

Webb Keane. *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007. 336 pages.

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The question of the relationship between Christianity and modernity was a foundational one in the social sciences, and has become a central topic of debate again in anthropology in recent years. At the time of the emergence of anthropology and sociology as academic disciplines, it was axiomatic both to imagine these new forms of intellectual endeavour in contrast to theology, and to anticipate that the Western world was, in general, moving beyond traditional religious forms. The foundational social scientists agreed that modernity rested on the disaggregation of aspects of social life, including the "religious," which elsewhere and previously had been whole. The "religious" therefore becomes objectified as such for the first time. It was recognized that these changes would not be un-nuanced; for Marcel Mauss, the idea of the "individual," which characterized Western modernity, was still a crucially Christian formation. For Max Weber, the evacuation of religious meaning would create a Europe haunted by institutional forms whose residual compulsive power was no longer mediated by values other than those of profit and bureaucracy.

Weber, of course, thought it possible that even in Europe new forms of religious inspiration might arise. Yet for many years, he was primarily invoked by others to justify various forms of the "secularization thesis," in which the sequence "Protestantism leads to secularism leads to irreversible modernity" is treated as predictive and universal. Yet the idea of modernity is itself modeled in central ways on Christian conversion; the claim to be "modern" entails a claim of one-way change towards a future; the claim to have gone "beyond" the historical past gains its purchase from the notion of the "beyond" in (Judeo-) Christian transcendence, in which God withdraws from the world of mortals to a place not knowable by human senses or provable by human reason.

In this context, "Protestantism" has often been freighted with so much of "modernity's" excess baggage that it has largely disappeared under the load. Recent landmark studies of local forms of Protestantism by anthropologists who are aware of these issues, such as work by Simon Coleman, Joel Robbins, and Susan Harding, have therefore been crucially important in restoring a sense of the particularity of different Protestant traditions and their unfolding in Western and non-Western locales. In so doing, they and many others, including Danilyn Rutherford, Peter Gow, and Patricia Spyer, to name but three, have begun to establish comparative accounts of how specific Protestant formations may interact with both local ontologies and the local construal of representations of the modern.

In this unfolding conversation, Webb Keane's is a highly significant and distinctive voice. Readers of this journal will already be familiar with his powerful and elegant study of Anakalangesese representation and exchange, *Signs of Recognition*, one of whose contributions was to present a detailed examination of the ways in which different ontologies condition systems of signification. Rather than treating the relationship between sign and referent as universal (as in Saussurian linguistics), Keane drew on the linguistic theories of Charles Peirce to illustrate ways in which both these terms

and the relationship between them are historically and culturally contingent. In the case of the Anakalangese, Keane shows us that, contrary to the Western tendency to view signs as abstract, in Sumba, signs cannot be separated from material objects and practices, a statement exemplified by the Anakalangese axiom that every instance of ritual speech requires an appropriate “base” (such as textiles, gold, or sacrificial meat) before it can possibly be effective as communication. Keane’s informants are also characterized by an overriding sense that ritual communication with the ancestors (and other forms of communication across social distance) is a risky business, which frequently ends in failure. The Anakalangese ancestors, known as *marapu*, may well not hear when addressed by their descendents; if they do, they may not pay attention, and if they do pay attention, they may be offended by some ritual solecism, especially by slips in the use of ancestral speech. This thought-provoking and original emphasis on the fragility of ritual success always rests on Keane’s underlying engagement with language. Here, and in articles published since 1995, he develops a range of arguments through the Sumbanese ethnography; in particular, he proposes that ideas are never free from material form since they must be communicated in speech, which readily becomes objectified. He also emphasizes that material signs (textiles, coins, etc.) are continuously prone to movements between symbolic registers, especially to slippages between their use as representations and their pragmatic qualities as objects. These slippages constitute one facet of the risks entailed in communication, offering insights into why ritual and other speech practices, while always making use of existing symbolic resources, may still play out fundamental changes in ontology.

Christian Moderns extends and develops this important work on the comparative ideology of signification within a strikingly interesting context. Keane returns to the Anakalangese, but this time to focus on the implications of their increasing adherence to Christianity. The monograph offers a full-length case study of the encounter between two symbolic systems, characterized by widely differing understandings of the distinction between persons and things, and of agency. Anakalangese exchange practices may simultaneously make marriages, found villages, establish status positions among political rivals, offer homage to the *marapu*, and much more; that is, they seem to exemplify what Mauss meant by the total social fact. Sumbanese Christianity, on the other hand, was brought to Anakalang in a highly particular form, by Dutch, neo-orthodox Calvinist Protestants. For these men, Keane tells us, the early Calvinist focus on Predestination had long been superseded; like Weber, Keane sees the history of Calvinism as one in which the overwhelming distance and “unknowability” of Divine Will ironically produced not an abnegation of human agency, but its opposite: “In practical terms, ... Calvin’s doctrine ultimately threw humans back on their own resources” (p. 57). By the time the missionaries reached Sumba, their God was the kind of deity who above all expected human beings to exercise the free agency with which He had endowed them—although preferably, of course, in obedience to Christian teaching. Nevertheless, this neo-orthodox Calvinism had retained from Calvin’s own teaching and from Puritanism generally, Keane tells us, an intense preoccupation with the necessity of keeping material objects separate from immaterial spirit. Any practices that might seem to confuse the two—whether in the Roman Catholic use of images, or later in the sacrificial offerings of the Sumbanese to their *marapu*—were generally treated with dismay, contempt, fear, or, at best perhaps, a patient sorrow for the error of others.

The first part of *Christian Moderns* follows through aspects of this Calvinist semiotics, and locates the study within discussions of colonialism, globalization, conversion, and the problems of defining Christianity (in general) and Protestantism (in particular) within anthropology. The second part of the book then presents a series of analyses taking off from particular ethnographic instances in Sumba, in which both Dutch and Anakalanges assumptions are placed in question in relation to specifically "religious" issues, while the third section follows themes of agency and morality in relation to the wider topics of text and money. As the latter half of the book draws on some essays previously published in other forms, it is worth stating that each chapter "republished" here is greatly enhanced from its original form due to its contextualization and from the new and linking materials. The cumulative effect of the argument is full of fresh impact, and this is an exceptionally rewarding read for those who are familiar with the earlier articles, as well as for those who are not.

Keane's overall aim, he tells us, is "to convey insights drawn from an encounter" (p. 33); to trace the ways in which a particular, modern, notion of agency—formed through Protestant understandings of "sincerity"—came to be the standard by which people in Sumba would be judged as fully human. Conversely, other attitudes to agency, such as those found in colonial and mission sites in Anakalang, were either misconstrued or devalued. Over the course of the encounter, many Sumbanese converts to Protestantism would come to stand with their Dutch Protestant co-religionists on these questions of agency, as against Sumbanese who remained loyal to the *marapu*. Yet the story clearly pivots on the importation of Western ideas, practices, and demands under the unequal political conditions of colonialism. There are, as Keane says, "winners and losers" in the story of modernity, even modernity considered as a trope (p. 24).

How does Keane lay out his arguments in detail? Part One of the book is deliberately presented at a higher level of generality than the second two sections. The aim here, Keane tells us, is to counteract anthropologists' occasional unintended tendency to present ethnography as if in isolation from external forces. While fully conceding the particularity of local Christian forms, the book also wishes to give central recognition to the fact that, when people say that they are Christians, they are consciously laying claim to an identity they understand as universal. This chapter also makes explicit the account of Protestantism that informs the book throughout, and as such it requires careful reading. Keane's formulation of this attitude is, as always with his work, intensely thoughtful, highly sophisticated, and elegantly and precisely expressed. He is careful to point out that his account is deliberately selective; he wishes to focus on the part which Protestant thought plays in the formation of semiotic ideologies, although he knows that this is not all that could be said about Protestantism. He moves between statements about "Calvinism," "Protestantism," and "Christianity" with an awareness that these categories are by no means coterminous, but keeping in view constantly the areas in which they do overlap. He is careful also with the issue of causality; while sometimes he is claiming a particular causative force for Protestant thinking and institutions, much of the time he is instead observing a synergy in which Protestantism reinforces ideas also promoted by other currents in modernity.

In "Religion's Reach," Keane begins to focus on the tendency in Protestantism "to abstract the human subject from its material entanglements in the name of freedom and authenticity" (p. 81). Drawing variously on the work of William Pietz (on the fetish), Charles Taylor (on agency), Lionel Trilling (on "sincerity"), and Bruno Latour (on "purification"), Keane argues that modernity's promise of historical transformation rests also on claims about the possibility of self-transformation, and on the notion that modernity (progress) is a form of human liberation; this in turn rests on the depiction of the self as an autonomous agent. Protestantism amplifies in this view "influential expressions of the high moral value of agency. In many cases, such as those I discuss in this book," Keane adds, "it ties that moral value to the preliminary task of getting people to see what beings in the world are actually agents (Gods and humans, not spirits and fetishes) and what kinds of agency properly belong to them" (p. 53). In the case of Calvinism, this focus on agency was intensified; both early Predestinarian Calvinists and followers of later traditions considered themselves bound by an obligation to develop self-discipline and to practice it by changing the world around them.

In the section "Beliefs, Words, and Selves" (chapter two), Keane lays out the semiotic ideology of this general (or ideal-typical, as it were) Calvinist Protestantism. In Keane's view, Calvin's sense of the immense distance between God and human beings gives rise to a suspicion of all material forms, including the forms of words. While words may be necessary as a means to convey God's message to humans, they are also themselves a partial concealment of divine nature, which is essentially beyond human language and all other human forms of signification. For Calvin, the faithful were admonished above all to seek an awareness of God in his most abstract forms, as the Holy Spirit, untainted by any "external figure" (p. 66). This theology rests, Keane argues, on a conception of ideas as abstract and as clearly distinguishable from matter; words occupied a privileged position as being the best (least material) way in which divine meaning could be conveyed; but to retain that value, their status, subordinate to spirit, must be kept constantly in mind. The effort of Protestant semiotics is therefore constantly towards maintaining boundaries between these pairs of categories, an effort that can never be successful or complete, since "Semiotic form requires material instantiation" (p. 80). Or, as Keane says, citing Latour, total "purification" is impossible.

Missionaries coming to Sumba, where human agency has been so much identified with material expressions, brought with them a series of attitudes to the nature of religion itself. As elsewhere in the European colonies, they were troubled by the problem of how to distinguish religion (which had to change in conversion) from culture (which could be retained where it did not conflict directly with Christian principles). While Roman Catholics, too, followed principles of "inculturation," for Sumba's Dutch Calvinist missionaries the question was given urgency by the principle that each church community should become autonomous. Keane argues that in Victorian anthropology, the work of Edward B. Tylor, and especially his *Primitive Culture*, had a special and direct influence on Sumba's Dutch missionaries. Tylor argued that all human beings shared one origin, and that humans in every part of the world were naturally in the process of progressing or evolving towards higher moral states. He viewed "animism" (the worship of spirits) not as evidence of primitive irrationality but as the consequence of universal human common sense operating on

limited available evidence. However, cultural and ritual forms could outlive the period that had given rise to them, and become anachronistic “survivals” that would impede human development. The work of ethnography, he argued, was “to expose the remains of crude old culture which have passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction” (p. 95). Thus, for Keane, Tylor was “a purifier, heir both to an Enlightenment contempt for superstition ... and to radical Protestantism’s hostility to Catholicism” (p. 96). These views fed directly into the traditions of thought from which Sumba’s rather intellectual missionary body was drawn. The missionary Albert Kruyt, for instance, Keane tells us, focussed on the hope that a folk church could emerge in Sumba. Such a church would express genuine Christian conversion, but through a living local cultural idiom. To determine whether any given tradition was inimical to Christianity or not, however, local people were asked to look beneath the appearance of practices and discover the true nature of the concepts beneath—a distinction between inner meaning and outward expression that was itself an importation of Protestant semiotics. This impulse was developed further over the years, as Kruyt and his fellow missionaries came to argue that local peoples could be taken through, as it were, a speeded-up process of moral evolution through exposure to Christian teaching. Although they might at first attribute magical meanings to Christian rites such as baptism, the Sumbanese would eventually, through repeated practice, come to understand the difference between the outward forms in such rituals, and their true inner (and abstract) meaning. From a Calvinist point of view, the converts would have gained access to the inner knowledge of divine law shared by all humans with the assistance of Scripture. For Keane, the Sumbanese would have been asked to become fluent in a new semiotic ideology. In the process, “religion” had become a dematerialized and distinct category, resting above all on the practice of assent to propositions. The old, material forms of religion were now treated as anachronisms, survivors from an earlier and less worthy era, over-staying their welcome in the present.

This requirement both to keep and to surpass local forms of value generated contradictions in attitudes to historical change. While conversion is meant to move history forward into a new era, Keane devotes a chapter to examining “the dilemmas posed for Christians when they wrestle with what looks like the stubborn persistence of a non-Christian past” (p. 115) and the counterparts of these dilemmas for Sumba’s remaining *marapu* followers. How, after all, was either side supposed to know for sure that “the deceased do not return” (p. 124)? This question, posed at the center of Keane’s book, is itself central for his argument. In his view, it is likely, at least in Sumba, that even if there are still today a number of *marapu* followers, their relationship to the ancestors has not in any simple sense “persisted” from pre-Christian times. Instead, such *marapu* followers have been cast, despite themselves, into an entirely different context. Anything they may now say or do will be in counterpoint to Christian views. Not only that, but the grounds for signifying (anything, but especially one’s own full humanity) have been shifted beneath one’s feet. For the followers of *marapu*, to contest Christian meanings it is first necessary to find some space to address them, and in that process one’s own organization of semiotics is altered. Most likely, it alters in the direction of an obligatory greater abstraction; one begins to have to explain, to define, to contextualize, and to quote terms that previously it was sufficient simply to voice. On the other hand, the Christian insistence that the future will be

radically different from the past is itself continuously at risk; "religion" in its modern and specialized form does not address every aspect of life. Everyday sociality, the practices of which (betel sharing, meat distribution) in fact embody another and less individualized ideal of agency, therefore generates repeated contradictions for Sumbanese Christians attempting to live the notion of heroic transformation.

For Keane, authors whose arguments stress continuities of ontology across historical rupture, especially conversion, are at risk of ignoring the importance of semiotics. Speaking of Vicente Rafael's study of sixteenth-century Tagalog (Philippine) conversion,¹ for example, Keane writes on page 144:

(Rafael) concludes that the Tagalog dealt with Christian divine beings as if they were ancestral spirits. In effect, his analysis ... presupposes some notion of functional equivalence ... that certain ways of acting, such as Catholic confession, are in some important respect *the same* as others, such as offerings given to ancestral spirits. But what transcultural metalanguage of actions would allow us to calibrate functions across such different practical and conceptual contexts?

I think the criticism of Rafael here is misplaced, but the question Keane is raising is a powerful one. How do different parties establish claims about continuity and change when the currency of meaning is itself contested? For Keane, the difficulty is that "The perception of continuity ... is mediated by semiotic ideology, which tells us, for instance, that these words are translations of those ones, these actions are equivalent to those..." (p. 146). It also makes available possible forms of action, and the ways in which those actions may become consequential in the world. When two semiotic ideologies are in conflict, the relationship between forms of action, their content, their reception, and their effects may be unpredictable and disparate.

Both the second and the third sections of the book illustrate such complex situations, starting with a striking story about conversion. Umbu Neka, Keane tells us, is unusual in Anakalang in claiming to have had a powerful individual conversion experience: a voice spoke to him from the darkness during an illness, and called him to join the church. As a ritual specialist, however, Umbu Neka phrased his conversion in the language of tradition, or at least, of traditional innovation. Timing a *yairwo* (a ritual conversation with the *marapu*) for the night before his scheduled ceremonial conversion to Protestantism, and the church conversion itself for Indonesia's Independence Day, Umbu Neka invoked the language of continuity. He addressed the ancestors as one founding a "new path"; he would leave behind him an appropriate successor, just as the ancestors always leave their "traces" behind them. He addressed the ancestors in formal ritual couplets and invoked the idea that both ancestors and Christians remained "present, *if* segregated" (p. 169). Yet as his political rival commented, Umbu Neka had actually abandoned the ancestors he was invoking; he was ceasing to offer them sacrifices, and therefore the "path" to the *marapu* would no longer be open. Moreover, in claiming to have heard God's call directly, he transgressed Anakalangese ideas of proper mediation with the divinity, who is so far distant as to be conversable, if at all, only through the ancestors. In this way, the rival noted, Umbu Neka was in fact robbing formal oratory of some of its power, since he was "separating

¹ Vicente Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1988).

speech from sacrifice" (p. 173), and in that sense following in the wider genre of Protestant "purification." Although the ritual couplets were highly correct, they had become invalid currency within an altered semiotic economy.

The misfit between two semiotic ideologies is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in Sumbanese attitudes to prayer. Calvinist attitudes toward speech, as Keane argues, lean on the Western notion that individual intention is key to meaning. They also privilege the "denotative" aspects of language, that is, the exact match between particular individual words and their referents, relying on the idea of precision in the choice of words to create accurate translations. Scriptural translation relies on knowing the correct local vocabulary; prayer is a matter of direct and personal address to God. For non-Christian Anakalangesese people, these are presumptuous attitudes. Talk to the *marapu* must be offered in the correct forms, and these speech forms originate with the ancestors and must be reproduced exactly. Individual innovations or improvisations will result in the absolute impossibility of successful dialogue. And as mentioned above, from the Sumbanese point of view it is never certain that the *marapu* will be listening. It is not surprising, then, that calling on God directly is regarded as scandalous; or that the formal properties of Christian speech appear to be of considerable interest in Sumba. If the *marapu* followers feel that Christians are hubristic, the Christians feel that *marapu* followers credit dangerously "magical" powers to speech. Since ritual speech, being the speech of the ancestors, is effective, it creates an anxiety for missionaries that Sumbanese ritual forms are inherently "fetishistic."

If there is a sense of something approaching an equal debate on these points, however, it is not one that Keane wishes to over-emphasize. For him, even as the *marapu* followers seek to answer their critics, they shift constantly into an alien terminology of engagement. Thus, while accusing the Christians of placing too much reliance on the Scriptures, the *marapu* followers seek to justify their ritual by referring to it as an unwritten "book." Practices in which meaning had been indistinguishable from its material embodiments come to be increasingly discussed as symbols or as representations, even by those who seek to defend them.

This new terrain depends crucially on the idea of "sincerity," which both defines the modern subject and draws much of its energy from Protestantism. The effort of sincerity stands as a guarantee of a clear relationship between interior thought and its external manifestation in speech. This externalization links directly, for Keane, into the public sphere; it is "a kind of public accountability to others for one's words with reference to one's self" (p. 211). And for this to be the case, sincerity must be underwritten by the notion of the freely acting individual agent. It is thus as perfectly fitted to the enacting of citizenship as to the enacting of the commitment to a church and its creeds. Thus, for Keane, the paradigmatic moment of Sumbanese Protestantism is the moment at which a new church member publicly confesses faith through assent to the Calvinist formulation of the creed: "I believe, acknowledge, and promise" (p. 219), as every new member is required to say. *Christian Moderns* traces the ways in which, through taking part in such practices over time, Sumbanese people come to operate within the notions of agency that those practices entail.

Part of Keane's sense of the "encounter" he is describing is that, at least to some degree, it unsettled Protestant as well as Sumbanese semiotics, although this was

partly occluded because of inequalities of political power. In the chapter "Materialism, Missionaries, and Subjects," he explores this process by looking at Anakalangesse attitudes to sacrificial meat. While the missionaries, of course, required that Sumbanese converts cease offering meat to the *marapu* during rituals, they did not usually forbid the distribution of meat that followed such offerings (recognizing that part of the ritual as crucial to social solidarity). *Marapu* followers reacted scornfully that those who ate meat without making offerings were simply slaves to their own greed; while the missionaries were unmoved by this claim, they were made anxious by the possibility that material things divorced from the context of traditional ritual might become mere possessions to the Sumbanese. In other words, the Protestant missionaries worried that by disconnecting people from their ancestors, they were also and unintentionally creating an alienated economy. (As Keane explains, some of these missionaries, particularly Onvlee, were directly influenced on this point by their reading of Mauss.) At this point, as Keane observes, the claim implicit in "purification" that "religion," "culture," "custom," and "economy" can be neatly separated from each other falters in missionary experience and observations; the two semiotic ideologies are glimpsed as alternatives of each other.

The third and final section of the book pursues two more contexts in which Sumbanese semiotics are being Protestantized: the relationship to ritual text and the circulation of money. In the section titled "Text, Act, Objectifications" (chapter nine), Keane returns to the issue of how traditional verbal oratory is being comprehensively reframed, although its content and form remain unchanged. Using the socially crucial example of descriptions of the Anakalangesse house in formal couplets, he traces the ways in which these pass from being performatives, in which ancestral spirits are implicitly guided through the house, to being merely "cultural" texts. *Marapu*-following Sumbanese would never use these couplets except in the context of the ritual to which they belong; for Christians, however, the couplets become detachable, quotable, and capable of being placed in other contexts without fear of ancestral reprisals. The final example, "Money Is No Object," takes up one of Keane's longstanding interests, the special qualities of material objects in signification. From ethnographic evidence, he argues that there is no straightforward opposition between "cash" and "exchange" transactions in Sumba. In a wedding transaction, the traditionalist bride's family were offended when their gift of cloth to the groom's side was reciprocated with paper money of a low denomination. The customary return gift for cloth is a gold object, but money may substitute for gold, on the basis of the shared metallic properties of coin and gold; and this substitutability has been extended to paper money. The bride's family at first took offense at the return gift. Their objection was based on the idea that the note offered, 100 rupiah, was too low in value and must therefore be intended as an insult. Through a ritual mediator, they were eventually persuaded that no insult was meant, and that the paper money was being offered as a ritually correct token. The acceptability of that token, Keane tells us, is indicative of a place that is still only partly monetized, and in which labor, land, and cattle are still more easily obtained through exchange than through a cash purchase. In contrast to the commoditized economy, therefore, in Sumba money can still only buy certain kinds of things (although these include education).

As Keane explains, since Sumbanese exchange maintains status distinctions that are of great importance to most people, there is considerable reluctance to replace it.

Although personal ambitions may play out through exchange, the character of giving and receiving is not intended to highlight them, and should, indeed, always honor both giver and receiver, even if there are inequalities between the two. Like the non-sacrificial eating of meat, monetary transactions strike traditional Sumbanese as uncontrolled and greedy, in contrast to an exchange system that depends on the passing of valuables from generation to generation. As Keane interestingly observes, Sumbanese are quite aware that gold and cloth valuables could be exchanged for other goods, but have historically considered it noble to refrain; that restraint is a form of work that maintains the distinctions between one kind of object and another.

If nobility depends on refusing to consider that all objects are commensurable, then it is Keane's observation that the alternate morality of the monetary economy is experienced most directly through the church in Sumba. It is the Protestant church that regularly demands donations in money; these donations are hidden in a bag as they are given, but the amounts are later publicly announced. These practices reconfigure economic life as the competitive rendering of dues by individual subjects to the public authorities. Thus the church instantiates the implicit logic of the state, Keane suggests, in which modernity is identified with "authoriz(ing) the cleverness of desiring selves and the endless possibilities that money can buy them" (p. 284). Yet despite its radical difference from exchange morality, this vision, too, exerts a claim on Sumbanese; for, as Keane says, when many of his informants tell him that they are good Christians and that they want to be modern citizens, he and his readers are under an obligation to take those statements seriously.

Although summary cannot do it justice, the seriousness and ambition of *Christian Moderns* should by this time be somewhat apparent. A number of earlier anthropologists have recognized that missionary encounters cause local peoples to abstract their practice as a category of "religion," but Keane's study is unequalled in the attention it gives to what this might mean, and how it might happen. He also lays out for us with great clarity what it means for our own dominant traditions to fetishize the idea of free agency, offering a powerful and convincing argument that "ideas" can never be separated from material forms (including words), even in societies like our own that rest on the claim that they can. His fascinating and deeply considered account of Sumbanese transformations, therefore, offers original insights into how "modernity" is constituted.

Keane also reaches toward a new mode of explaining *in general* what happens when two widely different understandings of the world come into contact. Keane wants us to re-envisage the process of encounter. Stressing the difficulty of mutual comprehension, he nevertheless rejects the kind of account that would dwell on its impossibility, on the radical separation between one thought-world and another. Rather, he wishes to analyze such encounters at a new level. Although Marshall Sahlins is not explicitly invoked in the book (except as the author of "The Sadness of Sweetness..."²), it is to the Sahlins of *Islands of History*,³ and his debating partners on the nature of historical transformation, that *Christian Moderns* appears partly to be addressed. On the last page of this book, Keane tells us that "...forms, disciplines, and

² Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

³ Marshall Sahlins, "The Sadness of Sweetness: The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology," *Current Anthropology* 37,3 (1996): 395-428.

ideologies are the stuff of history just as much as heroic actions and deep structural forces are" (p. 289). What he wants to offer us, it seems, is the ability to see history in motion at a new, intermediate level of generality, somewhere between the most individual and the most culturally general. Examining the meeting of two "semiotic ideologies," each with its interlocking notions of person, object, and agency, is like peering into a highly complicated set of gears and cogwheels. We get to see more about how historical change works. Not that Keane wants to suggest that the outcome of the interaction is ever automatic; but it is, in some way, patterned, and the patterns for Keane follow the articulations of specific semiotic ideologies with and against each other. "What looks like the localization of Christianity may be, above all, one perspective on the conflicting outcomes of the semiotic form in motion" (p. 175). Intention is always constrained by the form of its expression; this does not foreclose the possibility of radical change, but conditions in what way that change can occur.

A book this rich and serious demands to be recognized not only through praise, but through an active engagement with its ideas. The originality and achievement of *Christian Moderns* is to give such a precise exposition of the relationship of modes of signification to historical change. Yet in concentrating on this theme, the book provokes questions about other aspects of the situation it describes.

One question, for this reader, arises over the virtual absence of God from the story Keane presents. The ethnography does not focus on what the missionaries thought or felt about God, or on what Sumbanese Christians think or feel about God; nor does it discuss in detail how the special characteristics of God as an agent might modify the depiction of Protestantism that is here presented.

Why might this matter? Let me take the issues possibly arising, in reverse order. First, I wonder whether Keane's selective approach really allows us to explore what the tension between matter and spirit is in Protestantism. His account takes off from the idea that it is, in fact, an impossibility to maintain this distinction, a claim that is masterfully developed in the book. Yet it is illustrated most persuasively in the context of discussions of missionary encounters with ideas contrary to alienated *economics*. The Calvinist tradition contains, as is usually the case in Christianity, many contradictions of its own. Keane is careful to say so. But he does not exemplify. John Milton, for instance, whose warnings on the tyrannous dangers of set-form prayer open Keane's book, also thought that the soul was made of matter.⁴ Keane's Sumbanese missionaries are not Milton, and they evidently did not think the soul was made of matter. But they surely carried their own tradition—or else a repression of that tradition that itself costs energy—into theological discussion in some way. How did these missionaries think about the resurrected body? Or the body in general? In this study, we only see one strand of their ideas about the material world.

Relatedly, one might argue that even highly conservative Protestant Christianity allows that the normal properties and relations of matter and spirit may be suspended: water be turned into wine, the rotting corpse of Lazarus rise and live again, the divine be made manifest in a newborn. It is not that such things cannot be, but that the monopoly on making them so must belong to God. Nothing in Keane's text contradicts

⁴ John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1996).

this, and yet we do not find a discussion of how the concept of the miraculous played into missionary thinking about *marapu* materialism.

Second, the book leaves us with little sense of how, or whether, this Calvinist deity gains imaginative purchase for Sumbanese Christians. The central argument is that, as a public demonstration of the capacity for “voluntary” action, conversion signifies (in this economy) one’s liberation from the rule of ancestral tradition and therefore one’s modernity (pp. 214–15). Keane tells us, at various points, that Sumbanese tend to give pragmatic explanations for conversion (p. 165), stressing, for instance, its appropriateness for educated people (p. 192). He tells us that church worship is formal and formulaic, calling on rhetorical strategies that are derived from those of the Indonesian state, and that the experience of at least one Sumbanese woman in church was that of embarrassment, as if thrust suddenly into the modern public sphere (p. 217). Elsewhere, he mentions that even domestic prayer services and Bible readings are highly formalized (p. 220), and that Anakalangesese people place little stress on emotional interiority (p. 226, note 4). In reference to the unusually elaborated conversion narrative of Umbu Neka referred to above, he notes that we cannot know precisely what psychological processes were at work in this moment, although we can see the dominant semiotic forms through which they were enacted (p. 221).

It is clear that in the encounter between this particular form of Calvinism and the Anakalangesese, one sees a meeting between two systems that, however dissimilar their semiotics might be, share a somewhat austere sensibility. Neither party is given to highly expressive or overtly emotional forms of communal expression, and both are in their own ways modest in the forms of religious communication that they consider appropriate. Neither Calvinists nor *marapu* followers would find it seemly to demand frequent, dramatic, and immediate answers to their prayers. The fact that Keane portrays Sumbanese Calvinists as somewhat reticent, therefore, seems very much of a piece with the ethnography.

At the same time, it is impossible not to wonder how Anakalangesese people who state their adherence to the Calvinist creed in the required formula, “I believe, acknowledge, and promise,” think and feel about that declaration. It is difficult also not to want to know more about the processes of education and catechism leading up to a person’s acceptance as a Christian convert, and to wonder whether any new Christians experience feelings of ambivalence and mourning in abandoning the *marapu*, as, for instance, it appears is the case for the Protestant converts described by Mary Steedly.⁵ There are scattered references in Keane’s text to Sumbanese who say that people have converted to Christianity in such numbers because the *marapu* have been defeated by the ancestors of the foreigners, and mention of occasional, quite diverse Sumbanese speculations about the relationship between the two sets of practices. Although asking too insistently about how Sumbanese conversion feels might be construed as a “Protestant” question in itself—and therefore as missing the point of Keane’s argument—it does appear that the process of conversion is of some interest to Sumbanese themselves.

⁵ Mary Steedly, *Hanging without a Rope: Narrative Experiences in Colonial and Postcolonial Karoland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

While idioms of interiority may not be central to Anakalangese, it is also impossible not to wonder how the disconnection from flows of ancestral exchange that must follow when one no longer participates in ritual sacrifice feels to local people. In *Signs of Recognition*, Keane compellingly describes how ritual exchange is said to evidence the *dewa* of a person; their power to attract (luck, exchange valuables, and social deference), which is in part a gift of the *marapu*. He notes that flows of valuables and what they may say about a person's *dewa* are still of intense interest to Sumbanese Christians who know little about ancestral spirits. But what will happen to this orphaned interest? Will ritual exchange for Christians come to be seen as purely material in the ways that the missionaries feared? Will the idea of *dewa* ever become connected to Protestant doctrine in ways analogous to the development of prosperity cults in other parts of the world? Will something quite different emerge?

Christian Moderns is agnostic on such points, and indeed it is only because of the richness of the account and the clarity of the analytic focus that the question can be asked in this way. It may also be that it is not possible to know at this time how Anakalangese Calvinism will develop. Yet it is surely legitimate to ask.

For Keane, such questions are fraught with hazards, and for him Vicente Rafael, among others, has fallen foul of them. Rafael's account of the role of translation in the Spanish conversion of the Philippines in the 1600's stumbles, for Keane, on an argument about continuities, to which he says anthropologists (and, presumably, historians) are predisposed. Rafael's argument is that new Catholic Filipinos might have treated Spanish introductions as a source of power that could be negotiated with in similar ways as negotiation with their traditional spirits. For Keane this is flawed because it assumes that anything that preceded colonization and conversion could have been "the same" as anything that followed it. The lesson for Keane is that shifts in semiotic ideology change the context and the relationship of everything, so that statements about continuity are naïve.

My own familiarity both with Rafael's work and with the Philippine context disinclines me to accept this as valid criticism. I do not think that Rafael suggests that the Tagalog world and system of reference was not catastrophically changed by the Spanish annexation. Indeed, one conclusion Rafael reaches is that Tagalogs came to accept a notion of Christian heaven based on a completely unprecedented idea of exchange without debt. Rather, what he suggests—and here there is an underlying sympathy between his project and Keane's—is that Tagalogs responded to this catastrophe using the available conceptual and symbolic means. While Keane provides us with a heightened awareness of how changes in the context in which meaning is made may render meaning unstable, his argument cannot be taken to prove that it is never possible for ideas about the source of power, and the ways in which people should deal with it, to survive violent shifts in political and symbolic regimes. If instead Keane's point is that this is possible, but not proven, I can only respond that my own fieldwork in the Philippines in the 1980s and 1990s strongly suggested that there is contemporary evidence for it. The situation as I knew it was rather as it might be in Sumba if, despite all the shifts in semiotics that Keane charts, the Anakalangese found a way to be permitted to make offerings to the Christian God on a material "base," or to be able to claim that *dewa* was a gift of the Almighty. Keane would be right that everything had been altered by the intervention of the Dutch, but would the

character, ontological force, and degree of that alteration actually be in any way predictable? Elsewhere in *Christian Moderns* Keane gives a great deal of space to the acknowledgment that different conversion histories may have different conclusions to that which he is describing. But it is sometimes difficult to judge the degree of generalization that is being claimed on the basis of the Sumbanese case. If semiotic ideologies can have differing impacts in differing contexts, is it perhaps that this particular Calvinist attitude to materiality happened to latch onto a system like that of the Sumbanese at precisely that point which would render it internally incoherent and no longer viable?

One also wishes to understand what kind of object Dutch Calvinism is in Keane's argument. The emphasis in his ethnography on its "practical" attractions and its close identification with the colonial and Indonesian states seems an uncanny echo of Weber's account of the secularization of Dutch Calvinism in its European context. The idea that the Sumbanese are not really converting to Protestantism so much as they are converting to the modern state is lent weight by Keane's information that the rate of Christianization in Sumba only really gathered pace when the Indonesian government made membership in a monotheistic religion compulsory. But are we really to understand that this form of Christianity has become only the ghost of itself?

The trouble is that it is impossible to form a judgment on this question from the evidence Keane adduces. What we know about Sumbanese attitudes is fragmentary. When it comes to the Dutch Calvinist missionaries themselves, we find out more about their attitudes to Tylor and Mauss than we do about their attitudes to the God they had come to serve.

Keane notes wryly that this form of Calvinist practice is resolutely unspectacular, and I certainly believe him. But does "unspectacular" mean that religious resonance has fled in favor of the protocols of modernity? In many forms of non-charismatic Protestantism, the heart of religious feeling resides in intimate conversation between the believer and the deity. This is a private matter, not observable in public liturgy, and not necessarily readily discussed except in dedicated prayer groups of other like-minded individuals. The very deferral of spectacular, miraculous, or even mystical manifestations of the divine may, for certain kinds of Protestants, constitute an aesthetic of patient devotion, of waiting in hope for the life to come. Even the dullest of Dutch Calvinist missionaries surely talked to God, on whose behalf they had come so far, and I wonder what it was they said.

In sum, I wonder how far *Christian Moderns* has assumed that Dutch Calvinism was an already eviscerated form of Christianity when this may not be the case. But here I become agnostic in my turn, for perhaps it was, and is so in this particular part of the world. Like Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Keane's book should not be misread as a proof of the unstoppable force of "modernity," nor as a demonstration of the unreality of religious aspirations in contemporary life. *Christian Moderns* is a book of great brilliance; it reveals a process of historical change in the semiotic construction of the world in a way that, to my knowledge, has not been done anywhere else. In that respect, it is a tremendously innovative work that should be, and will be, very widely read and for a long time.