

The Art of Clothing

A Pacific Experience

Edited by

Susanne Küchler

Reader in Anthropology, University College London

and

Graeme Were

Research Fellow in Anthropology,
The British Museum/Goldsmiths College London



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THE HAZARDS OF NEW CLOTHES: WHAT SIGNS MAKE POSSIBLE¹

Webb Keane

As the people of the Pacific took on new forms of dress, they might well have been advised to consider these words from early in Henry David Thoreau's book *Walden, or Life in the Woods*: 'I say, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes' (Thoreau 1971: 13). I want to start with this admonition since it seems appropriate – dare I say 'fitting'? – for several reasons. Written in 1854, these words speak to us from the heyday of the missionary endeavour. Voicing Thoreau's version of New England Transcendentalism, with its roots in Puritanism and ties to Universalism, they issue – however idiosyncratically – from the heart of Protestant modernity in a form that will be especially familiar to many of us today. It is perhaps no accident that, at least in America, Thoreau was revived as a guru in the Sixties when the likes of Henry Ward Beecher, Bronson Alcott and William Ellery Channing had long been forgotten.

Thoreau identified himself with the great philosophical traditions of renunciation and the radical return to foundations. But in contrast to those, his was informed by a certain utilitarianism. We identify what should be renounced by discovering what is functionally necessary and strip away everything else as superfluous luxury. 'The object of clothing,' he wrote, 'is, first, to retain the vital heat, and secondly, in this state of society, to cover nakedness' (Thoreau 1971: 21). Note the order in which he expresses these functions, and the qualification. A stricter theologian would insist that we are naked in any society, and even when alone. Thus, when Erasmus advised children on good bodily conduct in the 16th century, he reminded them that the angels are always watching (Ebas 1994: 106). But Thoreau relativises the claims of modesty to 'this state of society' – to a particular historical moment, and to the presence of other persons.

And so Thoreau's moralism dwells not on modesty, as it might have, but on the ways in which clothing marks social distinctions, subjects us to the vagaries of fashion, and displaces our proper concern with our spiritual condition. He writes: 'there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have . . . clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience' (Thoreau 1971: 22). Clothes form a material outside that distracts us from the spiritual inside, with the result that, in Thoreau's words,

1 I am grateful to Susanne Küchler and Graeme Were for their invitation to take on this topic, and to Daniel Miller, Judith Irvine, Adela Pinch and Christopher Pinney for their comments and provocations.

'We know but a few men, a great many coats and breeches' (Thoreau 1971: 22). In this ironic rhetoric, we may hear something in common with the words of Thoreau's junior by one year, Karl Marx. Recall how Marx famously appropriated 'fetishism', a concept that had until then been restricted to comparative religion, in order similarly to accuse his contemporaries of inverting the proper relations between animate and inanimate things.²

But there is more. Caring about clothing gives us over too much to the opinion of others. Thoreau's discussion of clothing ends with an attack on fashion (Thoreau 1971: 25), which forces us to acknowledge the authority of others, whether that be the distant arbiters of style or the opinion of our neighbours. For Thoreau, the distinction between inner and outer provides ontological support for his individualism, which sees in social relations a threat to personal authenticity. For both Thoreau and Marx, despite their obvious political differences, the misapprehension of material things is not merely a mistake – it has grave consequences. It leads us to invert our values, imputing life to the lifeless, and thereby losing ourselves.

Thoreau's remarks about clothing express some assumptions about clothes in the world from which the first missionaries took sail to the Pacific. They reveal an important link between the 19th century Protestant world of white churches, plain meeting houses and sincere speech, and the high modernist aesthetic of, say, the Austrian architect Adolf Loos a half century later. Thoreau would surely have welcomed Loos's assertion that 'the evolution of civilization is tantamount to the removal of ornament from objects of use' (quoted in Gell 1993: 15) with its celebration of function over appearance, and rejection of surfaces not just as superfluous, but as immoral.

We can find that quotation from Loos, by the way, in Alfred Gell's brilliant book on Polynesian tattooing, *Wrapping in Images* (1993). Gell's spirit surely hovers over the contributors to this book. For if the authors are animated by one shared, underlying concern beyond their regional speciality, it is perhaps in their efforts to go beyond certain intellectual habits. These habits were summarised by Nicholas Thomas (drawing in turn on Marilyn Strathern, for example, 1979, 1988) when he criticised anthropology for having 'continually reduced material artefacts to other relations or meanings in which they are embedded; our interpretations treat the objects as no more than an illustration of things that are external to it' (Thomas 1999: 5). I want to pursue this thought today, and suggest how clothing exemplifies certain general problems in the analysis of material culture.

My central claim is this: if we still find it difficult to treat objects as no more than illustrations of something else, as, say, communicating meanings or identities, it is because we remain heirs of a tradition that treats signs as if they were merely the clothing of meaning, meaning that, it would seem, must be

2 Cloth and clothing are central to Marx's discussion of the commodity form in the first volume of *Capital*. Moreover, as Peter Stallybrass (1998) observes, Marx's own practical ability to write this book in the British Museum, where proper dress was expected, hinged on his uncertain capacity to keep his own coat out of pawn.

stripped bare. As this tradition dematerialises signs, it privileges meaning over actions, consequences and possibilities. Yet we must be wary of merely reversing this privilege and thereby inadvertently reproducing the same dichotomy. Drawing on concepts such as indexicality and semiotic ideology, I'd like to suggest some alternatives.

Thoreau's spiritualism is most like Loos's modernism when he dwells on clothing as superficial luxury. He rather ducks the problem raised by modesty, that by concealing our skin, clothing reveals our morality. But herein lies a persistent tension in missionary efforts to clothe the naked. For in covering our nakedness and directing attention to our artificial surface, clothing threatens to supplant us. Mission history across the colonial world shows a persistent and troubling tension between the hope that clothing will change people, and the danger that people once clad will invest their clothing with too great a significance (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 223; Hansen 2000: 26, 30-32; Spyer 1998). On the one hand, proper dress is essential to the inculcation of modesty, propriety and civility. Yet how much should one hope clothing will transform people? Not so much that they forget it is but a surface that can be removed. There are many dangers. They may, for instance, become frivolous and vain, or embark on new forms of fashion and status competition. Colonial writing is replete with depictions of dandified or otherwise ridiculous natives. Morality thus depends on the correct understanding of the materiality of things and the immateriality of persons.

Protestantism often sees itself as treading the middle way between two extremes: a disregard for clothing on the one hand, and excessive regard for it on the other. This is quite evident, for example, in the Dutch colonial Indies. If the pagans of Kalimantan, Sulawesi, or Maluku were insufficiently clad, the most orthodox Muslims of, say, Sunda and Aceh were too much so.³ Like Goldilocks, the judicious Christian should accord to clothing neither too little importance, nor too much, but just enough – a balancing act that invites perpetual anxiety.

Writing about Calvinist missionaries in the colonial Dutch East Indies, I have argued elsewhere that matter and materialism pose special difficulties for mainstream Protestants (Keane 1996). The effort to regulate certain verbal and material practices, and the anxieties that attend them, centre on the problem of consolidating a human subject that is at its core independent of, and superordinate to, the world of mere dead matter. What for anthropologists is a problem of social and cultural analysis – how to understand material things within human society – is faced by these missionaries as a practical problem: how to free humans from false relations to things as in fetishism, animism or naturalistic materialism. This view of signs has roots in an ontology that goes back before either Protestantism or modernity, to be sure, but it reaches a particularly strong and influential expression in their alliance, as expressed by Thoreau and

3 As Jean Gelman Taylor points out (1997), class and other distinctions in the colonial Indies were marked not just by what people wore, but by which parts of the body were exposed, at what time of day, and in what location. Differences in style also involved differences in which aspects of the body were emphasised or suppressed.

Loos. And this model of the sign underlies much of both missionary endeavours and our own social and cultural theories.

Of course it is hardly news to the authors in this book that clothing is more than a matter of 'mere appearances', and that we should be circumspect about purported distinctions between 'inner' and 'outer'. But I think we still have not sufficiently appreciated the extent to which this perception of clothing is rooted in a deeper set of semiotic assumptions and habits. Here I want to trace out some of the ways in which our discussion of clothing can be brought to bear on a rethinking of the concept of the sign in support of a more historically minded study of material culture.

To take clothes in particular, and objects more generally, as expressions of meanings that really lie elsewhere, is to depend on certain assumptions not just about objects, but about signs. Clothing seems most superficial to those who take signs to be the clothing of immaterial meanings. Like clothing, in this view, the sign both reveals and conceals, and serves to mediate relations between the self and others. These are the very grounds on which Thoreau and many other Protestants and modernists are suspicious of clothing and often of semiotic mediation altogether. In unmediated transparency they hope to discover unvarnished souls and naked truth. Here we have an example of what can be called representational economy. By representational economy, I mean the interconnections among different modes of signification. For instance, I have argued elsewhere that the ways in which people handle and value material goods may be implicated in how they use and interpret words, and vice versa (Keane 1996, 1997a, 2001, 2002). Their treatment of things and words both reflect certain underlying assumptions about the world and the beings that inhabit it. Such assumptions, for instance, will determine how one distinguishes between subjects and objects, with implications for what will or will not count as a possible agent – and thus, for what is a good candidate for being an intentional communication. Historically, changes in one will be reflected in changes in the other. Thus, they enter into a larger economy of mutual, often unexpected consequences.

Do new garments make a prince of a pauper? A woman of a man? It is not only missionaries who are unsettled by the question: how much change ought we to expect from a change of clothes? Transvestism, after all, is serious business. In Indonesia, the capacity of Buginese *bissu* to mediate between the world of the living and the dead, for instance, requires mixed-gendered dressing. And certainly new historical ambitions seem to demand new clothes. Across the Malay world, to convert to Islam required that one take on new kinds of clothing and food regulations, which is one reason people figured the same must be true of Christianity (Aragon 2000; Kipp 1993; Taylor 1997). Many Sumbanese assumed they needed Western clothes if they were to convert, despite the protestations of the Dutch missionaries; some still refer to this assumption today. By the end of the 19th century, young nationalists in the more urban parts of the Dutch East Indies were asserting their modernity and new capacities through sartorial transformations (Schulte Nordholt, 1997, especially the chapters by van Dijk, Danandjaja, Mrázek and Taylor). Numerous memoirs by members of the first generations of nationalists hinge on the moment in which they first acquired

shoes and slacks (notably, women did not follow suit until well into the 20th century). Efforts in the 1930s by the Indonesian nationalist party to imitate Gandhi's *swadeshi* movement, and clothe its adherents in locally produced, indigenous styles, failed as the leaders persisted in their love of white suits, ties and well polished shoes. When Sukarno was held by the Dutch during the war of independence in the 1940s, the prisoners were allowed a few requests. His companions asked for books and newspapers. Sukarno, however, asked for a new Arrow shirt (Schulte Nordholt 1997: 19, n 17). Can we separate his leadership from such embodiments, which set the national fashion for men: Western suit jackets without ties, and black *pici*, Muslim caps?

Do such examples simply boil down to mere emblems of identity? I think not. Too much of the subjective pain and expectation of history centres on changes of dress. From Sumba to Sumatra, we find people's single most vivid recollection of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War was often not the violence, the hunger, the fear, but rather the disappearance of textiles and return to bark cloth. In Sulawesi, one man is reported to have refused to give up his tattered sarong in exchange for a cow (Aragon 2000: 144–45). I doubt anyone with those humiliating memories would consider clothing a mere surface.

We needn't look only to historical crises to see the power of new clothes. Think of how much anthropological fieldwork has depended on the hoped for – or feared – effects of cultural transvestism. My own experience is perhaps exemplary of the disquiet the question can provoke. Some mix of a life-long aversion to exposing my bony knees, and a postcolonial discomfort with the images of TE Lawrence clad as an Arab and Frank Hamilton Cushing as a Zuni, made me at first wary of donning Sumbanese dress. Most Sumbanese men wear a *hinggi* (in some dialects, *regi*), a rectangular cloth wrapped around the waist and upper thighs. It is held in a loose bundle with some assistance from a belt, one end left to hang down between the legs. The longer it hangs (yes, I'm afraid it's true), the higher the man's status claims. A smaller length of cloth (called a *rowa*) is wrapped around the head; different modes of tying facilitating a remarkable range of self-expression, far wider than that afforded by the tilt of a hat, and more adjustable than that of a haircut (see Keller 1992). Both above and below, I found all this a terribly insecure arrangement, threatening to expose, at the very least, my incompetence if not more.⁴ My companions, however, would not let me get away even with such compromises as long pants under a symbolic waistcloth. With the sharp command *paburungumu!* ('gird your loins!'), they insisted I dress properly. And so I did. Yet, after two years I still hadn't come to feel entirely at home in this dress. And by sheer material logic I suffered from an additional impropriety: given my long legs and the size of the locally available cloth, I was forced to show myself at the lowest end of social order, or else leave so little material for securing it around my waist that I was at even greater risk of having the whole thing fall off me.

4 Even the habituated wearer can feel insecure; see Banerjee and Miller's evocative portrayal of the vulnerability of the sari wearer to slippage and exposure (2003).

Beware all enterprises that require new clothes indeed. The experience of comfort and discomfort has little to do with meaning, expression, identity, nor even, as Marcel Mauss (1979) would remind us, with some universal phenomenology of bodily experience. After all, most Sumbanese men feel at least as uncomfortable in pants and shoes (*kalabi jiwa*: foreign clothing) as I did in *regi* and *rowa*. No surprises here: we drape ourselves in habit, competence and constraint – with what clothing makes possible. Sumbanese cloth allows the comforting gesture of draping it protectively around oneself, as they say, like a hen huddled against the rain. The man's waistcloth leaves legs free to straddle a horse, his headcloth is good for everything, from wiping sweat off the neck to transmitting magical power (I knew one man who, as a child, was brought back from death when his father slapped him with his headcloth). Men and women's clothing has no pockets – another source of my discomfort – but special objects can be hidden in their folds and the very insecurity of this draping can be played to advantage. One man told me how he got rid of a powerful talisman that, while useful, was becoming dangerous. Knowing it would be even more dangerous were he intentionally to dispose of it, he folded it into his waistcloth and started on a long, cross-country trip. Somewhere, perhaps in crossing a river, the talisman was lost, as it were, accidentally on purpose. We could say he thereby elicits the very agency of the thing.

We should bear in mind the plasticity of the sense of comfort. Patricia Spyer (1998) points out that Dutch colonial observers sometimes exaggerated the discomfort of *Aruese* in western clothes, as if to insist on the irredeemable difference of native bodies, and on the limits of what new clothing could achieve. Indonesia's early nationalists struggled against these limits. Henk Schulte Nordholt remarks: 'Wearing a western suit with tie did facilitate a handshake instead of a humble *sembah* (a respectful Javanese gesture of greeting), and wearing trousers did lend itself to sitting on a chair instead of being seated on the floor' (Schulte Nordholt 1997: 15). And today's national style for Indonesian women, the so called *kain kebaya* (tight sarong, lace-decorated bodice, and high-heeled sandals) severely restricts free movement and imposes physical insecurity on the wearer (Taylor 1997: 113).

Of new clothing, then: what new practices, habits, intentions does it make possible – or inhibit? What projects does it invite? Nicholas Thomas (1999) observed that the adoption of the so called 'poncho' by western Polynesian Christians didn't merely express their new modesty; by offering new ways of covering themselves, it actually made it possible. What sense of protection does clothing afford – and against what threats? What Alfred Gell says of Polynesian tattooing, that it 'brings into existence and populates the world with subsidiary beings, spirit selves, which surround and protect the tattooed subject' (Gell 1993: 8), can *mutatis mutandis* often apply to clothing too.

Once you start wearing Western clothing, where do you get protection, and from what? What gives clothing its effects, or in Strathern's (1988) terms, what does it reveal and conceal, besides 'meanings'? This is a question we should ask of all material objects. For if we are to treat things 'in their own right', and not just as the tangible garments draped on otherwise invisible and immaterial ideas, we

must consider their forms, qualities, practical capacities, and thus, their place within causal relations. For if objects are revelatory, it is not simply because people say so, nor even because the anthropologist can impute to people certain beliefs. And if things mediate our historicity, we cannot be content to ask only what meanings people attribute to them now. Let me be clear: I do not intend to eliminate words or beliefs from the story. But I do want to situate words in their right place; in their practical and consequential relations with other signs and activities.

To do this requires situating words and material things in their qualities, the practices they mediate, and the interpretations to which they give rise, within a world of causality. So I want to turn now to some semiotic principles that bear on the analysis of material things. In particular, I want to consider the place of logical-causal relations within representational economies. The goal is to understand the historicity and social power of material things without reducing them either to being only vehicles of meaning, on the one hand, or ultimate determinants, on the other. The term 'logical-causal' expresses a fundamental concept in Charles Sanders Peirce's (1955, 1958) semiotic model of the sign, indexicality. Indexicality refers to those properties of a sign by which an observer can make an inference about something actual (as opposed to possible – as in resemblance – or of a rule-like character, as in the conventional signs of language). These may involve proximity: an exit sign indicates the presence of a fire escape. But most interestingly they involve causal inferences: smoke indexes the presence of fire, a cauliflower ear indexes a life in the boxing ring.

Since semiotics is so commonly associated with a certain kind of unworldly, ahistorical and often rather simplistic idealism, some explanation of its pertinence to material things may be called for. First, a word on what it is not. One of the most dazzlingly original and insightful uses of the index is Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* (1998). There, Gell identifies 'semiotics' (mostly) with 'language'. This won't do, he says, because he wants to attend to the qualities of the object itself. He writes: 'We talk about objects, using signs, but art objects are not, except in special cases, signs themselves, with "meanings"; and if they do have meanings, then they are part of language' (Gell 1998: 6). Fair enough, the problem here is that Gell too quickly assimilates 'sign' to 'meaning', 'meaning' in turn to 'language', and 'language' to something like 'coded messages'. In this, Gell seems to accept Saussure's (1959) structuralist model of language, as consisting of signifieds which are encoded in the form of signifiers, in order to be transmitted to someone else, who decodes them and thereby recovers the signified meanings.

Now, I agree with Gell that this model is of little help in understanding objects. But we can go further: it's not even a good account of language. Saussurean 'semiology' (not 'semiotics') also makes it hard to perceive the role that language does play vis à vis material things. First, it treats language as something that exists in a plane of reality quite distinct from that in which any non-linguistic things (material or conceptual) are found. It connects to those things only as objects of reference. Secondly, by seeing language only as coded meaning, Saussurean semiology fails to see the role linguistic practices play in the objectification of things, a point to which I will return. The problem is semiotics has too often been

treated, especially in cultural studies, as merely about the communication of meanings, an excessively complicated kind of text interpretation. Perhaps for this reason, Gell's use of the concept of index doesn't develop its articulation with other aspects of Peirce's analysis of signs. As a result, I would argue he doesn't fully explore the social and historical implications of the index. Instead he seeks a direct road to cognition. I would like to show how semiotics can help us restore these social and historical dimensions to the analysis.

In contrast to those who treat signs as coded messages, Peirce located signs within a material world of consequences. He insisted that concrete circumstances were essential to the very possibility of signification. Thus he criticised Hegel's idealism with these words: 'The capital error of Hegel which permeates his whole system ... is that he almost altogether ignores the Outward Clash ... [This] direct consciousness of hitting and getting hit enters into all cognition and serves to make it mean something real' (Peirce 1958: 43–44). Peirce offers a way of thinking about the logic of signification that displays its inherent vulnerability to causation and contingency, as well as its openness to further causal consequences, without settling for the usual so called 'materialist' reductionisms. I want to argue that this openness should be central to any theoretically principled effort to understand the historical dynamics of social facts such as 'clothing'.

The Peircean model of the sign has two features I want to bring out here. First, it is processual: signs give rise to new signs, in an unending process of signification. This is important because the process entails sociability, struggle, power, historicity and contingency. Secondly is the considerable attention that Peirce devotes to the range of relationships (resemblance, proximity, causality and convention) not only between sign and its meaning, but also between both of those and (possible) objects of signification in the world. I stress these points because of the common charge that to take things as 'signs' is to reduce the world to discourse, to give in to the totalising imperative to render all things meaningful. This is not necessarily so.

Iconicity refers to a connection between sign and object on the basis of resemblance. Peirce observes that icons in and of themselves remain only unrealised potential. For one thing, an icon can resemble an object that doesn't exist – a map, say, of a fantastic land, or a cloud that looks like a unicorn. Since all objects have qualities, any given object potentially resembles something: this means any object can suggest possible future uses or interpretations. Peirce pointed out that the artist's preliminary sketch for a sculpture makes use of this characteristic openness of iconicity as a means of discovery, 'suggesting ... new aspects of supposed states of things' (Peirce 1955: 106–07). Moreover, since resemblance is underdetermined, icons require some further guidance to determine how they are similar to their objects. After all, even an ordinary portrait photograph is normally flat, immobile and much smaller than its subject (see Pinney 1997).

For our purposes, examples of these aspects of iconicity range from colonial subjects who turned western shirts upside down and wore them as pants, to European tourists who buy flat, rectangular, 'ikatted' Sumbanese waistcloths (*hinggi hondo*) and hang them on the wall as art. Resemblance, however, can only

be with respect to certain features and therefore depends on selection. To hang a Sumbanese *ikat* as wall art requires one to overlook its bilateral inversion, since the images at each end are upside down relative to one another. Determining what features count towards resemblance commonly involves larger questions of social value and authority. This is easiest to see in colonial clashes. For instance, the Western sense of propriety in colonial southern Africa was offended by multifunctional apparel (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 270). Accustomed to one set of clothes for dining and another for gardening, one kind of textile to cover tables and another beds, Europeans were scandalised when Tswana used the same blankets as garments, ground cover, market bundles and baby carriers. In time, a successful hegemony would restrict such potential uses, constraining which iconic possibilities would be recognised in practice.

The point is this: iconicity is only a matter of potential. The realisation or suppression of that potential cannot be ascribed to the qualities of the object in themselves. There must always be other social processes involved that may involve varying degrees of self-consciousness and control. Semiotic analyses have tended to favour the more strictly regimented domains of royal or liturgical ritual, high fashion (Barthes 1983), or connoisseurship (Bourdieu 1984), but there are far less well organised dimensions to social life. Even in the more controlled domains, however, since those material qualities that are suppressed do persist, objects bring the potential for new realisations into new historical contexts (see Thomas 1991).

The key semiotic concept for understanding context and consequentiality is indexicality. Since iconicity and indexicality both require further instructions, their qualities are mediated by semiotic ideology, that is, a set of assumptions about signs and signifying practice.⁵ Consider Thorstein Veblen's (1912) notion of conspicuous consumption – on the face of it a clear case of indexicality. One appreciates the value of a silk dress or high-heel shoes by recognising their lack of utility. But this recognition is mediated by what you assume about the world. High heels are not useful, for example, only if you believe they don't have magical power – or, say, that height is immaterial to selfhood. Here's my point of difference from Gell. For Gell, indexicality functions through abductions (1998: 14–15). These are inferences that rely on *ad hoc* hypotheses. This idea of abduction is useful because it offers an alternative to the full determinism of natural law, but doesn't require us to assume everyone goes around with a pre-existing code or social rule book in their heads. Gell treats the logic of abduction as a cognitive process, but while necessary, this is not, I think, sufficient. For one thing, abductions depend on historically conditioned preconceptions as to what might be good candidates for agents (people? Spirits?) and thus for intentional signs (spilled milk? Failed harvests? Rocks? Rain? Solar eclipses?). For another, abduction doesn't explain how and when discrete entities do or do not come to be recognisable as 'the same'. The capacity to recognise discrete entities as instances

5 The term derives from analogy with 'linguistic ideology' (Schieffelin, Woolard and Kroskrity 1998). To the extent that 'ethnosemiotic assumptions' (Parmentier 1997) include ideas about the place of language among other signs, linguistic ideology is perhaps a special case of semiotic ideology.

or tokens of types depends on the social organisation of interpretative possibilities. The inherent capacity of things to be iconic leaves them open to new possible objects of resemblance.

Take the social power of *ikatted* cloth in old Sumba. A century ago, *ikat* was a prerogative of nobility, and so to possess *ikat* was indexical of being noble. But this was only by virtue of sumptuary regulation, that is, mere convention sustained by social force (you could kill someone who violated it). Today, *ikat* motifs are thoroughly commoditised. Although nobles may still claim them, they no longer control their circulation. A motif-laden textile may, in some instances, be indexical of nothing more than a buyer's taste and the act of purchase (Forshee 2001).

But there's more to the story. Indexicality alone can't give any content to nobility. Moreover, the Sumbanese never essentialised nobility, as, say a matter of bodily substance. So what makes a noble anything more than someone with more wealth than others? As it happens, Sumbanese nobles only wore black, or in some places, plain white; and in much of Sumba today these are still the favoured styles, which is why textile collections are so ethnographically inaccurate – who collects plain black cloth? It was the slaves of the nobility who wore the *ikats*. The displacement of that clothing from master's body to slave is iconic of the nature of nobility, as a quality that expands and transcends any particular embodied form. Detached from the possessor's body, the cloth reveals itself as more than clothing and its possessor as more than someone confined to the here and now. The indexical iconicity of displacement and expansion is reinforced by a formal parallel in linguistic practice. The noble's name is never uttered, but is replaced by that of the slave, the *ngara hunga* ('name which emerges') (Keane 1997b: 59–63). The naturalising effect wasn't merely a matter of communication – what slaves made possible was a way of being. Facilitating the capacity of nobles to extend themselves through the bodies and words of others, such displaced materialisations in effect dematerialised and thus spiritualised their object: noble rank. These indexical icons of rank emerged out of aesthetic intuitions and political actions, mutually reinforcing across different modalities (clothing, violence and linguistic habit). To be sure, the signs did communicate – but only as a function of their other capacities.

In general, for the concepts of icon and index to be analytically useful, they must be understood to face towards possible futures. What iconicity and indexicality begin to do is open up signification to causality, to the possible effects and new suggestions of material qualities. George Herbert Mead wrote that the self responds to inanimate objects socially: 'The chair is what it is in terms of its invitation to sit down' (1934: 279). The chair's iconicity, that is, forms a material instigation to certain sorts of action.⁶ As instigation, it can only invite actions, not determine them: people in the colonial Indies may not have responded even if the Dutch had permitted them to rise from their floor mats. To realise some of the potentials suggested by iconicity, and not others, is the stuff of history.

6 We might include here the instigation to involuntary memory, provoked by such things as smells and shapes imparted to clothing by a former owner (Stallybrass 1996).

I have been elaborating here Peirce's important insight that icons and indexes in themselves assert nothing. What did Western dress worn by people of the Indies in the early 20th century index? What possibilities did people hope to effect by a change of clothes? Acceptance of European culture, a desire to be part of a sophisticated world, acquiescence to Dutch rule, assertions of equality to Europeans, hostility to Islam, rejection of village society, being modern, access to fungible wealth, or short sighted extravagance? And why did some of these attempts at cross-dressing fail and others succeed? When the Dutch, for instance, refused to acknowledge Indonesians' sartorial assertions of equality, they were helped by a semiotic ideology that told them that clothing is merely skin-deep, a message of little consequence.

But semiotic ideologies are vulnerable, not least by their exposure to the openness and what Daniel Miller has called 'the humility of things' (Miller 1987). Consider the effects of what I call bundling (see Keane 2003). A qualisign cannot be manifest apart from particular objectual forms. But once a qualisign is embodied in something particular, it is contingently (rather than by logical necessity or social convention) bound up with other qualities – redness on a cloth comes along with light weight, flat surface, flexibility, warmth, combustibility, and so forth. There is no way to eliminate (nor entirely to regiment) that factor of co-presence or bundling. This points to one of the obvious, but important, effects of materiality: redness cannot be manifest without some embodiment that inescapably binds it to some other qualities as well, which remain available, ready to emerge as real factors as it crosses contexts. Western slacks treat the legs independently of one another; this permits a longer gait than does a Javanese sarong, inviting athleticism and making them potentially iconic of, say, 'freedom'. In Indonesia, slacks have tended to be more expensive than the sarong as well, and thus indexical of relative wealth and, by extension, urban life (Kipp 1993: 201). But now that the sarong has come to be purposefully deployed as a conventional symbol of Islam (indexical only by decree), slacks also threaten to be indexical of the not-wearing of sarong.

These associations provide raw material for ideological consolidation. Middle class men in Indonesian cities today have a rule-governed sartorial repertoire: a neo-traditional outfit for weddings; safari suit for official meetings; long-sleeved batik shirt for receptions; shirt and tie for the office; sarong and *pici* for Friday prayers (Danandjaja 1997; van Dijk 1997). These are co-ordinated with bodily habituses: the Javanese *sembah*, sitting on mats and eating with hands while in neo-traditional clothes; firm handshake, direct eye contact, chairs and utensils in office attire; Islamic *salam* while in sarong. This cluster of habits, expectations and constrained possibilities is the outcome of several generations of semiotic regimentation and stabilisation. In addition to the direct effects of government regulations over its vast civil service, other responses reinforced them. For instance, a popular 'uniform fever' swept Indonesia in the 1970s, as people at the margins of citizenship sought to distinguish themselves from the anonymous masses by identifying themselves sartorially with the bureaucracy (Sekimoto 1997). Some people, for whom the wearing of uniforms was somewhat optional, such as university professors, took to wielding them as apotropaic talismans against corrupt police and vigilantes (Danandjaja 1997). It is against the background of such self-consciously communicative and highly systematised

treatments of clothes that other modes of emblematisation, such as the taking on of more Middle Eastern styles of head covering by women emerge (Brenner 1996). Now, in these tightly regimented circumstances, a communication model of the sign actually does a great deal to explain style. But not all social life in all domains is so tightly controlled and totalised.

This consolidation, I think, is what Georg Simmel meant by saying that 'style is always something general' (Simmel 1950: 341), that is, a capacity for recognising 'the same thing' in further instances. This involves the effort to constitute general laws governing possible futures – something that often requires the work of language. For the practices of consolidation are often discursive, such as the ritual metaphors that emphasise some of cloth's qualities over others, or the government regulations that make uniforms the mark of citizenship. They may also require the textualising powers of language, its capacity to identify different things in different contexts as being 'the same' (Silverstein and Urban 1996). But the work of selecting and stabilising the relevant bundles of iconicity and indexicality, the semiotic ideology this involves, is a project that can in principle never be completed, or fully consolidated. As such, semiotic ideology is necessarily historical.

I want to conclude with the question of objectification and talk. Elsewhere, I have argued that a core component of the Protestant Reformation was a semiotic ideology that took words to be merely the outward expression of immaterial inner thoughts (Keane 1997a, 2002). Like language, goods too tended to become 'merely symbolic' or else merely functional; in either case their sensuous qualities devalued and their significance dematerialised. The habit of treating clothing as superficial or as a mere vehicle of communication is one expression of this semiotic ideology. It is this view that Henry David Thoreau and Adolf Loos exemplify, each in his own way.

What are the conditions under which cloth does or does not come into view as a bearer of iconography, with meanings that can be treated as texts? Sumbanese *ikats* are only produced in a small number of villages, although they circulate through exchange and are highly valued across the island. Some aspects of meaning don't travel well: the fact that the smell of indigo dye vats is iconic of rotting flesh (Hoskins 1989) is quite significant in weaving villages but not elsewhere. Even in weaving villages, the explanation of motifs was restricted to male specialists, not the women who actually wove. In central Sumba, where weaving was carried out but the technique of *ikatting* forbidden, *ikatted* textiles were ritually, economically and socially potent, but their imagery drew little attention. The highly valued *patola* designs derive from the eponymous Indian cloth, but ritual specialists in central Sumba couldn't identify them, and knew only that the word meant something of great power. Sumbanese textiles lie at the boundary between cloth and clothing, their functions shifting by turns from wrapped garment to folded exchange valuable, open curtain, shroud draped on a corpse, shield against ritual heat, suspended banner, object of verbal exegesis, hidden relic, and nowadays, art on a wall. In the past, once a cloth was off the loom, there were few normal uses in which the imagery was laid out and made clearly visible as a whole – most uses revealed only fragments of the pattern, in

constant motion. In practice, the qualities that come to the fore are brightness and busyness, fragility or durability (depending on context), capacity to block light and retain heat, softness, absorbency, ease of manipulation, and their bilateral symmetry (see Keane 1997b: 80–81).

Under what conditions, then, do iconology and exegesis become significant? We need to be sensitive to the historicity of semiotic practices. In old Sumba, the most common *ikat* motifs included *patola* designs drawn from Indian trade cloth, dragons from Chinese porcelain, and rampant heraldic animals from Dutch coins (Adams 1969). These require little exegetical knowledge beyond an awareness that they index the power of distance, conveyed through the capacity of objects to move across space and time. In recent decades, however, enormous attention has been drawn to motifs (but not, for instance, their repetition across the cloth, which gets overlooked). What has changed? Cloth is increasingly encountered as a plane parallel to the stance of the viewer. That is how they are displayed by sellers, illustrated in books, and hung on collectors' walls. They are visible as rectangular frames, taken in at a single glance, with a top and bottom. As frames for imagery, cloths become instances of the category 'traditional' art. They enter a series that also includes Balinese painting and Javanese shadow puppets, which encourages cross-reference among them. Commercial competition is also driving a focus on motifs, one of the main ways of differentiating producers and allowing them to display esoteric knowledge to the buyers. Discrete motifs become objects of discourse and readily circulate independently of waist clothes, to T-shirts and murals. This discourse plays a crucial role in objectifying cloth as bearer of motifs. Exegetical talk itself is becoming an indexical icon of male authority and of the 'tradition' embodied in the commodified cloth (Forshee 2001).

Whether one looks at such things as a failed harvest, torn cloth, or a minor stumble as evidence of spiritual disfavour, more mundane human malevolence, or as agent-less happenstance (see Keane 1997b: 29–32), depends on semiotic ideologies and the subjects, objects, and thus modes of agency, they presuppose. Thus the Protestant anxiety about the relative autonomy of the human subject from the material world constrains what will count as signs, as intentions, and as actions – excluding such things as the contingent materiality of things from the proper domain of the human. An analysis of the social power of things would thus demand an account of the semiotic ideologies by which things become objects. For these are the same processes that configure the borders and the possibilities of subjects.

Let me close by returning to the questions with which I began: what can we expect from a change of clothes? If Polynesian tattoos and Sumbanese *ikats* offered protective spirits against a dangerous world, what do our own clothes protect us against? Thoreau exemplifies an austere hope indeed, for we must rely on ourselves alone, and those selves only in the most disembodied form. A semiotic ideology that takes signs as mere clothing for immaterial meanings, and clothing as merely a covering for the covering of the solitary soul, leaves us protected against nothing but the elements. Perhaps it takes a spirit as rare as that of Henry David Thoreau to feel the need for no more shelter than that.

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