

School of American Research Press

Post Office Box 2188
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87504-2188

James Currey Ltd

73 Botley Road
Oxford OX2 0BS

Editors: Joan K. O'Donnell and Jane Kepp
Production Manager: Cynthia Welch
Series Design: Context, Inc.
Indexer: Jan Wright
Printer: Sheridan Books, USA

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

The empire of things : regimes of value and material culture / edited by Fred R. Myers.—
1st ed.

p. cm. — (School of American Research advanced seminar series)

Essays from an advanced seminar held at the School of American Research, Nov. 3-7, 1996.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-930618-05-0 (cloth)—1-930618-06-9 (paper)

1. Material culture—Social aspects—Congresses. 2. Group identity—Congresses.
3. Values—Congresses. 4. Art and society—Congresses. 5. Ceremonial exchange—
Congresses. I. Myers, Fred R., 1948- II. Series.

GN406 .E56 2001
306—dc21

2001032038

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:

The empire of things : regimes of value and material culture. - (A School of American
Research advanced seminar)

1. Material culture

I. Myers, Fred R., 1948- II. School of American Research

306

ISBN 0-85255-928-3 (cloth) 0-85255-927-5 (paper)

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 2001032038.

International Standard Book Numbers 0-930618-05-0 (cloth) and 0-930618-06-9
(paper). First edition 2001.

1 2 3 4 5 05 04 03 02 01

Cover illustration: Foreign loans to the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, refused
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The Empire of Things

Regimes of Value and Material Culture

Edited by Fred R. Myers



School of American Research Press

Santa Fe

James Currey

Oxford

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Money Is No Object

*Materiality, Desire, and Modernity
in an Indonesian Society*

Webb Keane

The distinction between what should and what should not have a price—between the alienable and the inalienable—is crucial to the ordering of relations among what Appadurai (1986) has called regimes of value, and it is central to Weiner's (1992) postulate about the creation of political hierarchies. Although often discussed with reference to so-called traditional exchange, the power and value of inalienables and of their supposed antitheses, commodities and money, are hardly restricted to "traditional" or "precapitalist" social or economic arrangements. In the contemporary United States, for instance, amid the efflorescence of free-market ideologies, the problem of confining the scope of alienability is evident in everything from debates over patenting genes and the question of child labor to the nervousness that often attends the circulation of money within the household.

As Miller (this volume) cogently argues, inalienable value need not be restricted to elite or rare activities. What is at stake, rather, is the relationship between persons and things. Distinctions among kinds of objects and the ways they circulate matter, in part, because they have profound implications for the character of the humans who possess the

objects and carry out transactions with them. After all, to be without a price is often taken, as it was by Kant (1956 [1785]), to define the human subject. Late in the twentieth century, most inhabitants of even the “freest” of market economies were still likely to feel that cash value stopped, or should stop, where the truly human began.¹ Market economies, then, do not do away with inalienables so much as they reorder the regimes of value in which they function (Carrier 1995; Miller 1994; Zelizer 1994). And contestations over these reorderings are not simply economic matters but are deeply concerned with the nature of persons as it is defined at the shifting boundaries between subjects and objects, boundaries whose particular configurations may define a historical epoch (Latour 1993).

In this chapter I address the unstable meanings of money and material objects at the margins of twentieth-century capitalism. In the process, I raise some general questions about the relations among materiality and abstraction, the values of persons and things, and the imagining of “modernity.” For the last few generations, people in Sumba, an island of eastern Indonesia, have been involved in a classic confrontation between an elaborate, costly, and socially potent system of ceremonial exchange and the growing importance of money. We can no longer assume, as an earlier generation of anthropologists did, that people who practice ceremonial exchange will simply perceive money to be a threat to social values. It has become clear both that the advent of money may be welcomed even in so-called exchange societies and that it is not necessarily seen as inimical to the persistence of exchange (Akin and Robbins 1999). But certainly the growing availability of alternative regimes of value can give heightened visibility to certain cultural assumptions. Faced with money and its attendant discourses about modernity, freedom, and economic rationality, Sumbanese must try to account for the value things hold for people.

Their efforts to do so, I argue, often involve a certain dematerialization of the human world, a denial of the ways in which human subjects are enmeshed with material objects. But in an increasingly abstract world, where could value come from? One common site in which to locate the sources of value is the desires of the individual person. And it is money, issued by the state and linked to state discourses about modernity, that seems most to promote these desires. Thus, in

dealing with money, people find themselves wrestling with a host of dilemmas raised by the tensions between the promises and threats of modernity.²

These tensions are especially prominent in local talk about “materialism.” As their long-term interests, immediate concerns, and discursive circumstances variously incline them, Sumbanese may portray “the modern age” (*I. masa moderen*)³ in terms of an increasing materialism in people’s needs and economic activities—or in terms of disenchantment, as people lose their primitive and fetishistic overinvestment in things such as ancestral valuables or bridewealth. New forms of production and circulation may be celebrated as bringing with them rationality and enlightenment. Conversely, money and commodities may be portrayed as corrosive agents that attack kinship, amity, spirituality, sociality, and virtue on all fronts. The relationship between modernity and “the materialist” (*I. materialis*) is a topic of anxious concern across Indonesia, whose ruling regime from 1966 until its fall in 1998 combined an aggressive emphasis on economic development with social conservatism and political authoritarianism. By conventional measures, until the crisis of 1997 the regime fostered rapid economic progress, although this progress may have seemed distant and of questionable value for many who lived at the geographical and political margins of the nation.

On the island of Sumba, modernity, markets, and money appear in the context of a subsistence economy and a thriving system of ceremonial exchange.⁴ Since Mauss’s *The Gift* (1990 [1925]), scholars have tended to see money and ceremonial exchange as fundamentally opposed. The latter is distinguished from the former by the obligations between people that bind one moment of exchange to others, and by the spiritual links between people and the things that circulate between and, in marriage, along with them. Similar views on markets and exchange are found in local talk in many places like late-twentieth-century Sumba. Many Sumbanese tend to see money and markets as incipient challenges to the values supposedly embodied in exchange. Government officials and development experts worry, on the one hand, that ceremonial exchange is hindering economic development and, on the other, that the demise of exchange systems will have destructive consequences for social cohesion (Iskandar and Djoeroemana 1994).

Nor are such worries new; in 1952 a Dutch missionary forecast that once Sumbanese came to see their traditional valuables in economic terms, possessions would “become a dangerous and threatening power” (Onvlee 1973:26). But the distinction between inalienable and alienable may not be so clear-cut. On examination, both money and ceremonial exchange present certain difficulties to any effort to explain the value of objects solely by appeal to their conventional sign value, mode of production, or innate ties to persons.

MEANING AND THE MOTION OF THINGS

Consider the following episode from a marriage negotiation I attended in 1986 in the Sumbanese district of Anakalang. Early in the initial stages of negotiation, trouble arose because the principals on the bride’s side were from a neighboring district and thus unfamiliar with local procedural nuances. The bride’s side initiated the exchange in the conventional way by sending over a dish on which they had placed a cloth, in order formally “to ask the purpose” of their guests’ visit. The groom’s side replied in an equally conventional manner by sending the dish back with a 100-rupiah note (a trivial sum even on Sumba—the smallest sum available in paper form, worth less than the price of a pack of cigarettes). The proper reciprocal to cloth is a gold ornament or its substitute, money. In either case, the object in the offering dish is an obligatory token that serves as a “base” to make the spoken words formal and binding. But the mother of the bride loudly rejected the note, saying the use of money in a formal exchange was inappropriate. After some discussion, the bride’s party asked that the Rp 100 note be replaced with Rp 500. At this, the spokesman from the groom’s side sharply berated them, explaining that when money is placed in the dish, it must not be treated as money. It is a token, just like a gold ornament. With a certain amount of grumbling, the bride’s side was persuaded to accept this, on the condition that it was a proper procedure and not an insult, and the negotiation proceeded.

This incident took place at the highly fraught border between money and exchange, but are the two positions really clear-cut? The bride’s side seems at first to be defending moral boundaries in a way familiar from received descriptions of spheres of exchange. From this point of view, they recognize the threat that money and the market-

place pose to traditional moral values and the solidarity of precapitalist society. But when they retreat, they ask for an increase in the face value of the money, as if the insult had not been the intrusion of money after all, but rather the low price. In this, they reveal a possibility that always exists in exchange—that symbolic tokens might slip into alternative regimes of value. For, on the one hand, exchange valuables do not necessarily possess all the properties (inalienability, personality, morality) attributed to them by the model of the gift a priori (see Keane 1997). And on the other, the status of money itself is not entirely stable: in this case it serves as a formal token whose referent is confined to ceremonial exchange, yet it retains the potential for reinterpretation as cash value. In either case it is “symbolic,” but its vulnerability to slippage is a function in part of its irreducible materiality. Even money shares with other objects the property of taking objectual form. Thus it can cross contexts and, being semiotically underdetermined, is subject to reinterpretation. To make sense of the materiality and semiotics of money, however, first requires a look at the meaning and value of other objects that circulate in Sumba.

In Sumba, objects come most prominently into their own in formal exchanges between individuals or groups of people. Formal exchanges are the binding transactions at the heart of virtually all events of any importance; in the 1980s and 1990s the most prominent were marriage alliances. I have discussed these exchanges in detail in Keane 1997. Here, in order to compare the semiotics and materiality of valuables and money, I want briefly to return to one incident recounted in that book.

Ubu Tara had a large stone tomb carved for himself. By convention, when the capstone was dragged from the quarry to his village, his wife’s kin provided two valuable textiles that were carried on top of it as banners. When Ama Koda, an important affine, was leaving the concluding feast, one of Ubu Tara’s sons gave him one of the “banners,” which by now were neatly folded up, to placate him in the wake of earlier hurt feelings. On arriving home, Ama Koda opened it up and discovered that he had only half a textile. On inquiry, it turned out that during the tomb dragging, the banner had snagged on a tree branch, and someone had cut off the tangled half. Once folded in the village, this was no longer apparent. Furious, Ama Koda sent the cloth back

to Ubu Tara with the message, "I'm not yet so poor that I need a bit of cloth to cover my loins!" Great efforts were required to heal the rupture.

This episode shows some of vicissitudes to which material signs are prone. Ama Koda correctly placed great semiotic weight on the physical condition of the cloth, but that physical condition was subject to happenstance. Note the rapid series of roles through which the piece of cloth moved: by turns, it was a conventional obligation between affines, a figurative banner, a physical encumbrance tangled in a tree, a token of regard meant to placate an irate guest, a vehicle of insult, a metaphoric rag of poverty, and finally a rejected gift. In practical terms, this sequence of roles illuminates three things about objects as social media: that they are readily separated from the transactors and the context of the transaction; that they are available for multiple interpretations; and that throughout, they remain material objects and thus vulnerable to all that can happen to things.

These roles illustrate how both the value and possible meanings of objects are underdetermined. They call for speech, interpretive practices, and political strategies. This means they are necessarily caught up in the uncertainties of social action. Being material, objects are always subject to the forces of what Grice (1957) called "natural meaning" (signs based on causality, as a tear means the cloth was snagged in a tree). But as tokens within social action, they are also always subject to transformation into bearers of "non-natural meaning" (intentional signs, as a torn cloth means an insult). And this means the latter is always intertwined with the former. The meanings of things cannot be sharply disengaged from the ways in which they are embedded in the physical world. Thus the very materiality of objects means they are not merely arbitrary signs. Their materiality makes a difference both in the sources of their meanings and in their destinations, such that they are subject to shifting physical, economic, and semiotic contexts. Finally, insofar as objects often *seem* to carry their values and meanings on their sleeves, as it were, they can play critical roles at the intersections among these shifting contexts.⁵ Their power and value emerge at the intersection of their character as conventional signs and their potential roles in a possibly unlimited range of contexts.

AMBIGUOUS ATTACHMENTS

In practice, Sumbanese formal exchanges stress the representative functions of objects, play down utility, and rigorously exclude money except as a symbolic piece of metal. Nonetheless, formal exchanges are embedded within a larger political economy of both social signs and usable things, and they take some of their meaning from the way in which they articulate with other "regimes of value." Explicit talk about "the real tradition" is one of the ways in which the barriers between exchange and its alternatives are regulated. Sumbanese can point to the coexistence of exchange with markets, barter, usurious lending, and theft in order to insist on its distinctive moral value. For example, when Ubu Kura tried to impress upon me the superior morality of exchange, he said that the same pig that would get you five buffalo and five horses in marriage exchange would be worth the price of only one middling buffalo and a small horse if sold. In saying this, he was drawing on market values as a way to measure the heavy weight of the obligations imposed by proper exchange. (The claims of rational calculation cut both ways: the early Christian converts sought to discredit ancestral ritual for its wastefulness. As one proselytizer put it, the offerings "just use up chickens." Of course, by some understandings of sacrifice [e.g., Bataille 1988a], that would be precisely the point.)

As elsewhere (Akin and Robbins 1999; Thomas 1991), such comparisons are part of the background against which exchange has long been carried out. They simultaneously represent formal exchange as morally elevated by virtue of its supposed exemption from the calculation and rationality of other transactions and as a difficult burden. The point of explicit comparisons between formal exchange and alternative regimes of value is usually to affirm the status and compulsory nature of "real custom" as a discrete domain of social action. Sumbanese who make this case may draw on the discourse of contemporary Indonesian national culture in order to contrast "real" and "politicized" custom. In reference to exchange, "politicized custom" denotes competition, calculation, and profit and confines these to the disorderly present. These are familiar themes in talk about capitalist relations (Bloch and Parry 1989; Hugh-Jones 1990). But I argue that they also manifest pervasive concerns about the potential detachment of objects from persons and

thus about the boundaries of the subject and the ability to locate value in persons or in things.

One aspect of the comparison of exchange and its alternatives is an implicit claim about rank. Sumbanese frequently assert that market thinking is purely a recent development and (depending on the case they want to make) usually a deplorable one—that in the past, no one calculated the value of what they gave you. This is a part of the logic in talk about custom, which explicitly portrays both donors and recipients as acting not out of their own desires or willfulness but only because they are obligated by ancestral requirements. But, people say, now we live in a selfish era whose slogan is “as long as I (get mine)” (*mali nyuwa*), an era in which people are driven by personal desires.⁶ As a way of expressing and historicizing the difference between formal exchange and its alternatives, people sometimes talk about the economic irrationality of the past. For example, one man told me that people used to trade like quantities for like, regardless of the actual substance: one sack of rice would go for one much more expensive sack of coffee. He was suggesting that the folly of his forebears consisted in being taken in by the very materiality of things. They were unable to perform the symbolic operations embodied in money: exchange value in those days was inseparable from the things themselves (see Keane 1996). Part of the subtext here is that the ancestors’ apparent folly is inseparable from their aristocratic disdain for haggling and calculation. The hierarchical implications of alternative regimes of value become explicit when some people observe that Sumbanese who engage in trade are usually of low rank, because, they claim, such people are naturally more clever at calculation. This is supposedly because they are unconstrained by the sense of honor, having little to lose.

Calculation implies a play on the relations between the object as a sign of something other than itself and as a source of value in itself, which is most evident at the boundaries between formal exchange and other kinds of transactions. The boundaries among kinds of transactions are permeable—if not conceptually then practically, for there are few exchange valuables that do not have some value in other contexts. For example, a horse received from Christian affines in marriage exchange can be sacrificed to “pagan” spirits or sold for cash. This permeability is both a resource and a threat, insofar as a skillful or simply

powerful player can take advantage of it, but the existence of alternative schemes of value bears the increasingly real potential to undermine the status claims that are sustained by exchange, a threat at once logical, political, and economic.

Despite the traditionalist tendency to claim for the past the high values of ceremonial exchange and to confine less exalted alternatives to the present, all sorts of transactions have been available to Sumbanese, even before the introduction of markets and shops (compare Barnes and Barnes 1989). The most formal kinds of exchange impose the greatest constraints on potential interpretations. They do so in part by drawing on the social authority of elders to limit the kinds of objects involved and the functions they may serve, and by emphasizing the properties by which they serve as representations (signs) and representatives (of agents).

Material objects contrast in several ways to the familiar Saussurean model of the arbitrary sign, which signifies only by virtue of a social convention, and whose phenomenal qualities (such as color or sound) are relevant only as marks of difference from other signs. Objects cannot be produced at will but must be sought from somewhere—they are subject to scarcity and are relatively easy to quantify. Moreover, even exchange valuables bear physical properties in excess of their purely conventional attributes, which contributes to their potential for diversion into use or to alternative kinds of transactions. Finally, they have durability. Nonconsumables persist over time, across multiple transactions, passing through the hands of many people and taking on a range of possible functions. The materiality of objects is a condition of possibility for their movement across social and semiotic domains. For example, the charisma of the Thai monk, once it has been objectified in the form of an amulet, is able to enter into the mundane realm of distinctly nonascetic purposes, such as good luck in the lottery (Tambiah 1984:336). The multiple uses, mobility, and durability of objects allows them to extend the agency of their producers and original transactors. But the same properties entail the possibility that they will become detached from their transactors altogether.

One effect of the high formality of exchange events in Sumba is to help separate signification and utility, emphasizing the semiotic character of objects that also bear use and market values. Such formality is

part of the ongoing effort it takes to keep gift and commodity distinct. It is reinforced by the ritual speech, which states explicitly that neither party desires the objects in question, but rather, each is compelled only by ancestral mandate. Acknowledging the possibility of misconstrual, people often say that marriage is not like going to the market. They insist that they seek objects not for the value or utility of the things themselves, as in purchase and sale, but as expressions of each party's value for the other. Underlining this insistence is the great attention they pay to the proper forms of transaction.

The insistent attentiveness given to tokens in offerings implies a latent alternative. People are aware of the possibility that the gift will become detached from the giver and the intent. Objects require the reflexive capacity of language if they are to serve as fully efficacious media of social relations. One pig, horse, or piece of cloth is pretty much like another of its kind: it is words that specify what kind of action is being performed, from whom the prestations come, to whom they are directed, and what kind of act they perform. As a result, the capacity of objects to serve semiotically as representations and economically as representatives of persons is unstable and requires constant effort to sustain. Recall the quarrel between Ama Koda and Ubu Tara over the torn banner. The conventional meanings that material signs convey are vulnerable to the accidents to which objects are prone. The insult is made possible in part by the way in which material signs expose semantics to objective circumstances, and in part by the way in which people's manipulation of objects constantly works to transform natural qualities into signs of persons. If a cloth really represents its transactors, how could a torn cloth fail to do so as well? If objects are parts of larger projects, then could the giving of a torn cloth be only an isolated incident?

Mauss's great insight was to challenge the Cartesian obviousness of the distinction between possessing subject and possessed object. But the very workings of exchange depend on the fact that the identity between the two is not seamless: their relation has a double character. For objects to be able to exteriorize and represent their possessors in circulation, they also must in some way be detachable from them. Like Mauss, Simmel saw possessions as extensions of the self: when a person acquires property, "the sphere of the individual extends beyond its original limits, and extends into another self which, however, is still

'his'" (1990 [1907]:323). This capacity for "extension" exists only to the degree that the object is *not* fully identified with the subject. It follows from this double character of objects that the subject must engage actively with them, that possession is a form of action (Simmel 1990 [1907]:302–5).

The relentless work—and the formality, the politics, the talk, the attentiveness—demanded by Sumbanese exchange seems to be one way of responding to these circumstances. Exteriorization and objectification (see Miller 1987) work hand in hand with detachability and mobility. Therein lies both the promise and the risk posed by things, as vehicles of representation. Sent into circulation, they can extend the identity and agency of their transactors. By the same token, they may become lost to those whom they would serve, or be diverted into other regimes of value. The capacity of the prestation to stand for its owner over the course of its travels is not an inherent property of objects themselves but requires human efforts and interactions to sustain.

ENTER MONEY

Since Mauss, systems of exchange like those in Sumba have come to stand for everything that the economic character of "modernity" supposedly lacks. The contrast is not restricted to Western scholars; for people in Sumba, as in many other places, the concept of "modernity" and the experience of the state that attends it are inseparable from the ubiquity of money. Sumbanese often experience modernity, strive for its promises, and resist its threats by way of their dealings with money. Like many of those who have written about modernity, Sumbanese often treat money as something with its own dynamic, something that, once introduced into society, has a rapid corrosive effect. The classic expression of this perspective remains that given by Marx (1976 [1867]:229), for whom money was a radical leveler, extinguishing all distinctions, because it never revealed which commodities had been transformed into it: "Circulation becomes the great social retort into which everything is thrown, to come out again as the money crystal." In this context, Sumbanese practices and discourses surrounding formal exchange are not simply remnants from an archaic past but are developing into strenuous and self-conscious responses to the world of money and markets. This response is both discursive, a vision of an

alternative regime of value, and practical, an effort to control the circulation of value's objectified forms (compare Akin and Robbins 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 1990; Ferguson 1985; Hutchinson 1996).

Here I focus on three aspects of money: its relations to abstraction, alienation, and production. I look at money not primarily as a component of an established system of commodity circulation but rather as currency in its phenomenal and imagined forms, ways in which it appears even in the absence of a full-fledged monetary economy. I am interested, that is, in local experiences of and ideas about money. For whatever the larger political economic context, as Guyer (1995:6) points out, money "is a vastly important reality to vast numbers of people, all but an infinitesimal number of whom have absolutely no idea of the official doctrines under which it 'makes sense,' but whose own constructions...are a necessary component of that 'sense' as it works out in practice." People, that is, cannot *not* have ideas about why and how money is valuable. Both money's fluidity and its limits—including the extent to which people trust it—are functions of those ideas.

Sumba is a useful place from which to look at money, because, being a relatively recent arrival and still scarce, money is far less taken for granted there than in more thoroughly monetized places. Until the twentieth century, the few coins that made it to Sumba were either treated like other inalienable valuables or melted down as raw materials for ornaments.⁷ It was not until the 1920s and 1930s, with Dutch encouragement, that regular markets appeared, but trade was still carried out largely by barter (Versluys 1941:463–64). In Anakalang, the first petty traders, none of them Sumbanese, seem to have set up more permanent kiosks in the 1930s (Riekerk 1934). Beginning in 1911, the colonial government imposed a head tax, to be paid in cash (Couvreur 1914). But by the end of Dutch rule, just before the Japanese occupation, one study found that money had made little impact on local society, being used largely as a unit of value for things of small worth (Versluys 1941:481).

Under the Indonesian state, monetization of Sumba lagged behind the rest of the nation, and large-scale government expenditure, the most important source of cash there, began only in the 1970s (Corner 1989:184; Iskandar and Djoeroemana 1994:67).⁸ In the 1980s and 1990s, most Sumbanese still lacked a regular cash income.

Everyday subsistence and most ceremonial needs were largely met by local production, barter, and other forms of exchange. Cash was required primarily for taxes, school fees, church offerings, and purchase of items such as medicine, kerosene, cooking oil, salt, sugar, coffee, tobacco, shirts, sandals, dishware, and bus fares. Only in the most recent decade or so have the most ambitious and well-heeled families begun to send children off the island for higher education, in the hope that they will land positions in the civil service. Funds for this are usually raised piecemeal by pooling the resources of many kinfolk—usually along links built through past ceremonial exchanges. In the 1990s, off-island schooling constituted perhaps the single greatest incentive for Sumbanese to sell cattle.

Money thus plays a limited and highly marked role on Sumba. Although the Indonesian rupiah is trusted, or at least was until the crisis of 1997 (in contrast to money in highly inflationary economies or weak states), in Sumba it does not flow freely or pervasively. Money's purchasing power is highly constrained; labor, land, and cattle, for instance, are more easily and legitimately acquired through kinship, patronage, or exchange.⁹ Many people obtain money only for specific purposes (Vel 1994:70) such as paying taxes or school fees, and thus money runs through very tight circuits, without entering into investment or credit (compare Guyer 1995:9). When one person comes into some money, others are likely to make their claims on it; this is why some civil servants try to get themselves posted to parts of the island far from their kin. For those few people who have bank accounts, the main reason is to hide their money from others. As a result, money in Sumba does not always fully possess the properties of fluidity, impersonality, or abstraction, and, like exchange valuables, it often retains some indexical links to its sources and owners.¹⁰

THE VALUE OF RENUNCIATION

Recall the use of money as a token in marriage exchange, in lieu of a gold ornament. This context suggests that gold and money have more in common than simply their properties. Both take their value in part from constraints on their materiality—the concrete particularity that for Marx defined the use-value of objects is played down in favor of semiotic abstraction. This is one reason money is so often compared to

the quintessential arbitrary sign: “Like money, language manifests itself in material form, but in the former as in the latter the manifestation is external to the nature of the means and does not really matter” (Coulmas 1992:10). This negative property of money was described by Simmel as the result of a process of elimination or suppression: “It appears that even the most useful object must *renounce* its usefulness in order to function as money” (1990 [1907]:152). Only in this way can objects serve to symbolize simple quantities of value (yet the very uniformity that sustains money’s abstractness has historically depended on the uniform, divisible, and durable properties of the materials out of which it is manufactured [Crump 1981:4]).

But this renunciation is incapable of fully abolishing its alternatives: even money, for example, to the extent that it retains a material form, may take on new functions. Coins may become jewelry or bullion—as Marx put it, “For a coin, the road from the mint is also the path to the melting pot” (1976 [1867]:222). Not only that, the very absence of one possibility is a critical component of the meaning of what remains: in Simmel’s words, “the value that money has, and that allows it to perform its function, may be determined by those other possible uses which have to be foregone.... The perceived value of the developed function is constituted by...the exclusion of all other functions” (1990 [1907]:155).

So both gold and money, when placed in the dish, take their value from a similar basic structure of deferred value: everyone knows that the object in the dish is convertible to other forms. The Rp 100 could, of course, become money again. Gold and cloth, too, can be diverted from exchange. Indeed, their persistence as valuables can be seen as a continual refusal to allow them to return to their original state. As I argued earlier, it takes the work of ritualization to maintain the boundary between the semiotics of exchange valuables and the alternative meanings and uses that things might possess in coexisting regimes of value.

Anakalanges descriptions of their world before “modernity” stress the absence of abstraction and a fetishistic clinging to the materiality of things. Anakalanges accounts of the naiveté of their forebears, however, contain an important subtext. People in the past ignored differences of quality because of their nobility. They eschewed such calculations because they refused to give in to their desires. Whereas for

Marx the concrete particularities of things were important as the source of their use-values (1976 [1867]:230), the apparent empiricism that Sumbanese ascribe to exchange is a mark of people’s relative *independence* from use-value. To follow ancestral rules is a demonstrative refusal to calculate utility, which can be understood only as a function of need or desire. Desire is something that separates one simultaneously from one’s own best self (a loss of self-control) and from others (by attacking the moral bonds of community), and thus it threatens one’s claims to high rank. By stressing the conventionalized semiotics of objects, formal exchange displays the players’ imperviousness to the appeal of utility or their own wants.

The abstractness and fluidity that are supposed to characterize money, by contrast, appear to place desire in the foreground. Unlike inalienable valuables, money realizes its value neither in transaction as a social performance nor simply in being held, but only in that which it obtains in a future expenditure. To the extent that money is abstract and its uses unspecified—that is, as it is free both of particular qualities in itself and of the constraints of ancestral rules—any particular expenditure represents a choice among possible options. Therefore it seems to express, above all, the wishes of the person who spends it. And to legitimate those wishes is to challenge the principles by which people are valued and particular relations of domination sustained.

ALIENATION

The multiple uses, mobility, and durability of exchange goods allow them to extend the agency of their producers and original transactors. But the same properties entail the possibility that they will become detached from their transactors altogether. This brings me to the second property of money, its relation to alienation. In most accounts of modernity, money is preeminently the instrument of alienation. It circulates promiscuously, without respecting persons or things. Ethnographic literature often describes it as dissolving the moral obligations that bind individuals into communities. Against this view of the multiply alienated conditions of modern life, Mauss saw the model of the gift as an attractive alternative.

Yet even Sumbanese exchange is never too far from the possibility of loss and alienation, both in practice and in fantasy. In practice, the

capacity of objects to circulate threatens to become total detachment, a possibility that formal procedures and elaborate ritual speech work constantly to prevent. On the other hand, divergence from exchange can be an appealing fantasy, for even those who hold the greatest stakes in the play of exchange may chafe against the constraints it imposes on them, complaining, for instance, of the relatives who show up asking for help the moment one comes into a windfall. The alternative, a source of wealth free from social obligation, remains attractive. This, along with the risk that wealth will become detached from its possessor, is elaborated in a rich discourse about *yora*, the spirits of the wild who can become demonic patronesses of selected individuals. *Yora* have several features in common with those presented by market, money, and government development projects. The *yora* is a source of antisocial wealth that cannot reproduce itself, lead to social ties, or be transmitted to a person's children. It is also associated with illicit unions between men and women, thus exemplifying unrestrained desire. *Yora* represent the conjunction of wealth from beyond society with the threat of loss. It makes sense that such wealth is ephemeral, since it often manifests individual willfulness. The *yora*, like the government development project, is distinguished by the inexplicable entry of money from no comprehensible or stable source. The fact that this wealth is ultimately sterile parallels its lack of grounding in social interaction. Those who are considered most likely to deal with *yora* are either young, unmarried, adventurous men or, more rarely, men so rich and powerful that they can hope to enter into such dealings with impunity.

The links between the idea of *yora* and the problems of modernity are especially evident in the following story, well known throughout Anakalang. The version I pass on here was told to me by Umbu Dewa Damaràka, a ritual specialist.

Ubu Nyali Malar was given a chicken by a *yora*. That chicken laid an egg which crowed from the inside. Once hatched from the egg, that rooster crowed continuously. As it grew, it kept on crowing. This crowing carried all the way to Java. Java over there heard that rooster crow. Now a man came from Java to Sumba wanting to buy that rooster. He wanted to buy it with money, but

Ubu Nyali didn't want to sell it. He said, "Better than that, give me that gold ring on your finger." The man from Java really wanted that rooster, so in the end he gave up the ring. Now he had the rooster, which he brought home to Java. So that's why now the president is in Java. That ring is in Sumba. It had child after child, until they put it in the granary. The granary filled up with gold. Then Ubu Nyali's slave, Mùda, ran off with the ring. The ring kept having children. He put it in a granary, it filled up the granary; put it in another, filled that too. Finally put it in a cave, but that too filled. It's all gold in that cave. So now that's why in Java, it becomes the president, and in Sumba, we're rich in gold. So it's like that rooster: we hear that president wherever we are in Indonesia, otherwise, why is the president always from Java?

The fate of Ubu Nyali's gold displays both the promise and the hazards of antisocial sources of wealth. Reproducing on its own, it contains the possibility of autonomy and riches beyond the demands and politics of social interaction. Nonetheless it remains detachable from persons and thus vulnerable to loss. Once lost, it becomes the property of foreigners. This certainly accords with Sumbanese experience both historically and in everyday life in the 1990s. Sumbanese are reluctant to introduce money into dealings with clan fellows and affines, which are structured by formal exchange and informal debts, dependencies, and mutual assistance. In practice, most money is directly received from and paid back to non-Sumbanese, either the state or ethnically "foreign" traders (Vel 1994:68–69).

Even after Ubu Nyali's gold becomes a stolen good, it is wealth that reproduces itself independent of human agency. This foreign gold is unlike normal gold valuables, which, either as inalienable ancestral possessions held by clans or as tokens that circulate in ceremonial exchanges, are intimately linked to the social identity of their transactors. In contrast, this gold carries on regardless of proper ownership. As value uprooted from ancestry, it is alienable. As value that requires no reciprocity, it is self-contained.

Finally, the loss of the rooster forms an image of the colonial relations between Sumba and both Dutch and Indonesian rule. The

rooster is a conventional Sumbanese image of masculine bravado, aggressiveness, and fame. With the rooster, Sumba surrenders power and self-esteem for wealth. Moreover, by Sumbanese standards, the very act of barter by which it is given away entails a suggestion of loss. Although barter in some form or other has long existed in Sumba, it is usually considered to be unworthy of proud people, since, unlike formal exchange, which is supposed to be dictated by ancestral mandates, it is visibly driven by personal, even bodily, needs or desires. It establishes no further relations, in contrast to the multigenerational ties of debt and ritualized obligations that are fostered by exchange. The result of Ubu Nyali's barter makes clear that local claims to wealth and authority now operate against a background of something that has been lost: the political control represented by the president will always be elsewhere, though his voice can be heard everywhere. Gold, self-reproducing and circulating without limit, enters as political autonomy departs.

PRODUCTION

Yora represent not only antisocial wealth but also its uncanny sources. This brings me to the final feature of money, its peculiar relation to its own materiality as a product. Money seems to many Sumbanese to have sources not only distant in space but also at a remove from the labor and agency of humans. In 1912, a Dutch official recounted the following conversation:

A puzzle which our host would gladly have solved was why the "taoe djawa" (= foreign men, Europeans) came to have much money. He was asked what he thought himself. He said that in the foreign land three trees must grow, one which bears as fruit gold pieces (English pounds of which men on Sumba see much), another of silver (rijksdollars), and the third copper coins (2 1/2 cent pieces). At a certain time, as soon as there is a need, the king or kings order a harvesting. Guilders and smaller silver money are nothing other than unripe rijksdollars, cents still undeveloped "gobangs" (2 1/2 cent pieces). (Witkamp 1912:486; parentheses in the original)

Juxtaposed to the widespread interest in *yora*, this familiar story

suggests that when people think about money, they think of uncanny origins that require no more labor than the plucking of fruit from a tree, a form of production requiring the minimal intervention of human agency. (This recalls Marx's satirical remark that those who fetishize capital assume it is "a property of money to generate value and yield interest, much as it is an attribute of pear trees to bear pears" [1967 (1894):392].)

But Sumbanese gold valuables also have uncanny and distant origins. People insist that "it wasn't *we* who made them" but rather the ancestors. Part of the value of gold, as I have suggested, derives from the fact that it is not produced locally, that it ultimately comes from nowhere in Sumbanese experience. Put another way, its value lies not in local control over the means of production but perhaps in the promise of an escape from the demands of production altogether, and in its capacity to supplement physical labor. In this respect money is like ancestral valuables to the extent that it represents the state as an absent origin. In a place like Sumba, money is one of the most pervasive everyday forms the state takes in most people's everyday experience. Money is legal tender because it is stamped with an inscription bearing the state's political authorization. The authority represented by money portrays itself on money's material substance: every coin or banknote carries some emblem of the state. It wears, in Marx's image, a "national uniform" (1976 [1867]:222; see Foster 1998; Hart 1986; Shell 1982). As a medium of alienation and an uncanny source of value beyond bodily labor, money is not always radically different from exchange valuables. Moreover, money is not necessarily even antisocial: like exchange, the use of money still requires trust (something made explicit, if sociopolitically obscure, by the slogan "In God We Trust" on American currency). It is just that the object of that trust has shifted from exchange partners and the ancestors to the state. To that extent, money does not so much abolish society as it institutes a different kind of society. So wherein is the distinctive difference that makes for modernity?

THE STATE OF DESIRE

In contrasting the casualness of market transactions with the formality of exchange, Sumbanese express historical imagination in terminology that reflects contemporary national culture, but they also

manifest more specific concerns about the potential detachment of objects from persons, concerns that are implicated in exchange itself. If the risk of loss has *always* haunted the ceremonies of exchange, then this risk has become inseparable from the dominant regime of value. In the modern world, the authority of ancestral mandates meets an alternative authority in the pervasive presence of money.

Money, of course, is issued and backed up by the state, but, as I have noted, Sumbanese often associate its appearance in their lives with the state in other ways as well. As in many subsistence economies, the need for money was initially produced by the state's demands for taxes. Today most money in Sumba ultimately derives from the state, either in salaries or from businesses whose income is due largely to government projects. More generally, the state has established itself as the chief promoter of capitalism and endeavored to do away with what it sees as the more irrational forms of local expenditure. Economic rationality has been the constant topic of government exhortations and directives. Finally, most states that issue money try to extirpate any competition with or restraints on the free movement of its currency—something that tends to meet resistance even in highly developed capitalist economies (Zelizer 1994).

What the state hopes money will come to mean may not fully determine how people understand it locally. Sumbanese understand money's threats and promises in terms of the virtues and frustrations of exchange. The ways Sumbanese handle and speak about money seem to be responses to a dilemma posed by the state project of development. This dilemma is that, to the extent that money's origin lies in the state, it seems to be the state that guarantees the play of individual desires. Sumbanese describe the present era with the Indonesian expression "free era" (*I. masa merdeka*). In national discourse, the "free era" usually refers to liberation from colonial rule. But Sumbanese often use the expression in speaking of the abolition of slavery and the resulting challenge to rank distinctions and the exchange system that helps support them. Depending on the speaker's social position, or the extent to which he or she is at home in the world of rank and exchange, this is not an unambiguous good. The "free era" means that Sumbanese live in a time dominated by "economic thinking," a time of rampant individualism. The ostentatious suppression of use-value and economic

profit that is displayed in the forms of ceremonial exchange is supposed to manifest the participants' nobility and public display of honor. Like other familiar critics of money, many Sumbanese describe the present day as a time of antisocial stinginess, a ruthless calculating of costs and benefits unconcerned with honor or rank. The two aspects are combined in the assertion that now people get ahead by virtue of "brains"—by which people ambiguously refer to both the economic rationality that development should produce and the cleverness associated with devious former slaves, people who, it would seem, have no honor to lose or ancestry to sully.

Of course not everyone has the same stakes in the regimes of value and the social hierarchies that money seems to threaten. Former slaves and unmarried women, for instance, may benefit from the promise of freedom both from rank and from material dependence as reproduced in exchange. But even those who celebrate modernity and economic rationality must have some account of the respective values of exchange and money. This is where Christian discourses of interiority and materialism often come into play, discourses that help give expression to shifting distinctions between subject and object (Keane 1996, 1998). Talk about "materialism" seems to incite people to a certain dematerialization in their understandings of the world. This is evident, for instance, in the effort to treat material goods as merely symbolic. For example, Sumbanese Christians must often face the question, what is the value that is transacted in marriage exchange? Few are willing to reject exchange out of hand, yet they also cannot accept the world of ancestor spirits and rituals at its foundations. Nor are they entirely comfortable with the apparent identification of persons with things that marriage transactions seem to produce. One solution, which I often heard, is to explain marriage exchange in functionalist terms, as fostering social solidarity. Another explanation is provided in this newspaper essay by a Catholic high-school student (Witin 1997).¹¹

Bridewealth in the form of traditional valuables like ivory, gold, buffalo, is at base only a symbol (*simbol*) in order to raise a woman's value and dignity. Demands for bridewealth show that a woman must be honored, valued....Bridewealth is only a symbol of the woman's self-respect....It is proper that bridewealth

be retained, on the basis of its essence as a symbol of woman's own value and dignity—and not tend toward business (*bisnis*) or “trade” in daughters. On the part of women themselves, the most important problem is as far as possible that she be able to guard her self-respect so that the demand for bridewealth which is to be discussed by her family doesn't put her to shame. One should value oneself by way of one's patterns of thinking, attitude, and praiseworthy behavior, before one is valued by others, especially the groom, by way of the bridewealth that will be discussed.

The author makes explicit something that is implicit in the social functionalist explanation as well—and that underlies many Western views, such as Polanyi's (1944:46), that assume a clear opposition between material and social values. Both accounts dematerialize exchange and treat material objects as merely signs of some immaterial value, whether that be social solidarity or self-worth. (The self-conscious modernity of this is evident in Witin's unusual appropriation of the English words “symbol” and “business.”) This dematerialization underwrites the world of money, in which the subject is supposed to be clearly separated from its objects and in which value can be fully abstracted from concrete practices and material forms. Yet in seeking to account for the value those objects hold for the subject, one is left with little but the willful and desiring subject itself.

Put in other words, the writer is describing how the modern subject must be the source of its own value. And there the subject encounters the promise and the threat of money, in the freedom that money seems to accord this subject. Money clearly proclaims a difficulty that other valuables also encounter, albeit more unobtrusively. It is hard to confine material objects to conventionalized symbolism and to constrain their motion to prescribed pathways. As the emblem of this social and semiotic fluidity, money bears a further implication. To the extent that it is abstract, it permits a potentially unconstrained range of choices among purchasable items. In coming to stand for those choices, for Sumbanese, it seems to point toward the desires that any given choice expresses.

But who stands behind money and its promises? Here the subject

encounters the state, which, by authorizing money, seems to sponsor that willfulness. Yet certainly neither the state nor (for different reasons) most Sumbanese are willing to accept the consequences. The state's efforts to control willfulness and desire (as stimulated, for example, by elections or advertising) lie beyond the scope of this chapter. Sumbanese efforts are visible in the continued power of exchange in the 1990s. Recall again the use of money as an exchange valuable in the offering dish. To use money as a material token, emphasizing the underdetermined character of its materiality, is to deny the authorizing stamp on its face. To treat money as if it were gold is to deny the ultimate power of the issuing authority in favor of the semiotic value asserted by ancestral mandate. The use of the coin does not replace material use-values with symbolic values but rather asserts the primacy of one authorizing origin for signs over another. It asserts the superior power of exchange to suspend use-values in favor of claims to higher value. In the process, it seeks to deny the abstractness of money. Yet it does not necessarily do so by reasserting the materiality of meaningful objects. Rather, those objects are turned into signs of invisible values such as “social solidarity,” “tradition,” or “self-worth.”

The tension between the two uses of money represents a tension between two sites of agency. In exchange, persons manipulate tokens of value in deference to the displaced agents of ancestral mandate. In commodity circulation, the state seems, unwittingly, to authorize the cleverness of desiring selves and the endless possibilities that money affords them. The individual who can buy and sell with impunity bears the warrant of the state, which itself remains invisible except in its effects, in the form of “use”-less, circulating signs of itself. This rather implausible vision is, in turn, an effect of that aspect of the ideology of money that celebrates abstraction, denies social mediation, and imagines that signification offers the subject an escape from materiality.

Notes

I am grateful to Fred Myers and Annette Weiner for their invitation to join the seminar at the School of American Research. My thanks to all the other seminar participants, especially Ivan Karp, Daniel Miller, and Fred Myers, for their comments. This chapter draws on fieldwork and archival research supported by Fulbright-Hays, the Social Science Research Council, the Wenner-Gren

Foundation, and the Association for Asian Studies and sponsored by the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia and Universitas Nusa Cendana. It was substantially revised during a year spent at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey.

1. At the boundaries of the properly salable in the United States we find things such as prostitution, fees charged for adopted children, the sale of body parts, and bribery. These are notable precisely for the discomfort, anxiety, or outrage they provoke. See Pietz 1997 for an insightful discussion of this problem as it was faced by the writers of liability laws for human deaths caused by machines in the early industrial age.

2. Albert O. Hirschman (1977) argued that the emergence of capitalism in the West was legitimated in part by the development of a conceptual distinction between the passions and the interests. The former were seen as destructive and irrational, the latter as subject to rational calculation. But like people in many other places in which other values are being challenged by the market, most Sumbanese find calculation and rationality themselves to be antithetical to social virtue.

3. Terms in the national language, Indonesian, are identified with an “I”; all other terms are in Anakalanges or cognate languages of Sumba.

4. Sumba, an island about the size of Jamaica, is dry, is sparsely populated, lies off the main trade routes across the archipelago, and itself offered little but sandalwood and slaves to attract traders. The Dutch took fairly light-handed control of the island in the first decades of the twentieth century. The postwar Indonesian state was too impoverished and distracted to attend to Sumba until the oil boom of the 1970s. What export and local trade now exists (in buffalo, horses, and local cloth) is controlled by ethnic Chinese, Arabs, and other off-islanders. Commerce in land is very recent and still highly constricted by the persistence of collective ownership and the general view that certain kinds of land should not be alienated. In the 1990s, most Sumbanese still depended on subsistence farming. Although there is considerable variation in systems of exchange and rank across the island, for purposes of this chapter, these can be overlooked, and I will speak of “Sumba” rather than “Anakalang” (Keane 1997), Kodi (Hoskins 1993), Weyewa (Kuipers 1990), and so forth.

5. I do not discuss the iconographic and other metaphoric features of exchange valuables here. Having done so in detail elsewhere (Keane 1997), I argue that these are insufficient in most cases to make sense of either the practices surrounding objects or the values imputed to them.

6. The association of modernity with desire and desire with money is made quite explicit in many parts of Indonesia. By the 1920s, the Minangkabau of Sumatra already contrasted the cooperative character they ascribed to traditional villages with the “desirousness” (I. *hawa nafsu*) that money induces in those who “eat wages” (I. *makan gaji*) (Kahn 1993:126). In Java, where conventionally it is women who handle money, people see both money and marketplace as stimulants to both sexual and material desire (Brenner 1995; Siegel 1986; for a Western analogy, see Hirschman 1977:9).

7. Even in parts of Indonesia where money and market production appeared much earlier than in Sumba, coins were often treated as valuables. In nineteenth-century highland Sumatra, for instance, pepper growers demanded payment only in Spanish “Carolus” dollars, whose high silver content was preferred for melting down into jewelry. Only coins with the full bust portrait of the king were acceptable for marriage payments, apparently for iconographic reasons (Steady 1993:90–91).

8. In the 1990s, the most important sources of money for Sumbanese were government salaries paid to minor officials and schoolteachers. Some young unmarried men and women earned wages by working for non-Sumbanese merchants, but these were not sufficient to support a family. Other people engaged in petty trade in weekly markets, and a very small number sold everyday goods from tiny kiosks. Reports from across Sumba gave the percentage of the population with access to cash at between 2 and 10 percent (Hoskins 1993:188; Vel 1994:47). Given Sumbanese resistance to outmigration (Iskandar and Djoeroemana 1994:57), remittance income was apparently negligible.

9. The anxieties raised by selling animals for money can be seen in the ritual precautions they provoke. If one sells a buffalo or pig that one has raised oneself, one should first pluck the eyebrows and place them under the household water pot so one retains a “cool corral.” Otherwise the money will disappear or the remaining animals will not thrive.

10. When Sumbanese, at least in some districts, obtain a sum of money, it is not likely to enter into an existing stock of capital. Therefore, the sum obtained in a particular transaction tends to retain its identity. It is also likely to be earmarked for a specific expenditure. This has allowed Vel (1994:70–71) to rank spheres of money expenditure in parallel with spheres of exchange: one would sell a buffalo, for instance, only in order to raise money for something as important as university fees, but not for children’s clothing. As Zelizer (1994) showed, earmarking is an extremely widespread means of constraining the

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abstraction and fluidity of money even in full-fledged market economies.

11. The author happens to be from the neighboring island of Flores, but the ideas she expresses are being propagated in churches and Christian schools across Sumba as well.