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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

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LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND MARGINALITY IN INDONESIA

Indonesia's policy since independence has been to foster the national language. In some regions, local languages are still political rallying points, but in general their significance has diminished, and the rapid spread of Indonesian as the national language of political and religious authority has been described as the "miracle of the developing world." Among the Weyewa, an ethnic group living on the island of Sumba, this shift has displaced a once-vibrant tradition of ritual poetic speech used in prayers, songs, and myths, which until recently was an important source of authority, tradition, and identity. But it has also given rise to new and hybrid forms of poetic expression. In this first study to analyze language change in relation to political marginality, Joel Kuipers argues that political coercion or the cognitive process of "style reduction" may offer a partial explanation of what has happened, but equally important in language shift is the role of linguistic ideologies.

JOEL C. KUIPERS is Associate Professor of Anthropology at George Washington University. He is the author of *Power in Performance* (1990).

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PREFACE

On the island of Sumba, a poetic form of ritual speech once integral to the local system of religious and political authority has undergone a substantial shift in its meaning and use. This book is an examination of the history of that process of transformation and marginalization in its ethnographic and linguistic context. Transcriptions of recorded performances, Dutch and Indonesian archival materials, and first-hand interviews and observations over the course of 20 years of research on the island, form the core of the data on which much of this analysis is based.

This book differs in scope, method and approach from an earlier work (Kuipers 1990) in several important ways. That book focussed on the role of the ritual-speech tradition of verbal performance in the establishment of the “words of the ancestors” as textual authority. In that work, I emphasized the integral nature of the Weyewa system of ceremonial communication and its role in the enactment of what were regarded as the fixed and timeless ancestral words as guides to conduct and exchange.

I now see that in certain ways the authority system I described there was more circumscribed, fragile, and marginal than I had realized at the time. When I first carried out fieldwork on the island in 1978, only 20 percent of the population of the Weyewa were Christian, and the overwhelming majority were still practitioners of their indigenous ancestral religion, *marapu*, and this fact no doubt colored my perceptions of the importance of ritual speech in shaping their local system of authority. While what I said in that book is, I believe, still valid, it is valid for a system that was interacting with forces of history and ideological change that I describe more fully in the pages that follow.

What prompted a recasting of my views of ritual speech and authority was the growing realization on subsequent visits – especially in 1989, 1990, and 1994 – that the changes that were occurring were so substantial, so major, and so fundamental that they could not be explained by the immediate factors preceding them. While it is true that television was introduced, new varieties of rice were adopted, and new roads, schools and churches were built in the late 1980s and early 1990s, these factors alone did not seem to be responsible by themselves for the massive

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Christian conversions, the large-scale rejection of feasting and ritual speech practices, and the widespread adoption of Indonesian in nearly all public gatherings.

To understand these changes in speaking practices and their relation to fundamental shifts in the structure of authority, this book argues that one cannot simply view the linguistic changes as passive reflections of external forces of material development and modernization, forces with which Sumbanese somehow calmly complied. One must look instead at the vibrant ways in which Weyewa attitudes, beliefs, and perception towards their own language have shifted. I argue that these changes did not begin in the late 1980s but had their roots much earlier, with the arrival of Dutch administrators and missionaries in the late nineteenth century. This provided the conditions for dynamic, ideological processes described in the chapters that follow: (1) dispersal from centers of ceremonial authority; (2) the marginalization of “anger”; (3) the expansion of the spectator/audience role; (4) the narrowing of practices of verbal reference; (5) the radical erasure of the diversity of ritual-speech fields of practices and modes of learning.

Following the fortunes of a special style of speech has broad benefits for the study of language change, especially in an archipelago so rich in liturgical languages (Adriani 1932; Fischer 1934; Grimes and Maryott 1994). By focussing on something self-consciously “special” and ideologically marked off from the ordinary ways of talking syntactically and pragmatically, ritual speech offers a privileged place from which to witness the operation of ideology as it organizes the language shifts associated with modernization and development; in the case of West Sumba, from center to margin, trunk to tip, whole to part, from speaker to spectator. These processes show how the very definition of what a language is, where and when it is spoken, how it functions, and how it is organized are all crucially mediated by language ideologies. If language ideologies mediate such important changes in exotic, special styles, might they also – as Molière’s bourgeois gentleman reminds us – play a role in the redefinition, structure and use of “prose”?

While I suspect that many of the processes described here are applicable in a general way to all of Sumba, and indeed to much of Indonesia, the main focus of the research has been on West Sumba, and on the Weyewa highlands more specifically. Analytical slippage between “Sumba” and “Weyewa,” however, occurs more often in this study than in the earlier, more ethnographic one, largely because of the ways in which Dutch sources tended to generalize from one ethnic group to the whole island, but also because of my own belief that in fact – in many cases – similar things were happening throughout much of the island. While it seems plausible that the east, with its more hierarchical and

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diarchic system of authority, has assigned a more “historical” role to ritual speech whereas speakers in the more egalitarian west view it as part of a lively, and dynamic “heritage” of ongoing relations to authority, this will have to await further study (see Hoskins 1996).

I am acutely aware that this book will be read by the descendants of some of the people described in these pages. I hope they will find much they can recognize, and much to admire in what was arguably one of the most vibrant and integral traditions of parallelistic speech anywhere in the world. By understanding how these changes came about, perhaps we can better grasp the historical implications of the present.

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NOTES ON ORTHOGRAPHY

Bringing the Sumbanese languages to the printed page provides challenges to ethnographers and linguists (Onvlee 1973; Kuipers 1990; Hoskins 1993; Keane 1997b). Although I have described my rationale for the orthographic choices in greater detail elsewhere (Kuipers 1990: xvii–xxvi), it might be helpful to reprise here some of the main features of the system I use:

1. The semantic and formal couplet structure of ritual speech is depicted orthographically by attempting to make the lines visually parallel. Where the spoken line is too long for the page, the remaining portions of the poetic lines are further indented in a parallel fashion.
2. “The phonemes of the Weyewa language consist of five vowels i, e, u, o, a/, three nasal consonants /m, n, ng/, nine stops /mb, b, p, nd, d, t, ngg, k (glottal stop)/, one spirant /z/ two semi-consonants /w, y/, two lateral consonants /l, r/ one affricate /c/, and consonant length. There are four diphthongs /au, ai, ou, ei/” (Kuipers 1990: xix).
While most of these sounds will be familiar to the readers of this book, there are a few sounds that readers from outside the island may find unusual, namely: /mb/ is a prenasalized, bilabial voiced stop; /b/ on the other hand, is a preglottalized, implosive bilabial stop. In a similar way, /nd/ is a prenasalized voiced, alveolar stop; /d/ is a preglottalized, implosive voiced alveolar stop.
3. Consonant length occurs intervocalically.
4. When consonant length occurs for sounds represented with a digraph (e.g. mb, nd, ng, or ngg), so as to avoid such unsightly words as *karambmbo*, I have used an accent on all vowels preceding doubled, digraphically represented consonants. Thus *karambmbo* becomes *karámbo*.

