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This worldview is not a primitive philosophy, a product of naïve philosophical speculation which is out of touch with reality. Instead, it is a religious belief which sustains the life of both the individual and the community and dominates it in a way which is difficult for the modern European to imagine. Man is no more conscious of the system as such than he is of the grammatical construction of his language. But he applies the system nonetheless and is guided by it in all his activities, in a very similar way to that in which he uses the system of his language and at the same time is controlled by it in his speech.

J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong, 1935

How is it possible to move beyond structuralism? A moot question, it would seem. When the word appears at all in recent anthropological writing, its fashionable prefix is firmly attached. Superceded in name, at least, the model proposed by de Josselin de Jong strikes anthropologists trained on this side of Atlantic as theoretically incoherent, politically suspect, or simply quaint. Nearly sixty-five years have passed since the so-called "Father of Dutch Structuralism" delivered his famous address, "The Malay Archipelago as a Field of Ethnological Study." De Josselin de Jong identified four features of the "structural core" of Indonesian cultures, old and new: circulating connubium (a.k.a. mother's brother's daughter marriage or asymmetric exchange), double unilinear descent, cosmological dualism and—almost as an afterthought—"the reaction of indigenous cultures to certain powerful cultural influences from without." In the subsequent years, the "system" proved hard to extend to Java and Bali. Rather it was in Eastern Indonesian places like Anakalang, Sumba, the site of Webb Keane's brilliant study, where the program bore the most fruit. De Josselin de Jong's description of "the fundamental oppositions and distinctions of heaven and earth, masculine and feminine, the center and two sides" expressing themselves "with monotonous but suggestive repetitiveness" should strike a chord in anyone familiar with the ethnography of the region. Keane does not shy away from the ritual contexts


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that provided fodder for structuralist analysis. But he approaches these contexts in a different way.

How is it possible to move beyond structuralism? Keane’s solution rests on a synthesis of theoretical insights, old and new. On the one hand, he draws on recent work in linguistic anthropology, explicitly and implicitly read in conjunction with Derrida. Like others working in this subfield, he emphasizes the first two of the three conditions that Charles Sanders Peirce took as defining a “representation”: an “object with qualities independent of its meaning,” which has a “real causal relationship with its object,” at the same time it “addresses itself to a mind.”5 But in focusing on the embodied, indexical character of discourse, his goal is less to ask “what are the verbal devices that reproduce authority” than to explore “what the use of these devices tells us about the nature of authority.”6 On the other hand, he turns to an older tradition of “interactionism,” citing Mead, Schutz, but above all, Hegel, to get beyond what he views as, at base, a Durkheimian tendency to oppose action to ideas. Keane takes as his starting point the assumption that people can only assume identities through inherently risky processes of “objectification” and “reincorporation”; just as action necessarily entails representation—a moment of seeing one’s gesture and oneself in another’s anticipated response—representation is a historically situated form of practice. This approach allows Keane to bring together the material and symbolic aspects of social life: “the intertwining of the causal and logical relations among acts of signification, the forms they take, their material conditions of possibility, and their political consequences.”7 In the six chapters that make up the book, Keane lays out, clearly and painstakingly, the implications of what might be described as the irreducibly mediated character of social life and the irreducibly social character of representational media. Bringing to light a far more ambivalent form of “consciousness” than that posited by his structuralist predecessors, Keane reveals how the Anakalangese contend with the dilemmas raised by the “underdetermined” character of words and things.

The book focuses on Anakalangese “scenes of encounter”—ritual confrontations between nga vini (wife takers) and yera (wife givers). In the events, whose outcome is anything but a foregone conclusion, groups and individuals pursue status and authority through exchanges of valuables and valued speech. Each chapter begins with a failed bid for recognition—a gamble lost—then proceeds to tease out the requirements for success. Chapter 2, for instance, opens with an episode in which a disjunction between “power and pomp” gives rise to a breach in the relationship between affines. Ubu Tara neglects to invite Ubu Elu and Ama Kode, his erstwhile nga vini and allies, to participate in a tomb dragging ceremony. Inferior in rank, as wife-takers, yet superior in wealth, Ubu Elu and Ama Kode show up anyway and are treated as common guests by their affines, who walk past them “with their heads high, like deer.”8 When the two men leave, one of Ubu Tara’s sons gives them what turns out to be a torn piece of cloth. For Ubu Tara, the gesture was an accident; his son didn’t know that the folded fabric had been damaged. But for Ubu Elu and Ama Kode, the

5 See p. 8.
7 Ibid., p. xx.
8 Keane, Signs of Recognition, p. 30.
gesture was an insult, plain and simple, and it takes exchanges of gold and ritual speech to get the affines back on the same page.

Keane uses the incident as an entry for discussing how contemporary scenes of encounter play out tensions that are rooted both in history and in the dynamics of Anakalangese kinship. The conflict over the damaged cloth exemplifies the vicissitudes of exchange in a place where every gesture is scrutinized for secret meaning, and the cost of a mishap can be high. Where Dutch observers saw exchanges as expressing the "desire for unity" that orients relations between affines, Keane shows how ritual encounters generate difference: they posit a dangerous social distance that they then symbolically overcome. In part, ritual encounters hark back to slave raiding and headhunting, the suppression of which was the main achievement of Dutch colonial rule. But they also reflect current perils. Affines are supposed to cooperate in the vast network of exchanges that link and define kabisu, Anakalang's patrilineal descent groups; but the possibility of losing affines is always present. This possibility not only threatens a kabisu's prestige, but its very existence; those who are not able to reproduce themselves through the exchanges needed to incorporate wives and offspring can and do disappear. Ancestral houses and heirlooms pass on to other lineages better able to guard them through successful transactions with ancestors and other groups.

In contemporary times, the fragility of kabisu identity is exacerbated by the encroachments of mission and the bureaucracy. The Anakalangese have plenty of land for subsistence; there is little pressure for outmigration, which keeps the young subject to the demands of their elders. Still, the people of the region participate to varying degrees in the forms of "modernity" represented by the state, the market, and the Protestant church. Anakalangese define "scenes of encounter" in opposition to these external spheres of action, the greed and dirty dealings of the economically minded ("ekonomis") and those caught up in "politik." But at the same time they draw on the resources of a wider world to define and sustain ritual practices. Like other Sumbanese, the Anakalangese take a diarchic view of the relationship between the Indonesian government and local authority. The moral superiority and, indeed, survival of the latter rests on practices that link material wealth and political power with the transcendent potency of the ancestors through a strategy of displacement. One sees the logic of this strategy in the special position of slaves, who, in the past, provided their noble owners with their names and represented their extended agency. But one also sees it in ritual contexts where people, animals, valuables, and poetic speech serve as indexes and icons of realms beyond the here and now. In both cases, the objectification of identity is experienced as inherently hazardous. The same slaves who served to define nobility were feared for their treachery and taste for the occult. The wealth that comes from the market can be lost to the market. One's representatives can always break free.

At once addressing and reproducing the risk of alienation, the dynamics Keane describes throughout the book turn on the fact that, in Anakalang, words and objects must always be transacted together. Words spoken without objects fail to "hit" their target, while objects presented without words can be misread. Authority is not simply an effect of having access to valuables—or valued words; it resides in one's ability to bring symbolic and material resources felicitously into play. In chapter 3, Keane describes the broader economy of "causal" relations that underwrite participation in
ritual exchange. Anakalangese sort material goods into different regimes of value. The scale runs from tubers and corn, which are produced by women and used for subsistence and informal hospitality, to betel and rice, which require access to permanent holdings and kabisu land, to pigs, labor-intensive animals, which are raised by women and can be exchanged for more prestigious goods. At the top of the ladder are cattle, horses, machetes, spears, cloth, and gold ornaments, resources that appear in ritual contexts as most fully abstracted from the immediacy of feminine toil and market trade. Imported from beyond the region, some of these items are referred to in legends as the product of skills and materials from beyond humankind. Conceptually, as well as causally, ritual exchange depends on what it excludes; it is only through a calculus derived from the market that one can compare the two arenas. Constitutive of ritual practice, displacement is doubled at the moment of encounter, when serving dishes filled with betel and metal valuables are spoken of as standing for animals that have been or will be transacted. What makes a horse—or a plate of betel—a particular ritual meaning is its embeddedness in further exchanges of words.

These words, just like the horses, do not exist on a plane divorced from the concerns of day-to-day life, as Keane clarifies when he turns to the aesthetics and pragmatics of ritual speech. In chapter 4, Keane shows how ritual discourse is defined in relation to non-ritual interaction, on the one hand, and the pronouncements of the ancestors, on the other. Where earlier scholars took Sumba’s large corpus of poetic couplets as holding the key to the generative metaphors of its cultures, Keane finds significance in the form, not the content, of speech. When Anakalangese refers to the “horse of spirit, dog of fate,” they are not simply drawing a parallel between dogs and horses, elements in the two halves of the couplet, but making connections within each syntagm. Horses belong with spirit, dogs with fate. Moreover, the meaning of various elements is contextually defined, as one learns from place names, where the mediating term is a particular locale. While couplets follow a general trend of associating the culturally valorized with the everyday, more insight is gained by considering the logic underlying their composition. Just as the first half of a couplet evokes the second, each performance of the genre brings to mind missing counterparts. Everyday speech stands to ritual speech—like ritual speech to ancestral words—in a relation of deficiency. Instead of couplets appearing as an embellished form of “normal” language, everyday language appears as an abridged form of ritual speech. Just as valued ornaments refer to what is missing—the creativity of the ancestors who called them into existence—valued words bring to mind a fuller, even more valued text.

Through deixis, which locates generic couplets in a particular place and time (“this horse of spirit, this dog of fate”), ritual speakers contend with a dilemma. Iconic of ancestral talk, which was effective in and of itself, their words index ancestral power, and yet this power must be imported into the here and now. This imperative—and the hazards associated with it—are more fully elaborated in chapter 5, which describes the use of reported speech in ritual contexts, and chapter 6, where Keane describes the horung, or marriage negotiation, and the forms of agency it posits and, if successful, produces. A chain of delegated action runs from the parents of the prospective spouses, to the principles who organize and act on their behalf, to the ritual speakers who convey their messages to the other side. Indeed, it is precisely the discursive constitution of “sides” that is at stake in these events, in which each group depends on the recognition of the other to confirm its integrity and worth. While everyone
involved is within earshot, the negotiations proceed like a poetic game of telephone, with the various functions usually united in Western ideologies of talk parsed out among formally determined roles. Two sets of interlocutors receive and transmit speech. Each consists of a speaker, or wunang, and a respondent, or ma kadehang, a term that refers to the ritual name of the group, which is often the “slave name” of a noble ancestor. Where the underdetermined character of objects implies that prestations can miss their mark, the underdetermined character of speech implies that agency can be deflected. Instead of speaking for the group, a ritual speaker might find himself speaking for himself in competition with his counterpart. A faulty performance by one wunang can be read as a lack of respect, causing the other to storm off. The danger of social dissolution is figured in the danger of bodily harm, for errors affect more than a kabisu’s marriage prospects or a wunang’s prestige. Orators who fail to “follow the path” risk sickness, injury or worse. Speaking properly is not easy; indeed, by definition, one’s words always fall short of ancestral models. If words are not scarce in precisely the same sense as objects can be, ritual talk is anything but cheap.

As Keane shows in chapter 7, appeals to “pata”—“custom”—in Anakalang entail more than simply reification. Pata is at once the product and precondition for evaluations of oneself, one’s interlocutors, and both parties in relation to the ancestors, whose skills one can imitate, but never match. Individual and collective attempts to attain and defend a reputation give rise to a complex economy of signs, whose workings prevent one from drawing sheer distinctions between “symbolic capital” and other forms of wealth. The constraints set on valuables arise not only from their material conditions of production and (possible) consumption; they also emerge from the overlapping, mutually incompatible networks of obligation into which any horse or pig, for instance might be placed. The meaning and value of an object resides in part in the future transactions it makes possible; given the role of ritual speech in mediating these transactions, an object is not simply a sign of wealth, but of successfully spoken words. Bringing into play another level of discourse, chapter 8 draws connections between the “inalienable” possession of kabisu heirlooms and talk about dewa, the “fate or fortune” that differentiates persons and accounts for their success in exchange. Building on Weiner’s formulations, Keane shows how the notion of dewa, on the one hand, and ancestral valuables, on the other, allow Anakalangese to assimilate the actions of others to themselves. What is on one level the effect of another’s recognition is recast as the result of an autonomous, transcendent source of potency—be it one’s “fortune” or one’s clan’s hidden treasure. The shadow side of the dream of withdrawing from exchange finds expression in stories about yora, supernaturals who provide an abundance of unreproductive wealth. Coercive in their attentions and predatory in their effects, yora provide a figure for Anakalangese participation in broader economies of value, knowledge and power. Anakalangese may define ritual exchange in opposition to the contemporary market and government—but the promise and threat of autonomy has been present in their practices all along.

What could one find to criticize in this insightful, tightly argued study? Clearly, not much. But let me return to my opening question. How is it possible to move beyond structuralism? One answer might be to build on the contradictions that lie within it. In setting up his theoretical framework, Keane draws a sharp division between intellectual traditions; against Durkheim (and all he has spawned), we can resort to Hegel. Theorists are lined up and selectively mobilized in an introduction that could
serve as a standard for a concise, compelling exposition of complicated ideas. But it may be that, in the name of coherence, important subtleties are lost. One place where a slight meander might have served Keane’s project well is in his discussion of Hegel’s “Lordship and Bondage.” Ironically, in light of his title, Keane elides a critical moment when he proposes reading Anderson’s account of charisma in light of the dilemma facing the Lord. “An other from whom all agency is removed,” Keane writes, “is incapable of the real act of granting recognition.”

In such a case, any such recognition would seem ultimately to emanate from the Lord’s own desires, and thus would suffer the same disabilities that Anderson describes for the possessor of charisma, who cannot appear to strive for power. At this point, recognition takes on a dialectical meaning: the Lord wishes to see himself in the recognition of the Bondsman, whose recognition comes from seeing himself in the Lord.⁹

This is a fair interpretation, but a partial one. A more complete reading of the relevant passage suggests that recognition is not symmetrical in the sense that Keane suggests—as it is at the opening of Hegel’s discussion, when the positions of Lord and Bondsman have yet to emerge.¹⁰ Rather, Hegel argues that it is the slave who has “self-certainty” at this point in the dialectic, by virtue of the “trial by death.” It is not the degree of autonomy he is permitted, but the experience of being “seized by dread” that enables the Bondsman to conserve “the concept” through work.¹¹ Georges Bataille, among others, describe the “ruse” on which the progress of the dialectic depends: the Lord must die, yet live to enjoy the fruits of recognition.¹² Death is precisely what exceeds “experience”; it can only be figured in varying ways. Bataille, incidentally, drew explicitly on Durkheim, and his discussion of Hegel brought to bear a strain within Mauss that is also missing from Keane’s neat synopsis—the potlatch, described by Mauss as a moment of all but total expenditure that creates bondsmen and yields lords their names. In neglecting this alternative genealogy, Keane does more than miss the interplay between seemingly hostile traditions; he overlooks the contradictions undermining every effort to identify—and thus domesticate—chance.

Does this elision matter? Yes and no. Keane cuts short his discussion of Hegel; he does not “intend to take on Hegel’s metaphysical assumptions or become embroiled in the debates to which they have given rise.”¹³ Another of the writers he quotes, Derrida, would call into question whether any writing in the tradition of Western theory could ever entirely escape such debates.¹⁴ I don’t mean to suggest that Keane should have

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⁹ Ibid., p. 5.
¹¹ Ibid., p. 117.
¹³ See _Signs of Recognition_, p. 16.
¹⁴ See “From Restricted to General Economy,” pp. 251-2.
written a different book; we already have a useful genealogy of Hegel’s notion of the fetish and as much anthropological reflexivity as the market can bear. Rather, I would only question whether a closer reading of Hegel might have contributed to a more nuanced discussion of the relation between Anakalang and the church and state. Anakalang is certainly not an “autonomous unity”—“it is simultaneously encompassed within a series of larger wholes.” In dealing with this complexity, Keane points to the internal divisions created by varying relations to the outside and wisely resists the temptation to ground analysis in the “largest possible context.” Yet, in my mind, it would be more than an “injustice” to deny “the sphere of reference within which Anakalangese themselves situate so many of their most strenuous endeavors”; it would be wrong. Keane’s ethnography reveals the misrecognition involved in Anakalangese efforts to fix and supercede boundaries. No less than the realm of the ancestors, notions of “politik” and “ekonomis” are a product, as well as a precondition, of social discourse, read broadly as the systematic (if hazardous) transaction of things and words. At its strongest moments (and there are many), this insight is embedded in Keane’s book. Every time Keane refers to the dilemmas faced by ritual speakers—who must assume the position of the ancestors—i.e. “death”—and still “live” for recognition to register, every time he points to the risk that semiotic categories can slip, he reminds us of what Hegel had to deny in his narrative of the march from “immediacy” to “the truth of self-consciousness”: there is no unmediated relation to death or hazard. What is “outside” social discourse can be figured, but it can never be pinned down.

At the end of Keane’s book, he describes an encounter with an educated Christian. “She often expressed her astonishment that someone from a rich country like mine would waste his time with such ignorant and impoverished hicks.” This informant’s doubts notwithstanding, Signs of Recognition has much to say to Indonesianists at this supposedly “post-Suharto” moment. When Anakalangese turn to the various “modernities” on offer, they are not turning to a hazard or formality-free universe, but one in which the interplay between risk and order persists in different and changing terms. Targeting dilemmas at the heart of social discourse, Keane’s study offers an alternative to works that have moved beyond structuralism into naive notions of resistance or voice. It points away from readings of the “New Disorder” as the resurgence of primordial aggressions or the birth pangs of a transparent “public sphere.” Keane has succeeded not only in showing Sumba as a part of Indonesia—implicitly he has offered new ways of approaching the politics and pragmatics of national discourse. Keane does not waste a word in this groundbreaking study; and he certainly did not waste his time.

16 See Signs of Recognition, p. xx.
17 Ibid., p. xxi.
18 Ibid., p. 235.