

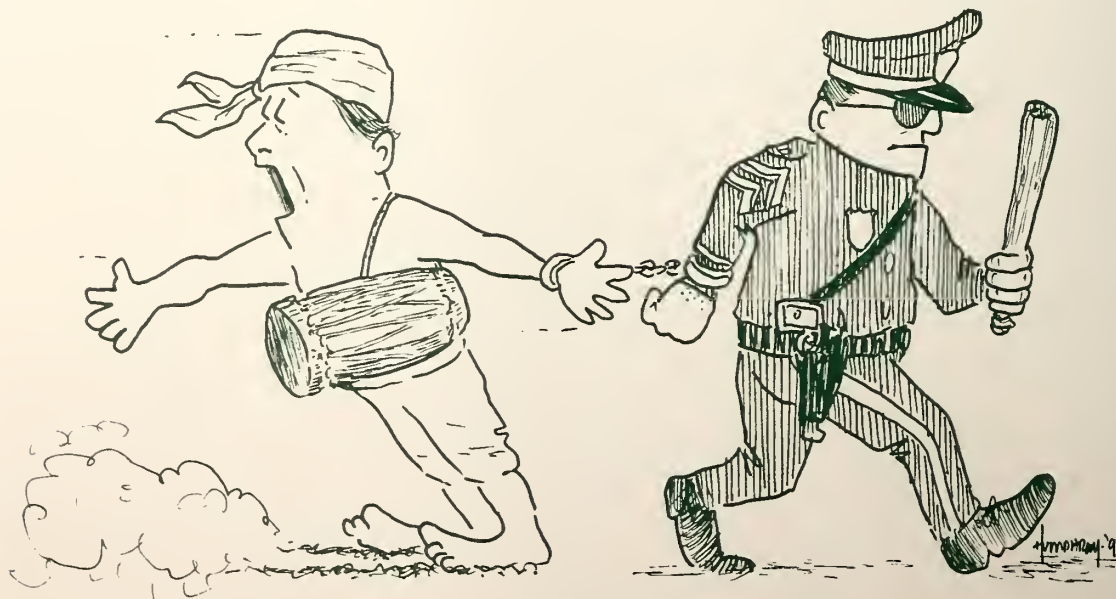
THE POETICS OF POWER: SUMBA AND BEYOND

In literature class, we tend to teach poetry as isolated texts that we analyze to derive meaning. As a result, poetry is often seen as a marginal and somewhat effete literary form whose audience is largely intellectuals. We forget that poetry in most societies is a performance art in which text, expression, motivation, and the audience interact to create events of great emotional, political, and social power. To what extent is verbal art, the performance of poetry, central to the understanding not only of the poem but also of language and other culture forms?

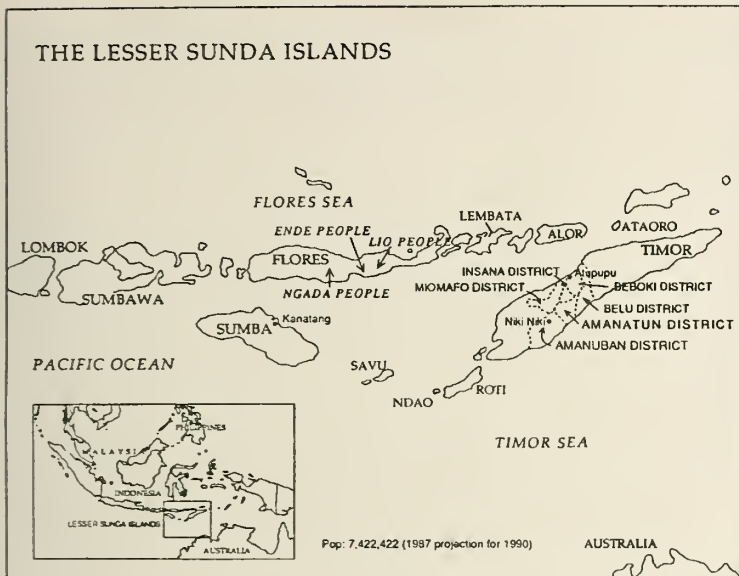
In Indonesia, an island nation stretched out in a 3,000 mile arc between China and Australia, one can find elaborate and sophisticated traditions of poetic performance among the 350 language groups. The leather shadow puppet shows of Java, the masked dances of Bali, and song duels of Sumatra are among a few of the most famous. For many Indonesians, however, speaking poetry is not only an aesthetic experience, it is an exercise in spiritual and even political power. People employ verbal art to comment on, legitimate, and even establish authority for key social institutions such as law, religion, medicine, and politics. But as the Indonesian central government seeks to modernize and create a homogeneous "national culture," it has run into conflict with local minority groups' traditions of poetic performance.

When I returned to the Weyewa highlands of the eastern Indonesian island of Sumba in the summer of 1988, I learned that the lively and elaborate ritual speaking events that I had studied for the past ten years had been officially banned as 'wasteful' and 'backward.' The whole series of ceremonial performances by which men use a poetic speech style to construct the most authoritative and sacred texts in their culture is now against the law. Nonetheless, I had no trouble getting research permission to study this illegal style of communication, because, as one official in the Ministry of Culture informed me as I cleared my papers, I was studying linguistic and literary forms, "you know, the grammar and poetry." Indeed, the couplets on which this ritual style is based are not against the law; the regional government has even asked me to prepare a textbook for elementary school children in order to teach them how to read and write in their own language using these couplets as the text examples. Nor were the myths banned that these performances enact. Again, the Ministry of Culture showed a real interest in printing some of these texts for educational purposes, in order to develop an emerging category--a national folklore.

What are banned are the poetic events as performances. On the one hand, the poetic texts as marginal, aestheticized objects, are safe, but on the other, the poetic texts as action are viewed as dangerous. Why? What is it that happens when people actually use



POETICS AND POWER



language in situated action? What is the role of poetic and aesthetic activity in social life?

Government officials seem threatened by the view of poetics as a shaper and inscriber of social life; they seem more comfortable with the view that it is a marginal, derivative albeit pretty feature of the social world. But as many recent articles and books have forcefully brought home, strict attention to the referential content of words overlooks the "meta-messages" about social relationships, social situation, and personal feelings also conveyed in a message. Deborah Tannen has argued vividly that the style through which messages are transmitted is often the crucial factor in making or breaking human relationships. In her recent 1990 best-seller, *You Just Don't Understand*, Tanner analyzes men's speech to show that it is designed to assert and establish dominance, while women's speech style promotes co-operation and compromise. Style--the manner in which communication is accomplished--is not a parasitic or marginal aspect of the communicative process, but part and parcel of it. The message of ritual Weyewa poetic performance is the centrality and authority of the ancestral spirits in the lives of the Sumbanese, a message that challenges the sovereignty of the secular Indonesian state. By banning ceremonial performances, the Indonesian government asserts its

dominance as the only legitimate authority in peoples' lives.

WEYEWA RITUAL SPEECH

In my research (see Kuipers 1990), I have been particularly interested in how the Weyewa manage to use a poetic style to create authoritative texts, which they say represent the true 'words of the ancestors.' According to Weyewa ritual leaders, these texts provide a kind of charter of the rights and the obligations that these people have to their ancestors and to their fellow descendants.

When I first arrived on the island in 1978, I studied this remarkable parallel style of speaking by

focussing on its use in divination, prayer, and myth recitations. Weyewa encouraged me to focus on the couplets themselves, and I memorized over 1500 of them in order to become a performer. In each couplet, the first line parallels the second in rhythm and meaning. For example,

ndara ndende kiku
horse with a standing tail

bongga mette lomma
dog with a black tongue

This couplet refers to a 'good orator,' because such a person would be lively and high spirited like a horse with a 'standing tail.' Effective speakers are also often likened to dogs with 'black tongues' since the latter are considered good barkers.

I soon learned, however, that in order to understand and transmit the deeper messages conveyed by ritual speech, I had to look past the formal poetic patterns of the couplets, and the (often very enchanting) references of the metaphors, and pay close attention to the stylistically important but often ignored "filler material" that poets used to connect the couplets and verses to one another. Using pronouns, conjunctions, and other connecting phrases --or by strategically omitting such connectors--these performers make poems that are more than isolated objects of beauty; they create sacred objects of ancient authority.

Among this rural agricultural people, the importance of creating spiritual coherence through poetic speech is especially clear following a misfortune--the death of a child, a fall from a tree, a crop failure. This is viewed as a result of a broken promise to the ancestral spirits and a neglect of the 'words' embodied in the ritual speech of the ancestors. Divination is the first stage of atonement in which a specialist performer tries to identify the broken 'word' or promise to the ancestors through poetic dialogue with the spirits. If the victims have the feasting resources and the determination, the second stage usually occurs a few hours or weeks later. It is a spectacular, all-night ritual dialogue in which the broken promise is re-affirmed. The final, climactic stage is when the promise is fulfilled and the charter myth of the founding of the agnatic clan (on the father's side) is told. It is here that the 'true voice of the ancestors' is revealed.

In the short text below from the first phase of a "misfortune" ritual, a diviner humbles himself before the spirit by comparing himself to a jar with tiny lips and a bottle with a small mouth, but then proceeds to break out of the couplet frame by saying "take this rice"... "right there by you."

wíwi ána sádda

I am like a jar with tiny lips

máta ána nggósi

I am like a bottle with a small mouth

máma yása!

take this rice!

nenna

right there by you

Divination as a form of oracle gets its authority and legitimacy from the way in which the performer speaks directly to the needs of the suffering client. The client wishes to feel a sense of connection with the ancestral spirits from whom he feels alienated, and the diviner supplies this connectedness with the highly interactive language (e.g. "here!" "right there by you" "over there" "and then you said..."), despite the fact that the performance is a monologue.

Compare this short text then with the final stage of atonement for a misfortune--a 'blessing song.' In these songs the singer wishes to describe the moral foundation of

the whole clan as a kind of journey in which a prominent mythic ancestor establishes all the sacred practices and obligations--its ritual duties, marriage alliances, and village and house designs.

Nyákkana pasámakongge láwina

therefore the tip is matched

nyákkana pamérákongge pú'una

therefore the trunk is parallel

néwe wólo innangge

these deeds of the Mother

néwe ráwi ámangge

these works of the Father

Wé'e Maríngi O-oo

Cool Water O-oo!

tédamúni náwwangge

wait for this one [named]

Mbúlu Nggólu Wólangge

Mbúlu Nggólu Wóla

a lónggena kadíppu runda rangga

whose hair is silver dewangga cloth

kadíppu mbáli mbónungge

a piece of gold from abroad

Unlike the more interactive and involved divination performance, the singer of this poem seeks to create the image of a detached monologue stripped of references to the "here and now," in which there is no opportunity for the audience's voice to intrude, challenge, and modify the authority of the text. It consists only of couplets, with few pronouns or other connective devices to link it to the actual social situation of use. The formalization process by which texts acquire authority and power is known as "entextualization," in which texts are increasingly patterned linguistically and poetically at the same time as they are increasingly detached from their context of performance.

But while the Weyewa describe this performance as an ancient, transcendent text from the 'voice of the ancestors,' in fact, it too, is linked to its social context of performance, but in more subtle ways. For instance, in the recounting of the tale, the speaker selects the names of certain ancestral figures who are related to the principal sponsor of the event, so as to make the sponsor appear more central in the history of the lineage.

The process of entextualization has relevance well beyond eastern Indonesia. One area where this attention to the role of poetic organization in social life seems relevant is in the analysis of medical discourse, where the immediate, situated speech of the patient-doctor interview is eventually recoded into the detached and scientific medical terminology of the physicians' report. Errors and misunderstandings often occur not only in the face to face interaction per se, but over the course of this entextualization process (see Kuipers 1989).

THE POLITICS OF FEMALE POETRY

The ban on ritual speech events is a powerful and effective challenge to the authority of the patrilineal clans. This has not silenced the women and other unpaid performers of ritual speech, who are often marginal to those clans. Women's ritual poetic speech is highly personal, spontaneous and often autobiographical. These poems are sung at harvest celebrations or in other intimate or family contexts. A performance in this style carries the message that the speaker is marginal to the power structure of the society as a whole. Since the ban on men's ceremonial poetic performances, women's poetic performances increasingly convey messages of political protest. More men are performing the poems in the contexts once thought of as "female" and in the process, conveying the men's own feelings of marginality to the central power structures of Indonesia. The changing nature of poetic performances once thought of as "female" calls into question the practice of fixing texts--through ritual, literacy, or law.

An example of such a performance is the following ironic song that tells the tale of a young woman who feels the power of a new kind of text--a love letter from a non-Sumbanese police officer luring her to the west Sumbanese capital for "education." When she has an illegitimate child by him, she urges her kinfolk to consider the 'words of the ancestors' and accept her back into the family. Part of the song's poignancy derives from the conflict between foreign modernity and the traditional authority of the patriclan. Accepting the girl back means to give priority to personal feelings, individual desires, and government

programs of education and religious modernization over the lineage's traditional right to demand brideprice from the policeman. As with many personal songs, the performance of this song was specifically solicited--in this case by me. The performer was a young woman who heard the song from a friend while attending junior high school.

Hitti-ki-po manna

Way back then

ku masi ana muda

when I was a young child

ammi nome polisi komidani

a police commander came visiting

na kirimo-ngga suratu

he sent me a letter

terima dua tangan....

I accepted it with two hands... 5

"kako-nggo-we ole

"go ahead my friend

ne kota Waikabubako

to the town of Waikabubak

wewe-nggu-ndi pānde

and seek after knowledge

ne kantora mandyangga"

and high office"

ne pa-oro lénge-léngemo

What was truly the main source [of
problems] 10

ne zurata pa-tulita

was that letter which was written

After she became pregnant, then she returns to her village. In a scene strongly reminiscent of traditional orphan tales, she pleads for mercy from cruel kinfolk.

ku-ndunni bali oro-nggu

I returned in my tracks

ku-zangga bali ziwu-nggu

and I retraced my steps

mainda itto ole

come on my kinfolk

a paditto lolo lende

who share an umbilical cord 15

kata mata moro etawa

let us all see with open eyes

na ana woro ndobbanda

let us all gather together

ka nda tak inda-ka-ni koko

so that our throats feel no revulsion

ka nda talabbo-ka-ni ate

so that our livers are not blistered

ate-ku-mi na'a

look into your heart, older brother 20

a balleku malara

to reverse your pungent feelings

koko-ku-mi na'a

it all hangs upon your neck, older brother
kubbuku manili

to splash [water] on your hot feelings

lángoko pa-deito-ko-ngga zala

even if you bear resentment towards me
ku-ndara nggole wello

I am like a blameless fallen horse 25

lángoko pa-toddu-ko-ngga palu

even if you heap beatings upon me

ku-kari teba kadu

I am like an innocent hornless water
buffalo

ku-wúnggu wai-ko-ngga limma

I carry in my hand

li'i ukku a Marawi

the voice of the Creator's covenants

ku-billu wai-ko-ngga béngge

I stuff it in my waistband 30

li'i ukku a Mawolo

the voice of the Creator's law.

This genre of 'personal songs' forms a category of ritual speech sharply contrasting with the authoritative discourse of collective ritual. Unlike political and religious genres, this song is not addressed to spirits but to actual specific individuals. Unlike ceremonial performances, the encounter is not conducted with close attention to reciprocity, exchange, and hierarchy. Most striking of all is the general assault on the traditional patterns of entextualizing discourse: i.e. the use of couplets, the creation and maintenance of a consistent ceremonial frame. She deliberately violates couplet conventions for emotional effect. For instance, the completion to the couplet beginning on line 15 should have been 'whose heads proceeded [down a single birth canal].' In ritual discourse, such an infraction results in a fine to the speaker of at least one cloth, and possibly supernatural retribution. Also, most distinctively, she switches into Indonesian --something unthinkable in ritual performances. One example of this is line ku masi ana muda 'when I was a young child' and line 5 terima dua tangan 'received with two hands.' In this context, in a ritual speech performance, such usages have a jarring, ironic effect. Unlike men's performances, such stylistic inconsistencies do not have the effect of linking the speech to the dialogue form of participation, but function instead to enhance its emotional expressiveness (see Irvine 1982, 1990) and evoke the inner state of the performer.

Taken together, these features contribute to shape a speech event that is neither a negotiation with implied dialogue or an authoritative monologue, but instead constructs what many Weyewa seem to regard as a challenge to the whole notion of fixing (or inscribing) the 'words' of the ancestors. When I played this tape to one Weyewa elder to ask for his interpretation, he said "she's lost the tracks, the trail of the ancestral spirits." She does not follow the inscriptions.

CONCLUSION

Examples such as the ones sketched here I hope provide a glimpse of the centrality of the poetic performance to an understanding of the role of language in social life. As long as we persist--like our Indonesian government officials--in walling off the stylistic features of language use from other arenas of culture, we will be stuck in a limited view of communication, and the relationship of language to arenas of power and social control will be obscured.

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