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DISCUSSING THE WRITTEN WORD: ORAL TRADITION TRANSFORMATIONS

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Abstract:

The paper attempts to show how the emergence of writing in 'oral cultures' transforms the society and how, in the process of rapid modernization, oral traditions diffuse and are lost. Through a discussion of Walter Ong, Havelock and Jack Goody's work I will attempt to highlight the change that such societies go through with the introduction of writing. Using the Naga society as a model for analysis I shall attempt to show the impact the emergence of this new medium of communication. Through Havelock, Ong and Goody's theory of how writing changes and restructures the consciousness of the people, we shall see how the cultural heritage transmitted in non-literate societies, particularly the Nagas, changes with the widespread adoption of writing; also, what man makes of his world is closely related to systems of communication and any change in these systems is linked to changes in human interaction. In our discussions, we shall ponder upon questions including: What are the complications involved in the shift from an oral mode to a written one? What happens to indigenous oral cultural systems when the written form takes over the role of the spoken one?

Keywords: *Written, oral culture, modernization, oral tradition, consciousness, indigenous, oral mode, written one.*

Writing powerfully augments features of language and memory such as storage capacity, preservation, and accuracy, and as a result it promotes all manner of change in human life-
Tony E. Jackson

Writing Restructures Consciousness

In the history of the world, no discovery or invention has affected human life more than the emergence of writing. The evolution of a writing system has tremendously affected and changed the quality of life and perception of human thought. Writing emerged as a means of communication between people across time and space. Writing as a social process connected people's thought, perceptions, experiences and projects into a wider collection of organized action and belief. With the spread of formal education, indigenous people took to writing and eventually started writing about their tribes and their cultural practices.

The impact of writing systems on different societies at different periods of time in history has had various implications. There were societies-like the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Greeks and others-in which the system of writing developed from within themselves. On the other hand, there were societies in which writing did not evolve on its own but was brought by outsiders and it began to be used within these communities. For instance, in the case of the Nagas, writing was brought by the Christian missionaries and the British colonial administrators around the late nineteenth century.

When writing emerges from within the culture, the inhabitants slowly imbibe, adapt to the change, and adjust their lives according to the cycle of change. However, in the case of writing coming from outside, the impact on the society is tremendous and a total overhaul of the society takes place. The appearance of a "superior" technology accelerates the changes taking place in the society. Once the changes in the religion and in the social set-up seep in, rapid transformation of the society takes place.

The Interface between Orality and Literacy

There have been numerous attempts to discuss the balance between orality and literacy in terms of technological changes, alienation from the oral life, and a transition from community ownership to individual authorship and ownership. The distinction between orality and literacy cannot be simply narrowed down to the spoken and the written or in terms of tradition and modern, primitive and advanced. In order to understand the interface between literacy and orality in an oral culture, it is necessary to consider the influence of literacy in terms of societal and cognitive effects.

There are two main schools of thought, namely the “autonomous” model proposed largely by Goody and Watt (Goody and Watt 10) and the “ideological” model coined by Brian Street (Street 23). Goody and Watt claim that literacy as a technology was responsible for “raising consciousness,” promoting abstraction and reflection. They define literacy as an autonomous agent and emphasize the great divide of theory between oral and literate societies.

Goody's and Watt's theory was also endorsed by Walter Ong, who said that writing led to the “evolution of consciousness,” provided composition techniques and the ability to create intricate narrative (Ong 20). Street, on the other hand, developed the “ideological” (Street 23) model—an amalgamation of responses from Finnegan, Bloch, Graff and others to the general claim of literacy described above. This model of literacy places more emphasis on the importance of society on literacy, i.e. “the meaning of literacy depends upon the social institutions in which it is embedded.” (Street 16)

Whilst Ruth Finnegan agrees that writing can promote abstraction, she argues that oral cultures can have awareness of language and abstraction. She uses the Limba and Dogon tribes of West Africa as examples. She writes that “their [the Limba and Dogon tribes'] reflectiveness strikes an observer immediately in the interest they take in their own language and in their philosophy of speech” (Finnegan 9). Another factor Finnegan cites against the autonomous theory is the diversity of oral compositions and genres, even within the same society. According to her:

Much of the plausibility of the 'Great Divide' theories has rested on the often unconscious assumption that what the essential shaping of society comes from is its communication technology. But once technological determinism is rejected or queried, then questions immediately arise about these influential classifications? Of human development into two major types: oral/primitive as against oral/literate... It is worth emphasizing that the conclusions from research, not only about the supposed 'primitive mentality' associated with orality, but also about, for example, concepts of individualism and the self, conflict and scepticism, or detached and abstract thought in non-literate cultures now look different... [and] once-confident assertions about the supposed differentiating features of oral and literate cultures are now exposed as decidedly shaky (Finnegan 13).

David R. Olson appears to situate himself in the middle of these views. He admits that oral culture is an all encompassing phrase but feels that literacy does effect cognitive changes, and so he narrows the terminology to 'Western scientific thought' (Olson 18).

The polarity between orality and literacy leads to the theory of the “Great Cognitive Divide” and the “Great Leap”. This refers to a theory of literature and/or of social organization generally which pretty well hangs all “human activity and all changes in human activity on orality-literacy pegs.” This theory has been generated because of the rampant use of the contrast between orality and literacy in a simplistic manner (Ong 700-701). Despite the two interfaces being on opposite sides of the pole, today the distinction between the two cannot merely be seen in terms of their polarity. It should rather be seen in terms of interdependence and compatibility. Russell H Kaschula says that orality and literacy, if seen as incompatible and different and not as a part of the same continuum, results in the notion of literacy versus illiteracy, civilization versus non-civilization, structure versus non-structure, and so on (Kaschula 173). The emergence of writing in Naga society dislodged the system of orality, which was deeply entrenched in

it. The society's newly acquired tool confronts the traditional stronghold of orality and in the process brings about numerous changes in the society. However, the unsettling of orality does not lead to its disappearance and this action of writing should not be seen as a competitive element. Jack Goody says that writing may replace orality in certain contexts but it does not diminish the act of orality totally. (Goody xiv).

Eric Havelock, while acknowledging the revolutionary impact of literacy, says “without modern literacy . . . we would not have science, philosophy, written law or literature, nor the automobile or the airplane.”(Havelock 24). In other words, the impact of literacy has “resulted in alterations in the organization and operation of the human consciousness” (Biakolo 43). In the same vein as Havelock, Walter Ong also contends that literacy is necessary “for the development not only of science but also history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself” (Ong 15). He says that, “[m]ore than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness” (Ong 78). The paramount effect of writing on humans can be gauged from the above statements. The emergence of writing in primary cultures like the Naga society defined and changed the outlook of the tribal people. The change that took place in the society resulted in a state of consciousness which was induced by a new experience. This new state of consciousness altered the way in which one viewed life.

Writing allows for abstract thought and through the technology of writing, one is able to see language as an object of consciousness and how literacy, in the form of a literary text, allows people to restructure their thoughts and more specifically, in this case, to restructure the people's traditional culture. Aier states that the “spread of education meant more for Naga tribal transformation and it was a development, that would greatly replace the very mental frame and idea of the reality of the traditional world” (Aier 48). The idea here is not to suggest that only Christian missionaries and colonial administrators were responsible for the spread of literacy in cultures without writing. But in this study, since the focus is on Naga society, where writing was brought about by Christian missionaries and colonial administrators, studying their role becomes important. Takatemjen talks about the factors leading to the abandonment of traditional cultural practices states:

The Naga communities of the eighteenth century with their traditional beliefs, values, and customs were modified tremendously as a result of coming into contact with Christianity. The changes which were brought about by the missionaries were the direct consequences of the nature of the Christian faith they taught. At the same time, their attitude to traditional culture was greatly responsible for rejecting some elements of culture and for retaining others. (Takatemjen 12)

The indigenous Naga culture underwent a major overhaul with the onslaught of literacy. The meeting of writing and oral culture changed the entire social set-up of the community. The proliferation of literacy was swift and the impact tremendously indelible. Within a time span of less than a century, the Naga society turned from animistic worshippers to Christianity. In the process, a significant portion of traditional cultural values and customs were lost in the myriad of modernity. This duality between orality and literacy implies, therefore, a cross-over period when the Naga society underwent structural changes in the organizational set-up of the village. The fact that new form of activities emerged in the community hardly needs to be stressed.

Lanutemjen Aier adds:

It would appear that the Naga tribal religion greatly determined the ethos of the people. It is believed that it functioned to the extent of controlling the behavior of the individual life and that of the village society at large. It is explained as involving many elaborate rituals and ceremonies strengthening the belief of the people and thereof the social bond of the total society of the village. Animism, as it were, at that time served the people well. (Aier 46)

The change in religious practices resulted in a new consciousness. From being believers in an animistic religion, the tribals turned to Christianity. A change in the religious faith is a significant move for beliefs are important and valuable. In the words of Takatemjen, “Christianity brought to the Nagas a new philosophy of life, a status of equality with the rest of the world and a new social consciousness. It transformed the habits and the character of the Naga people” (Takatemjen 1). Christianity has deeply influenced the consciousness among people in oral cultures.

In dealing with the development that took place in the Naga society, one sees how the basic cultural realm of the Nagas was dissipated by the coloniser and their system of education. Within the Naga traditional structure, the society lived by a network of collective interaction and a bond of dependency among themselves. Earlier, transmission of culture was by word of mouth. The introduction of formal education not only disturbed the transmission of oral culture through induction and initiation and group activities, but was also responsible for breaking the harmony between the individual and the social environment. This eventually widened the individual's awareness about one's cultural practices.

Jack Goody says that what man makes of his world is clearly related to systems of communication. Any change in the means of communication is linked to the change in human interaction. According to him,

Language is the specific human attribute, the critical means of interaction between individuals, the foundation of the development of what we call 'culture' and of the way in which learned behaviour is transmitted from one generation to the next. But if language is inextricably associated with 'culture', it is writing that is linked with 'civilization', with the culture of cities, with complex social formations, though perhaps not quite in so direct a manner. Nor is this only a matter of the implications for social organization, radical as these were in the long run. It is not just a question of providing the means by which trade and administration can be extended, but of changes in the cognitive processes that man is heir to, that is, the ways in which he understands his universe. (Goody 3).

The social organizational set-up is disturbed and the people move beyond their village and in the process become more aware of the outside world. In the case of the Nagas, the introduction of writing enabled the villagers to move beyond the realm of their village. At the same time, it enabled the Nagas to become more aware of each other and in the process bond together as one people.

Goody also discusses how the cultural heritage transmitted in non-literate societies change with the widespread adoption of writing. The advent of literacy affects the cultural tradition of the society. From a society that relied on oral communication for transmitting knowledge, it changed into a society that depended more on the written form. Goody states that:

it increased the potentialities of criticism because writing laid out discourse before one's eyes in a different kind of way; at the same time it increased the potentiality for cumulative knowledge, especially knowledge of an abstract kind, because it changes the nature of communication beyond that of face-to-face contact as well as the system for the storage of information. . . (Goody 37).

Communication takes on a new role and the society does not only rely on the oral mode of communication. It also changes the way one perceives things. The awareness level of the people increases as one does not only rely on the “face-to-face” passage of knowledge. But with the new storage of information that is available through writing, one is able to broaden one's sense of the world.

The emergence of literacy leads to the loss of what McLuhan called “aural space.” (McLuhan) McLuhan's concept was that primary orality's world of involvement, participation, and expression was obliterated by print culture. The active participatory realm of storytelling in the *morung* eventually gave way to modern formal education. No longer was there a need for the *morung* as the younger generation

attended schools run by the missionaries.

Goody refers to writing as a technology of the intellect. He interprets the transition from oral culture to a written one as a move from pre-literate society to modern literate society in terms of how the new development has not only altered the individual as such but also our sense of what we interpret of our communities and the shared physical environment. Thus, one of the changes in the mental and social structures brought about by the use of writing in the transformed oral culture is the emergence of writers. The manner in which information in the oral society was presented and meaning was constructed changed with the emergence of writing.

Social science research in literacy assumes that some kind of decisive change takes place when individuals and societies acquire literacy. Jack Goody summarizes these changes as: the move from myth to history, from magic to science, status to contract, cold to hot, concrete to abstract, collective to individual, ritual to rationality. Yet the social science approach to literacy is not as dichotomizing as Goody's characterization suggests. Social science research tends to focus on how these changes occur within individuals, changes in the ways they think and interact with the world, but it also considers these cognitive changes as conditioned by the social contexts in which literacy is used. Hence, there is no monolithic concept of what happens when any individual or society, regardless of the historical circumstances, acquires literacy. Goody prioritizes the specific role played by written communication in the emergence, development, and organisation of social and cultural institutions in contemporary societies: religion, law, commerce, bureaucracy and the state. Goody clambers with us through the social structures, which have been erected as a result of literacy, and views their long-term effects on the organization of society, so that we now better understand their functions and the human environments which create the record.

Conclusion

Lastly, this paper sets the stage for further work by looking at the ways in which communities with strong oral characteristics communicate and perceive information, realised through ethnography and participatory design. The aim of this future research is not to provide a conclusive technological product designed for 'oral cultures' by 'oral cultures' but rather to open up the channels of discourse and understand more about information behaviors. We should realize that imposing literate technologies on other cultures is perhaps not the best or only way to design. The literate mindset is so deeply embedded that it can be hard, if not impossible, to contemplate existence without it. However, there is no need to welcome the trend of homogeneity, the technology exists to provide new ways to express, design and create. We should celebrate orality and not demote or force it into emulating literacy.

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