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RELIGION IN THE EMERGENCE OF CIVILIZATION: ÇATALHÖYÜK AS A CASE STUDY

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Marked, absent, habitual: Approaches to Neolithic religion at Çatalhöyük

Webb Keane

One motive behind the quest for prehistoric religion has been a search for those elements of human existence most characterized by independence from sheer necessity. In this view, religion is an especially strong version of a general cultural capacity to transcend what is merely given. It embodies people's ability to create and to respond to new realities, to project as yet unrealized futures, to exercise their agency in and upon the world. At the same time, religions characteristically displace or deny human agency. Indeed, the displacement and the exercise of agency may be dialectically inseparable from one another. Unknown ancient humans learned to make fire, but if their descendants are to recognize themselves in the deed – *to recognize that it is a deed at all* – Prometheus must steal fire from the gods. Objectified agency makes possible the reflexivity that transforms habit into inventive, or morally responsible, or simply audacious actions. If one accepts these claims, it follows that religion would seem well suited to play a crucial role in the development of new forms of human agency in the Neolithic.

In this chapter I both develop and challenge these assertions. I begin by criticizing certain assumptions found in theories of Neolithic religion and propose some heuristics for thinking about prehistoric religion. I then turn to Çatalhöyük's artworks, animals and houses, drawing on my own ethnographic materials as a stimulus to reflection. The category of

The project was directed by Ian Hodder with funds from the Templeton Foundation. The other participants at the field site at the same time as me in 2006 were Maurice Bloch, Peter Pels, LeRon Shults and Harvey Whitehouse. Lynn Meskell and Shahina Farid were also very active in the work of the group. I am grateful for the invitation to join this project, and for the insights offered and challenges posed by all the participants. For comments on the manuscript, I thank George Hoffman, Adela Pinch, Andrew Shryock, Mary Weismantel, Norm Yoffee and especially Ian Hodder.

"religion" groups together a wide range of practices, ideas and experiences from diverse sources. I argue that what looks to us like religion may emerge from the convergence of practices that produce effects I call "markedness" and "absence." These effects stand out from, and take their place amid, the habitual and repetitive activities that surround them. In Çatalhöyük, for instance, the cattle horns that remain after dramatic events of killing and feasting end up marking certain houses whose ongoing reproduction, like that of all houses, is shaped by largely unmarked cycles of birth, nurturance and death. In addition, some houses conceal things (human burials, animal remains inside walls, paintings that have been plastered over) that may point toward potent absences in the midst of those same unmarked activities.

The dialectic between markedness and absence, on the one hand, and the habitual, everyday world, on the other, may lead people to recognize, reformulate and reappropriate their own and others' agency. People who reflect on agency become capable of imputing responsibility for, and judging the value of, the actions of humans and nonhumans. These evaluations feed back into the production of new forms of agency. This is one way in which those practices we retrospectively call "religion" can have historical consequences. In conclusion, I suggest that attending to the materiality of social phenomena, and the semiotic ideologies that mediate people's responses to that materiality, may help archaeologists avoid some of the temptations of teleological thinking.

Art, religion and utility

Much of the speculation about religion at Çatalhöyük is based on its visual displays. The site has yielded some of the earliest known paintings on human-made surfaces. Paintings and reliefs are found in many excavated houses. Along with patterns and handprints are some striking figural images of animals and humans. Interior walls also contain painted plaster reliefs of leopards and bears. It is immediately apparent that both paintings and reliefs feature wild animals whose remains are rare in the settlement, in contrast to those of sheep and goats, which are by far the most common faunal remains (Russell and Twiss 2008). Embedded in walls, pillars and benches are bucrania, the plastered-over skulls and horns of wild cattle, and skulls of foxes and weasels. Some walls also bear protuberances, within which were hidden the lower jaws of wild boars.

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In contrast to work built into the physical structure of the house, large quantities of tiny figurines are found, mostly in domestic rubbish heaps between houses (Hodder 2006: 194; Nakamura and Meskell 2008). The figurines were quickly made and in most cases are smaller than the palm of a hand. Among these figurines is perhaps the most famous object from Çatalhöyük, resembling a heavy-set human, apparently a female, her arms resting on two felines. This image helped give rise to the early speculations that Çatalhöyük was home to a mother goddess cult (Gimbutas 1982; Mellaart 1967; cf. Meskell 1998). Most, however, are more roughly shaped to form vaguely human or animal-like forms.

This art has been taken to exemplify the increased symbolic activity that marks the Neolithic. It has also been a chief focus of speculation about its inhabitants' religion. In fact, the relationship between art and religion is virtually predetermined by the way in which the writers have defined them. The main diagnostic for identifying material remains as art or evidence of religion is their supposed lack of utility. If the absence of utility is diagnostic of the symbolic, then the explanation of the symbolic is usually taken to lie in its meaningfulness. This definition of symbol thus isolates a domain of meaning from the practical. Not only does this separation threaten to render the practical meaningless, it also defines art and religion in terms of meaning, which, as I will suggest later, is equally misleading.

According to Jacques Cauvin, for example, the symbolic revolution was manifested early through the appearance in Pre-Pottery Neolithic B of flint knapping on bipolar nuclei to produce fine regular blades and the use of a flat lamellar retouch on blades, which, he says, takes them beyond the requirements of utility (2000: 243). Of the display of bull skulls, he writes, "These devices are obviously symbolic, for very little hunting of the wild bull itself took place" (2000: 238). Similarly, Bleda Düring's (2001) analysis of the data on houses at Çatalhöyük shows a regular contrast between clean and dirty areas, the latter associated with food preparation (Hodder 1999:186), an observation confirmed by micro-analysis (see Matthews, Wiles and Almond 2006). From this, Düring draws the conclusion that these are respectively the "symbolically charged" and the domestic areas of the house. This pattern of diagnosis is widespread in treatments of the material record: in the absence of apparent utility, the assumption runs, we must be in the presence of the symbolic.

According to a venerable tradition in British social anthropology, lack of utility virtually defines something as religious. This way of thinking persists in some more recent definitions of religion. For instance, in Harvey Whitehouse's opinion, "What both ritual and art have in common is their incorporation of elements that are superfluous to any practical aim and, thus, are irreducible to technical motivations" (2004: 3). Similarly, Steven Mithen writes, "Artefacts which relate directly to religious ideas lack any utilitarian explanation" (1998: 98). If the symbolic is defined as the meaningful, then religion is the quintessential expression of the symbolic. And if religion is defined by meaning, then the central question one should ask is, what does it mean?

There are a number of problems with the assumptions these approaches display. First, of course, is the sheer difficulty of accurately identifying a lack of utility. Just as the absence of proof cannot be taken as a proof of absence, so too the investigator's inability to imagine a use for something may demonstrate nothing more than the limits of his or her imagination – or breadth of ethnographic knowledge. What, for example, could be more useless in modern times than the study of a "dead" language like Latin? But it is useless only if one does not, say, think it is the actual language of God or has magical powers, or if one ignores the social utility of status display through conspicuous educational consumption. When Constantine placed the Christian *labarum* sign on his soldiers' shields, it was not as a useless symbol: he was activating divine power to a very practical end, victory in warfare. Conversely, efficient European state bureaucracies emerged out of ecclesiastical structures designed to serve religious purposes (Gorski 2003). Anyone familiar with American car culture will recognize the inseparability of transportational function from status, sex and power. And surely we ought not to be forced into deciding that American baseball and European football are either religious or practical.

Efforts to isolate "the symbolic" as a distinct set of empirical observations reproduce an invidious dichotomy, in which the symbolic stands apart from the truly useful. To separate the archaeological evidence into things that are useful and those that are symbolic implies that the practical side of human activity is *not* symbolic. Yet an enduring insight of cultural anthropology is that even hunting reflects cultural choices made on the basis of certain values (Sahlins 1972). So we might turn back to Cauvin's bull skulls. Suppose they were displayed by people who regularly ate

the animals; would that make their display any less symbolic? Not necessarily – look at rice in East Asia (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). Nor can we know that apparently more humble aspects of life in Çatalhöyük were not symbolic. Furthermore, even if we were to demonstrate a lack of utility in any given instance, this would be neither necessary nor sufficient to count as an instance of religion. Religion may be, for some people, the ultimate utility. What could be more functional than protection against misfortune, access to divine powers or guidance to the good life?

It is no doubt significant that the inhabitants of Çatalhöyük portrayed and displayed the skulls only of animals they hunted and that were not their primary sources of food.[1] And this pattern does suggest that such animals were foci of particular kinds of attentiveness and interest. It does not follow from this that the display of bucrania is peculiarly symbolic in ways that the making of pottery, the harvesting of lentils or the marrying of cousins are not; the ethnographic and archaeological record is full of examples of the "meaningfulness" of precisely "practical" things (Bradley 2005; Fogelin 2007; Walker 1998). Nor is this evidence that wild animals are somehow more symbolic than domesticated ones. People on Sumba, the Indonesian island where I have done fieldwork, keep water buffalo. They talk endlessly about their qualities, represent them on tombs and display their horns on houses. They are an expensive sacrifice and offering to ancestral spirits. But this makes them neither more nor less useful – nor more or less meaningful – than deer, horses, wild boars, dogs or chickens. Rather, it marks them out against an unmarked surround, a process I return to later.

Religious ideas?

If one identifies necessity with the material world of cause and effect, and religion with its opposite, it typically follows that the latter will be identified with immaterial ideas. To the extent that the symbolic is a distinct domain and identifiable with a certain class of noninstrumental objects, those objects themselves have a distinctive relationship to the world of thought and activity. That relationship is usually one of representation:

[1] In 2008 a single sheep's skull was found embedded in a wall and plastered over (Çatalhöyük Research Project 2008), but it is not clear if the animal was wild or domestic (Nerissa Russell, pers. comm.).

the material object expresses, and is logically secondary to, the idea that gave rise to it. But as Carolyn Nakamura and Lynn Meskell remark:

> The notion of representation entails a remove from the real, it depicts a likeness, rendition or perception rather than the immediacy of the object in question. . . . By employing the notion of representation we infer that figurines stand in for something real and are a reflection of that reality, of someone or something. And yet these objects are not necessarily referent for something else tangible, but could be experienced as real and tangible things in themselves. (2006: 229)

The point does not just hold for the distant world of the Neolithic. Early Christian icons functioned to make divinity present, not to depict it (Belting 1994); in India, the figure of a god furnishes that eye before which the worshipper makes himself or herself visible (Davis 1997; Pinney 2004; cf. Morgan 2005). Some visual images, such as Navaho sand paintings (Newcombe 1937) and designs in various media by Australian Walbiri (Munn 1973), are above all outcomes of the processes by which they were created, and eventually destroyed; they are not images meant primarily for the gaze (nor, for that matter, are the visual patterns created by most modern-day crossword puzzles). Something similar is very likely in the case of Çatalhöyük's paintings, which were plastered over and seem to have had a short life span as "rare, transient events" (Matthews et al. 2006: 285).[2] Even an image that is meant to be viewed by a spectator presupposes significant material conditions. As Holl observes of Saharan rock art, "The conversion of these media into cogent ideas is subject to sensory and motor capabilities as well as skill and understanding" (2004: 5). To treat artifacts, or even pictures, as representations is to look *beyond* their fundamental materiality and all that makes it possible and that follows from it.

Discussions of prehistoric religion at Çatalhöyük have tended to treat material objects as representing ideas.[3] Cauvin, for instance, pays special

[2] Interior walls, which presumably grew sooty fast, were plastered on a regular, repeated basis; e.g., one wall was washed and replastered 700 times in 70 years (Matthews 2005). Paintings would have required special efforts to preserve, and indeed, the reliefs did receive such efforts, being renewed through periodic replastering.

[3] Not all major theories of religion in Çatalhöyük are subject to this criticism. David Lewis-Williams (2004), e.g., tries to reconstruct a phenomenology of life within the houses. Unfortunately, his conclusion, that Çatalhöyük was home to shamanism, is

attention to the bull horns embedded in the walls and what he takes to be females carved in stone and molded in clay. From these he concludes, "These two figures, the woman and the bull, were destined to represent the divine couple, the mother-goddess and bull-god, which were to persist in the Near East and the eastern Mediterranean from the Neolithic until the classic period; the bulls, for instance, foreshadow the Phoenician and Hittite god Ghada, also represented as riding a bull" (2000: 238). There are good reasons to be wary of this reading and its bold leap across millennia.[4] What I want to stress here is how the representational approach can incline one in this direction. First, the very category of representation leads Cauvin to see horns and figurines as part of a single complex: male bulls, female figurines. But why should such different kinds of things be any more connected than any other set of objects in Çatalhöyük? Apparently it is the concept of representation, rather than anything about their form, means of production, location or evidence of treatment, that induces Cauvin to see them as related. They form a complex because they are both representations. Much of his interpretation depends on this initial step of grouping them together by virtue of their membership in this dubious class.

The representational approach to material evidence plays an especially important role in the major cognitivist interpretations of Çatalhöyük religion. This is perhaps not surprising, given the two foundational premises of the latter approach. One, already mentioned, is that religion, like art, is defined in opposition to practicality. The second is that religion consists primarily of beliefs. It follows that material objects, like practices, are secondary to the beliefs they serve to express. The task, then, is how to get from the object to the belief. For Mithen, this means taking the paintings of Çatalhöyük as literal depictions of the content of people's ideas. A similar representational interpretation to Çatalhöyük is given by Trevor

largely unsubstantiated by the actual evidence. He claims shamanism derives from universal neurophysiological experiences, but like all such claims, this one fails to account for why those experiences are elaborated only in some social worlds and not others. Moreover, if neurophysiology is already sufficient to produce those experiences, it would seem unnecessary to reproduce those phenomena in wall paintings and other manipulations of the external environment.

[4] Nakamura and Meskell (2008) argue that the figurines indicate no particular interest in sexuality or reproduction, the usual explanation of "mother goddesses." In many cases even the identification of the figures as female is uncertain (Voigt 2000: 283).

Watkins. He describes the transition from Palaeolithic to Neolithic as a shift in balance between nature and culture, in which people "devised means of embodying abstract concepts, beliefs and ideas about themselves and their world in externalized, permanent forms" (2004: 97). In both cases, Mithen and Watkins treat material things as evidence for immaterial concepts. There is certainly nothing wrong with this as speculative strategy. But it becomes problematic when it also leads us to ignore the implications of their materiality, and to assume that things function *in order to* express concepts, rather than as indexical entailments like those left by *any* mode of activity, no matter how mundane and utilitarian. As I will suggest in the conclusion, to see them as indexical is to situate them in the causal nexuses through which they circulate socially and endure historically.

Ideas leave material traces only to the extent that they take the form of activities. But this is not merely a methodological scruple. It may be a more realistic way to think about mental life, as it is lived within society (Keane 2008). Once we try to look *past* the things, in our effort to get at ideas, their materiality ceases to be informative. But that materiality is crucial to their place within social life, and not just as a determinant. It is as material things that pictures and figurines, houses and burials have causes, effects and histories. It is as material things that they enter into people's perceptions, stir memories, provoke thoughts, conjure up actions. As material they are conditions for possibilities that may, or may not, be realized. Being material, things are part of the shared experiences and actions that mediate sociality. They are not just sensory inputs for individual cognitions.

Elements of religion

The ethnographic variety of historically known societies suggests these general axioms for the investigation of prehistoric religion:

Function: Religion does not serve some particular psychological or sociological function. In any empirical setting it may serve many functions or none, and those functions may shift from context to context.

Genealogies: Trying to link prehistoric remains to much later religions not only is questionable on grounds of evidence, but also encourages a teleological bias toward what persists in later periods at the

expense of important elements of the prehistoric context that failed to do so.

Beliefs: Religion is not necessarily defined by any *particular* beliefs, much less the contemplation of deep meanings.[5] It may, for instance, consist of practices and disciplines around which, historically, ideas develop and change. And even granting that religious practices are unlikely to endure without involving ideas of some sort, similar beliefs can sustain different practices, and different beliefs can underlie the same practices, which may thrive despite conflicting interpretations.

Deities: Religion is not necessarily defined by the presence of supernatural agents. This follows in part from the injunction against placing beliefs at the definitional heart of religion. But it also follows from ethnographic observation, that sometimes it makes no sense to draw a line between religion and magic, which requires no agents (Du Bois 1993; Keane 2007; Pels 2003), or between spirits, ancestors and elders, who are not supernatural (Kopytoff 1971).

Religion: We should not assume there is always and everywhere some clearly demarked domain we can call "religion" as such (see Asad 1993; Masuzawa 2005; Saler 1993).

These axioms are not meant to dissolve an important dimension of human societies. Rather, I will suggest that much of what seems to fit received categories of religion lies at one end of a continuum of forms of attention and hierarchies of value that range from relatively unmarked to marked. That marked end of the spectrum brings together a heterogeneous variety of practices, ideas and institutions. There may well be no single source for those phenomena that have come to look like "religion" to observers today. More likely, a wide range of experiences, cognitive potentials and sociological phenomena provided material that could come together in different formations that would eventually be called religion. The list should be kept open-ended, and surely it involves experiences and ideas that range along a spectrum from those that are clearly not "religious" to those that are excellent candidates for "religious" (see Smith 1982).

[5] Ethnographers have long known that practitioners of ritual, magic, divination, trance, etc. may lack any theory of how or why these work, and even find the question uninteresting. The centrality of beliefs may also be challenged in philosophically self-conscious contexts as well (e.g., Kellner 2006; Lopez 1998; Sharf 1998).

The marked and the absent

The materials from Çatalhöyük suggest two aspects of experience that would count as candidates for "religious," those that are *marked* for attention and those that seem to point toward some significant or potent *absence*. Neither is confined to phenomena that we might call "religious." They are neither necessary nor sufficient to define religion. But markedness and absence seem characteristic of experiences that have been classified under rubrics like "spirituality" and "transcendence." Unlike those terms, however, "markedness" and "absence" lend themselves to the task of sorting out material evidence.

By "marked," I refer to any features of an activity or experience that convey a sense of being unusual and demanding special attention, in contrast to unmarked alternatives (Keane 2008). What is crucial here is that the sense of being marked arises from the evidence, and not from our own a priori assumptions about what is or is not ordinary. We cannot know in advance what will strike other people as normal or strange, taken for granted or hard to believe. To one who is socialized to expect that there are witches or spirits all around, they may seem quite ordinary. But this does not mean that life presents itself to people as an unvarying plane of sameness. There are elements in any social or cultural world that seem strange *to the people themselves*. In any instance, however, outside observers cannot rely on their own intuitions to decide what those elements will be. They must attend to the ways in which things *are made* the focus of special attention, are marked in some way.

For example, everyone has noticed that large cattle are accorded special treatment in Çatalhöyük that marks them as unusual relative to small or domesticated animals. But that special treatment itself is likely to be a dialectical response to an emergent sense of the distinctiveness of cattle in a world within which some animals have become domesticated. As wild cattle came to stand apart in ordinary experience, special treatment began to mark them as apart in ways that demand yet further attention and may have produced further markedness. That attention might not derive entirely from unmediated experience. Ian Hodder (pers. comm.) points out that wild animals might already have been in close relation with humans at Çatalhöyük, so there may have been no sharp distinction between the wild and the domesticated. Yet the distinction in the treatment of their remains seems fairly clear. The practices of killing and

display may have helped sharpen a distinction that was less evident in ordinary experience. Then, as cattle became increasingly domesticated, this marking may have become less interesting, relevant or plausible. Perhaps, given the widening scope of people's powers of domestication, mastery of cattle seemed a less potent image of human powers than other manifestations of agency. This may be one reason that bucrania installations and the proportion of cattle remains relative to that of sheep decrease in the higher levels at Çatalhöyük.

My hypothesis is that, on the one hand, marking for attention will not be drawn to just *any* aspect of experience but, on the other, *not all* things that stand apart in experience will come to be so marked.[6] Once some things (such as wild cattle) *are* marked out for attention by certain practices, however, the distinction between them and the background of ordinary things (such as sheep) will become accentuated and thus more perceptible, making them more interesting and subject to still further attention. This further attention may have contributed not just to religion but to domestication too.

Actions that are marked tend to seem, to the practitioners, linked to some sort of risk, difficulty or hard work. Rituals are not always rigid, rule-bound or repetitious, but they do seem to require some degree of attentiveness *in response to* some special pragmatic challenge they face, such as communicating with invisible agents or counteracting an otherwise given state of affairs.[7] Activities called religious commonly invoke or produce the felt *absence* of a potent entity or force. For example, offerings are often designed to deal with the problem of conveying a material gift to an immaterial recipient; similarly, ritual speech is marked by the special efforts needed to communicate with an invisible and inaudible listener (Keane 1997a,b).

But to put the matter in these terms places beliefs prior to material activity. What if we start with material practices (as is often the case for

[6] Colin Renfrew (1994; cf. Renfrew and Bahn 1991) included "focusing of attention" in his list of indicators of ritual. Where my approach differs, I think, is in proposing that the marking process is not just something produced by a religious system, but a moment in an emergent set of dialectical responses to experience, *out of which* "the religious" may emerge. The mark may precede, ontogenically, the attention it draws.

[7] Ritual should not be conflated with religion (see Humphrey and Laidlaw 2007). However, definitional questions aside, the material evidence for prehistoric religion is most likely to have been produced by ritual (Kyriakidis 2007), which will perforce be my focus here.

participants, especially novices)? Through the special efforts they involve and their formal features, religious practices *construct the very difficulties they seem designed to overcome.* In the process, these activities constitute transcendence by means of transitions or transformations across semiotic modalities. By these means, they render available to experience the *very absence* they invoke (say, that of the dead or of protective spirits or demonic forces), and not other absences (e.g, travelers, other people's dead, lost property), and mark that relevant absence as a focus of attention.

This possibility is already built into the basic structure of human semiosis. The feint that might otherwise seem to be an aggressive punch points to and builds on the significance of a contrast between what is present and what is absent (Bateson 1972). Thus, a wall painting of cattle in Çatalhöyük, whatever else it does, takes its significance not only from making present the animal it portrays, but also from pointing to the *difference* between that painting and the animal which is *not present.*[8] This capacity to thematize presence and absence – and the potential reflexivity it may help develop – may be a more useful way of defining "the symbolic" than the more traditional focus on "meaning."

Marking certain aspects of experience for special attention does not necessarily produce religion: warfare or difficult craft skills might also call for such attention. And the production of absence likewise need not mean religion: any kinship group that extends beyond individuals who are physically present at the moment already deals in absences. But when markedness and absence converge and become thematized, those various things anthropologists have called religious may begin to emerge. In particular, by producing a sense of otherness, they help make agency into a more clearly delineated object of experience, reflection and reappropriation.

Killing and displaying wild animals

In Çatalhöyük, food plants, sheep and goats had been domesticated, but cattle and equids remained wild. The period was at a tipping point in

[8] Notice that this is consistent with the criticism of approaches to representation expressed by Nakamura and Meskell (2006), which I quoted earlier. Where they emphasize the consequences of focusing on the absent referent, at the expense of the present object, I stress the ways in which the present object can make the *distinction* between the two parts of its significance.

8.1. Bull horns stacked above a bull skull installed in the wall in Building 52, Çatalhöyük. *Source*: Jason Quinlan and Çatalhöyük Research Project.

the processes of domestication. I do not mean by this the teleological fallacy that assumes people in Çatalhöyük knew where they were heading in history, or in some sense *needed* to head in a certain direction (see Pels, Chapter 9). Rather, the sense of a tipping point may have taken the form of people's *sharpened awareness of contrasts that they found interesting.* Certain elements of experience came to be marked as possible foci for attention and, perhaps, innovative efforts.

In Çatalhöyük, foraging was giving way to agriculture, and hunting was coming to coexist with herding. The vast majority of faunal remains come from domesticated animals like sheep and goats, isotope analysis indicating they were the primary sources of dietary protein (Richards and Pearson 2005; Russell and Martin 2005). Yet the buildings display bucrania from wild bulls and depictions of bulls, deer, bears, leopards and equines (Figure 8.1). Moreover, there is more evidence of feasting on cattle than on sheep and goats. Taken together, this suggests that wild animals had some grip over people's imagination. No doubt such animals held power over the imagination for Palaeolithic hunters as well. What is important at Çatalhöyük is that hunting now offered a possible contrast to animals that were killed but not hunted. In this semiotic economy, not only were deer and bulls things that humans killed and ate, they were also animals that were not domesticated. The contrast between wild and

domesticated seems to be not just an opposition that we, the observers, impose on the people of Çatalhöyük, but an approximation of a focus of attention and interest of their own that seems to be emerging from the material remains.

Some observers take the remains of bulls and the depictions of leopards as evidence that violence played a central role in Çatalhöyük religion. But the category of violence is excessively capacious, encompassing everything from the excited sadism of bear baiter or lynch mob to the indifference of the butcher or the professional hit man. Those who obtain meat themselves rather than from the market, and those who have never formed relations with pets, may not see the killing of animals to be violence at all.

Consider, as a provocation to the imagination, the slaughter of buffalo in contemporary Sumba. Sumbanese society in the 1990s was based on an economy of pastoralism and small-scale subsistence farming (Keane 1997a). Water buffalo and horses were used primarily as work animals, buffalo trampling rice fields to ready them for planting, horses affording transportation. They were also among the most valuable and prestigious items used in the ceremonial exchanges necessary for marriages and burials, among other major events. Most buffalo, and some horses, were eventually slaughtered and butchered, and their meat was distributed in public sacrifices. Virtually no meat was ever eaten outside the context of ceremonial feasting, and traditionally not even a chicken was killed without first being offered to the ancestral spirits.

As I mentioned, there are some clear contrasts between Sumba and Çatalhöyük. First, unlike aurochs but like the sheep and goats of Çatalhöyük, Sumbanese water buffalo are domesticated. Second, Sumbanese buffalo killing takes place within a hierarchy of sacrificial value that also includes offerings of betel nut and the killing of chickens, pigs and horses.[9] The hierarchy reflects the kind of labor, the extent of kinship ties and the powers of exchange relations that are concretized in the very existence of the animal. Third, the components that ritualists consider most important leave no material traces: prayers and divinatory reading of the entrails of the victim.

[9] Bucrania, mandibles and similar remains placed in houses offer the strongest evidence for the ritual use of animals in Çatalhöyük, but for speculation about the significance of cranes, see Russell and McGowan (2003).

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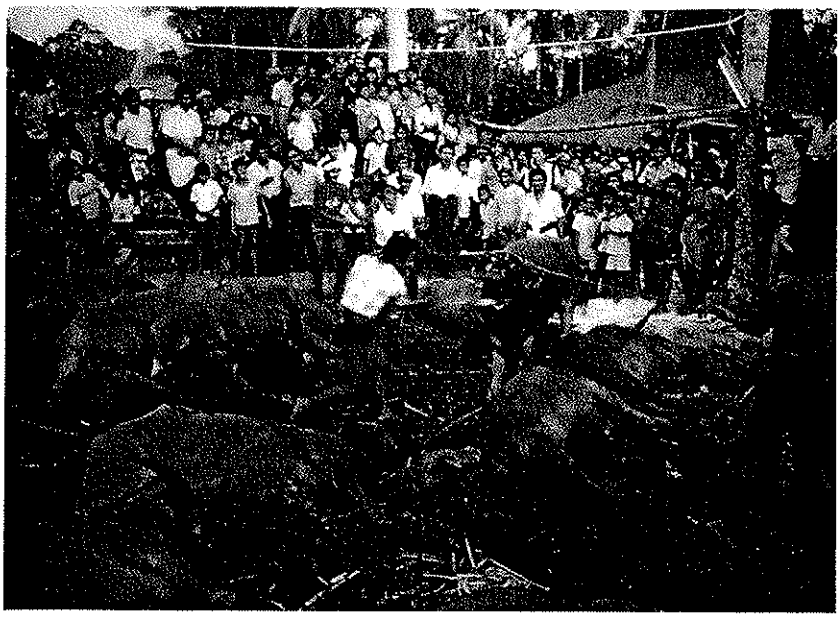

8.2. Slaughtering buffalo for mortuary feast, West Sumba. *Source*: Webb Keane.

Sacrifice of chickens was far more common than that of larger animals, but the killing itself elicited little interest. The killing of small and weak animals lacks drama and offers little opportunity for spectatorship. Buffalo slaughter, on the other hand, is a hugely popular spectacle (Figure 8.2). It takes place in the village plaza, and everyone who is able to watch does so with great enthusiasm. But what is that enthusiasm about? First, there is a certain thrill in the sheer display of wealth and its expenditure. The killing produces huge quantities of meat, which people anticipate with enormous relish. Many spectators focus on the risk-taking bravado of the young men who undertake the killing. And people seem to find the fatal blow of the machete and the struggles of the buffalo to be fascinating, and sometimes to carry divinatory significance.

What did Sumbanese see in the spectacle? Power, domination, fear, the killers' display of athleticism, youth and masculinity, identification with or a vast sense of distance from the victim, sadism or empathy, excitement at the dramatic movements of the animals, amusement at the occasional slapstick may all be involved, even the joy of humiliating a great beast (Hoskins 1993) – a sentiment echoed, perhaps, in the painting at Çatalhöyük that might portray men teasing an auroch. The slaughter also results in meat. Sumbanese love to eat meat, but do so

8.3. Front veranda of a house in West Sumba in the mid-1980s publicly displays tokens from past feasts. Water buffalo horns are stacked along the exterior wall; rows of pig mandibles hang from cords running from wall to outer pillar. *Source*: Webb Keane.

only at ceremonial feasts. These bodily pleasures are inseparable from the giving and receiving they presuppose, the commensality and reciprocity. Confronted with evidence of killing, we cannot be sure that violence is the principal focus of attention. It may also be mere excitement, in which the killing is inseparable from the stimulation of being in a crowd and the anticipation of the feast.

So if Sumbanese objectify themselves in the form of the sacrificial animal, they also absorb that objectified beast into their own flesh. They are very aware of the pleasures of satiety and renewed vigor this produces. The dead body of the animal becomes part of the revitalized living body of the feasters; the animal rendered an object of human actions contributes to their constitution as subjects both through the agency by which they kill the beast and through the act of consumption by which they appropriate it to themselves. This is a kind of objectification, an externalization of an aspect of oneself, at the same time that it is a subjectification of the object world.

The objectification process leaves traces not just in the bodies of the eater, but in their houses. Across the ethnographic record, we find people discovering certain latent possibilities in the remains of feasts. For example, not only are cattle horns dramatic in their own right (being large, hard, pointed), but also since they are durable, they can be accumulated over time and, at any given moment, enumerated (Figures 8.3 and 8.4).

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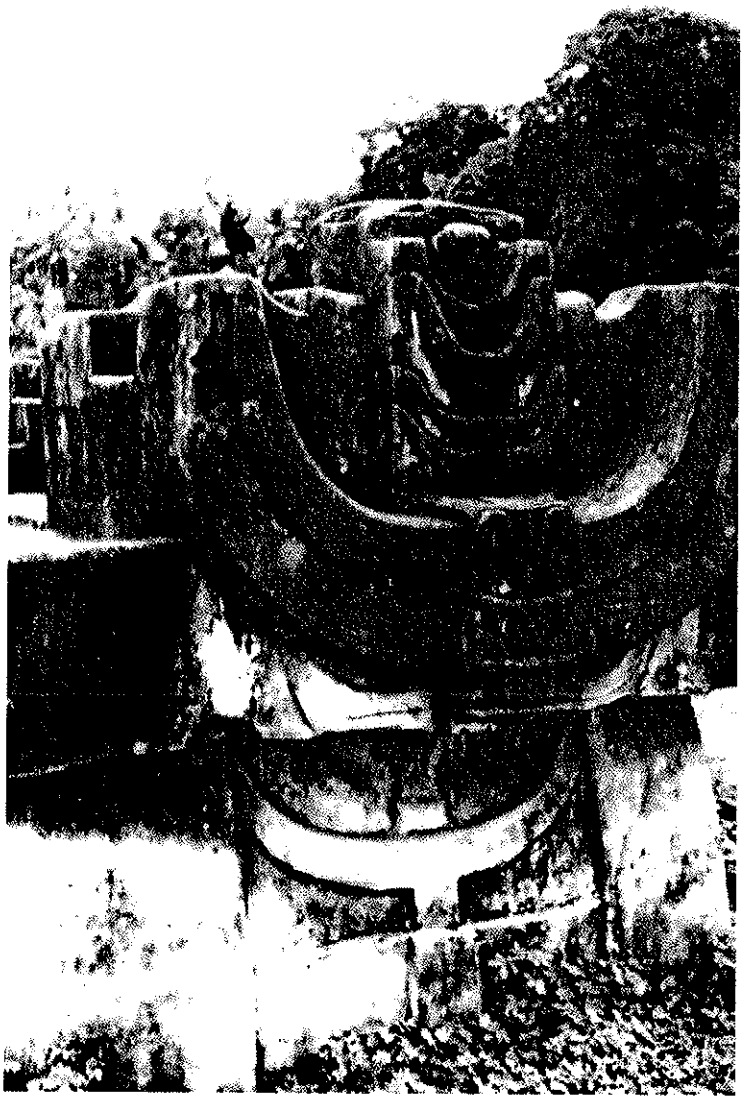

8.4. Buffalo horns depicted on contemporary stone tomb, West Sumba. *Source*: Webb Keane.

The houses of feast givers in Sumba display rows of mandibles and stacks of horns from past feasts (Keane 1997a; see also Adams 2005; Hodder 2005). These displays make immediately obvious the relative strength of each household as feast givers. They manifest both the inherent interest of certain animals and the social differentiation that feasting entails. Since horns accumulate over long periods of time (and some houses never

develop the wherewithal to stage feasts), at any given moment they represent the *historical fact* of the house's situation within a multigenerational career. What is relevant to Çatalhöyük is that the difference between displays in houses is not necessarily categorical (some houses are by definition places where horns are displayed) but contingent (excavators are catching houses at different stages of development).

In Çatalhöyük, animals that are represented and those that are major sources of food exist in complementary distribution. Sheep and goats may be good to eat but they are not good to display. Viewed retrospectively as milestones on the road to domestication, they objectify human agency, yet they do not *stand for it* in the marked contexts. Why are cattle more interesting? Perhaps it is not just their danger, but the way they live at the very edges of human control: we can kill them but nothing is guaranteed. The fully domesticated animal, on the other hand, is too thoroughly subjugated; again, this may be one reason for the apparent dropoff in interest in cattle in the later houses.[10]

The point of killing need not be violence, or even life's end, as such. As Valerio Valeri observed, killing dramatizes the ubiquitous experience of transformation or transition from presence to absence: "Sacrificial death and destruction . . . represent the passage from the visible to the invisible and thereby make it possible to conceive the transformations the sacrifice is supposed to produce" (Valeri 1985: 69; cf. Bloch 1992). Sumbanese make clear that killing forms a bridge to the invisible world. Sacrificial animals must die in order to convey messages between the manifest world of the living and the invisible world of the dead.

Perhaps we do not have to decide which aspect of killing or feasting is the key one. These aspects are all bundled together (see Keane 2003). All components of this bundle of features (wealth, social power, domination over the wild, youthful folly, masculine bravado, plentitude and the feelings of meaty satiation, aggression, fear, transition from visible to invisible, from living animal to dead meat, incorporation of edible object into vital subject) are in principle available for attention, elaboration and development. Different components of this bundle may come into play in different circumstances; some that were only latent in one context may

[10] Interestingly, some Sumbanese myths suggest that cattle are held in contempt for having surrendered their powers of speech along with their autonomy in return for the ease of life in the corral (Hoskins 1993). It is almost as if Sumbanese wish there were still really dangerous wild beasts to contend with, yet also recognize they could sacrifice only mute ones.

become prominent in another, only to recede again in yet another. At any given historical moment and social configuration, the range of experiences and practices opens into multiple possible pathways. Nor need only one of those pathways prevail: herding may coexist with farming and trade, ancestors with animal spirits and deities.

In Çatalhöyük, the markedness of wild aurochs and deer, in contrast to the unmarked character of sheep and goats, suggests that the distinction between control and lack of control was quite salient for inhabitants. We might think of control over aurochs as a question of contested agency: aurochs have power of their own, against which human power is measured. This is perhaps one way of understanding Cauvin's speculation that Neolithic developments derived from "a certain existential dissatisfaction" (2000: 242) that drove the emergent human perception that nature is something that should be transformed.

Burials and habitual life in the house

I suggested that religion may emerge out of the convergence of different kinds of process. In Çatalhöyük, this convergence seems to have a physical dimension: the marked, the absent and the habitual are brought together in the daily life within the house. Wild, dangerous animals that had been mastered through punctate events of killing and, in some cases, eating were incorporated into the house, which was also, of course, a locus of the ongoing flow of daily routine. People in Çatalhöyük lived with the traces of wild animals. Some of these traces seem to have been designed to induce the experience of a potent absence. For example, the hidden mandibles were manifested as protrusions from the walls – pointing to something that cannot be seen. These were only some ways in which the houses seem to have pointed toward an absence. For example, paintings that were plastered over were no longer visible, but probably still remembered.

The most ubiquitous form absence takes in Çatalhöyük is perhaps that of the dead, who, buried in the platforms, coexist invisibly with the living in the house.[11] In contrast to the prominence of bucrania displays, given the small size of these houses, burials are understated. This

[11] Although not all houses hold burials, almost all known burials are inside houses (a few are in middens; Hodder and Cessford 2004: 29). A preliminary analysis (Düring 2001: 10–11; see also Düring 2003) showed that 20% of buildings have burials and moldings. Although houses are fairly similar in size and layout, burials are not evenly distributed

makes sense if we think of death as having a place within ongoing cycles of reproduction, along with birth, child rearing, cooking and feeding, unmarked habitual activities centered in the house. But intramural burials also seem to form a transition between the more marked and unmarked ends of the spectrum. We can assume human deaths were powerful events, and like cattle feasts, they would have a punctate, event-like character (if not, perhaps, the same display of agency that killing cattle might have shown), in contrast to the flow of everyday life. The treatment of some corpses, like that of wild animals, suggests special attention to the head. Certain corpses had had the heads removed, and it seems that some skulls were later dug up and reused in different contexts. The headless burials recall the paintings of headless humans and the many figurines whose heads were purposely broken off or designed to be detachable (Nakamura and Meskell 2006; Voigt 2000). Detached human skulls appear in some foundation and abandonment deposits (Hodder and Cessford 2004: 35). Like the bucrania, some human skulls were "refleshed" with plaster (Hodder 2006: 148). We cannot specify what this attention to heads means, or even that there is a single meaning, but these treatments seem good evidence for markedness.[12]

Human corpses, cattle horns, boar mandibles, paintings and reliefs all find their place in the house – in close proximity to cooking, eating and sleeping. As I suggested earlier, however, the display of horns and paintings might be traces of an individual house's place in an ongoing career or history rather than a purely categorical distinction. Horns and paintings form a gradient of accumulated markings that stand out against the unmarked background of ordinary habits that shape every house and render houses so uniform in other respects; this might even be true of the large number of burials that accrued to certain houses. Main rooms are always divided by platforms; ovens and hearths are usually on the south side, the entrance ladder nearby, art and burials to the north, large reliefs on the west walls (Hodder and Cessford 2004). This uniformity, along with the sheer density of habitation, is a striking feature of Çatalhöyük.

among them, but seem to cluster, with as many as 62 in a single house (Hodder and Cessford 2004: 35–6).

[12] In the past, Sumbanese took trophy heads in raids and displayed them on altars in the plaza in the center of the village; and to this day, it is widely believed that heads or entire corpses from human sacrifice are used in foundation rituals for unusually large, modern edifices (on headhunting see Keane 1997a: 41–3, 256–7). But headhunting is subject to a wide range of interpretations even by the actors themselves.

Not only are most houses alike, they often go through as many as 500–1,000 years of rebuilding on the same location with little variation in basic layout (Hodder and Cessford 2004: 20).[13] This seems to be the trace of habitus, the structuring repetitions that reflect the conditions that unconsciously produce regular ways of doing things, the somatic or aesthetic feel for the appropriate, the right procedure, the pleasing fit (Bourdieu 1977).[14] Evidence from Sumbanese houses suggests that this uniformity is an effect produced by habit, much as a trail is worn, not from a rule or a decision, but as one footstep absently follows another, along a line already laid out by predecessors. In Sumba, houses materialize aspects of cosmology. Their builders draw on their experiences of helping to erect previous houses, and they seem most comfortable raising the central pillars on the same spots as their predecessors, reusing what materials they can salvage. It is the materiality of former houses more than purposeful intentions and formal regulations that reproduces their form in new houses.

In Sumbanese daily routines, some habits fall near the self-consciously "religious" end of a spectrum: the modest shelf on which betel nut is left for the spirits, the display of pig mandibles from past sacrifices, the knowledge that the most recent ancestors are in the attic. Others are harder to mark off this way: the intuitive distinctions between spaces more suited for male or female activities, aligned with relatively outward and inward oriented spaces, the prohibition on moving a certain hearthstone. In a Sumbanese house, it simply feels right to locate sleep and sex in the innermost room where the ancestors' inalienable valuables are stored. This is how bodily habits realize cosmological models.

Human intentions are materialized in the house, which is the environment within which children are formed (Watkins 2004). Spaces are separated by solid walls (quite different from those of huts or tents) and rendered out of sight from one another: there are people on all sides,

[13] Some evidence suggests that old bucrania were dug out of older layers of the house to be retrieved for reuse when later houses were built (Hodder 1999: 189; Hodder and Cessford 2004).

[14] Hodder and Cessford use the word "rule" to describe the routine behaviors that produced this uniformity, but I think the word "rule" is misleading, since it suggests conscious representations, models that are external to the activity itself (Taylor 1993). The power of Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" lies in its *causal logic*, that bodies somatically reproduce the conditions that produced them without the necessary intervention of directives or prohibitions.

above and below, known, possibly heard, but not seen. The structure renders some things out of sight within itself as well: walls harbor mandibles and paintings that have been plastered over; platforms contain corpses. In such spaces, the play between the perceptible and imperceptible (but known), simple experiences of footsteps above and voices in other rooms may have provoked the imagination.

Çatalhöyük houses suggest that their inhabitants' daily experience involved a play of visible and invisible, presence and absence. Even descending by ladder from the roof into the house, and from bright day into the darkness below (Last 1998), or moving from one room to another, although utterly ordinary, may have prompted the imagination (and, given the open landscape of the Konya Plain, perhaps nowhere but in houses were such experiences likely). This everyday experience, along with the more marked signs of absence (burials, mandibles, bucrania, paintings), may have played into a more general aspect of the house, which could be experienced as a stage for appearing and disappearing, visibility and hiding. Its interior spaces are separated by walls and rendered out of sight from one another: there are people on all sides, above and below, known but not perceived (except, perhaps, by sound). The play between the perceptible and imperceptible, the present and absent (but known) is one ordinary experiential source from which a sense of transcendence might be produced. There is a very old theory that the concept of spirits might arise from witnessing the transition from life to death. Less familiar is the possibility that the concept might also be prompted by the sound of muffled voices from other rooms. The visual displays and hidden mandibles, the postmortem handling of human skulls and the digging up of old bucrania from earlier levels may all be evidence of the inhabitants' interest in controlling the transitions between presence and absence, between visible and invisible. The house, containing both the visibly present and the palpably absent, the marked and the habitual, could be a physical and, perhaps, conceptual point of convergence for those effects out of whose combination emerged something we might call "religion."

Subjects and their objects

The plastered or "refleshed" skull seems to reverse the process by which animals are reduced from fleshed, living things to bony objects of human

actions. Less dramatically, the working of obsidian takes away from stone to produce an object of human agency; as a form of self-objectification, the process of making pottery is like the refleshing of a skull, producing a thing with a membrane-like surface from a nonthing. If killing effects a transformation from a living subject to a dead object, the crafting of artifacts undertakes the reverse, from objects to extensions of the subjects who made them. In both cases, the result is an expression of human agency and its abilities to transform the world.

The Neolithic in Anatolia was marked by a massive increase in the sheer quantity of things made by people, including buildings, pottery and textiles (Hodder 2006: 241, 2007). For the first time, people were spending their daily lives in environments that were largely of human construction or subject to ongoing human manipulation, in towns, agricultural fields and pastures (Watkins 2004).[15] Lynn Meskell remarks that the materiality of human artifacts "represents a presence of power in realizing the world, crafting thing from nonthing, subject from nonsubject" (2004: 249). The numerous figurines of Çatalhöyük, for instance, seem to be small presences. This is what a child's doll, a hex figure and a worshipper's amulet have in common: they are companions, social others who are smaller than me, over whom I can exercise some dominion. They can be carried about, manipulated, hidden, kept to oneself, passed around, lost accidently or on purpose. They are quintessential objects before my subjecthood as an agent in a physical world. At the same time, yet insofar as they invoke the agency of living beings, they may also represent my power over the agency, not just the physical being, of others. In this respect, we may see some parallel to the relationship between humans and animals.

Nakamura and Meskell (2006: 238) write of the clay figurines, "The figured world of Çatalhöyük directs our attention to heads and necks, stomachs and buttocks, with scant attention to arms, legs, feet, facial features. The torso is the main area of interest." Writing of the rounded form of these torsos, Voigt concludes that although we cannot tell if the figurines are fat or pregnant, their apparent heft means they "have a relatively high amount of leisure time and are exempt from the kind of heavy labor performed by village women today" (2000: 288). Although we

[15] As Pels (Chapter 9, this volume) points out, the increase in *artifacts* must not be confused with an increase in "materiality" per se; hunting and gathering take place within, and make use of, quite as material a set of circumstances as anything else.

should be careful not to assume that such images are representations of something other than what they are, the observation is suggestive. Ethnographic experience suggests that some images are powerful because they are *counterfactual.* This is more than just a matter of being memorable, as the cognitive approaches suggest. More specifically, they present alternatives to certain nagging anxieties or frustrations associated with core social values. In a society in which exchange is of central importance, such as Sumba, some myths enact fantasies of a world without the relentless pressure of one's exchange partners (Keane 1997a). In a world in which new forms of labor such as agriculture and herding are beginning to impinge on people, a life without labor may be especially interesting. Some images may offer, in effect, meditations on certain salient, morally loaded conditions of life.

Objects are under the agency, and can serve as extensions, of subjects. But they are also entities that stand apart from them. Whatever the original purpose of the decorations in houses, they became part of the environment within which human subjects come to know themselves. The house itself exemplifies this. Living within walls, people are contained within a microcosm that they know themselves to have produced and that requires maintenance and reproduction in the future. The walls produce a clear distinction between inside and outside, and the contents of the house might be seen as interiorizations of people's engagements with that outside world. As Tristan Carter put it in the 2006 workshop at Çatalhöyük, the house with all its contents could be seen as "your world in a box."

If the house is a container for a world, this may help explain the high degree of attention that is paid to their closure. Houses seem to have had continuous identities across episodes of rebuilding, sometimes for centuries. The end of a sequence is sometimes marked by purposeful actions. Storage bins and floors were cleaned, ovens and rooms filled in, timbers dismantled (Hodder and Cessford 2004: 32). Abandonment deposits include burned animal bone, horn and red deer antler, clusters of grindstone, polished stone ax heads, tools and worked bone, evidence of baskets or mats (e.g., House and Yeomans 2008: 39), scattered cattle scapulae and possibly digging tools (Russell and Twiss 2008: 119), and in some cases, houses may have been subjected to controlled burns (Hodder 2008: 2; but see Farid 2008: 27). In contrast to the habitual round of daily life, such attentive control over the end of a house, or a lineage of

houses, may (like burials) manifest a self-conscious effort at control over the transition from visibility to invisibility, presence to absence.[16]

Watkins observes that the transition from Palaeolithic to Neolithic is one from an environment mostly untouched by human manipulation to daily life carried out in a constructed world of architecture. He proposes, "By means of architecture, they constituted . . . 'theatres of memory' in which the history of the community, its inhabitants and former inhabitants, and much else was recorded, retained, and transmitted" (2004: 97). As one would expect from the cognitivist approach, Watkins sees this theater as primarily a matter of ideas (rather than, say, the exercise of power or the inculcation of a bodily habitus), the elaboration of thinking about the structure of the world and the cosmos. This conceptual orientation treats religion as primarily contemplative and separate from practical and goal-oriented activities, a view I criticized earlier in the chapter. Nonetheless, Watkins's attention to architecture is valuable, especially as it does not rely only on "art" to carry the full weight of analysis. It invites us to see the house as a critical component of the materiality of religion in ways that studies of art tend not to.

But this should not lead us to conclude that people in Çatalhöyük lived in some simple mystical unity with the spirit world. In Çatalhöyük, the ways of marking cattle, raptors and leopards suggest that some aspects of experience were subject to greater attention, circumspection and discursive elaboration than others. Near the more marked end of this continuum, the conditions for the exercise of people's powers and social relations come to the foreground, objectified and thus made recognizable as the outcome of the processes by which they have been materialized. In objectified form, human and animal agency takes public form, available for people's perceptions and subject to their moral evaluations.

Marked and unmarked distinctions such as those between domesticated and wild, unelaborated house and elaborated, the manifest and the hidden indicate where we might find those hierarchies of value and attentiveness that start to give content to the category of religion. Dramatizing absence sharpens a contrast to the agency of people who are immediately present and draws attention to their power to bring about and control the transition between visible and invisible. People in the midst of their

[16] There is some evidence of foundation deposits as well (Hodder and Cessford 2004: 32).

ordinary routines are not likely to perceive agency or at least to reflect on it. Placed against the background of habits, the marked and the absent foreground actions, events and possibly their sources, and in this way may help objectify the very idea of agency, making it available for reflection, evaluation and transformation.

Toward a materialist semiotics

Steven Mithen asks, "Why are material symbols so fundamental to religious ideas and ritual?" (1998: 97). In response, we might ask, "Why do material things make us think of religious ideas?" I have already criticized the assumption that material objects that have no apparent use must be symbols, that they therefore represent ideas and that certain ideas define religion. Here I will conclude by proposing that a materialist semiotic will help us understand the social character of religion without merely returning us to functionalism (see Keane 2003; Preucel 2006).

Society may be impossible without ideas, but people cannot read minds. Their access to others' ideas, and thus the possibility that ideas become socially distributed and historically durable, depends on some materialization, some words, bodily gestures, artifacts, transformed environments and such. Materializations possess two important features. First, they are relatively independent of the intentions of those who produce them (e.g., words can be misconstrued; artifacts can be diverted to new purposes). Second, all materializations involve networks of causal relations. But this does not mean materializations are merely determinate effects of specific causes. Purposeful actions are characteristically future oriented, from which several things follow. First, in projecting into the future, people may *or may not* respond to hitherto unrealized possibilities in their material surround and will respond to *some* possibilities *but not others* (Keane 2003). Second, actions not only produce intended (and, of course, unintended) results, but may also bring about the preconditions demanded by those intentions (compare this with what Renfrew 2004 calls "engagement"). A materialist semiotic, combined with a fully social theory of objectification, can help us rethink the place of causality in the analysis of society and history, and in people's discovery and manipulation of their own agency.

Plastering the walls of a Çatalhöyük house required marl extraction plots, tools to dig the house, containers to carry the mud and some

kind of division of labor and allocation of time (Hodder 2006: 60). Hodder surmises that these conditions would also have required ways of gathering and organizing people, killing animals and staging feasts, "a network of entanglement." One important aspect of this is that *material* entanglements produce and are produced by *social* ones; social ones in turn produce new material nexuses. There is no reason to privilege one or the other as a prime mover. The material artifacts this labor involves make possible a distribution of agency across a social field. The materialization of human activity makes it public and extends the activities of some people into those of others, in ways that are inseparable from – but not reducible to – material things (Latour 2005).

The material outcomes of people's activities make it possible for other people to treat them as indexical, drawing inferences about what made them possible (Keane 2003). When people do in fact draw such inferences (which depends on their semiotic ideologies), the meaningfulness of material things is part of a causal logic. For instance, the presence of plastered walls allows the inference that people had been organized to do the work, just as the presence of bucrania might index past feasts and that of fine obsidian access to distant resources. But such potential interpretations are not *necessarily* ever realized. Nor are they necessarily any guide for future actions. The conditions of possibility are only conditions, not goals. There is no reason to assume they are based on some particular set of utilitarian judgments or practical reasons that would be obvious to us. We must be wary of the temptations of teleological thought.

The hunt cannot be quite the same when there are also domesticated herds, at the level of either meaning (because now hunting stands in conceptual contrast to herding) or practice (time and energy spent hunting could have been used for the making of pots, flaking of obsidian, cultivation of fields, telling of myths, negotiating of marriages, etc.). The outcome of the hunt objectifies these possibilities. That does not necessarily mean that objectification is in itself meaningful, in the sense that it aims to give rise to specific concepts, or purposeful, in the sense that it derives from them. But once objectified, an activity or artifact is *available* for being rendered meaningful and subjected to evaluation. It can become an object for the acting, thinking, evaluating and choosing subject. The capacity to reflect on agency is shown both in assertions of agency we may reject (all kinds of magic) and in the denial of those we may accept (the human sources of rituals and scriptures).

An agent that can reflect on agency itself may also judge it, evaluating the merits of the action and the responsibilities of the agent. A subject that evaluates is potentially a moral subject. Reflection on agency makes it possible to link actors and consequences, to attribute responsibility (Keane, forthcoming). As I have suggested, a more useful distinction than that between symbolic and practical or material would be that among degrees of markedness of attention: objectification is one way to mark out certain parts of experience for special attention, vis-à-vis its relationship to human subjectivity, agency and values.

If during the Neolithic people found themselves within a context increasingly affected by human activity, whether they *recognized* and accorded any significance to the role of any distinctively *human* agency in their environment, is a distinct question (see Brown and Walker 2008). Human cultures vary widely in what entities (people, gods, spirits, etc.) they will recognize as agents in their surroundings, and even to what extent they recognize their own agency at work. In practice, how agency is recognized or not is mediated by *semiotic ideologies* (Keane 2007: 16–22), notions about what might count as an intentional sign or as evidence of a purposeful agent or not. Thus, if one believes in germ theory, disease is not normally evidence of an agent; if one is surrounded by witches, it is. Identical symptoms will have quite different semiotic statuses in each case, a point of caution for archaeological interpretation.

Self-recognition is not automatic: humans' ability to deny and displace their own agency is well attested. That very displacement may sharpen people's attention to agency as such. Artifacts are potentially indexical since they bear the traces of the actions of those who made them. Confronted with those artifacts, however, people may not necessarily recognize that agency, or find it interesting (Sumbanese traditionally thought that the archaic stone points they found were created by lightning spirits). Conversely, they may also impute agency to objects that we might consider natural in origin (Sumbanese also say that certain sacred valuables flee bad owners and cause fires). But to the extent that people do draw inferences about agency from the artifacts around them, those objects are indispensable media by which agency comes to be dispersed or distributed, and thus by which discrete actions in the past may become part of social worlds in the present. This may be the case for a house, a wall painting, even a herd of domesticated sheep, and holds true regardless of either explicit meanings or their apparent utility.

A materialist semiotics seeks out the logical-causal nexus behind and arising out of objectification. It takes seriously two aspects of the materiality of social life. First, all social action is mediated in some material form. It is therefore subject to causality, and thus to contingent precursors and unintended consequences, that is, to history. Second, all human experience is in part a response to the material forms that, at least since the Neolithic, were created by previous human actions, which form part of their context: however private the initial impulse behind an action, its materiality gives it an inevitably social character; its reach extends beyond any original intent or agent. Even the experience of transcendence, if it is to become socially viable, draws on the resources of multiple semiotic modalities and the relations among them. Those dimensions of experience and practice that we have come to group together as "religious" build on and develop the possibilities that begin with the marking of some parts of experience for special attention and the semiotic possibilities of pointing to absence. Marking and absence are aspects of material forms. It is no accident that material things are central to religion.

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