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978-0-521-62408-4 - Language, Identity, and Marginality in Indonesia: The Changing Nature of Ritual Speech on the Island of Sumba

Joel C. Kuipers

Excerpt

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## I

## INTRODUCTION

When the third world . . . begins to modernize . . . a very old phenomenon, as old as the displacement of the American Indians, the Australian Aborigines, the Bushmen, the Bedouins, the Lapps, the Gypsies, gets a new lease on life. Those people who lack or who are denied the means of participating in such modernization, or who simply reject the terms on which it is offered, become marginal, and this leads to the creation of encapsulated societies, societies viewed by the majority population in the countries in which they live as “backward,” “traditional,” “archaic,” “static,” or “primitive.” Go-ahead states, bent on “take-off,” do not bring all their citizens with them when they join the contemporary world of capital flows, technology transfers, trade balances and growth rates.

(Geertz 1994: 3)

When I returned to the Weyewa highlands of the eastern Indonesian island of Sumba in 1994, I was surprised to learn that one of the most renowned and skilled practitioners of an elaborate and lively style of poetic ritual speech had converted to Christianity. With a wide, red, betel-stained grin, he held out his hand in the modern Indonesian style, and said, self-mockingly, “[allow me to] make your acquaintance, [I’m] David” (“kenalkan dulu: Daud”), then touched his hand to his breast after the Muslim practice. David! I was fascinated, because, when I first met him in 1978, he had been one of the most defiant towards the government’s intense programs of educational, religious and political modernization and development. He had loudly dismissed the idea that native religious feasting practices were “wasteful and backward.” It seemed to me that if anybody had the personal savvy to turn what used to be regarded as a key, if not the key political and economic resource – namely, one’s ability to fashion eloquent and persuasive discourse from poetic couplets – into a modern asset in the courtrooms, marketplace, and political forums of the modern Indonesian state, – it was he, Mbora Kenda, now named David. He had in many ways, beaten the system, by Sumbanese standards: although functionally illiterate, he had won title to his lands through successful litigation in modern courts, he had negotiated several favorable deals for the sale of his coffee and rice crops, and he was able to create and maintain politically important alliances with several powerful people

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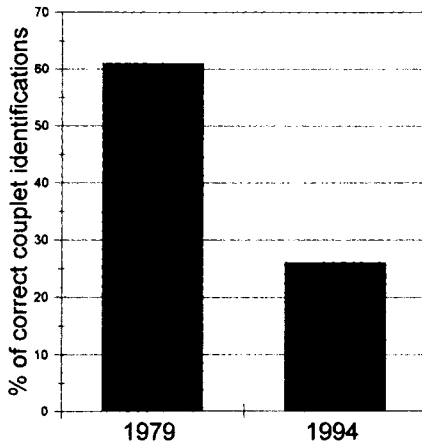
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Figure 2 *Ritual speech knowledge among Weyewa sixth graders*

through strategic marriages of his own and his children. He had done all of this while proudly maintaining his identity as a leader of the indigenous religion based on ancestor worship and resisting government pressure to convert to one of the “modern” religions: Protestantism, Catholicism, or Islam.

When I asked him, “Why did you do it?” he responded with a phrase that I heard many times in 1994, but which defies simple political or psychological interpretations: roughly glossed, it goes, “In the past, I was angry all the time, and hot inside; now I feel cool, but cunning.” What fascinated me was his rhetorical positioning of the emotions as a way of talking about transformations in the local system of authority, and the implications of this shift for the use of language in public and private settings. Ritual speech used by men in their native religion had to be “angry” to be authoritative, perhaps not unlike rap music in the US; but in Sumba, it was not confined in the relatively safe and neatly defined aesthetic frame of song – in Sumba, this form of ritual speech was a required part of the most important economic and political transactions of their lives.

During the past decade, after nearly a century of linguistic resistance, accommodation then marginalization, a dramatic shift has occurred in language use on the island of Sumba. Use of ritual speech for religious and political purposes has plummeted, apparently pushed aside by the national language, Indonesian. Figure 2 shows (see p. 12), the number of Weyewa sixth graders (i.e. children of 12 years of age) in the same school who could discern the meaning of couplets was significantly fewer in 1994 than in 1979.<sup>1</sup> It is a shift which reflects the growing presence of the

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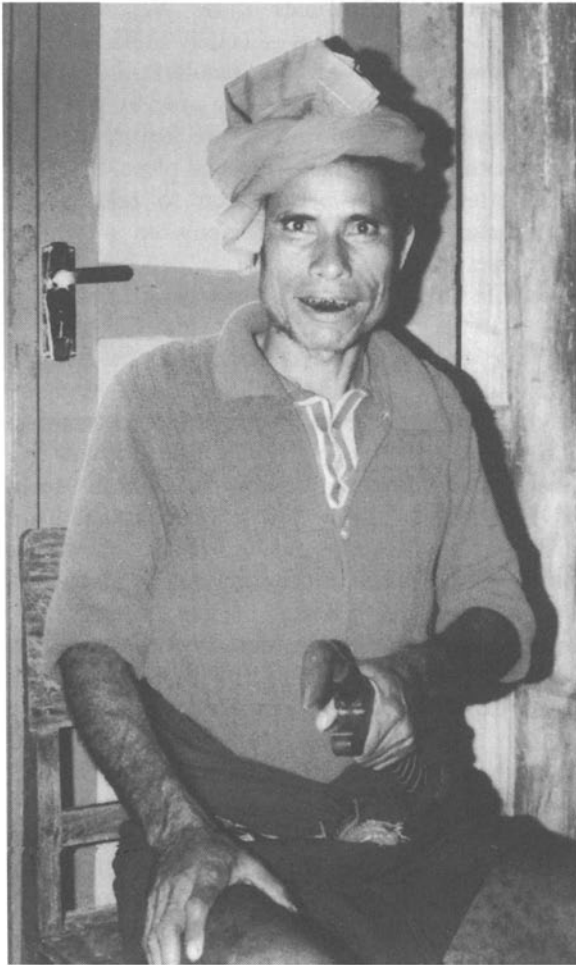


Plate 1 *Mbora Kenda*

state in the everyday lives of the Sumbanese, particularly through government-sponsored programs of economic development and expanded access to the educational system. However, even as some traditional forms of Weyewa speech atrophy, others have blossomed, and been transformed into a new kind of discourse, an ambiguous realm of “custom,” “tradition,” and “art.”

Mbora Kenda is often now a silent spectator in an ever-expanding number of Indonesian-language events in the Weyewa highlands, such as state-sponsored rallies, local government meetings, and church services.

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When he does speak, he sometimes orates Weyewa ritual speech, or offers ritual applause (*yawao*), but it is usually brief, and often framed as the voice of a newly narrowed and secularized domain of “native custom” (*adat*), a relatively novel category used by government officials to refer to the ways in which local culture legitimates state practices. There, his passion and “anger” have a special place. Since his Indonesian language skills often do not permit him to take a public role in negotiations, he can nonetheless participate in a way that is both authoritative and yet contained.

Yet life as a Christian holds profound paradoxes for him. He has two wives, a fact of which many in his Calvinist congregation disapprove. While he feels he has forsworn the “angry” life, with many of its economic risks and liabilities, he faces a loss of status. Economic moderation and steady accumulation of wealth may have its satisfactions but the lavish feasting – as was customary in his past – is not one of them. As a Christian, he now feels himself to be more fully a citizen of Indonesia – since the government did not recognize ancestor worship as legitimate – and he feels his children now stand a better chance at getting a full education, but he also sees the Chinese and government elites driving about in cars, trucks, and motorcycles which he cannot afford and which seem beyond his reach. Unable to perform in rituals, and incapable of full participation in Indonesian bureaucracy, he expresses his growing sense of irony in ritual-speech “laments.”

This book is about new and emerging features of ritual speaking in modern Indonesia – laments, applause, prestige naming, and contest songs – and it seeks to understand them in their cultural, linguistic, and historical context. I argue that these new ways of speaking, singing, naming, and cheering cannot be explained only by external forces such as political or religious coercion – the barrel of a gun or threats of hellfire – nor can they be accounted for as the logical outcome of an autonomous linguistic system requiring “stylistic reductions” and cognitive “simplifications.” A less obvious explanation, but one of crucial importance in the developing societies of Southeast Asia, is that these new features make sense in relation to an historical and ideological shift that I call “marginalization,” in which highly valued verbal resources are reinterpreted, drawing on a spatial idiom, from whole to partial, from trunk to tip, from “total” to “local”: i.e. from center to margin. In a country like Indonesia, an aspiring Asian “tiger” where “modernization” of language, culture, and economy is central to political legitimacy, space (e.g. centers and margins) is a modality through which the contradictions and disruptions of change are normalized, naturalized, and neutralized: ideologized.

### Language ideology and social change in Sumba

The case of the transformation of this special poetic style of ritual speaking over the past hundred years provides an extraordinary socio-linguistic lens with which to examine more general problems concerning the relationship between linguistic and social change. As “modernization” and “development” transforms the societies of the “third world” such as Indonesia, it is also having a profound impact on their language. However, if I had limited my attention in this analysis to a study of “dialect shift” – on the level of sound or morpho-syntactic change – it might have been possible to conclude that relatively little change was occurring. Yet by turning the focus of the study to what the Sumbanese people have long considered the most valued words in their culture – their ritual-speech register – then it becomes clear that major changes are afoot. On the other hand, if I had concentrated entirely on the socio-cultural aspects of the changes – conversion to Christianity, agricultural production, and political reorganization – I would be at a loss to explain why, in this apparently standard narrative of modernization, detribalization, and development, some ritual-speech genres have not only survived but thrived, and others have withered.

As the example of Mbora Kenda suggests, an important clue to the shifting fortunes of this prestigious and ideologically prominent speech code are the local beliefs and attitudes about the structure and function of language, and how these play a role in the transformation and reallocation of political, economic, and social resources. Sumbanese speakers care deeply about their verbal culture, and are not passive bystanders to the changes that are occurring. They actively represent aspects of their culture to themselves in ways that provide valuable clues about how they perceive its changes. Keyed by locally significant terms such as “speech,” “anger,” “humility,” “name,” and “cunning,” Sumbanese *linguistic ideologies* (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994) about expressive performance, audience structure, naming and reference, and grammar organize verbal shifts interpretively in a manner that reveals the powerful role that language has played (and still plays) in the shaping of their history.

In the Weyewa highlands, the local “science” of language – a systematic language ideology, in this sense – begins with a classification of language varieties. Most prominent among these types is ritual speech. Consisting of couplets in which the first line parallels the second line in rhythm and meaning, this ritual-speech form is known as *tenda* or *panewe tenda*. As the “words of the ancestors,” it has been an intense focus of ideological interest, and has long been regarded as a privileged medium of ritual wisdom and ancient truth. Weyewa ritual speakers

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draw on a stock of about 3,500 traditional couplets and link them together as they perform any of about nineteen different genres – narratives, chants, oratory, divination, songs and laments. These discourses must be fluent, eloquent, and frequently last all night. Thus a man singing in a placation rite refers to his audience as

<i>a mattu-ba-na mata</i>	The complete sets of eyes
<i>a tanga-ba-na wiwi</i>	the paired sets of lips

i.e. they are an attentive and complete audience. He may continue by saying

<i>nyakka ku nonga powi</i>	because of them, I blow my flute
<i>nyakka ku bale dungga</i>	because of them, I pluck my guitar.

i.e. because the audience is complete, the singer modestly attempts to perform in front of them. By linking such couplets together, one after another – hundreds in the course of an evening – performers of ritual-speech acquire reputations as skilled orators, singers, and mediators among living descendants and deceased ancestors.

To understand the relationship between linguistic and social change, I find it useful to first to adopt locally defined concepts of *genre* as the starting point for analysis, rather than beginning with sentence structure, phonemes, or morphemes. In Bakhtin's evocative image, genres are the "drivebelts" between the history of language and history of society (1986; see Hanks 1987). In standard linguistic approaches to change and shift, the "uncontroversial point" that "dying languages exhibit 'stylistic shrinkage'" in fact assumes that "style" is a formal set of options that "shrinks" in a neutral fashion when such affixes, certain syntactic constructions, and phonological resources are no longer used (Campbell and Muntzel 1989: 195; see also Mougeon and Beniak 1989: 299-302). In the Weyewa case, such "style reductions" are not impartial. They are inseparable from the ideologically charged genres in which those styles are embedded. Which genres survive and are reinterpreted, which remain as "folklore," and which ones are erased altogether, is a matter crucially mediated by language ideologies, and has fundamental implications, in turn, for understanding which syntactic, phonological, and morphological resources actually "shrink" and are "reduced."

As Jane Hill observes, strictly linguistic approaches to "endangered languages" tend to assume a relatively homogeneous stylistic repertoire (1993: 69). When discussing "abrupt transmission failure" or "tip" (e.g. Dorian 1989: 9), the assumption is that this refers to an "entire" language, not a specific style, or context of use, or genre. If declining styles are mentioned, they are discussed as one symptom of an overall decline in shared property belonging to all members equally. It is



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assumed that speakers wish to use it in appropriate, orderly, and traditional ways. In fact, such stylistic registers – as Mary Louise Pratt points out – can also be seen as internal fault lines that, particularly in situations of rapid social change, can be and are used as tools of exclusion and critique that fracture, divide, and rearrange groups and sub-groups in new ways (Pratt 1987; Hill 1993: 69).

It is only by understanding the language ideology as interpreted by local actors that we can explain why personal songs such as *lawiti* have been elaborated not only in villages but in settings such as schools. The more formal, religious, and political genres – despite interventions and support from church and state – have not received much local interest. Only when we appreciate how laments (*lawiti*), for example, were constructed as the voice of marginality, subordination, dependency, and “humility” can we understand why Weyewa did not simply change the addressees of the more authoritative political and religious genres from the ancestors to God and government. They could have, but did not.

**Linguistic totality**

A key feature of many linguistic ideologies is a belief about the nature of linguistic totality – a conception of a complete, pure, or coherent verbal whole against which improper usages, partial performances, and less valued features can be constructed. A good example of such beliefs emerged in the recent, passionate debate about Ebonics in the United States in the late 1990s. This debate revealed starkly the importance of “completeness” and “wholeness” in American linguistic ideologies. African-American vernacular English, it was alleged by its critics, is “broken” English, and not a “full”-fledged language deserving an institutional place along with other varieties of English.<sup>2</sup>

Assumptions about linguistic wholeness have long been important to the field of linguistics and linguistic anthropology. While in the past, this preoccupation arose out a concern with the linguistic fragmentation of society in Europe (Eco 1997), in the United States in the early 20th century, it was associated with a broadly liberal, democratic spirit of defending the integrity of non-Western cultures (e.g. Hall 1955). Sapir, for example, describes the wholeness of language from a structural standpoint in terms of its “formal completeness”: “no matter what any speaker . . . desires to communicate . . . he will never need to create new forms or force upon his language a new formal orientation” (Sapir 1949: 153). The affective correlate of this formal completeness is the “whole feeling”: the “feeling of inability or unwillingness to break up an object into smaller objects” (Sapir 1930: 7).<sup>3</sup> Note how “formal completeness” is thus linked with autonomy, i.e. the lack of a “need” for new forms, or

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external “force” imposing such forms. Sapir notes elsewhere, however, that no language is a completely integrated system, for “all grammars leak” (1921: 31).

Other scholars have extended such ideas about totality and completeness at different levels of linguistic structure. Anttila (1980), for instance, argues that the “totality” of the phoneme is a *Gestalt* enabling its contextual invariance and relative autonomy. Leont’eva (1974) observes that, while structural and semantic completeness requires formal repetition, most text-building traditions offer structural devices for reducing redundancy by creating logical ellipses. On the level of style, Paul Kay (1977) argues, drawing on Basil Bernstein’s (1974) notion of “elaborated and restricted codes,” that elaborated languages are more advanced because they are more “complete” and whole unto themselves, since no knowledge is needed to interpret them other than the language itself.

It is useful, however, to recall the cautions expressed in other areas of anthropology about formal completeness. There is, after all, no inherent reason why one language *must* express everything that a speaker wishes to say, if another language is available – other things being equal – to do the job. Most of the debate, unfortunately, has focussed on either attacking or defending the speaking varieties accused of being marginal and partial, with little questioning of the cultural representations of “completeness” and “wholeness” that such evaluations ultimately rest on. In the realm of sociocultural anthropology, critics have for over a decade now been criticizing the tendency in ethnographic writing to represent societies as complete totalities, and have pointed out that many of these societies were in fact marginal, partial, even dependent. Is it possible, then, that many of the languages represented by linguists as having a full “grammar” might, from a different perspective, be regarded as themselves marginal and partial? If so, what difference would it make? While much effort has already gone into a critique of the anthropological construction of “tribes” and “peoples” into ethnographic “wholes” (Clifford and Marcus 1986), little comparable critical scrutiny has been devoted to the common assumption that “language” is a neatly integrated totality.

### **Ideologies of linguistic totality in Indonesia**

Indonesia, formerly the Dutch East Indies, with over 680 distinct ethnolinguistic entities (Wurm and Hattori 1983), is a particularly fascinating place to study the historical and ideological construction of totalities and their margins. The archipelago has a long history of deploying spatially defined imagery of identity for the legitimacy of



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systems of political and spiritual authority. Exemplary centers (Heine-Geldern 1942; Geertz 1968; Tambiah [1977] 1985), *adat* “circles” (Van Vollenhoven 1934), and localized “self-rule” were all part of a spatialized idiom for understanding indigenous processes by which subjects make moral, political, and economic choices about highly valued verbal, political, and social alternatives over time. Specifically, in eastern Indonesia, concepts of margin and center, “tip” and “trunk”, part and whole, have been crucial to understanding the local Weyewa ideologies through which social and linguistic changes have been interpreted (Fox 1980; Fox and Sather 1996).

The history of ritual speech on a colonial periphery like Sumba challenges some central ideas about Dutch imperial history, as it reveals the ambivalence of the Dutch towards their own language and its cultural authority. As their polyglot island empire grew and developed, Dutch struggled to define what was whole, complete, and correct speech, and often could not agree among themselves. Groeneboer (1992) chronicles the fascinating, centuries-long doubts of the Dutch about the adequacy and appropriateness of their language as an instrument of empire, an ambivalence not found among any other European colonial power. Partly as a result of this ambivalence, and because it was the only major European colony administered through a non-European language, Dutch scholars and administrators were more concerned about the completeness, adequacy, and wholeness of local languages as a policy issue (particularly after the British reforms in the early nineteenth century) than were other colonial regimes. As Siegel points out, many of the Indies-born Dutch and Eurasians spoke Malay, not Dutch, as their first language, and “were told by colonial authorities and sometimes by their fathers, that their first language was not a language” (Siegel 1997: 15; see Maier 1993).

As a particularly self-conscious example of “language,” ritual poetic speech and its changing fortunes in the history of this island empire reveals the strong ideologies of language operating among the Dutch at the time, and the crucial role that these ideologies played in the organization of their empire. Van Vollenhoven, one of the intellectual architects of a legal framework for the administrative organization of the Dutch East Indies, claimed that native languages were wholes that were “likely to correspond to a law group” (1934: 58). Thus the classification of native languages could provide valuable clues about the legal organization of the archipelago. Just as the surface differences among European languages justify national boundaries, differences among Indonesian languages can legitimate the boundaries and extent of legal claims.

But what is “language”? For Van Vollenhoven, the language of Indonesian law is not “utilitarian, expedient, and practical, like a

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telephone book or almanac, but originates out of something higher . . . that affects the mood and evokes feelings of devotion, respect and dedication" (1934: 119). In an essay entitled "Poetry in Indonesian Law" ["De Poëzie in het Indische Recht"], he suggests that, for example, the reason why local Minahassan (Northern Sulawesi) rules for dividing family land among in-laws are so inflexible has to do with certain local poetic sayings that have religious and moral force to them (1934: 120–121). Poetic speech, for Van Vollenhoven, deserved closer scrutiny as an important contributing factor in the more emotional, and thus non-rational, organization of Indonesian law and social structure.

Their approach to language defined the Dutch as a Southeast Asian empire (see Anderson 1996). As the field of linguistic study itself became increasingly professionalized and intellectually legitimate in the Dutch East Indies, the establishment of the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences in 1778 and the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Ethnology (KITLV) in 1851 in Delft significantly enhanced the professional authority of scholars promoting the use of Javanese and Malay. As linguists gained in stature, the extractive, production-oriented character of Dutch political and social colonial policy was in constant tension with its linguistic policy (Groeneboer 1992). From the colonial government's perspective, the goal of language study was to develop a way for administrators effectively to communicate with their people so that they could effectively keep order; and, secondarily, to use the local languages as a means of identifying "rational" units for administrative structure, e.g. *desa*, "village." Relatively few resources were devoted to promote language study among the natives themselves. The goal of language study was thus the smooth functioning of the social order itself, and not to define, create, or meet local "needs" *per se*. For the British, by contrast, one important goal of language study in colonial India was a kind of "market research" to better understand, create and shape consumer needs and thus enlarge their markets.

As for the scholarship on Sumba itself, the impact of Van Vollenhoven was indirect, since the man who did the most important linguistic research on the island, the missionary linguist Louis Onvlee (1973), was most influenced in his early training by two legal philologists – Johan Jonker and Samuel Philippus van Ronkel. Both of these men, however, were scholars who had distinguished themselves through study of Indonesian languages in order to discern native laws: Jonker on old Javanese laws (1885), and van Ronkel on old Malay laws (1929), and thus were very much aware of Van Vollenhoven's writings. Both of these men taught Onvlee.

Onvlee himself investigated the Sumbanese languages not only to provide practical assistance to those wishing to learn it, and to develop a