

# BIOGRAPHICAL OBJECTS

*How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives*

JANET HOSKINS

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*For Valerio, In Memoriam*

|                            |                                                  |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Ndara ole ura              | The horse companion of my spirit                 |
| Bangga ole ndewa           | The dog companion of my soul                     |
| A ando koti lighya nggu    | The post that my ginger vine creeps up           |
| A nggallu mbaku haghv nggu | The enclosure of my tobacco patch                |
| Bu otunguka henene         | If you leave me now                              |
| Ku kapepe nja pa todi      | I will be the basket left without a lid          |
| Ku halidi nja hamera       | I will be a container without its<br>counterpart |

for the History of Art and the Humanities, headed by Salvatore Settis. I am grateful to people at each of these institutions for their companionship and assistance.

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This book reconsiders various arguments that I have advanced earlier, often with somewhat different interpretations. For permission to reprint sections of earlier published articles, I thank the *Journal of Anthropological Research* ("A Life History from Both Sides: The Changing Poetics of Personal Experience" [1985] 41, 2: 147–69), Cambridge University Press ("Complementarity in This World and the Next," in *Dealing with Inequality: Analyzing Gender Relations in Melanesia and Beyond*, ed. M. Strathern, 1987), *Social Science and Medicine* ("The Drum is the Shaman, the Spear Guides His Voice" [1988] 27, 2: 819–29), Stanford University Press ("Doubling Descent, Deities and Personhood," in *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia*, ed. J. Atkinson and S. Errington, 1990), and Center of Non-Western Studies, Leiden ("Sacrifice and Sexuality," in *For the Sake of Our Future: Sacrificing in Eastern Indonesia*, ed. S. Howell, 1996).

As always, I remain immensely grateful to the people of Kodi, both those I have named in these pages and those who remain unnamed, for sharing their lives and stories with me. I hope they will recognize themselves in this book.

# 1.

## INTRODUCTION

Ordinary objects which have long been used by one master take on a sort of personality, their own face, I could almost say a soul, and the folklore of all nations is full of these beings more human than humans, because they owe their existence to people and, awakened by their contact, take on their own life and autonomous activities, a sort of latent and fantastic willfulness.

—Paul Claudel, *Meditation on a pair of shoes*,  
Prose works, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1965, p. 1243

There are no ideas but in things.

—William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, 1947

Recent theoretical interest in the study of personal narrative has highlighted the extent to which storytelling is a formative process: Through "telling their lives," people not only provide information about themselves but also fashion their identities in a particular way, constructing a "self" for public consumption. Anthropologists have long had an interest in personal narratives, but earlier accounts of "life histories" have operated as if they existed "out there," already formed, and needed only to be "collected," recorded, and transcribed.

More recent ethnographic writing has recognized that neither narratives nor selves are so easily "discovered." An ethnographic interview, whether conducted at one time or over many years, is a complex dialogue, a co-creation of a narrative that is in part structured by the listener's questions and expectations. The context of the story told has come back to center stage, as well as the hidden relationship between the storyteller and the person to whom the story is told—the "biography in the shadow" (Frank 1979, 1985). A number of recent experiments in ethnographic writing (Abu-Lughod 1993, Behar 1993, Kondo 1990, Lavie 1990, Visweswaran 1994) play with the old genres of life history in new ways, and offer us vivid portraits of persons with multiple identities, allegorical personas, and complex hidden agendas.

My own contribution to this literature comes from the paradoxical experience of frustration at *not* receiving the hoped-for "life history" from informants I first interviewed with that intention. I began fieldwork with the

Kodi, at the western tip of the Eastern Indonesian island of Sumba, because they lived on the last island in the Malay archipelago to preserve a pagan majority throughout the 1980s. Steeped as they still were in an animist tradition, Kodi narrators could tell us about more radically different notions of self and personhood than those peoples more thoroughly absorbed in Indonesia's rapid development. But the notion of telling one's life directly to another person did not exist in Kodi. From men, especially prominent ones, I often heard a list of accomplishments, offices, or ceremonies performed. From women, the question "Tell me about your life" usually initially produced little more than a list of children. But I did get some insight into personal experience and subjective reactions through a set of interviews that I was conducting on another topic—the history of exchange objects and of ritually important domestic objects.

What I discovered, quite to my surprise, was that I could not collect the histories of objects and the life histories of persons separately. People and the things they valued were so complexly intertwined they could not be disentangled. The frustrations I experienced in trying to follow my planned methodology proved to be an advantage in disguise: I obtained more introspective, intimate, and "personal" accounts of many peoples' lives when I asked them about objects, and traced the path of many objects in interviews supposedly focused on persons.

In studying a society so deeply steeped in exchange, a "person-centered" ethnography (Levy 1994) has to be rethought as one that uses objects as metaphors to elicit an indirect account of personal experience. Kodi is a society in which the origins and circulation of valuables are crucial to a sense of time and even of history. The role of named "history objects" in demarcating and preserving a sense of the past and collective memory I have examined elsewhere in some detail (Hoskins 1993a). In this work, I want to move to the more intimate level of individual actors and domestic objects—ordinary household possessions that might be given an extraordinary significance by becoming entangled in the events of a person's life and used as a vehicle for a sense of selfhood. I argue that the stories generated around objects provide a distanced form of introspection, a way of discussing loaded sexual politics in an ironic mode, and a form of reflection on the meaning of one's own life.

This book explores how identities and biographies are formed around objects in a society that has not been "psychologized" in a confessional tradition. The narcissistic preoccupation with telling and retelling about their own lives is not well developed in Kodi, where direct questions seem either indiscreet or uninformed. But these people, although bashful and tongue-tied when asked to describe themselves, were often great storytellers when asked to talk about their possessions.

Kodi is a language rich both in conventional metaphors (the paired couplets of ritual language) and in idiosyncratic variations on these themes (often "speaking against the grain" of a conventional metaphor to highlight

an unconventional meaning). The conventional dualism of ritual speech is gendered, and plays on notions of masculinity or femininity to "finish" an image as somehow composed of both elements. Sexual politics are rarely discussed in Kodi, and sexual feelings almost never. But the nuanced language of gender dualities made it possible for many people to communicate about these things through metaphors focused on objects. In my work on life stories and exchange histories, I became increasingly fascinated by the problem of personal symbolism and the idiosyncratic significance of objects.

A young girl I knew well never confessed her feelings of romantic longing and later disappointment to me directly, but she was fascinated by the story of a magic spindle that flew through the air to snare a beloved. When later her own hopes were cut off, she sent a message to her lost lover through the secret gift of the object. A famous singer and healer who also wanted a female companion composed long ballads to his drum, introducing each ritual session with a history of efforts to cover the drum properly so it could be pierced by a male voice and travel up the heavens.

A respected older man who had served as the Raja in colonial times identified his heritage of spiritual power with the snake depicted on the cloth he chose to be his funeral shroud. Instead of writing an autobiography, he wrote for me an account of his ancestor's encounter with the snake and a gift of cloth that he interpreted as the "basis" of his power to rule.

Another man, famed as a storyteller and bard, said he received his "gift of words" in the simple, woven betel bag he carried with him at all times. His wives, who had sat in respectful silence to listen to him during his lifetime, invited me to hear their own stories after his death—and revealed fables about domestic animals, stories transparently critical of masculinist privilege.

Finally, a young woman who died tragically in a traffic accident was associated with the image of a green bottle, the disposable modern object no longer capable of regeneration. She never narrated her own story to me, but the associations of her death and the disruptive influence of modern technology continued to haunt the area, and my own fieldwork, for many years.

The stories I tell here, and try to make sense of, are stories I played a part in creating, but I did not create the idiom that they were articulated in—it is a cultural propensity to speak about such issues indirectly, and to use objects as a metaphor for the self. I am especially interested in trying to understand how these narratives are constructed, and how the object can mediate for the person.

Sometimes this mediation is direct. In Kodi life-crisis rituals, a spindle or a knife can substitute for a man, a cotton board or a gold pendant can take the place of a woman. A betel bag can be buried instead of a person, and the burial of someone's betel bag in his or her absence can signify their social death—a disinheriting curse by close kin, or a legal sanction by more distant ones. More often, the mediation is somewhat more subtle: A metaphoric alter ego may initially be proposed as part of the elaborate word play that

characterizes all formal interactions, and only later come to carry more weight as metaphorical connections are extended to new domains.

A well-known definition of autobiography is "a retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing his individual life and especially the history of his personality" (Lejeune 1975: 14). By this definition, only some of the stories I recorded in Kodi would qualify, because several took the form of songs or sections in parallel verse, and others revealed their more personal content only through an interpretation of the allegorical message of a fable or folktale. But I prefer to use the term loosely and heuristically, to suggest an autobiographical content to stories that, on the surface, might be said to be about other things as well.

I will try to argue that the Sumbanese narrators of these stories used the objects autobiographically, as the cornerstone of a story about themselves, a vehicle to define personal identity and sexual identity. In a way, the object becomes a prop, a storytelling device, and also a mnemonic for certain experiences. However, such devices are never innocent.

#### "TELLING ONESELF".

#### THE RELATION OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND MEMORY

Any narrative device does not so much reflect "the truth" as construct it in a particular way. As Frank Kermode notes in discussing his own memoir,

The honest truth, insofar as this suggests absolute fidelity to historical fact, is inaccessible; the minute you begin to write it you try to write it well, and writing well is an activity which has no simple relation to truth. For memory cannot do the necessary work independently of fantasy; and if it tries, the result will be a dull report. (1995: 37)

Making a life into a story involves crafting it, editing it, giving a form and finality that is always to some extent fictional. Because every book based on fieldwork is also a memoir of shared time and space, my fictions blend with theirs. But most of us who tell stories do so with the intention of offering some truth about ourselves. Freud remarked with surprise, "The urge to tell the truth is much stronger than is usually supposed" (quoted in Kermode 1995: 37), and the popularity of confessional writing in the West certainly bears him out. Though my Indonesian subjects were less overtly confessional, they also insisted on accuracy when it came to autobiographical reflections.

Kermode describes the dominant model of autobiography as St. Augustine's notion that the past can be usefully reworked in present memory, rather than Freud's idea that memory invents a past to defend us against the appalling timelessness of the unconscious. The revelation of unpleasant secrets is not the goal, but the creation of a certain integrated interpretation. "The analyst tries to open the box so that all its contents will eventually

fly out; the autobiographer has a notion that his life, as memory reconstructs it, can by certain skills be made to hang together; so, needing the contents, he closes the box and snaps the catch on the lid" (Kermode 1995: 43).

This is an arresting image of why each story has to come to an end. A coherent narrative constructs a unified image of the self out of the disparate, messy fragments of daily experience. It is perhaps significant that the "biographical objects" my informants selected were often containers (the betel pouch, the hollow drum, the funeral shroud), which served as "memory boxes" for holding certain things inside or (in the case of the green bottle) creating anxiety about their capacity to escape.

The closure offered by the well-told story offers "a kind of substitute timelessness, or a time that has a stop, with its own benefits, its own felicity" (Kermode 1995: 43). Kermode points out perceptively that closure is so attractive to writers that "when they go out of their way to avoid it you can tell they are thinking about it but are being rebellious and avant-garde" (43).

In a classic article, the literary critic James Olney defined autobiographies as "metaphors of the self" (1972) and noted that the analysis of life stories now has come to focus less on the *bio*, the events that occurred throughout the lifetime, and more on the *auto*, the construction of self through narrative. In recent years the burgeoning interest in these narratives (Gullestad 1996, Personal Narrative Group 1989, Watson and Smith 1992, Krupat 1985, Linde 1993, Rosenwald and Ochsberg 1992) has carried that orientation still further. Perhaps because many of the "grand" narratives of science, progress, and politics have lost their credibility, "little" narratives situated in the particular experience of individuals have resurfaced. Third World authors are publishing their own personal accounts of the rise to nationhood (Rodgers 1995), and "alphabetization increasingly seems to imply autobiographization" (Gullestad 1996: 14). Within the academy, interest in people's own stories has been spurred by a new hermeneutic self-consciousness in criticism and history, and the struggles of feminists and minorities to be heard on a personal as well as a political level.

One of the disappointments of the new trend to reflexivity in anthropology has been the realization that accounts of the anthropologist in the field are still heavily edited and crafted. Indeed, they must be, but the pretended candor of many such accounts can be no more than an engaging stylistic device that makes ethnographies better reading than technical reports are. Anthropology is based on eyewitness accounts, and it is nice to render the immediacy of the field experience, but vividly written first-person ethnographies may hide as much as they reveal of fieldwork dynamics.

The anthropologist writing an ethnography is, of course, telling a tale that is in part an autobiography (Olney 1992). It exists because there was a time when the fieldworker shared time and space with the people who spoke to her, and she shared in their lives. However, if we dismantle the realist position that the life history is the mirror of life events, we must also do the

same for the ethnography. Every graduate student trying to finish a dissertation becomes painfully aware of the fact that there is no coherence that dwells within events or social structures themselves. Coherence is imposed by the work of story makers, and much of what the anthropologist does in writing up her material is to try to devise a coherent story line that will shape fragmentary episodes of experience into something intelligible to an academic audience.

Our informants, the people we call the "subjects" of life histories, must go through a similar process when we ask them to narrate aspects of themselves, to give a direction to their lives by explaining them to an outsider. The stories I collected were told in a series of conversations with each of the people I write about. Some include more self-consciously produced "texts"—a ritual song, a long deathbed oration in parallel verse, a fable, or a typed manuscript—but the text is then supplemented by contextualized commentary. In correcting successive versions of stories about themselves and objects, these people were revising and refining their own sense of connection between the events of yesterday and today. As Rosenwald and Ochsberg note: "The subjective conviction of autobiographic coherence is intrinsic to a sense of identity" (1992: 6).

They note, however, that from a modern narratologist's perspective, this coherence is an illusion—even a tactical maneuver. We tell our lives in ways that suit the predicaments in which we find ourselves at the moment, and we edit and revise them for other audiences. We may want our listeners to admire us, to understand us, to forgive us, or perhaps to become converted to something that we value very highly. The telling of the tale turns the person listening into someone who may affirm or approve the story told, perhaps even helping to identify and explain discordant accounts.

For this reason, some poststructuralist textual analysts have treated accounts that people give of their own lives as pure fictions, invented more or less of whole cloth. Kamala Visweswaran speaks of "fictions of feminist ethnography" (1994), and Pierre Bourdieu calls the study of life histories "the biographic illusion" (1986). But even if we accept the highly invented and constructed nature of any such narrative, we must address the relationship between experience and representation.

Anthropologists distinguish between a life as lived, a life as experienced, and a life as told. The first refers to what happens to a person; the second to images, feelings, sentiments, desires, and meanings the person may ascribe to these events; and the third to a narrative, influenced by the context in which it is told, the audience, and cultural notions of storytelling (Brunner 1984: 7). More recently, they have also come to define the self as constructed through narrative, in a process of enactment and rhetorical assertion. This calls into question the commonsense boundaries between "self" and "world," and makes it possible to examine individual identities not as unified essences but as "a mobile site of contradiction and disunity, a node where various discourses temporarily intersect in particular ways" (Kondo 1990: 47).

Since a life history is not only a recital of events but also an organization of experience, the way memory is rendered in a narration of the self is a part of both individual style and cultural fashioning. Through an examination of six individuals, three men and three women, I try to see both gender differences and cultural similarities. I look at a way of telling lives that is somewhat alien to Western literary genres but that has enough metaphorical force to be intelligible in translation. I try to explain why objects are important as foils for self-definition and an anchor for the self-historicizing subject. And I wonder, finally, about the relations of persons and objects that underlie these stories.

### THE BIOGRAPHICAL OBJECT

In 1989, building on the work of Appadurai (1986), Kopytoff (1986), Strathern (1988), and A. Weiner (1985), I tried to define a new category of "biographical objects," which occupy one pole of the continuum between gifts and commodities and are endowed with the personal characteristics of their owners. My example at the time was an extreme one: the severed head of Rato Malo, a nobleman from Rara who was ambushed by a head-hunting party from Kodi just before the turn of the century. His young son was captured and sold as a slave, but he came to work for the first Catholic mission on the island, where he acquired basic literacy and was baptized "Yoseph." As an adult, he returned to his homeland and began to work for the colonial administration. He used his acquired wealth and political skills to negotiate for the return of his father's skull as part of a counterprestation for bridewealth. The skull was ritually treated first as a female exchange valuable, then "dressed" in male clothes, reunited with the bones of the body, and reburied as a person. The transformations of this "biographical object" show how the lines between persons and things can blur and shift, and also how other inanimate objects (cloth, jewelry, porcelain dishes) are often endowed with the qualities of persons.

The story of Rato Malo's head is a striking example of an object that was once part of a human body and came to be treated as an exchange valuable, and was then ritually retransformed into a part of a person. Its significance for his descendants was easy to understand, and its return was believed to restore honor and fertility to his family. But in arguing that other things (not only those that were once part of human bodies) could also be "biographical," I have to go out a bit further on a limb: I have to transgress the usual boundaries between persons and objects and show how far certain possessions can come to be seen as surrogate selves.

### COMMODITIES AND EXCHANGE VALUABLES

The inspiration for my title comes, however, not from anthropological writing about exchange but from an article by the French sociologist Violette

Morin, which deals with the changing significance of objects in modern France. Beginning with graffiti at the Sorbonne during the May 1968 strikes and demonstrations in Paris, it asks how a slogan such as "Object, hide yourself" (*cache-toi objet*) could emerge as an ironic commentary on consumerism.

Has our own subjectivity been lost in the process of marketing new products? Do we objectify ourselves in gendered images? She speculates about its relations to slogans that ask "Inanimate objects, do you have a soul?" (*Objets inanimés, avez-vous donc une âme?*) or speak of women as objects both beloved and despised (*objets chers et fâchés*). A modern image of Faust emerges in the bazaar as a man who petrifies his soul in mechanizing his life, "loving to have so much that he forgets to simply be" (1969: 131).

She discerns in the relations that modern French people have to objects two opposing uses, one that is centered on the person, which she calls *biographique*, and one centered on the cosmos, which she calls *protoculaire*. Though both sorts of objects may be produced for mass consumption, the relation that a person establishes with a biographical object gives it an identity that is localized, particular, and individual, while those established with an object generated by an outside protocol (what we might call a public commodity) are globalized, generalized, and mechanically reproduced. Three levels of mediation are identified as the distinguishing characteristics of biographical objects: their relation to time, space, and the owner or consumer.

At the temporal level, the biographical object grows old, and may become worn and tattered along the life span of its owner, while the public commodity is eternally youthful and not used up but replaced. At the spatial level, the biographical object limits the concrete space of its owner and sinks its roots deeply into the soil. It anchors the owner to a particular time and place. The public commodity, on the other hand, is everywhere and nowhere, marking not a personal experience but a purchasing opportunity. She notes here the difference between an ethnologist's mask (collected as part of a long period of research and deep professional involvement) and the "souvenirs" acquired by tourists or bought at import shops without any significant stay in their place of origin.

Finally, the biographical object "imposes itself as the witness of the functional unity of its user, his or her everyday experience made into a thing" (*sa quotidienneté faite chose*) (1969: 137–38). The public commodity, on the other hand, is not formative of its owner's or user's identity, which is both singular and universal at the same time. Consumers of public commodities are decentered and fragmented by their acquisition of things, and do not use them as part of a narrative process of self-definition.

Biographical objects share our lives with us, and if they gradually deteriorate and fade with the years, we recognize our own aging in the mirror of these personal possessions. Public commodities, on the other hand, project an eternal youth from which the user feels—although always attracted—more and more distant. The anonymous and alienating furnished apartment

is compared here with the "lived-in feel" of a place filled with objects that have affective, traditional, or personal ties to their owner. "To meddle in the space between a biographical object and its owner is always, potentially or really, the act of a voyeur" (1969: 133; my translation).

To French eyes, modern American living represents the culmination of consumer alienation. Morin recounts the perhaps apocryphal story of "an American" who got off/on the wrong floor of his building and mistakenly entered someone else's apartment, only to find its anonymous furnishings so familiar that he did not even realize he was not at home. He was a man whose own biography was not invested in any particular object, but scattered through a generalized and replaceable series of modern mechanized products that deprived him of any icon of his individuality. This is the danger, she implies, of substituting the public commodity for the personal possession, the total divorce between physical objects and human identification.

Morin's categories are brought into even sharper relief when they are juxtaposed with those of a society like that of Kodi, in Eastern Indonesia, where objects and their meanings are crucial to the constitution of history, gender, exchange, and social groups. The archive of the past is displayed or at least alluded to through "history objects," the heirlooms stored in ancestral villages and presented as the evidence for ritual rights and prerogatives (Hoskins 1993: 118–41). Marriage defines a flow of goods between wife givers and wife takers that establishes the superiority of the former and the continued indebtedness of the latter. The ancestral cult is centered on the house and its valuables, which must be named in genealogies along with the names of each of the ancestral founders.

Kodi may represent something of an extreme: a society where objects are invested with very great significance, in both the collective representation of the past and the individual storing of biographical memory. The preoccupation that the Kodinese have with things is not, however, unusual in the context of Eastern Indonesia, as many have noted (Howell 1989, Keane 1997, McKinnon 1991, Geirnaert-Martin 1992a) and is not dissimilar from neighboring Melanesia (Battaglia 1990, 1995, Lutkehaus 1995, MacKenzie 1991).

#### PARTIBLE PERSONHOOD AND GENDERED GIFTS IN MELANESIA

The landmark volume in problematizing all of our assumptions about the relationships between persons and objects in Pacific societies has been Marilyn Strathern's *Gender of the Gift*. Heavily influenced by her as a young scholar, I have struggled for over a decade to articulate the ways I have found her work on this topic both inspirational and frustratingly abstract. She begins by postulating there is a difference between the root metaphors of Western industrial societies and exchange-based Melanesian ones: "If in a commodity economy things and persons assume the social form of things, then in a gift economy they assume the social form of persons" (Gregory

1982: 41). Westerners imagine that "things exist in themselves" (Strathern 1988: 134), while Melanesians see them instead as detached parts of persons, metonyms for their producer. Since a person circulates through his or her work, becoming "enchained" in relations with others (1988: 161), alienation does not occur.

She uses these differences to argue against views of sex role antagonism or the encompassment of female spheres by men: "There are no spheres in that sense, encompassment is relative. There are positions from which people act. And women as much as men are able to construct themselves as reference points for their own acts" (Strathern 1988: 284-85). I am in deep sympathy with an approach that acknowledges that it is "agents, not systems, who act" (328), and that reclaims a measure of autonomy for women even in apparently oppressive circumstances. However, I cannot understand how a theory of "partible personhood" can be advanced without probing the personal relationship established between people and particular possessions. But Strathern deliberately excludes considerations of individual subjectivity or biographic experience from her accounts of Melanesian understandings of persons and things.

In ceremonial exchange transactions, as common in Kodi as in any of her Melanesian examples, she says that "things are conceptualized as parts of persons.... These objects create mediated relations.... They are apprehended as extracted from one and absorbed by another" (Strathern 1988: 178). She argues that the things do not actually stand for persons ("that is our construction") (178), but that they flow between persons and create their mutual enchainment. But her account does not include emotional affect or trauma as part of this process of "extraction" and "absorption," and the "parts of persons" that circulate are not objects of contemplation or reflection.

I am troubled by the fact that Strathern's Melanesian actors are not concerned to construct a coherent sense of self out of their movable parts, and that little attention is paid to their own narratives or exchange histories. Stories of feeling dislocated, displaced, and fragmented into several possible object-identities were common in my own fieldwork, but the people I spoke to were constantly concerned with telling and retelling their lives around these objects to finally achieve some closure. Even the illusory narrative completion of a "story with a beginning and end" is absent from her accounts of persons and exchanges. Strathern explicitly rejects the idea that a coherent story is needed: "The conceptualization of the person as an individual, a being that worries about its boundaries and searches for a unitary identity, remains an unspoken premise in the anthropology of experience" (1988: 57).

To counter this premise, she proposes instead that Melanesians are not individuals but "dividuals," whose detachable parts circulate freely because there is no indigenous theory of unitary identity. She sees "androgyny" as an initial state, from which women and men are made by detaching parts that make them "incomplete." They reconstitute their selves through the move-

ment of objects, and the objects come to make up their new social identities. The idea of androgyny is proposed to destabilize essentialized notions of masculinity and femininity, and to indicate the possibility of movement. An earlier tradition studied "how women and men experience being women and men" by taking the relationship between the sexes as axiomatic, instead of questioning how these differences could be produced through systems of representation.

But androgyny is so much a concept of the current, gender-bending 1990s that I wonder about its applicability to the traditional Melanesian or Indonesian societies she is describing. Deconstructing the images of "sexual antagonism" of the 1960s and 1970s by substituting more recent versions of "gender trouble" (Butler 1990) does not necessarily bring us closer to the lived experience of other cultures. There are a number of other, locally generated models for sexual difference that deserve to be examined—specifically, eastern Indonesian notions of dualism and gender doubling that I will discuss in the next section.

Strathern's exciting formulations of how objects can be complexly gendered and identified with persons can be critically tested in a place like Kodi, because it is close to Melanesia and shares the attributes of ceremonial exchange that she sees as characteristic of a "gift society," but it combines them with very Indonesian dualities and complexities. My own enterprise is not a broad regional analysis, but a thick description of a single society where persons and things are intimately entangled. "Partible personhood," if it is to survive as a viable concept, must also be meaningful at the analytic level of individual lives and strategies, and in the relations between biography and objects. We need to pay more attention to diverse and often contradictory interpretations of the rhetorical value of objects and how they can be "read" to reveal more about the subjects of our investigations, and their own subjectivities.

In an earlier work (Hoskins 1993a), I explored how the public view of the past was represented in objects, and the ways in which heirloom valuables were used to anchor a form of temporality "demonstrated" through things. In this book, I look not at the public world of history objects and founding narratives, but at the smaller scale of domestic objects and the stories told about them, and particularly at how these stories are gendered. Morin in fact pays little attention to narrative, but her definition of these characteristics is very useful for the questions I am seeking to ask.

The categories of the personally meaningful possession, the biographical object, as opposed to the public commodity (or gift, heirloom, piece of ancestral regalia) can lead us to an interpretation of how objects on Sumba are differently involved in the production of selves and identities. Feminist writings about Pacific exchange systems have revealed how complex the process of gender identification can be (MacKenzie 1991, McKinnon 1991, Tising 1993, A. Weiner 1992), and recent work in history and literary theory has centered on the circulation of goods and its significance for defining

new modes of consciousness (Greenblatt 1991). Here, I try to take very personal, grounded narratives and show how they are made up of metaphors involving objects, which tell a story that then provides a unity to a sometimes disparate self. My argument is focused on the Kodi people of Sumba, but its aim is ultimately comparative: to show how a different relation to objects generates differently gendered lives, presenting a model of identification and lived dualism that is an alternative to our own assumptions.

Thomas (1991) has criticized the dichotomy of gift-centered Melanesians and commodity-centered Westerns as oversimplified and essentializing. Strathern proposes the contrast of "gift" and "commodity" as a rhetorical strategy, an heuristic tool, rather than a "fact." But reading her provocative descriptions of Melanesian ideas of personhood and gift giving, one is almost inevitably lead to a homogenizing view of Pacific societies that presents them as inverted mirror images of our own. The strongest argument she makes is that the "gift economies" are not really economies at all, but systems of sociality. What they produce is not unequal forms of value but social relations of a complex kind.

In a rehashing of the Strathern-Thomas debate in the pages of *Social Analysis*, Strathern noted that Thomas "domesticates" the distinction between commodity and gift for a Euro-American context as one between commodity and possession (Thomas 1990: 193): "Possession" summons all the inalienable qualities of identification that are expressed through the attachment of things to persons by contrast with the alienable commodity" (Strathern 1993: 99-100). She then notes that Thomas fails to question the commonsense realism of the category of possession, which is a cultural category of considerable metaphorical power:

Metaphors are not detached entities, "things" to be innocently used now in this, now in that manner. Power here rests in the assumption that it is natural for things to become identified with persons (and vice-versa), each in this sense "belonging" to the other, for that in turn feeds into European (and Euro-American) ideology concerning the naturalness of possession itself. . . . Euro-Americans do not need to be reassured that the rest of the world might think in the commonsense way that they do about the naturalness of human possession, of holding on to what you have, of the inevitability of dividing that world into the haves and the have-nots. (Strathern 1993: 98)

If Euro-American possessiveness is colonial and acquisitive, and we need to deconstruct it by contrasting it to other models of the person/object relation, what would then be the content of these new models? Do gifts in traditional societies escape the exclusiveness of other possessions? Or is it instead the case that they have value precisely because they are imbued with the "subjective" attributes of the biographies of their former owners?

Thomas defends himself by noting that he is unequipped to "undertake the historicization of Western conceptions of possession and property that

Strathern calls for" (Thomas 1993: 134, but see Carrier 1990, 1994 as a first step in this direction). He does, however, note that the apparently "subjective" meaning of things in Western industrial societies is established through a process not so different from that of Melanesian shell valuables, which are given a "biographical significance" through the intersection between the life of the shell and the life of the person:

Such apparently individual or personal appropriations of things are not "subjective." I do not even see that a Euro-American teenager's preoccupation with an article of fashion manifests a subjective valorization of an inanimate object, because precisely what the objects in each case reify are attributes of particular or possible persons and relations. That is, in a Melanesian case the idiosyncratic valorization of the valuable might commemorate a kinswoman. In the Euro-American case it might turn upon a kind of flashiness or allure that a singular ornament seems to contain and convey; what is at issue is the embodiment of sexualized and sexualizing attributes, not inanimate things and property metaphors. (Thomas 1993: 133)

The differences between Strathern's view (a radical discontinuity between possessing Westerners and Melanesians whose personhood is made and unmade by the circulation of objects) and Thomas's (who sees parallel processes of appropriation of objects by both sides) will come to occupy us in the conclusion. I have tried to steer a middle path between these two theorists by looking at objects and their relationships to individuals. Thomas's call for a historicized, contextualized account of how things are conceptualized and exchanged is honored by grounding my interpretation of objects in a particular life history. Strathern's more challenging and exciting thinking about an alternative epistemology in the Pacific, where things may take on aspects of agency and be perceived as part of the process of creating identities, is confronted but moved from its highly abstract formulation to the narrative articulations of specific actors and things.

The use of autobiographical materials is also intended to show the moral or affective quality of particular social experiences in Pacific societies in ways that will make these stories recognizable to Western readers even as they seem quite different and exotic. Michael Young writes about Melanesian life histories that "autobiographical narratives offer a salutary lesson by reminding us that conflict is not the only or even the main thing being managed, masked or muted by their authors, and that love too may be seeking an opportunity to express itself" (1983a: 498).

Love is often expressed through an image of possession, a desire to possess another person in his or her entirety that, when frustrated, may be deflected onto the possession of a beloved thing. The search for a love object, a companion or surrogate, is a pervasive theme in the accounts of biographies of things that circulate in Kodi, and its resonances with our own notions of romance and possessiveness are significant.

## GENDER AND DUALITY: HOW IS DUALISM LIVED?

I had another reason to be fascinated by the problem of the relation of persons and objects, which stemmed more from my personal interests in feminism than my academic interests in exchange. I was attracted to fieldwork in the area because I knew it was characterized by "dualism." In earlier ethnographic reports, this dualism was described as either a characteristic of formal ritual verse ("speaking in pairs" of metaphoric images; Fox 1988) or social organization (paired villages with opposing ritual tasks; Fox 1980). However, it was also obviously expressed in gendered terms, and I was curious about how a system of what was generally called then "symbolic dualism" would affect the lives of individual women and men. The question is a very complex one, and over the years it seems to me that I have received more clues to its answer by asking about objects than I have by asking directly personal (and thereby indiscreet) questions about people.

I wanted to escape an earlier view of Eastern Indonesian symbolism as totalizing and consensual, in which objects could be lined up neatly in two columns according to their gender attributes, and notions of "male" and "female" then deduced from the characteristics of these columns. Without denying the insights of this earlier tradition and its identification of dualism as an important theme in regional representations (Onvlee 1973), I nevertheless want to emphasize here the significance of objects to individuals and their struggles and the ways in which they are involved in complex negotiations of sexual identity.

Perhaps the most famous early article to tackle the issue of gender dualism was Sherry Ortner's "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" (1974). It has been very controversial (MacCormack and Strathern 1980, Valeri 1990), but remains, in my view, one of the most cogent early explorations of the problem of how gender symbolism and people's lives might be related. In a recent reassessment of her own argument, Ortner notes that anthropology has turned away from its interests in universals, but remains concerned with "existential questions" such as the opposition between nature and culture evoked in that article. Moving from the "static parallelism of the categories" to look instead at "the politics of the construction of such linkages," her more recent work involves a much greater emphasis on history and practice (Ortner 1996: 180).

If I return, at this point, to a critical re-examination of what is going on in gender dualism, it is with these new goals in mind. The most crucial flaw in Ortner's argument, as she now recognizes, was its emphasis on universals, including the supposedly "universal" subordination of women. After twenty-five years of more detailed research on gender, few people now would flatly assert that female inferiority is uncontested or invariable. This is partly because, as Ortner notes, "universals are of less compelling interest" (1996: 173), but also because we have come to see that gender hegemonies are very complex. Even in societies roughly described as gender egalitarian, this

egalitarianism can be inconsistent and fragile (Atkinson 1990, Tsing 1990, Lepowsky 1993), and even in societies where women seem very "subordinated," they retain the agency to resist, protest, and subvert male domination (Abu-Lughod 1986, 1993; Raheja and Gold 1994). Thus some more complex interaction of historical processes involving notions of power, gender, and embodied selfhood must be at work.

However, another aspect to her argument has not been adequately addressed. Ortner was specifically investigating dualistic divisions as mental structures, influenced here by the work of Lévi-Strauss and Simone de Beauvoir, and most commentators took the nature/culture opposition much too literally as local categories. Certainly, many were able to argue convincingly that the terms "nature" and "culture" did not take the same form in all societies. But Ortner herself notes that the great questions articulated in gender dualism cannot be easily dismissed:

Gender difference, along with nature/culture, is a powerful question. And the gender relationship is always at least in part situated on a nature-culture border—the body. What I think tends to happen in most if not all cultures is that the two oppositions easily move into a relationship of mutual metaphorization: gender becomes a powerful language for talking about the great existential questions of nature and culture, while a language of nature and culture, when and if it is articulated, can become a powerful language for talking about gender, sexuality and reproduction, not to mention power and helplessness, activity and passivity, and so forth. (1996: 179–80)

In my own commentary on this debate, I argued that in Kodi gender served as an effective metaphor precisely because it was not always the dominant structure of inequality, and could provide a language to express mutuality and complementarity (Hoskins 1990: 305).

Now I would make that argument more complex. The societies of Eastern Indonesia are not simply "gendered," they are saturated with gender, they are "overgendered." There is no practical reason why such a great variety of things should be assigned a connotation of male or female, arranged and rearranged in gender categories, at times even inverted and given a gender-crossing, "transvestite" character. The surfeit of gender in Eastern Indonesia is at one level a pure mental invention, a play of classificatory order, but because it deals with gender—that most human of classifiers—these gender games have serious consequences on the lives of women and men.

Ortner's pioneering insight was that a dualistic opposition articulated in terms of gender ("female is to male as . . .") would necessarily have an impact on the sexual politics of everyday life. In Eastern Indonesia, gender dualism is developed and elaborated to an unusual extent, so rather than arguing that there is anything universal about this, I would instead claim that it deserves analytic attention precisely because it is an ethnographic particularity.

Why are these societies so obsessed with gendered dualities? How does this feature of classificatory logic affect personal experience? Does the "two in one" imagery of paired metaphors in ritual speech also permeate everyday interactions? Do men and women see each other as more dependent on a counterpart than do people in other societies?

To anticipate my conclusions somewhat: Yes, I do think the pervasive complementary dualism of Eastern Indonesian societies has social consequences. I would not describe these societies as sexually egalitarian, and certainly not as female dominant. But several male colleagues of mine who have done ethnographic research in the region might do so. (See Lewis 1988 on "maternal descent groups" among the Tana Ai of Flores or Hicks 1989 on the "maternal religion" of Tetum of Timor.) The apparently "matrilinal" societies give women genealogical pre-eminence but usually not ritual leadership, while the more "patrilinal" ones may include (as in Kodi) named female descent groups and a subversive female tradition of herbalism, indigo dyeing, and witchcraft. However, the dualistic dichotomy between matrilineal and patrilineal societies that anthropologists have been so fond of has been shown to have relatively little significance in this region, as people are affiliated to houses through a complex number of different ways, and everything called "descent" must also be confirmed through alliance payments (McKinnon 1991, Valeri 1980).

The consequences of gender dualism lie most obviously at the level of ideology, and they involve the idealization of sexual union. Both men and women believe that their lives are incomplete without a counterpart, and they part with American ideologies of individuality and autonomy by stressing partnership and dependency. The battlegrounds between the sexes that are so readily observable in American daily life (perhaps especially marked in academic contexts) are not drawn in the same way on Sumba. Men and women are not members of opposing teams or clearly demarcated interest groups. They do share some secrets and some sisterly (or brotherly) solidarity, but the cultural norm of double-gendered completion gives a hierarchical priority to the union of male and female.

Exchange valuables in Eastern Indonesia are complexly gendered, as many others have observed (Adams 1969, Fox 1980, Howell 1989, McKinnon 1991). In formal exchanges, they may be marked as male or female gifts. Because such exchanges are hierarchically coded, an object that is "female" in one context (such as women's jewelry) may be "male" in another (when all "male" metal objects are opposed to "female" cloth). The complex hierarchies of formal exchange circumscribe these gendered identities and make them the subject of long, drawn-out negotiations.

The domestic objects I discuss here are also complexly gendered, but I found it impossible to draw up a tally sheet of which objects were seen as "male" or "female" because—instead of oscillating their gender identity as many exchange valuables seem to—these objects were all in some way "double-gendered." I define double-gendering as a quality that represents an

idealized union of male and female rather than their separation or opposition. A doubling of gender is thus quite distinct from the "androgyny" that Strathern and others have described in Melanesia (Strathern 1988, Mackenzie 1991). While I respect this work and do not want to challenge it for the materials they discuss, I do not find it describes the kind of gender fusion I saw in Eastern Indonesia.

In Kodi, male and female are not blended and neutralized but brought together in the reproductive model of parenthood. Male and female are thus intensified and made hierarchically more encompassing than any single gender. An androgynous object is of uncertain sex, while a double-gendered one represents the wholeness of sexual union. The domestic objects I discuss all have, to a greater or lesser degree, a quality of double-genderedness that is not "made incomplete" by extractions of maleness or femaleness (in Strathern's model) but instead made powerful by their union. In these objects I read a story of romantic longing on the part of men for women and women for men. Since Freud's early work on fetishism, we have recognized that an idealized longing for human partnership can be projected onto objects that may serve as surrogate companions. Rather than seeing this as a "pathology of everyday life," I chose to analyze it as a dynamic field for the narrative articulation of identity. It is the longing for completion and companionship that runs as a theme through the different stories told around and about objects that I collected.

In Kodi, individual biographical experience is "made complete" by including within it elements of the opposite gender. Eastern Indonesia is an area that, while riddled with many of the usual tensions between men and women, is not characterized by sexual antagonism or avoidance, and notions of celibacy or single life styles are virtually unknown. Partnership and complementarity are very highly held cultural goals, hard to realize in individual lives, but aspired to by almost everyone. So the complex sexual politics in which objects are entangled revolve around efforts to unify male and female domains, not to separate them.

The biographical object is regendered and re-gendered as a person completed by including missing aspects—an idealized companion with a complementary and contrasting form of experience. From the deities addressed as "Great Mother, Great Father" or "Elder Mother, Ancient Father" down to the small couples of spirits of each sex that guard each door and gateway, Kodi is a cultural geography impregnated with dualism and struggling to resolve the contradictions involved in an often forced combination of male and female elements everywhere.

Individuals strive for a sense of completion through their lives and narrate stories that give them a way to envision this. Men and women tell different kinds of stories, and cultural norms force them to focus them more or less directly on their own personal experiences. Men are allowed to be more overtly self-aggrandizing, but women's uses of metaphor and irony to criticize some of these masculinist patterns are readily understood and need

little translation to be recognized by Western readers. These stories are not about "men's and women's worlds," however, but always about a shared world, and efforts to bridging the gap between the sexes to achieve completion and wholeness in a bipartite cosmos.

#### KODI AS A STRATEGIC SITE TO RE-EVALUATE INDONESIAN SEXUAL POLITICS

The idea of androgyny, which is often opposed to earlier paradigms of sexual relations that were described as either "complementary" or "antagonistic," has attracted a great deal of interest in recent feminist theory (Butler 1990, Grosz 1994), with particular relevance to struggles for gay and lesbian rights. Its application to exotic fieldsites, particularly where it is posited as an "original state," the basis of a later, socially negotiated, personhood, may, however, be an idealistic projection—a bit like the "abuses of anthropology" in early feminist anthropology that used anthropology as a precedent for modern claims and saw the primitive as bearer of primordial human need. "Women elsewhere are, it seems, the image of ourselves undressed, and the historical specificity of their lives and of our own becomes obscured" (M. Rosaldo 1980: 392).

Judith Butler's critique of the notion of fixed gender identities stresses how selves are constructed through discursive practices:

The "coherence" and "continuity" of "the person" are not logical or analytical features of personhood but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. (1990: 17)

Each society is based on a system of tacit constraints that produce culturally intelligible "sex." Her condemnation of the regulatory practices of "compulsory heterosexuality" in North America and Western Europe is not sensitive, however, to variations on these themes in other societies, such as the many Asian forms of dualism, and specifically the intensified importance of sexuality and sexual union in Eastern Indonesian "complementarity."

Kodi is significant because it has long held a strategic place in the history of theories of social dualism. In 1935, this society attracted scholarly projections based on somewhat different gender models. Dutch structuralism the Leiden school, inspired by the totalizing theories of FAE. Van Wouden, postulated that Kodi might be the site of the original proto-Austronesian form of dual organization, since it seemed to combine asymmetric marriage with a form of "double descent" that included clans traced along both

patrilineal and matrilineal lines. Two distinguished anthropologists, Van Wouden himself and his English colleague Rodney Needham, traveled to Sumba in the early 1950s to investigate this possibility. Both were disappointed: The Kodinese do have a form of "double descent" (at least according to the now somewhat dared definition of the term; cf. Van Wouden [1935] 1968), but they do not have a strict directionality of marriage. Van Wouden returned, convinced that evolutionary models had to be opened up to more complex historical interpretations ([1956] 1977), and Needham decided to abandon serious fieldwork in the region (pers. comm.).

But the gender puzzle remained: If Kodi is an area where patrilineal and matrilineal descent are recognized but subject to different ritual and social processing, was this also a recognition of a special form of "double-gendered" personhood? Is this "double gendering" of spiritual beings and objects the same as or different from Strathern's model of "partible personhood" in Melanesia? Are the Kodi not merely a bizarre society whose special proclivities are writ small for the specialists, but also evocative of the problems of gender-confused Americans of the late twentieth century writ large?

The answer is much more complicated than either of these statements. Kodi worshippers of the *mangu* certainly have a cosmology that is classically dualistic. Spirits are invoked in paired couples, in which two images are juxtaposed to suggest a single metaphor. The Creator is called "Mother who bound the forelock. Father who smelted the crown" (*Inya wolo hungga, Bapa rawi lindu*), suggesting that people were formed by a combination of women's work in binding threads (for weaving) and men's work in smelting metal (for tools, weapons . . . or the hard human skull). All of the most important guardian deities (of the clan altar, the house pillar, and the garden hamlet) are similarly double gendered. The womanly element at times appears "primordial" in these representations: Female spirits are usually named first, so they are called "Elder Mother, Ancient Father" (*Inya Mamyu, Bapa Mabehu*) or "Mother of the Earth, Father of the Rivers" (*Inya mangu tana, Bapa mangu loko*).

Below these deities, pairs of female and male spirit intermediaries are found at the edge of the ceiling and the top of the house, at the garden's gate and the edge of cultivated land, and in the graves and tombstones. They skirt the margins and boundaries of human spaces and are given human names. Ancestors are normally invoked as couples, "dead mothers and fathers," and even famed ancestral personalities must be called along with a lesser-known counterpart of the opposite sex. Ra Hupu, the lord of lightning, is said never to have married, so he is summoned beside the name of his sister Tila, who spread out his nets along the shore. Inya Nale, the goddess of sea worms whose annual swarming off the western beaches marks the greatest festivity of the Kodi calendar (Hoskins 1993a: 142–71), is summoned with her maritime companion the Ipu fish, which swarms in a later month.

At the bottom of the spirit hierarchy lie the undifferentiated and gender-

ambiguous spirits of wealth and plentiful harvests—rice and corn, livestock, and cloth. Their lower rank is marked by the fact that they are not anthropomorphized or even given personal names. The double-gendered deities are the most “complete” and perfect beings, their paired subsidiaries are somewhat less illustrious (and addressed according to the same etiquette as human ancestors), while the spirits of wealth and crops are more inert and faceless.

Any dualism that plays heavily on sexual difference must have some weight on human lives since, contrary to the assumptions of early binarists, sexuality cannot be reduced to a system of formal oppositions. Women and men are never simply “signs” but also agents, and gender—that most human of classifiers—inflects any system of “complementary balances” with power differentials. The *walla* system of matrilians is said both to precede the history of *paroma* patrilians and to encompass it by its size and proliferation. And yet the key political and social offices are linked to patrilineal descent, which also organizes the ownership of land, heirlooms, and livestock.

Kodi is a society that, like several others recently described in Eastern Indonesia (Sugishima 1994, Howell 1995) appears fully “patrilineal” on the surface and hides its “matrilineal” elements in stories of witchcraft, scandal, and incest. Patrilians define the owners of “houses” (*uma*), who worship common ancestors and make up “villages” (*paroma*) with complex ritual divisions. Matrilians define marriage prohibitions, relations of “blood,” and the inheritance of personality characteristics. A person’s patriline is always an object of public knowledge, while the same person’s matriline may be a shameful secret. Some matrilians are made up of hereditary witches, others of the descendants of slaves, foreigners, or outcasts (Hoskins 1993a: 16–18). While matrilineal ties may provide access to occult knowledge (especially of the “blue arts” of indigo dyeing, midwifery, and abortion; Hoskins 1989b), they are carefully kept out of the spotlight and alluded to only discreetly, when marriages are being negotiated.

Women must move from their house of birth to their husband’s house once a substantial payment of bridewealth (at least ten “tails”: five horses and five buffalo) has been made to the bride’s parents. However, the wife is “bought but not sold,” because once her parents have agreed to accept the groom, they make an equivalent counterpayment in pigs, cloth, ivory bracelets, and perhaps even a slave attendant (Valeri 1994). Women do at times leave their husbands and seek divorce, but in doing so they lose their children, who affiliate patrilineally once the bridewealth has been paid. Many Kodi wives tolerate physical abuse and younger cowives in order to remain with their children and raise them with their husbands. A wife joins in the worship of her husband’s ancestors when she joins his household, and she can invoke her own ancestors in prayers only to ask for more children. She retains the right to veto, through nonparticipation, any important decisions about the marriages of her sons or daughters or the transfer of property (land, livestock, etc.), but she rarely speaks in formal negotiations and is almost always on the sidelines.

Kodi gender dualism is not, therefore, an inspiring recipe for female empowerment. It does imply a spiritual and symbolic parity that seems, however, not to be fully realized in the day-to-day sexual politics of the region. In an earlier assessment of gender doubling, I argued that gender duality was used as a “way of thinking” about a variety of relationships not directly structured by gender: The “idealized interdependence of male and female can be diffused over a number of contexts where images of mutuality are needed” (Hoskins 1990: 305).

Now I have become both more concerned about the gaps between this “idealized interdependence” and real sexual inequities, and more sensitive to ways in which women and men have drawn on these images to their own strategic advantage. The completeness of sexual union is desired by all, but the terms that each will accept to gain that desired union vary enormously. Few people are willing to talk directly about sexual politics, which is precisely why only a language of objects and metaphors expressed through things can give us access to these kinds of subjective experiences. Women are themselves “objects exchanged in marriage,” so they identify with the domestic animals traded against them. They may fantasize about a spindle that selects a bridegroom, or a buffalo’s daughter who founds her own village and marries a prince. Men want to speak with the authority contained in a betel bag, the hierarchical prestige of a python, or the great resonating tones of a man’s baritone and his “sweet voiced” drum. Their stories reveal part of themselves attached to the biography of an object, elaborating its history and its characteristics in order to better understand their own needs and desires.

Personal possessions can also be used as a means of conjuring up the memory of an individual. When someone dies, he or she is eulogized by chanting the names of significant possessions—horses, buffalo, spears, knives—which are seen as poignantly evocative of their missing owner. These possessions are believed to be so imbued with the personality of the deceased that they they must leave the house at the same time the dead person does. Some (like the betel bag) may be buried with the body, or sacrificed (like the horse), or broken on the grave. Others may be ritually bestowed onto a descendant to anoint him or her as a successor to a particular role (as a ritual speaker, a warrior, a spinner of fine cloth). When a personal possession such as a headcloth, knife, or betel bag is accidentally left behind, it is believed that a part of the owner’s soul (*nduvu*) is lost, and a small rite must be performed to “recall the soul” when it is found and returned.

#### COMPARATIVE IMPLICATIONS

My central argument is that local constructions of selves on Sumba are tied to the construction and use of specific types of objects. Within the wider context of debates about dualism in anthropology, objects can become a site for the cathexis of overcoded symbolisms of gender and sexuality. The

emotional significance invested in personal possessions gives them a charge of psychic energy, which is given narrative expression in paired verses, songs, and stories. Freud has described things that seem to "take possession" of their owners (German *Besetzung*), and my Sumbanese friends would seem in some ways to be similarly possessed. Complementarity does not mean a weakening of the significance of sexuality in Eastern Indonesia but, on the contrary, may precisely lead to its powerful emphasis.

How widespread is this preoccupation with possessions and gendered duality? This book does not go beyond my own ethnographic research in Kodi, but the idiom is certainly found throughout the island (Forth 1981, Kuipers 1990, 1998, Geimaert-Martin 1992, Keane 1997) and in neighboring Timor and Flores. Writing about another district on Sumba, Kuipers records, "Listening to Weyewa talk about a powerful man or woman, one does not hear connected, temporally organized biographical narratives about events during a lifetime; instead one hears about clusters of belongings, radiating out, as it were, from a charismatic center" (1998: 155). Writing on East Sumba, L. Onvlee notes, "Personal possessions are singularly linked with the life of their owner. They are not impersonal; rather they are part of the person who owns them and related to his life in a particular way" (1980: 196).

In many other parts of Indonesia, the importance of regalia and magical objects is highly developed, but gender tensions are different. The "syncretic and absorptive center" of the Javanese polity is expressed by the potency of its ruler and occasionally concentrated through ascetic practices, but not expressed in paired polarities (Anderson 1972, Keeler 1987, Pemberton 1994). The evocation of dualism on a more playful and speculative level is reported by Anna Tsing in her witty vignette about the "lessons in structuralism" she received from a mountain shaman among the Meratus of Kalimantan:

Twice, I watch Uma Adang teach the Dualities as a core secret, a deep structure of the world. Each time, she listed a number of oppositions, including gender, and some of the others [day and night, life and death, maturity and youth], leaving her audiences to chime in as they go the idea with oppositions of their own. "Good and bad," said one man, "big and little, vulva and penis." "Humans and rice," added another. "Rich and poor," suggested a third, mining this rich vein of thought, he continued: "Gold and diamonds . . . silver and iron . . . silver and lead." The listeners were excited, jumping in with the enthusiasm of university students learning about structuralism for the first time. At each suggestion, Uma Adang nodded approvingly, with the wisdom of a professor who embraces all interpretations. It could have been a send-up of my own training, in which, according to many hoary authorities, dualities really do structure the experience of the native but at such a deep, all-pervasive level that the native cannot explain them, much less invent them as a speculative science. (Tsing 1993: 270)

Her irony underscores the resemblance between the occult knowledge of academic theoreticians and that of village-based religious specialists. While a somewhat similar scene could be imagined in Kodi, no one would teach the Dualities as a personal magical science, as Uma Adang did. Instead, ritual specialists pride themselves on knowing which word must necessarily pair with another, and which object must necessarily be reciprocated by another. Kodi speakers are then able to improvise against this background of conventional pairs, using the dualities less as a secret code than as a shared system of coupled meanings.

Gender dualism is certainly more marked in places like Sumba, Flores, and Timor than in Kalimantan or Sulawesi. Shelly Errington (1990) formulates this contrast as a comparative difference between the "Centrist Archipelago" (which would include Java, Bali, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan) and the "Exchange Archipelago" (which would include most of the other islands). However, the difference is obviously more one of degree than of orientation: Centers and oppositions are part of the conceptual vocabulary of all Indonesian societies. If dualism is more marked on Sumba, it is partially because of the importance of exchanges between houses, which give primacy to the wife given in an ever-shifting play of marriage strategies.

The key question to be asked, here as elsewhere, is not why finding dualities should have appeared an amusing game, but why it also seemed a legitimate pathway to wisdom and secret knowledge. If Uma Adang chose to draw on dualities as the mark of mystical perception, it was because they had a wider resonance that made this convincing to her followers. And, though I agree that assuming that dualistic oppositions provide the universal substructure of all thought is perhaps a mistake, the meaning of paired contrasts as local categories of experience for many peoples in Eastern Indonesia remains to be explored.

Gender dualism was addressed during the period of structuralism's heyday (when it inspired Ormer's article), but few attempts were made to account for its impact on the experience of actual men and women (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974, Fox 1980, Maybury-Lewis and Almagor 1989). More recent research on gender in Southeast Asia (Ong and Peletz 1995, Sears 1996) focuses much more on individual experience, resistance, and sexuality, but none of the contributors tries to tangle with a thorny old issue like dualism.

A partial exception within the theoretical literature is Judith Shapiro's essay on "Gender Totemism," which argues that the structuralist binarism often imposed on lowland South America should be reinterpreted as a play of signs and relationships:

Following the logic of Levi-Strauss' argument, we can say that biological opposition between female and male, like the array of animal species, provides a powerful natural model for representing differences between social groups and oppositions between culturally significant categories. . . . The main point

is to shift the focus from the properties of groups to the nexus of relations. Instead of focusing on the characteristics of women as a group or men as group . . . [t]he issue becomes one of seeing how a series of categorical oppositions, including the one between female and male, map onto and construct each other. (Shapiro 1988: 3)

I might add that it is also necessary to look at the problem of how individuals, in different subject positions, interpret and construct these relationships. As fathers, daughters, husbands, sisters, wives, brothers, sons, and mothers, men and women are always complexly related. The question of how gender dualism is actually lived requires an ethnographic answer, using the particularities of individual lives to understand how they negotiate their own identities against the backdrop of paired cultural categories.

By subjecting the apparent binarism of male and female to a closer and more nuanced scrutiny, there may also be a way to modify certain other binarisms that haunt the Western imagination more consistently, such as the opposition between "self" and "world." Strathern has effectively and persuasively theorized things as reifications of detachable and attachable parts of persons and relations. But this "political economy" mode of analysis has had little to say about experience, subjectivity, or how these "parts of persons" may be narratively organized to provide at least a temporary illusion of coherence. In criticizing what has been left out of this picture, Nicholas Thomas (1993: 132) remembers an argument she made to the Canberra research group on gender in the southwestern Pacific (in which I also participated) that analytical fictions necessarily produced lacunae as well as presences. In order to privilege an insight into one area, it is necessary to privilege a blindness in another.

The insights that I try to privilege in this study focus on the narrative creation of the self through the vehicle of an object. A number of other theorists have argued that objects and subjects are mutually defined and reciprocally constitutive, and they have looked at moments of transaction and display (Munn 1986, Miller 1987) in which an object's exchange value is determined. The personal possessions I discuss in this work, while sometimes also involved in exchange, are more significant because of the ways they are remembered, hoarded, or used as objects of fantasy and desire. They are used to reify characteristics of personhood that must then be narratively organized into an identity.

This book, then, looks at six stories, each of them articulated around an object, which establish the link between person and possession that is part of the pervasive gendering of persons and objects in Eastern Indonesian sociality. The complex ways gender is manipulated and reinterpreted in these people's lives can show us an alternative way of looking at female and male, persons and objects.

## 2.

## THE BETEL BAG

## A Sack for Souls and Stories



Maru Daku, chewing a betel quid beside his simple plaited betel bag, with his only daughter on one side and his first wife, Daku Maru, on the other. (Photo J. Hoskins, 1980)

"A story in a sack (*nguru kedoko la kaleku*)? That's what you want, isn't it?" asked Maru Daku somewhat derisively when I balked initially at all the complicated rites needed to elicit a long traditional narrative.

"I got my stories in a betel bag once, but now I don't hand them out that way. To hear the real thing, you must come to our village, share a meal with us, spend the night, and listen as we speak in the dark. Little stories, yes, they can see the light of day. We can tell them even on the edge of the veranda, or off in the gardens. But the real thing, the long ones, the ones we hold from our grandmothers and grandfathers, they need a bit more preparation."

Maru Daku was defending his place and authority as one of the most respected storytellers in Kodi. He was also playing on the problematic "portability" of stories, and their relation to the most portable of Kodi items of everyday wear: the betel bag, which is almost inseparable from its owner. The deep, pleated inner pouches of the betel bag are a place of secrets and can stand for certain forms of hidden knowledge. His own power to speak,