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- *Christian Moderns: Freedom and fetish in the mission encounter* **By Webb Keane**

One day in the course of fieldwork with the Amazonian Urarina, I was asked to assist in the healing of a gravely ill young child. My elderly companion wanted me to teach him Christian prayer, which he claimed to have once seen work miracles when used by an evangelised Urarina man living much further downstream. Such prayer might usefully supplement his own incantations, which he said were not on this occasion proving effective. As examples of the genre known locally as *baau*, such incantations involve fixed verbal formulae, passed down through the generations, and whispered into tiny bowls of breast milk which are then fed to the child by his mother, in the hope that the words will enter the bloodstream and there take effect. After protesting that I was really the wrong person to ask, I found myself suggesting that no set formula was required for Christian prayer; that the trick was to speak sincerely and spontaneously from the heart in the hope that God might hear one's words and intervene accordingly. My companion seemed deeply sceptical of this possibility, however, and replied – not unreasonably – that someone more knowledgeable than I might be able to teach him to pray properly, but that in the meantime he had best continue with his chanting.

Conflicting assumptions about the nature of language and its effects on the world is a topic of interest not only to anthropologists and Urarina elders, of course. At the start of the twentieth century, writing from his remote outpost in the recently expanded Dutch East Indies, the young missionary Douwe Klaas Wielenga struggled with these issues as he considered the obstacles he faced in his attempts to convert the natives. To begin with, God seemed to exist for them 'only in faint recollection', seated high above the clouds, aloof and mostly ignored. But no less worryingly, the Sumbanese – mostly followers of an ancestor-focused ritual practice known as *marapu* – were engaged in a series of errors, or misattributions, that appeared to rob humans of their proper place in the world: "The primitives confound that which is a fruit of the imagination with the reality, the objective with the subjective, the outer phenomena with their own spirit life". Among other concerns, Sumbanese 'prayers' took a dialogical form and were typically addressed to spirits, animals and material objects. Extraordinary powers were even attributed to the words themselves, which were seen to have an ability to impact on or transform the world that supposedly derived from their direct connection to the primordial ancestors.

This takes us, then, to the classic problem of the fetish: intrinsically linked to situations of encounter, it involves an accusation that someone is attributing a false value to objects, including words, and thereby blurring the proper boundaries between persons and things. Underlying the missionary's talk of reality and illusion, of knowledge and error, lay a deeper question of where to locate moral responsibility. In ascribing agency to things that

in truth lack it, the Sumbanese were seen to be denying it not only to God, but to themselves – a seductive as well as dangerous error from a Protestant perspective. By believing that evil arose from outside themselves, in malicious spirits and the like, they were condemned to live in a permanent state of fear. Their brand of fatalism effectively implied that one's virtues and vices had been determined in advance, and in failing to take full responsibility for their actions, they lacked an adequate sense of guilt, and hence consciousness of sin. Full moral competence required an ability to recognise oneself as the sole and unique author of one's words and actions. This demanded an appropriate sense of personal autonomy and independence from the illusory influence of external forces or agents. In short, it required drawing a clear line between the private, inner self and outward worldly existence.

The differences between the Protestant missionaries and the *marapu* ritualists were neatly encapsulated in their respective understandings of the nature of language, which quickly became an issue of vital concern because of the centrality of language to the religious and social life of both groups. The invisible inner soul and strong sense of personal interiority postulated by the missionaries has, as its counterpart, a particular view of the nature of language. This is seen most clearly in ideas surrounding prayer. Simply put, words should come from, and express the will of, the sincere individual speaker. This idea was diametrically opposed to the fixed and highly formal canon of couplets used in *marapu* ritual: comprising words said to have been passed down unchanged from the ancestors, their value to the Sumbanese derived precisely from the fact that the speaker was *not* their author, or the agent of the actions they perform. This recognition further accorded the words themselves a certain objective, thing-like quality. Instead of expressing some inner mental state, or reflecting the nature of reality, words for the Sumbanese were intrinsically about performing an action. Just as they commonly held that the causes of their own actions arose outside themselves, so too they viewed the most effective kinds of words as originating with others. From the standpoint of Protestantism, this decentred model of speech and action encouraged an irresponsible disregard for the power of the human individual to create meaning and shape social life. Yet in return, the *marapu* ritualists viewed the Protestants' claims to direct, unmediated communication with God as the height of human folly and arrogance.

Webb Keane's sophisticated discussion of this ideological encounter opens in fact not in Indonesia but in 17th century England. John Milton has just written a polemic against royal tyranny in which he attacks the use of fixed, published prayers, such as those that appeared in the *Book of Common Prayer*. His problem is not with the words in themselves, but in the way they restrict one's freedom to speak. To follow a published text when praying, he claims, is to submit one's inner spirit to the 'outward dictates of men', and is equivalent to committing an act of idolatry. Keane swiftly draws a parallel to the complaints he heard local Calvinists direct against Catholics in 1990s Indonesia. While the former pray with their eyes shut so that they can speak from within, Catholics pray with their eyes open, so they can read their prayer book. As such, they were said to be little better than the backward *marapu* followers who worshipped stones and other fetishes. Indeed, Catholics could even be found worshipping statues of the virgin.

Submitting to fixed forms of language, like submitting to statues, threatens to rob humans of the independence and agency that is rightfully theirs.

Such global resonances would justify an analysis against the backdrop of the master narratives of modernity: that constellation of processes variously labelled individualization, abstraction, objectification, purification, interiorization, and so on – along with, often, secularization. While encapsulating a certain drive or tendency typically associated with the Enlightenment and the rise of science, Keane wishes instead to demonstrate the historical role of Protestantism, and more specifically Calvinism. While many of the ways in which Protestantism has been historically entangled with modernity are fairly well-known, we are far from the line of enquiry made famous by Weber, in which the distinctly moral 'this-worldly asceticism' of Puritanism, demanding heightened self-discipline, paved the way for the development of rational capitalism by combining a frugal lifestyle with an impulse to accumulation. Keane writes squarely in the tradition that treats modernity less as a set of institutions than as a particular kind of culture, comprising above all assumptions about human beings, their rights and agency, and the nature of meaning.

In some respects, all these concerns recall older debates surrounding the opposition between primitive religion and science. The latter was seen to have moved beyond a personalised view of the surrounding world, potentially influenced by the priest or magician, by invoking instead an impersonal mechanism of cause and effect. A present-day echo of these debates centres on the notion of 'ontology', though this is not a term much used by Keane. Instead, he develops the notion of 'semiotic ideology', which ties a similar concern with the (ontological) question of what kinds of beings inhabit the world to an analysis of underlying assumptions about the nature of signs, including not only language but objects too. While both concepts – that is, both 'ontology' and 'semiotic ideology' – seek to relativize the modern worldview, the latter has the potential advantage of drawing attention to questions of politics and history, questions all too often lacking in many discussions of ontology, including, for example, in the literature on perspectivism. That said, Keane himself does not pay much attention to real relations of power, for example in the sense of what an ideology might conceal: hence *marapu* ritual speech is linked to the abstract constraint of 'tradition', but not to the authority of those certain male practitioners which it presumably serves to legitimise. He is similarly much more interested in cultural concepts of agency than in peoples' actual ability or inability to act on the world, to manipulate social outcomes in directions of their choosing.

In case these issues should seem relevant only at the margins of Western civilization, consider for a moment contemporary debates surrounding freedom of speech. Justification of censorship very often hinges on the question of whether certain words or gestures are properly construed as mere 'expressions' of a viewpoint – valid in principle, even if distasteful – or as injurious speech 'acts' whose victims deserve protection. Judith Butler insightfully discusses the case of *R.A.V. v. St. Paul*[1], in which the U.S. Supreme Court considered a white teenager's burning of a cross in front of a black family's house to be an example of free 'speech' potentially protected under the First Amendment, rather than an act of intimidation and violence. In general, she points out, arguments that insist

that speech acts are speech rather than conduct work in favour of suspending state intervention, while arguments in favour of collapsing the speech/conduct distinction tend to strengthen the case for state regulation. Very similar issues are raised in relation to pornography, claimed by some to itself be a kind of 'hate speech' with the power to act on and debase women in harmful ways, but by others to constitute a form of free expression, art, or 'mere' representation. Conversely, the rationales presented in favour of the U.S. military's ban on declarations of homosexuality, as self-definition, reveal a concern that such speech poses a greater danger than the tacit operation of the sexual practice itself. In fact, the Pentagon's own policy guidelines explicitly deem 'a statement that the member is homosexual' to be tantamount to 'homosexual conduct' – in short, to be a ritualised form of speech that wields the power to enact what it says.

Such cases make clear that political positions do not map straightforwardly onto linguistic ideologies; as elsewhere, the ways in which words and other objects act on the world is open to debate. Further difficulties arise when one is forced to consider issues of accountability: the efficacy of speech acts often relies on their formulaic, conventional qualities, not at all unlike the ritual speech of the Sumbanese, or, for that matter, the Urarina. The speaker who utters a racial slur is in fact always effectively citing that slur: borrowing and repeating it, adopting a formula whose potency has already been proved. Its performative force, its capacity to hurt or wound, derives not from the speaker but from an accumulated history of usages and the relations of power this history embodies. According to Butler, the model of the fully autonomous actor presupposed by our own legal system and by Western liberalism more generally, of a sovereign subject whose own words alone can magically cause harm to others, is itself ultimately a theological construction and a fiction, modelled on the divine power to name and call into being that which is named.

Given growing popular concern for the ecological catastrophe wrought by modern culture's failed mode of relating to nature, the introduction of a substantive moral dimension into analyses of ontological encounter and difference is welcome indeed. Western thought has long taken individual autonomy, and its premise of a bounded sense of self, to be the true basis of moral responsibility and accountability, while systematically divesting nature of its social and therefore moral value. Similarly, replacing convention and authority as bases for making moral decisions with autonomously derived principles of justice has long been explicitly construed as an emancipatory activity. Yet it is noteworthy that the advanced division of labour under capitalism effectively permits each individual to enjoy a discrete moral identity and sense of responsibility, while the destructive impact of society as a whole remains largely unencumbered by moral concerns. Ironically, as we are compelled to revise some of the assumptions so cherished by Wielenga and his colleagues, it may be in no small part due to their ethical limitations.

1. Butler, J., *Excitable speech: a politics of the performative*, New York and London: Routledge, 1997.