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The desire to be desired: magic spells, agency, and the politics of desire among the Petalangan people in Indonesia

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Abstract

The Petalangan people in Indonesia practice beauty and love spells to evoke others' desire. This article explores (1) the linguistic features and devices that are available for Petalangans to represent and recognize specific attributes of desires and (2) the metalinguistic dimensions of the language practice. The analysis demonstrates that Petalangan notions of desire are not necessarily associated with sexuality, but rather with the differences in agency and power between subjects and objects of desire. I discuss how a performer of the spells acquires agency by denying one's own power and intentions, thus critiquing the conventional Western ideas of agency that emphasize individual will and intentions.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the interplay between language and desire, by analyzing magic spells that are used among the Petalangan people. The Petalangan people, an ethnic group of Sumatra in Indonesia, use beauty and love spells. In their belief, beauty spells enhance one's power to attract others and love spells compel a targeted person fall in love with the one casting the spells. Both types of magic spells are supposed to control others' emotions and desires by penetrating the bodies of the recipients. Given that the texts of the spells project imaginary figures of self vis-à-vis others as engaging in different modes of agency—'I' as an object of desire and others as experiencing desire, I would like to discuss how the Petalangans' culturally specific concepts of desire are constituted through their language practices and mediated by

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their notions of agency, their interpretations of the act and its responsibility. My analysis will show more localized and culturally specific notions of desire and agency, as they emerge in and through the language practice.

In the Western tradition, psychoanalysts such as Freud and Lacan view desire as a specific aspect of the individual, especially inseparable from sexuality (cf. Kulick, 2001). (Sexual) desire is one of the ontological components of existence that are universally found in humankind. Refuting psychoanalytic assumptions about the universalistic nature of desire, Kulick (2000) views desire as ‘culturally grounded semiotic practices’. By employing the concept of ‘iterability’ (Derrida, 1982) that emphasizes the preexisting linguistic system that allows a certain expression to be recognized as such, Kulick argues, ‘the iterability of codes is what allows us to recognize desire as desire’ (2000, p. 273). He proposes to look at ‘how specific linguistic conventions are used to structure, convey and socialize desire—all of this contributes to an understanding of the ways in which desire is materialized in language’ (Kulick, 2001, p. 6).

By adopting Kulick’s view on desire, this paper will discuss discursive constructions of desire reflected in Petalangan beauty and love spells. Specifically, I will analyze grammatical patterns and metaphors of desire found in the spells that are available for Petalangans to represent and recognize specific attributes of desires. In doing so, I will argue that the Petalangan notions of desire are not necessarily associated with sexuality, but rather with the differences in agency and power between subjects and objects of desire.

Formal features and patterns of the spells will be examined in particular, as formality detaches a spell from its immediate pragmatic contexts. With the aid of Goffman’s model of speaker roles (1974), I will analyze the ways in which the spells project a current performer of the spells as an ‘animator’ (Goffman, 1974) of ancestors’ words. I will examine diverse linguistic forms and devices used in the spells, through which the spells acquire the performative power regardless of the power or intentions of current speakers in the immediate pragmatic contexts.

I will also examine the Petalangan culturally specific notions of agency, both as reflected in the texts of the spells, and as enacted through their uses of the spells. By agency, I mean ‘socioculturally mediated capacity to act’ (Ahearn, 2001, p.112). In her review of current studies of language and agency, Ahearn refutes the concept of agency as freewill or resistance. Rather, she argues that concepts of agency involve people’s conceptions of act, causality, and responsibility (*ibid.*). My primary concern in this paper is to show how Petalangans conceptualize agency—how people interpret their actions and attribute responsibility to events. Unlike the conventional Western ideas of agency that emphasize individual will and intentions, my analysis of the spells will demonstrate how the speaking subject ‘I’, as an object of desire in the spells, acquires power by disclaiming one’s own agency as well as by invoking the authority of the ancestors’ voices embedded in a specific type of formula.

Given that Petalangan male elder leaders use beauty spells in their negotiations with powerful outsiders during land disputes, I will focus on the Petalangans’ emphasis on social desirability and spiritual potency as the cultural background behind their uses of magic spells. In the Petalangan view, making one ‘appeal’ to

others is another mode of agency, so as to cope with one's own marginality in social encounters. The Petalangan case will reveal that the Petalangan notions of desire are not exclusively about sexual desire, but are always intertwined with their notions about self-other relations and power. As a critique of the common Western notions of desire as immediately emanating from the individual, the Petalangan case will demonstrate their notions of desire as linguistically mediated and socially embedded in relations of power.

The data presented in this paper has drawn on the collection of magic spells that I gathered during my fourteen months of ethnographic and linguistic field research among the Petalangan people between 1998 and 2000. The majority of the spells were collected at Desa Betung, one of Petalangan villages. Through consultation and interviews with people from other villages, I found that practices of magic spells are common throughout the Petalangan society, and that the textual structures of the magic spells are similar in spite of some lexical variations from spell to spell.

2. Ethnographic background: Petalangan society

The Petalangan of Riau are one of the indigenous ethnic groups living in the remote Kampar River hinterlands on the eastern part of Sumatra. Geographically remote and socially isolated, they practice swidden farming, fishing, and gathering, and have been less influenced by economic development in Riau province than have any other ethnic peoples.

Historically linked to both the Minangkabau of West Sumatra and to the Malay of East Sumatra, Petalangan society has been influenced by the Minangkabau matrilineal system as well as by a patriarchal Malay Islamic culture (cf. Andaya, 1993). Based on a matrilineal system, Petalangan society is divided into several clans (*suku*). Members of each clan are presumed to have the same ancestry and show a high level of solidarity. These matrilineal groups consist of practical units for subsistence economy and family activities in daily life.

Despite the matrilineal practical units of daily subsistence activities, the Petalangan culture displays its strong patriarchal features. Even though the heritage system follows the female line from a mother to her daughter, male relatives control the actual process of inheritance, because only male members of the clan can control and enact their customary law (*adat*), rules, and regulations of everyday life, as a patriarchal Islamic society. Based on Islamic gender ideology, Petalangan women are also restricted in mobility and do not have any chances to meet with others, while men can go anywhere and socialize freely. Petalangan society is thus an interesting example of male dominance within a matrilineal system.

Under the strict customary law systems, clan leaders control Petalangan daily life, including marriage arrangement. They decide on the time and place for the wedding ceremonies. They also apply and enact the strict fine system governing marriage customs. For example, girls and boys are not allowed to meet each other at night. If caught, the boy's family is required to pay a fine to the girl's family and leaders of the village. A fine is enforced since the boy disobeyed their customary law and

thereby shamed villagers. Besides paying the fine, the boy and the girl are forced to marry, which is called ‘capture marriage’ (*kawin ditangkap*).

3. Overview of Petalangan magic spells

Petalangan people officially claim to be Muslims. However, the practices of magic spells accompany most activities in daily life, for farming, hunting, healing, courtship, child-birth, and so like. Beauty and love spells are used in courtship and do not necessarily require any sorcerers or magicians. Anybody who knows magic spells can practice the beauty and love magic. People cast beauty spells onto their own bodies, similar to putting make-up or ornaments on the body. Love spells are to make a targeted person fall in love with a performer of the magic. Unlike beauty spells, love spells are cast on others, not on one’s own body. People believe that love magic can control a target person’s feelings and emotions by penetrating into the target person’s mind.

Petalangan magic usually combines verbal utterances with the manipulation of objects, but the verbal components are more essential to the magical performance. Specifically, people practice beauty and love magic mainly by reciting spells, although it may sometimes require another medium to transfer the words to a target person. In beauty magic, spells are recited to the water in which one will take a bath. If a person practices beauty magic for another person, it often uses a medium such as oil, lemons, and areca nuts to transfer the magical power to a target person’s body. In the case of love magic, people recite magic spells to the foods and drinks that a target person will eat or drink, resulting in infatuation. Recitation of magic spells thus is the dominant form of magical practice in Petalangan society.

Petalangan magic spells are believed to come from the deceased ancestors. The ancestors’ words, furthermore, originated from God;¹ God’s messages were transmitted to the ancestors through diverse medium of communication.² As the ancestors articulated God’s messages into verbal formulas, God’s messages became verbalized. God’s messages contained esoteric knowledge of this world and provided access to hidden realms.

Spells themselves have become a communicative tool through which people can communicate with supernatural beings as well as connect to exogenous sources of power in the invisible supernatural world. According to their belief, reciting the ‘words’ or ‘formulas’ from the ancestors can invoke the same spiritual power as did the ancestors in the past. Mere utterances of spells’ titles are believed to have magical effects. A speaker can assert his/her own speaking ability in the recitation of a specific magic spell by referring to its title.

¹ By *God*, I refer to the immortal supernatural power conceived of as a creator of the universe by the Petalangans. Petalangans use the Muslim names for god, such as *Allah* or *Tuhan* (the Lord) to refer to this supernatural power.

² According to the Petalangan belief, animals, especially birds, used to be messengers who brought God’s messages to the ancestors, since all animals were able to speak human languages when the world was created.

Reciting magic spells is a very sacred ritual act through which the performer invokes the divine power embedded in the spell. As it is believed that God creates the world through speech, ancestors' words that originated from God are thought to entail deeds in the utterance itself. In Goffman's terms (1981), the Petalangan practice of magic spells comprises three different levels of speakers: God as a principal speaker of the magic spell, the ancestors as authors, and the current speakers as animators. Despite the change of speaker, the spells are still effective since the words themselves retain magical power. Even repeating the words in the present context carries the same creative force as when uttered by the ancestors. By the utterance of the same 'words' uttered by the ancestors, the current speakers render magical power in the present context. Fig. 1 shows the basic Petalangan notion of magic spells as having creative force.

Interestingly, the power of magic spells has nothing to do with the individual's potency. It does not belong to a specific position or person. Rather magic or magic spells exist as a source of power by themselves detached from people. Invisible energy can be claimed by anybody who aspires to power, depending on whether or not he or she has a chance to learn the mystical knowledge and magic.

Recitation of a specific magic spell is believed to be powerful enough to activate a range of agents, such as spiritual beings of the outer world and deceased ancestors. Thus, spells' power of invoking spiritual agents is often compared with mobility. Petalangan women, in particular, explain their use of magic spells through a comparison to men's mobility, the freedom to go everywhere. Women's magic spells are believed to allow women a freedom of movement similar to that of men, since they utilize spiritual agents that can be moved anywhere. Magic spells' capacity to move spiritual agents entails another source of power.

In addition to the view of language as a medium to invoke supernatural power, Petalangans view language as object or matter, a generating force to influence the world. Beauty spells are treated as ornaments for the body. Practicing magic spells is viewed as decorating the body. Petalangan magic spells are also supposed to have autonomous agency external to a speaker. Recitation of spells can absorb the specific attributes of objects that are addressed in the magic spells and transmit them to the recipients of the magic. This view of language as agent is most apparent in Petalangan beauty spells that are directed at people's own bodies. No matter who performs the spells, the spells are believed to be effective, as long as a performer follows exact phrases of the original version.

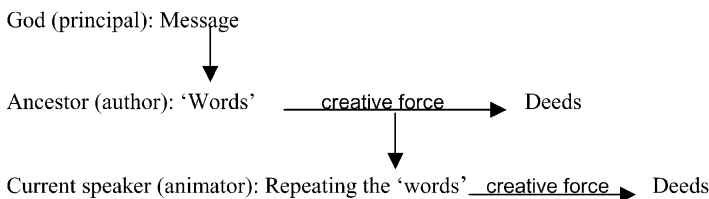


Fig. 1. Petalangan conceptions of magic spells: creative forces of the 'words' (cf. Kang, 2002, p. 274).

Most Petalangan informants report that they start to learn magic spells around the age of fifteen to seventeen. If someone wants to learn a specific magic spell, he/she should find the right teacher for his/her specific purposes. Boys are more likely to form a peer group with their close friends and relatives, and to make further trips to other villages in order to find proper teachers of desired magic and spells. Girls, on the other hand, tend to learn magic spells from their female relatives in their own matrilineal clans, alone or in pairs. Since the Petalangans consider magic spells an important resource for dealing with the opposite sex, they prefer not to reveal their magic spells to the opposite sex. People say that they do not want to give ‘arms’ (magic spells) to the ‘enemy’ (the opposite sex). Therefore, it is easier to learn such magic spells from elders of the same sex, rather than from those of the opposite sex.

The spells traditionally have been handed down as a form of oral tradition from generation to generation, and have no written texts. Aside from the fact that most Petalangans were illiterate in the past, there is another reason why the spells should not be written. Since it is believed that the spells must be absorbed into the performer’s body, the spells are thought to work only if they are memorized. In their belief, repeated applications of magic spells to the body transform the words into ‘flesh and bones’ (*daging tulang*), because the magical words transfer desirable qualities of objects addressed in the spells to designated bodies. If a student learns the magic spells by taking notes, the notes should be burned and the ashes should be eaten so that the words become part of the body.

In the following, I will analyze the textual organization of two spells. One is a beauty spell, and the other is a love spell. Stereotypically, women are described as using spells more frequently than men. People think that the use of magic spells is more ‘suitable’ (*cocok*) for women, because the spells are believed to activate the spiritual agents beyond women’s limited social boundaries. This stereotype also reflects Petalangan discourses on gender differences in courtship. In their view, men are aggressive in achieving desired partners, while women tend to be attractors, casting magic spells and conjuring others.

4. Beauty spells: allocations of agency in the bodies

The first spell is a beauty spell called ‘the Prayer of Tall Sialang Tree’. Sialang refers to bee-hived trees found in the forest. This particular magic spell promotes one’s beauty to attract others, like a Sialang tree in the forest.³

³ The genre of beauty and love magic is also called ‘youth magic’ (*ilmu muda*), because it is for courtship between boys and girls. Once married, people are not allowed to use this category of magic. Yet, rumors and gossip about old people’s use of magic spells are recursively reported, a transmission that is considered undesirable, on the grounds it may cause a danger of excessive sexuality in the community. If a married woman uses this spell, it is believed that there would be fights among village men who are attracted to her, which sometimes results in her divorce or village men’s death.

Spell 1: The Prayer of Tall Sialang Tree (Doa Sialang Lobe)

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. <i>Bismillahirrahmanirrahim</i> | 1. In the name of God, |
| 2. <i>Minyak si tuang-tuang</i> | 2. oil is pouring and pouring |
| 3. <i>Tuang dalam kual</i> | 3. pouring in a pot. |
| 4. <i>elok enda aku dipandang</i> | 4. Pretty and beautiful, I am seen, |
| 5. <i>bagi anak bidodari</i> | 5. like an angel from heaven. |
| 6. <i>Limau aku si Ajo Gagang</i> | 6. My lemon is King Gagang (stalk) |
| 7. <i>Tumbuh saompun tasobe</i> | 7. grown in the widest garden. |
| 8. <i>elok endah aku dipandang</i> | 8. Pretty and beautiful, I am seen, |
| 9. <i>makai doa Sialang Lobe</i> | 9. [I] use the prayer of Tall Sialang. |
| 10. <i>memakai aku nan lobe</i> | 10. Clothing, I am the best. |
| 11. <i>bajalan aku nan lobe</i> | 11. Walking, I am the best. |
| 12. <i>bakato-kato aku nan lobe</i> | 12. Speaking, I am the best. |
| 13. <i>gilo somuo uang nan amai</i> | 13. [Driven] crazy, all crowded people, |
| 14. <i>sumuo anak sidang manusia</i> | 14. every group of human being. |
| 15. <i>katuonya Si Co'am Balik Gilo</i> | 15. Their leader is Mr. Turning Crazy Choam, |
| 16. <i>sagolo uang amai</i> | 16. all crowded people, |
| 17. <i>sedang kan Allah lagi sayang</i> | 17. while Allah also loves [me], |
| 18. <i>sedang kan Muhammad sudah gilo</i> | 18. while Muhammad is already crazy. |
| 19. <i>aku mamakai doa Sialng Lobe</i> | 19. I use the prayer of Tall Sialang. |
| 20. <i>Kabul Allah Kabul Muhammad</i> | 20. Bless [me] Allah, bless [me] Prophet Muhammad |
| 21. <i>Kabul Bagindo Rasullullah</i> | 21. His Majesty, the Messenger of God |

Magic is effective only when a spell evokes powerful spiritual beings successfully, according to the desired goals. The words of ancestors embedded in verbal formula are believed to activate a range of agents in the world of spiritual beings. The scene of invocation (cf. Kuipers, 1988)⁴ is thus essential in most magic spells, and calls out different spiritual beings according to their varying purposes. This scene of invocation frames and contextualizes the recitation of the prayer to be interpreted as a specific genre of magic spells.

The most commonly found linguistic devices are framing devices (cf. Goffman, 1974) through which a current speaker's speech is displayed as detached from immediate pragmatic context of 'here and now.' Influenced by Islam, most of Petalangan spells show a typical opening phrase of Islamic prayers, by addressing the name of 'Allah' in the texts. Spell 1 is also framed in Islamic opening and closing remarks. By framing the spell as uttered 'in the name of god,' this locates the present speaker as an 'animator of God.' (Fig. 2)

⁴ By *scene*, Kuipers (1988) refers to a unit that shows a coherent theme and temporal perspective (p. 107).


1. <i>Bismillahirrahmanirrahim</i>	1. In the name of God	Opening  Closing
20. <i>Kabul Allah Kabul Muhammad</i>	20. Bless [me] Allah, bless [me] Prophet Muhammad	
21. <i>Kabul Bagindo Rasullullah</i>	21. His Majesty, the Messenger of God	

Fig. 2. First framing: opening-closing Remarks.

The second framing is found as a parallel in repeating the spell's title in lines 5 and 19. These sentences define the very action which the speaker is engaged in, as repeating a specific ancestors' words (Fig. 3).




1. <i>Bismillahirrahmanirrahim</i>	1. In the name of God	Opening  Title  Title  Closing
5. <i>makai doa "Sialang Lobe"</i>	5. [I] use the prayer of "Tall Sialang"	
19. <i>Aku memakai doa Sialang Lobe</i>	19. I use the prayer of "Tall Sialang"	
20. <i>Kabul Allah Kabul Muhammad</i>	20. Bless [me], Allah, Prophet Muhammad	
21. <i>Kabul Bagindo Rasullullah</i>	21. His Majesty, the Messenger of God	

Fig. 3. Second framing: repetition of the spell's title.

We also find the use of *pantun*, a traditional quatrain of Malay poetry in Example 1, which displays an alternate rhyme patterning coupling in lines. This *pantun* style enhances the spell's poetic structure, and increases its formality. The first line of *pantun* typically describes items used as media for magic, such as oil, lemons and areca nuts. For example, lines 2 through 3 portrait the scene that 'oil' is pouring in the pot, and lines 6 thorough 7 describe a 'lemon' which is in a garden. These lines describe the attributes of the items for magic media as well as their locations. Through these descriptions, the speaker 'I' in the spells is objectified and located in a specific context of the magic performance.

Example 1: Couplets of 'The Prayer of Tall Sialang Tree'.

2. <i>Minyak si tuang-tuang</i>	2. oil is pouring and pouring
3. <i>Tuang dalam kual</i>	3. pouring in a pot.
4. <i>elok enda aku dipandang</i>	4. Pretty and beautiful, I am seen,
5. <i>bagi anak bidodari</i>	5. like an angel from heaven.
6. <i>Limau aku si Ajo Gagang</i>	6. My lemon is King Gagang (stalk)
7. <i>Tumbuh saompun tasobe</i>	7. grown in the widest garden.
8. <i>elok endah aku dipandang</i>	8. Pretty and beautiful, I am seen,
9. <i>makai doa Sialang Lobe</i>	9. [I] use the prayer of Tall Sialang.

Petalangan beauty spells are believed to transfer desirable qualities of objects or desirable situations of a speaker to the real world. Given that 'brightness' (*seri*) is a main imagery of beauty in Petalangan society, beauty spells frequently address the

names of oil because of its ‘shining’ quality. Since lemons are believed to purify the body because of their acidity, they are also cited very often in beauty spells. In addition, most beauty spells rarely employ directive words, such as ‘command,’ ‘warn,’ or ‘order’ to direct supernatural power at the speaker’s intentions. Instead, the speaker’s wished-for result is declared as truth in the text. Consequently, the beauty spells explicitly describe detailed desirable physical qualities of a speaker. For example, the speaking subject ‘I’ appears as engaging in diverse bodily acts in lines 10 through 12 in Spell 1—‘dressing,’ ‘walking,’ and ‘speaking,’ which are ‘best.’ Use of passive voice in ‘pretty and beautiful, I am seen’ in lines 4 and 8 projects ‘I’ as an object of desire (Table 1).

Spell 1 projects imaginary figures who engage diverse bodily activities and experiences. Although this beauty spell is commonly used between girls and boys in courtship, the bodies and bodily activities reflected in this spell are not sexed. Yet, the bodies are different in terms of agency—a performer as an object of desire, and others are subjects of desire.

The performer does not perform any direct accusative acts to others. The encounters between a speaking subject ‘I’ and others are only possible through others’ perceptions (Line 8: Pretty and beautiful, I am seen.). They ‘look at’ the performer, and they go crazy. ‘I’ am not a direct cause, but others’ perceptual act of ‘looking at’ me causes them to go crazy (Table 2).

Table 1
Performer’s bodily activities in Spell 1

Attributes of a speaker : ba- (attributive verbal prefix)	
10. <i>memakai aku nan lobe</i>	10. Clothing, I am the best.
11. <i>bajalan aku nan lobe</i>	11. Walking, I am the best.
12. <i>bakato-kato aku nan lobe</i>	12. Speaking, I am the best.
Speaker’s appearance : di- (passive verbal prefix): object of desire	
4, 8. <i>Elok endah aku dipandang</i>	4, 8. Pretty and beautiful, <u>I am seen</u>

Table 2
Roles of Subject^a

8. <i>elok endah aku dipandang</i>	8. Pretty and beautiful, I am seen	Patient/Undergoer
9. <i>makai doa Sialang Lobe</i>	9. [I] use the prayer of Tall Sialang	Agent
10. <i>memakai aku nan lobe</i>	10. Clothing, I am the best	Actor
11. <i>bajalan aku nan lobe</i>	11. Walking, I am the best	Actor
12. <i>bakato-kato aku nan lobe</i>	12. Speaking, I am the best	Actor

^a Dixon (1994, p. 6) points out that all languages reveal three basic relations—subject of an intransitive verb; Agent, or subject of a transitive verb; and Object of a transitive verb (quoted in Ahearn, 2001, p. 120). Semantically, Subject plays various roles such as Agent, Actor, Perceiver, Instrument, Patient/Undergoer. (Ahearn, 2001, p. 121). I also employ these categories of Subject in my analysis of magic spells; Agent refers to a subject of a transitive verb; Actor as a subject of an intransitive verb; Patient/Undergoer as an object of a transitive verb.

Even though Spell 1 is believed to promote beauty of the body, it describes neither physical figures of the body, nor the sexed body. Instead, the spell presents interactions between the figures by describing bodily activities. The figures are different in agency—a performer as an object of desire, and others who perceive and desire the performer. Expression of desire emerges from discursive acts that allocate agency relationally between figures who are perceived and perceiving, Undergoer and Actor.

5. Love spells: desire as spiritual potency

The next spell is a love spell called ‘The Prayer of Inviting Life Force’ (*Doa Si Kundang Mayo*). This spell is believed to activate a spiritual agent called ‘White Angel Who Invites Life Force’ (*Malaikat Putih Si Kundang Mayo*) who takes a target person’s soul to a speaker.

Spell 2: The Prayer of ‘Inviting Life Force’ (*Doa Si Kundang Mayo*)

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. <i>Bismillahirrahmanirrahim</i> | 1. In the name of God |
| 2. <i>pinangku si gaganjolalai</i> | 2. My Pinang (areca nuts) swings back and forth |
| 3. <i>tanam di ate kubu</i> | 3. planted on a grave. |
| 4. <i>nyawo di dalam obuk solai</i> | 4. A soul is in a string of hair, |
| 5. <i>bangkit bangun <Si Anu> tidu</i> | 5. Wake up and stand up, <someone> who is sleeping, |
| 6. <i>aku mamakai doa Si Kundang Mayo</i> | 6. I use the prayer of “Inviting life force.” |
| 7. <i>tibo di da’a mangalolak</i> | 7. [It] arrives in the blood, [making it] boil. |
| 8. <i>tibo di ati mayang podih</i> | 8. [It] arrives in the heart, [making it] painful. |
| 9. <i>tibo di bonak mangamuncang</i> | 9. [It] arrives in the spine, [making it] shake. |
| 10. <i>hak, bangkit, bangun</i> | 10. Haii! Wake up and stand up |
| 11. <i>engkau, Malaikat Putih Si Kundang Mayo</i> | 11. you, “White Angel Inviting Life Force” |
| 12. <i>mintak dudukkan</i> | 12. [I] ask [you] to make [him/her] sit |
| 13. <i>mintak togakkan</i> | 13. [I] ask [you] to make [him/her] stand. |
| 14. <i>mintak bawokan</i> | 14. [I] ask [you] to make [him/her] return, |
| 15. <i>aku komai</i> | 15. back to me. |
| 16. <i>gilo siang dengan malam</i> | 16. Crazy, day and night, |
| 17. <i>gilo potang dengan pagi</i> | 17. crazy, morning and afternoon. |

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 18. <i>ayam kukuk sangkonyo aku</i> | 18. If a chicken is crackling, he/she remembers me. |
| 19. <i>muai bakicau sangkonyo aku</i> | 19. If Muai (a bird) is singing, he/she remembers me. |
| 20. <i>Kono doa monto ku iko</i> | 20. Get hit by my spell. |
| 21. <i>Berkat Lailahaillallah</i> | 21. Bless [me]. There is no god but Allah. |

This spell shows the same internal organization as in other spells. The spell is framed by an Islamic opening phrase (line 1), pantun (lines 2–5), defining speech act (lines 6 and 20), and closing remarks (line 21).

The spell projects images of a person who is experiencing physiological changes in lines 7–9, which are preceded by the word ‘arrive’ (Example 2). Itemizations of body parts and their physiological changes project a scene wherein a spiritual agent acts upon the target person. Use of the second person pronoun in line 11 ensures that the speaker successfully invokes the spirit agent in the current pragmatic context.

Example 2: Spiritual agent acts upon a target person’s body

- | | |
|--|--|
| 7. <i>tibo di da’a mangalolak</i> | 7. [It] Arrives in the blood, [making it] boil. |
| 8. <i>tibo di ati mayan podih</i> | 8. [It] Arrives in the heart, [making it] painful. |
| 9. <i>tibo di bonak mangamuncang</i> | 9. [It] Arrives in the spine, [make it] shake. |
| 10. <i>Hak bangkit bangun</i> | 10. Hai! Wake up, and stand up, |
| 11. <i>Angkau Malaikat Putih Si Kundang Mayo</i> | 11. you, White Angel Inviting Life Force. |

The spell describes the target person as engaging in bodily acts, such as ‘sitting,’ ‘standing’ and ‘returning’ in lines 12–14 (Example 3). With the causative suffix ‘-kan,’ the target person’s activities appear as totally controlled by outer forces.

Example 3: Speaker’s Speech Act (ask) + *-kan* (causative verbal suffix)

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| 12. <i>Mintak <u>dudukan</u></i> | 12. [I] ask [you] to make [a target person] sit |
| 13. <i>Mintak <u>togakan</u></i> | 13. [I] ask [you] to make [a target person] stand |
| 14. <i>Mintak <u>bawokan</u></i> | 14. [I] ask [you] to make [a target person] return |

As Table 3 shows, the speaking subject ‘I’ in Spell 1 and Spell 2 does not perform any direct accusative acts. But the speaker appears as an object of desire. The speaking ‘I’ is focalized through others’ perception and thinking.

Spell 2 projects actors engaging diverse activities as different in agency, not as different in physical figures of the sexed bodies. The target person’s body is projected as Undergoer/ Patient controlled by a spiritual power. The agency of the speaking

Table 3
Focalization of the speaker

Spell 1: 'I' in others' perception	
4.8. <i>Elok endah aku dipandang</i>	4.8. Pretty and beautiful, I am seen
Spell 2: 'I' in other's thinking	
18. <i>Ayam kuku sangkonyo aku.</i>	18. A Chicken crackling, he/she remembers me,
19. <i>Muai bakicau sangkonyo aku</i>	19. Muai is (a bird) singing, he/she remembers me.

subject 'I' is not apparent, either. The speaking subject 'I' as Agent only appears in invoking a spiritual agent in line 6 by repeating ancestral verbal formula, and as Locative of the target's mental process in lines 18–19. In this spell, only a spiritual power personified as 'White Angel,' and a target person are those who engage in direct activities, while a performer appears as an object of desire.

6. Social desirability: Petalangan notions of power and agency

My analysis of the Petalangan beauty and love spells demonstrates their culturally specific notions of desire. Although these spells are commonly used in courtship, the spells are not necessarily linked to sexed bodies, or sexual desire. Instead, the spells project imaginary figures who are not gendered, but different in agency—a performer as an object of desire, others who perceive and desire the performer, and a spiritual power who makes others desire the performer. This, in turn, reveals that Petalangan conceptualizations of gender do not only draw on physical differences between the male and female body. Rather, they recognize gender differences as differences in the forms and degrees of agency between men and women.

Petalangan notions of desire are also related to social hierarchy. Usually, the imaginary figures who desire the performer are described as highly positioned in social standing. For example, Spell 1 projects others as hierarchically structured, from a group of people, its leader and even to Allah and Muhammad. Implicitly projecting status marked scenes in lines 13 through 18 (Example 4), the spell articulates how Petalangan notions of desires are intertwined with their concepts of social power—a superior desires an inferior.

Example 4: Hierarchy of others (Spell 1)

13. <i>gilo somuo uang nan amai</i>	13. [Driven] Crazy, all crowded people,
14. <i>sumuo anak sidang manusia</i>	14. every group of human being.
15. <i>katuonya Si Co'am Balik Gilo</i>	15. <u>Their leader</u> is Mr. Turning Crazy Choam.
16. <i>sagolo uang amai</i>	16. All crowded people.
17. <i>sedang kan Allah lagi sayang</i>	17. While <u>Allah</u> also loves [me],
18. <i>sedang kan Muhammad sudah gilo</i>	18. while <u>Muhammad</u> is already crazy,

The desire to use the spells is social as well. Petalangan customary law defines one of the duties of parents as that of arranging for their children's marriages. Petalangan parents say that they would feel shame if their daughters could not find spouses at an early age, around 15 or 16.⁵ The desire to find spouses does not merely emanate from individual needs, but is also based on social desirability.

The notion of social desirability is central to understanding the Petalangan construction of social life as well as the sexual self. In the same way that the Javanese conceptualize power as revealing itself through a person's refined demeanor and behavior (Anderson, 1972), so the Petalangan conceive of power as emphasizing the person's sociality and desirability to others; the more spiritual potency a person has, the more people flock to that person. In the Petalangan view, 'appeal' is a more dominant way of exercising power than 'assertion' in social encounters. Power is not an attribute of a person but a divine energy that reveals itself as radiance of light, while power in the Western sense is identified with 'activity, forcefulness, getting things done, instrumentality, and effectiveness brought about through calculation of means to achieve goals' (Errington, 1990, p. 5). The Petalangan people think that a person with spiritual potency attracts people and makes them act. Engaging in a direct activity only reveals the person's lack of spiritual potency.

Given this background, women's practices of beauty and love spells are not only expressions of female marginality, but also can be viewed as enabling powers to invoke specific sentimental intimacy in social encounters. Strathern argues that gender symbolism plays a crucial role in people's conceptualization of the social world (Strathern, 1987, p. ix). Just as the sibling relationship between brother and sister as a metaphor for romantic relationships recurring across diverse expressive genres of the Petalangan people (cf. Kang, 2000), the trope of seduction and solicitation becomes a primary means for describing the diverse transformations of Petalangan power relations. Such power relations with superiors, including supernatural beings, nature, and powerful outsiders, employ the metaphor of female marginality to describe the people's collective sense of marginalization from the powerful center.

Recently, as government-sponsored palm oil plantations and logging companies have infringed on Petalangan territories, Petalangan people have experienced a loss of ancestral land. Many male elder leaders told me that they use beauty spells when they try to 'appeal' to powerful outsiders in negotiating land compensation. Petalangan leaders used to say some of their successful negotiations were because of their beauty spells. When I stayed in Petalangan villages for my field research, villagers also used to tell me that their beauty spells are powerful enough to attract people, even foreigners like me. My presence among them appeared as a proof of their spiritual potency. Their use of beauty spells to evoke a specific sentimental intimacy or compassion becomes one of the important tools by which Petalangan people manage and manipulate others. Petalangan magic spells thus appear not as a col-

⁵ The average age for marriage is under twenty in Petalangan society. Petalangans tend to explain their early marriage tendency as due to their lack of education. Since many villagers have no education higher than the elementary school level, they think that the age of finishing the elementary school (around 12 or 13) is the best time for marriage. This tendency is most frequently found among girls, not boys. Because boys are expected to find jobs before marriage, they take more time to get married.

lection of fixed texts, but as ongoing practices where a language practice and the Petalangans' marginality converge with a politics of desire.

7. Conclusion: agency in Petalangan spells

The Petalangan case reveals the ways in which their notions of desire are related to their culturally specific conceptualization of agency. With their cultural emphasis on social desirability and spiritual potency, Petalangans use 'appeal' as a common behavioral style through which a person induces others 'to do something' for his/her own benefit. They conceptualize agency as the potency to make others act, rather than engaging in direct activity.

Then, how do the Petalangan spells reflect this notion of agency? Throughout the beauty and love spells, the agency of speaking subject 'I' is not apparent. 'I' as an agent only appears in describing the subject's speech activities as repeating the ancestors' words or invoking a spiritual agent (Table 4).

Given that all of these lines describe the subject's speech activity itself, the speaker's agency is restricted to the activity of repeating ancestors' words. Moreover, the high formality of the magic spell infuses textual authority into the spells so that it appears unchanged from generation to generation. Unlike the conventional Western notions of agency that emphasize individual will and intentions (cf. Ortner, 1984, 1996), a performer of Petalangan magic spells acquires agency by denying their own intentions as well as by invoking the authority of 'the ancestors' voices' embedded in a specific type of magic formula. The speaker's agency is not an attribute or power through which the speaker asserts control over action. Rather, it is found in the very act by which the speaker ascribes agency to higher sources of power.

In conclusion, Petalangan beauty and love spells demonstrate the multiplicity of notions of desire in relation to notions of agency. Petalangan notions of desire are not transparently and autonomously linked to the sexed body and sexual desire. Rather, Petalangan expressions of desire are constituted and sustained by discursive allocations of agency among the figures of the spells, as subjects and as objects of desire. Based on the cultural emphasis on social desirability, however, becoming an 'object of desire' is another mode of agency in Petalangan society, as it solicits spiritual power and attracts others. This notion of agency contrasts with the traditional Western dichotomy between women as subordinated objects of desire and men as actors who control and dominate. Agency is not necessarily linked to 'act' or 'action' in Petalangan society, thus critiquing the common Western ideas of agency in language that focus on 'subjects' and 'acts' (see Keane, 1997; Ahearn, 2001). Petalangan magic spells, as the 'words

Table 4
'I' as an agent: describing speaking activities

Repeating Spells' Titles (Spell 1, 2).	<i>"I use the Prayer of X"</i>
Invoking Spiritual Power (Spell 2: 12–14)	<i>"[I] ask [a spiritual agent] to do X"</i>

of the ancestors,' serve as another source of power to which a performer ascribes his/her own agency, while providing cultural models through which people conceptualize their agency and their relationships with others. The analysis of Petalangan magic spells thus draws our attention to social contexts and metapragmatic dimensions of language practice in understanding the discursive constructions of desire.

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