, Wielenga continued, that "the greatest stumbling block in the path of personal consciousness of sin is that he denies his human responsibility. That deprives him of all personal sense of guilt. He is firmly certain that he has come into the world with all his virtues and all his vices. These a man cannot alter" (Wielenga 1923:222–3).

Within the spirit world itself, a similar confusion about agency can be found. Sumbanese attribute too little agency to the Deity and too much to the ancestors. According to Wielenga, "A highest Being that has created all exists only in faint recollection . . . a man on earth takes no account of him. High above the clouds he sits enthroned in inaccessible distance" (Wielenga 1909:334–5). The agency possessed by the ancestors deprives *both* humans *and* God of that which is properly theirs. Therefore, Wielenga (1923:220) proposed that the preacher tell them, before anything else, that

it is not evil arbitrariness and angry envy of the spirits that determines men's lot, but the almighty and all omnipresent power of God . . . (such that) leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and illness, wealth and poverty and all things come to us not by chance but from His fatherly hand.

This distinction among kinds of agency means that the Protestant subject provides an ambivalent origin for actions. In addition to the human interior, there is another locus of agency, namely God, along with the mediator, Christ. The story of creation and the insistence on the continuing activity of the Lord in the contemporary world impose a critical limit on the extent of human agency. In this respect, Protestants are more like their marapu interlocutors than like their own more materialist contemporaries in early twentieth-century Europe.

The presence of a transcendental subject affects even beliefs about the nature of language. Despite the centrality of individual intentions and authenticity in Protestant language ideology (or, indeed, as a historical and logical precondition for that centrality), there is an important qualification, for language is in some ways exterior to its speaker. Therefore, however much one might wish to find in words the true locus of the spirit, language cannot entirely guarantee the autonomy of the subject. This is due to its material embodiment in sounds or writing and its social character. Words have some degree of existence outside both the speaker and listener. After all, since we hear ourselves speak, our words once uttered come to us as much as the words of others. Our words also come to us from other 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; Lucy 1993). These aspects of language thus can 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 those words, this might not present a problem for religious practice. But to the extent that language is social in origin, it reveals, at least potentially, the incipient insincerity that threatens to intervene between speaker and the divine addressee.

Although the Dutch Calvinists did not take their concern about this problem to the extremes of groups such as the Quakers or Pentecostals (see Keane 1997c), they did demand that worship be spontaneous enough to forego the use of written prayers. Yet at the heart of their faith remained one overwhelmingly ulterior source of words, the Holy Gospel. In 1957, Onvlee (1973b:197) offered the following reflections on a lifetime of linguistic research and Bible translation:

After our return from Indonesia someone asked me to speak about how you translate a Bible. To this I answered: You do not do that, I do not do that, we do not do that, human beings do not do that. Yes, indeed, men are really occupied with it, and human activity is really involved in it. Languages must be investigated and known, as far as this is possible; a text and understanding must be established, and there must be translation from one language to another. And that all ought to occur in responsible ways; linguistics and philology and exegesis ought necessarily to contribute, and not only these. But to translate the Bible . . . [ellipses in the original] It is with this as with all work in God's kingdom and good understanding will say this with all our work. . . . [O]ne investigates and explains, and the other is occupied in translating, but God translates the Bible.

The language of the Bible, of course, is different from the authentic speech of the person who prays, as Onvlee went on to observe: "What, now, can men say in words? All that which in one way or another falls in the circle of our thoughts and our experience. But what was spoken here (in the Bible) has arisen in no man's heart. How can human language be the bearer thereof?" (1973b:198). Onvlee's reflections suggest that in at least one respect Biblical language resembles that of Sumbanese ritual speech. Its authority lies precisely in the fact that it does not derive from living speakers and they are not its authors. They are, that is, the agents of a principal: They give voice to words that must be understood to derive from a source that lies beyond experience.

The existence of words that emanate from a distant, divine source opens up a possibility on which many Sumbanese seize immediately—that the Christians' Book itself could be fetishized as a site of or access point for agency that lies beyond the human subject. Onvlee (1973b:201–2) recalled:

On a certain day one of our acquaintances came running in to us, asking if we could look in the Book for him. On inquiry, it appeared that his son was working in the government office in the administrative center of Waingapu, thus outside the sphere of Sumbanese life. Now he had received news that his son was sick and so would like to know if he would recover, and what should be done to bring it about. Therefore he

asked us to look in the book. He had thus assimilated the word *zurata* (letter or book) to a related word (of his), viz. *urata*, which means line, also the line of the hand and the line in a chicken entrail or pig liver which is inspected in communicating with the dead in the spear-divination, from which one can know the word and wishes of the dead.

According to Onvlee, the man's confusion here was twofold—he was self-interested where he should be otherworldly, and he misconstrued the functions of language and thus the nature of material signs. The anxious father here sought from the Bible not statements about the truth of the world but directives for efficacious action.

Some five decades after the colonial period of Onvlee's recollections, the authority of scripture, and by extension, of the written word more generally, remains a central concern for Sumbanese, both Christian and marapu.¹⁵ Some Sumbanese seize on the centrality of writing in the Protestant church to justify their reluctance to convert, explaining that, being unable to read, they must remain marapu. Although many Sumbanese take the lack of a scripture as one defining feature of marapu ritual, others seek to ground their authority in alternative forms of writing. Like the father in Onvlee's anecdote, many people today identify the divinatory reading of intestines as "the Sumbanese book." Others claim for themselves an equivalent to the authority of the Book, some marapu ritualists asserting that their knowledge too is a form of writing. For example, to gloss the expression "there is the (ancestral) track," one told me that "this means it's like we take a piece of paper, then put down lines (that is, write), we give (our performance) direction." Still others directly resist the authority of the written word. A recalcitrant marapu follower, complaining of the aggressive efforts of young local evangelists, told me: "How I surprise them! When the proselytizers come to my house and open that book to read to me, I tell them to listen first, then I tell them what I know about the origins and Babel." Yet another priest said: "But those Christians, all they have is a book. This book can be destroyed, or again its handiwork can fade." In contrast, marapu followers argue that they have a more secure evidential base for their links to the ancestors (gold and tombs that remain to this day) and that these links parallel those along which ancestral words have been transmitted.

The lack of an ancestral book does not prevent Sumbanese from trying to take advantage of the powers latent in books as sources of words exterior to the speaker. Some, for example, use the Bible as a tool of divination. In this, Sumbanese are simply discovering a possibility that the authority and materiality of the written Divine Word seem always to have contained. Keith Thomas (1971:45), for example, reminds us that throughout the Middle Ages and into the Reformation, "Any prayer or piece of the Scriptures might have a mystical power waiting to be tapped. The Bible could be an instrument of

¹⁵ If anything, this concern is accentuated by state religious policies, by which only scriptural religions are legally recognized (Kipp and Rodgers 1987). Sumbanese views of writing tend to associate the authority of religion with that of the state (see Keane 1997b).

divination, which opened at random would guarantee one's fate." On the one hand, such divination is simply an appeal to a source of words whose authority is superior to that of ordinary humans. But this use of the Bible participates in a more general characteristic of divination, which, as the linguist John Du Bois has argued, constructs aleatory mechanisms precisely in order to suppress the existing intentionality of persons (Du Bois 1993). Thus, the appeal to a non-human source of words acts to efface or momentarily bracket human agency. As I have suggested above, this is the active mode of one side of the discourse of fetishism: To ascribe agency to one locus is simultaneously to deny it to another. In using the Bible for divination, Sumbanese seem to mobilize the latent possibilities afforded by the very distance of the Calvinist's divine agent—as if they seek agency, but not exactly to claim it for themselves.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

Dutch Calvinists in Sumba counterpoise 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. For them, a mistaken view of language is inseparable from a mistaken understanding of the human subject. Of particular concern to them are wrong speech that form 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 a 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, emphases in original).

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 inseparable from materialism, going hand in hand with the corruption that conflates economic exchange (the purchase of an indulgence)

¹⁶ To speak of effacement may, I think mistakenly, tempt one to conclude that local constructions of agency merely dissemble the real agency that humans actually know they possess or induce false consciousness. To efface or bracket one's own agency, however, can also be a way of deferring to the agency one imputes to others, including denizens of the spirit world. For example, Sumbanese purposely do this in non-verbal ways by creating situations in which they will "accidentally" lose spiritually powerful objects that are too dangerous to get rid of intentionally (see Keane 1997a:92 and 251,n.34). For more on consciousness and power, see Keane 1997a, especially chapters 1 and 9).

with spiritual effects (forgiveness). Wielenga's view of speech, in its very appeal to interiority, recognizes the ambiguously external character of language, which needs some additional resources if it is to be bound to inner states and outer works.

But both sides in the encounter between Christians and marapu followers find the other to be in error. Dwelling on different loci of agency, Christian and marapu followers alike accuse each other of willfulness and lack of deference to the world of invisible beings. Thus, for their part, marapu followers frequently accuse Christians of hubris in seeking to address the Deity directly. Marapu followers see their ritual forms, in contrast to the direct address to which Protestant prayer aspires, not as insincere but as deferential. The performers insist that the words they utter are not their own and that they dare address only intermediary spirits, not the ultimate powers.

In this light, marapu followers commonly attribute to the isolated speaker of Christian prayer an excessive willfulness that is at once dangerous and ineffective. According to these critics, it is precisely the Christians' refusal to attribute the warrants claimed by the speaking subject to the exteriority provided by language that renders them suspect. That is, through its efforts at sincerity and spontaneity, Christian prayer seems to deny that language and its powers originate beyond 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. Looking at the individual assertiveness embodied in Christian practices, marapu followers are unimpressed by doctrinal claims of respect for the Lord. Conversely, attending to the deluded character of fetishism, colonial missionaries were similarly unimpressed by marapu followers' understandings of agency and overlook the persuasiveness, authority, and delegated nature of ritual couplets. To be sure, there is a predictable cultural and political clash going on here, but I suggest there is something else involved as well. Both sides have to contend with a lingering doubt: For marapu followers, it is about the presence of the invisible spirits; for Christians, the presence of sincere intentions in the worshipper. What both sides share is that neither, in practice, treats the subject as fully autonomous and self-present.

The potential for dispute or confusion about the locus of agency and the authorship of words is perhaps inescapable. The Protestant mission seeks to fix and stabilize the agency and authorship that most matter, distributing them between the interiority of speaking subjects and the distant site occupied by God. The Protestant genealogy of the version of authenticity and agency I have sketched here suggest that those who use these words should be alert to the assumptions they bear. Both marapu followers and missionaries share a fundamental understanding of authority. Its human bearers should not be known—or even know themselves—to be the ultimate sources of agency. This authority is most legitimate, persuasive, and efficacious when the agency

it manifests seems most to arise from somewhere else. What worries marapu followers and Protestants (both Dutch and, increasingly, Sumbanese) about each other is not entirely that the other “displaces” agency away from living human beings. Rather, it is that the non-human site at which they find agency is the wrong one.

The discourse of fetishism, whether theological, Marxist, or Freudian, harbors a promise of liberation linked to self-consciousness. As part of a broader concern for agency, it is especially evident in the current anthropological reworkings of Marx’s assertion that human beings make themselves, even if not under conditions of their own choosing (1963:15). But however fundamental their differences, marapu and Calvinist discourses coincide at one critical point. Neither accepts the proposition that human beings simply make themselves, and both impose significant limits on human agency—locating it not just in Marx’s dead weight of the past but with other, non-human agents altogether. Indeed, both Calvinists and marapu followers might doubt any vision of fully self-present agency freed altogether from the possibility of what others might describe as fetishism. Indeed, if we take seriously the ways in which the actions of subjects are mediated by objective forms like those of speech, we might ask whether *anyone’s* practices could altogether escape some sort of charge of fetishism. This is part of the puzzle for the well-intentioned interlocutor: If the agency of others is predicated in part on their own beliefs and on the notions of agency immanent in their practices, how are we, if we are secular scholars, to reconcile their attribution of agency to divine subjects with our desire that they recognize that agency lies within their own hands? And, to the extent that the value Western scholars place on self-transformation is itself a product of our own genealogy, what does it mean for us to insist on the self-transforming powers of others? As we seek to grant agency to historical subjects, we might ask ourselves not only what agency is and where to find it but under what terms, and with what entailments, it must be accepted.

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