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The Weyewa are a swidden-gardening population of some 70,000 people, predominantly pagan, who live in the fertile highlands of West Sumba. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they were attacked by their Endenese neighbors seeking slaves, and in the twentieth century they were invaded and colonized first by the Dutch (beginning in 1906) and later by the Japanese. More recently, the Indonesian state has intervened to reorganize their political and religious traditions by, among other things, encouraging them to give up their traditional rituals and adopt a world religion acknowledged by the Indonesian state.

Weyewa religion is primarily an ancestral and world-spirit cult, concerned with the maintenance of balance between ancestral beings and their descendants. As a result of demographic and ecological changes which began in the early twentieth century, the Weyewa descended from their hilltop ancestral homes into mid-slope garden villages. No longer protected by their highland fortifications, they have endured numerous calamities and misfortune, in the form of fires, drought, illness, and death. Misfortune, particularly repeated disasters that befall a family or individual, is thought to result from the “singling out” of those individuals by ancestors displeased by promises made but broken, what Weyewa refer to as “lost or forgotten words.” Weyewa believe that such lapses on the part of the living can only be redressed through the discovery of the oath left unfulfilled and the subsequent enactment of the necessary rites. Joel Kuipers’ book focuses on the exploration of the discourse structure of such rites in “ceremonies of misfortune.” Its primary concern is the careful analysis of the cline of rhetorical devices used to uncover the source of disaster or discord, restate the neglected commitment, and restore harmony.

Readers will recognize the author’s approach as falling within the anthropological tradition known as the ethnography of speaking, in that it seeks to explore aspects of Weyewa culture (here ceremonies of misfortune) through intensive linguistic analysis of a particular speech form. Kuipers identifies ritual speech as a specialized linguistic register (or speech “style” in Ervin-Tripp’s sense) within the Weyewa linguistic repertoire. What this means is that ritual speech can be differentiated from “plain speech” based upon the predictable co-occurrence of several linguistic features including parallelism, heightened rhythmicity, and frequent use of dialectal variants. Though some ethnographies of speaking attempt to investigate a wide range of related speech styles, in an effort to understand their relevance for a broader understanding of social relations and cultural meanings, Kuipers’ work is more modest in its scope. It does not attempt a complete description of “Weyewa through their speech,” nor of even all genres of Weyewa ritual speech. It is, rather, a detailed account of an extraordinarily rich, if situationally limited, array of ritual speech genres used in the most verbally elaborate of Weyewa ceremonies.


As members of one of several agnatic lineages associated with a particular lineage house, Weyewa inherit the words and obligations of their ancestors, referred to, using an arboreal metaphor, as the “trunk.” Calamity inevitably results when the descendants, the “tips,” fail to honor sacred obligations that they or their ancestors have earlier incurred to other ancestors. When misfortune strikes, the descendants initiate a series of rites of divination, placation, and fulfillment. It is the discourse that accompanies these rituals that serves as the focus of Kuipers’ study. He uses sample texts, each one hundred words long, to facilitate the statistical comparison of discourse features of these rites. In so doing, he assesses the presence or absence of features such as pronouns, deictics, “locutives” (reported speech phenomenon), and the conventional couplets which are the hallmark of Eastern Indonesian ritual discourse. It is these features, Kuipers reveals, that underlie the creation of “textual authority” within (but not necessarily outside of) ritual speech.

Kuipers first examines rites of divination (urrata), in which speakers “attempt to inscribe and thus ‘fix’ the uncontrolled, disorderly communication between humans and the spirit world, so that the source of misfortune can be identified and the true ‘word’ of promise to the ancestors can be reaffirmed and fulfilled.”3 This is achieved through the use of highly contextualized language which is spoken rather than sung as in later rites. The diviner here attempts to create coherence from the chaos following a misfortune by balancing, contrasting, and evaluating the perspectives of human and spiritual actors in a troubled relationship.4 His discourse is highly “dialogic” as he engages the ancestors (using techniques of reported speech) in an effort to establish the source of the misfortune. In addition, the diviner may undertake an augury, slaughtering a chicken or pig to examine its entrails to determine whether the spirit in question agrees with the diviner’s insights.

In zaizo placation rites the dialogue continues, but is enacted through both speech and music. In this case a singer accompanied by gongs and drums “invites orators to ‘supply’ him with words of assurance and contrition that he can convey to the spirits.”5 The singer then weaves from the orators’ words a “true” story, creating a narrative of the commitments broken and their reinstatement. Through this process he attempts to restore harmony. In their efforts to re-establish the neglected ancestral “word,” orators employ important elements of prior discourse in the form of conventional couplets. In a final stage of these rites potentially harmful spirits are escorted out of the village.

The last and most elaborate of the ceremonies of misfortune to be performed are rites of fulfillment. The most important of these are the dragging of a tombstone (tengi watu), the building of an ancestral house (rawi umma rato), and the “celebration feast” (woleka). All are intended as a culminating gesture on the part of the living to restore ties to the dead through additional, and especially expensive, celebrations. In all such rites the orators utilize a sacred (erri) genre that evokes the Weyewa cosmological order in some detail. The narratives which are central to these rites of fulfillment, recounted through chants and blessing songs, are delivered by a single orator who acts as the “voice” of the ancestors. Unlike the earlier ritual speech genres, the singing in these rites cannot be interrupted, embedded as it is almost entirely in stylized couplets. There is thus little room in these more formalized speech performances for the interjection of personal comment or contextual reflection. Hence, there is none of the dialogic debate of the other ritual genres, but, instead, a unified, monologic enunciation of the words of the ancestors.

3 Kuipers, Power in Performance, p. 81.
4 Ibid., p. 83.
5 Ibid., p. 108.
Kuipers makes the observation that what distinguishes the other, earlier forms of ritual speech from this final one is the former's frequent use of indexical linguistic forms associated with individualized, spontaneous, and dialogic speech, most of which are lacking in the canonical parallelism and ritual couplets of the rites of fulfilment. The meaning of the latter discourse, the author argues, "points away from the particulars of the immediate performance situation, toward other texts, toward its own internal coherence relations, and toward other times, other identities, and places." Borrowing from Bauman and Briggs, Kuipers refers to this process as "entextualization."

The author's preoccupations are informed by a larger set of concerns, most of which emerge out of recent debates in anthropological linguistics. Early on in the book the author poses the question, "Is there a systematic relation between formal linguistic features and authoritative discourse?" It is within this entextualization process that he finds his answer. The creation of textual authority, Kuipers argues, is rooted in the denial of the contextualized character of discourse. In this, Kuipers' analysis is reminiscent of that of the English anthropologist Maurice Bloch, on power and authority in ritual oratory. Kuipers' analysis, however, aspires to a more thorough contextualization of ritual discourse, examining, in particular, not just the features of syntactic occlusion emphasized by Bloch, but also the role of the orator and the speech relationships implicated in the performance of each ritual genre. Contrary to Bloch's model, orators are not depicted as at the mercy of their texts, or under the tyranny of formal syntax, but as adept agents calibrating their words to a given situation even while attending to the constraints of genre. Kuipers also stresses that entextualization "does not necessarily produce certain mental states," nor particular social ones; its effects must be analyzed within the context of its use. Here his argument supports that made earlier by Judith Irvine in her critique of Bloch.

Kuipers' book constitutes a useful addition to recent work in the fields of discourse analysis and the ethnography of speaking, particularly inasmuch as it moves beyond an exclusive focus on text to a sustained examination of speech process and context. He points out, correctly, that although authors like Dell Hymes and Richard Bauman pioneered this shift in emphasis in anthropological linguistics, their work has not yet had significant impact on linguistic research in Eastern Indonesia.

Kuipers' analysis is meticulous and linguistically detailed. It will, as a result, be of primary interest to specialists of text and discourse analysis. More general readers, including non-linguistic Indonesianists, may wish that the author had on occasion taken us beyond the confines of ritual genres and speech performance to the larger world of which Weyewa are part. For example, the author's exquisite descriptions of authority and discourse within ritual raise tantalizing questions as to the nature of authority relationships outside its performance. Concerned as he is with the painstaking cataloguing of discourse structures,

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6 Ibid., p. 62.
9 Kuipers, Power in Performance, p. 62.
however, Kuipers eschews any sustained excursion beyond the confines of these select ritual interactions. "Entextualization" speaks to textual authority expressed or established within the structures of performance, but its relationship to the social and political struggles which take place outside of performance remains unclear. We can note, for example, that after a ritual performance the diviner's divination may be challenged and a second opinion may be demanded, the placation rites may be deemed ineffective, or the division of meat which follows the rites of fulfillment may be violently contested. Clearly the discursive authority expressed in ritual performance is not the only authority affecting relationships in Weyewa society, even those operating just at the boundary of ritual events.

These broader issues aside, Kuipers has provided us with a careful analysis of the linguistic aspects of an important and, as he notes briefly in his Epilogue, threatened ritual tradition in Eastern Indonesia. His study also succeeds in the important task of drawing the attention of specialists of Indonesian linguistics to recent developments in discourse analysis.