

Looking Back in Oral and Written Cultures

One thing that old-time anthropologists have taught us is that societies with only oral communication can be very complicated. Human society became much more complex (perhaps began) with the invention of speech, giving rise, I would suggest, to thought itself, or to higher consciousness. The so-called 'human revolution' took place with the dispersal of homo sapiens from Africa some 60,000 years ago (according to DNA evidence) with a fully developed language. The revolution has often been associated with France and with the appearance of cave art. But cave-art had a rather limited distribution in Southern France and northern Spain. Anyhow, the point is that given this technology of the intellect, i.e. speech, humans developed what we call a culture, that is, where speech enabled us to communicate quite differently. In the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic these human achievements had been broadly similar in various parts of the world, e.g. in hand-axe cultures. The Upper Palaeolithic saw the advent of modern man with a fully-fledged language and what has been called the 'human revolution'. With the invention of agriculture, in the Neolithic, you find a greater diversity of local cultures that existed in Africa until recently, as they did in America and the Pacific; these were generally the cultures the earlier anthropologists tended to study.

From the beginning there was certainly an evolution taking place in the way humans communicated but as far as culture was concerned that evolution was relatively slow (albeit fast by genetic standards) – involving human learning. The evolution of cultures clearly speeded up with the invention of human language, the human revolution

of the Upper Palaeolithic. What is so remarkable by the criteria present-day society is the extraordinary development that we have seen since the invention of 'visible speech', of writing. In a number of productions but beginning with *La Raison Graphique*, I have tried to outline the changes that writing has made, in the religious life, in the polity, in the economy, and in intellectual life generally. But here I want to concentrate on one aspect, on the speed of change. While other factors are undoubtedly involved, I want to signal the rapid increase in the rate of human development from that time, only 5,000 years ago, no time at all in terms of human history, compared with what went on in the Old and New Stone Ages. This was mainly because writing provided an external means of storage of information, marked another step on the build-up to an information society, and meaning that not only can we store old information but we can add the new. This is what the Bronze Age invention of writing enabled us to do, to increase the speed of cultural innovation enormously.

At least, it did and it didn't. Because in the transcendental sphere of religion, one looked back to the unchanging word of God. Religious change was not impossible but God's word was nevertheless permanent, whether in the Hebrew Bible, in the Christian testaments, or in the Muslim Qu'ran. Or even, it should be added, the Vedic scriptures or the Confucian classics, because it is not only monotheism or even religion that can be canonized in this way. Each instance involves a looking back to a canonized text which continues to act as a guide to the present. The process is essentially conservative. If religion is to change, it does so by returning to the text and maintaining that subsequent generations have misinterpreted the written word.

In the arts, too, we have the phenomena of canonization. Homer's poems were recited at the great festival in Athens. Shakespeare receives a similar treatment, above all

at a specially dedicated theatre in his birth place, Stratford-on-Avon, but his work is performed at many other places too. However the difference is that religious canonization is distinct from the secular variety; no alternative to God's world is possible whereas Shakespeare's work served to stimulate that of other Elizabethan dramatists. Secular canonization means artistic performance which also encourages variation; religious canonization means the recognition of the pre-eminence of a single text, and therefore of stasis. With religious art, too, there is more confinement, anyhow as far as topic is concerned. It is with secularisation that we get the widening of the possible subjects, the abandonment, for example, of the limits placed upon medieval Christian art, more variations of topic that emphasized freedom of choice and individualism, which marked post-Renaissance art in Europe (but which had appeared earlier in other parts of the world).

Science in this respect was more like art than religion, except that it was built on experience of the world in a different way. The Arabs in the Abbasid and Buyid periods translated almost all Greek science, especially Aristotle and the works attributed to him. They were written works. They did this partly in order to get to know past knowledge and partly to build up their own science, which they did especially in astronomy, mathematics and in medicine, where they not only translated Galen and Ptolemy but added to them, using hospitals in Baghdad, libraries in all capitals, observatories as at Maraghah, and the translations included Sanskritic works from India. But the Muslims did not look back to Greek artistic works, such as Homer's. They had their own artistic traditions to recall, the pre-Islamic poets such as Al-Quays. So in art the looking back was localized, while in science (technology, medicine) it was more universal and travelled more easily across cultures. In these various spheres, what

literacy permitted or encouraged varied in its social importance and consequences, but throughout it permitted a looking back which oral discourse could not provide, except in a much more flexible way. One thing that writing allowed in every sphere was this capacity for permanent storage.

I do not want to imply that in oral societies, there is no looking back – of course there is, but it is to a more variable tradition, to a more mythical past, not to history. Let me bring out the difference by referring to a personal experience that I had in the field among the LoDagaa of Northern Ghana.

When I worked there in West Africa, I recorded various versions of the long recital known as the Bagre over a period of 40 years. First I wrote it down with a pencil and paper. It took me 10 days to complete the transcription. I also wrote down every word and I believed what the inhabitants told me, that they had ‘learnt’ it from an elder and that it remained the same over time. Hence the myth could be related to other permanent aspects of the social life of the LoDagaa in an unambiguous way.

Subsequently I used a portable tape recorder, made possible by the invention of the transistor which did away with the need of wireless valves. That machine had not been previously available to anthropologists in the field and the vast majority had just taken down one version of a long myth, which was then regarded as *the* myth of the LoDagaa (or the Nambikwara, or the Kwakiutl).

When I returned some years later and recorded a further version (The Second Bagre), I found that this was not at all the case. Even the first (12) lines of the Bagre which I called the invocation and which people seemed to be able to recite ‘by heart’ like the Lord’s Prayer, even this varied from Speaker to Speaker. But it was not only verbal changes. The White Bagre, the first part, remained roughly the same because it

presented an embellished account of the actual ceremonies that were being performed, hence there was a relatively fixed order in which these occurred. Even so, there was some switching of that order, some forgetting of ritual events, although in the main the versions were reasonably similar. However, the second part of the Bagre, the Black Bagre, told of the creation not of much of the world but of man's culture, the way he learned to perform various tasks, including the reproduction of mankind itself. This part of the myth was more thoughtful, more speculative, and it varied much more. There was one passage in the First Bagre where the younger one of the first two men, looking for a solution to his problems on earth, climbed up to Heaven to speak directly to God (the High God) with the help of the spider (who in Akan tales is a typical trickster) and whose web formed a ladder to the skies. There he witnessed the creation of a child, and met its 'mother' with whom he as the 'father' continually quarrelled about 'ownership'. I saw this as a central part of the narrative but also as central to the main themes and it played a prominent part in my analysis.

Some years later I recorded the Second Bagre. My surprise was great to find no mention of this incident. There was some reference to animals flying through the air which I might have understood as a reference to the visit to God (who was surrounded by animals), but no-one else would have done so. Indeed God played a relatively minor part in this second version, which gave much more emphasis to the creation of man's culture by the *kontome*, the beings of the wild, denizens of the hills and the streams, and half-way between mankind and the gods. In the Third Bagre that I collected and published some years later the emphasis had shifted once again from the transcendental to the human, to the idea that 'man made himself'. In other words, intellectually there had been a complete shift of theme in the recitation.

With the myth changing its tone in such a radical fashion, there was no question of a single version of the Bagre being attached to LoDagaa society, even in one settlement. It was impossible to derive an interpretation of LoDagaa society based upon any one version. There was no 'charter' in a Malinowskian sense. For the recitation was changing all the time, independently of other social changes but relative perhaps to varied intellectual interests. So that under these oral conditions a recitation was totally different from the largely fixed text associated with written religions. The myths of oral societies apparently changed constantly and that had to do, inter alia, with the type of storage available. In written societies one could learn a fixed text as with those members of any of the Abrahamic religions who tried to memorize the complete book, in a kind of homage to God, even though writing made this kind of memorization unnecessary. In oral conditions however, one could not memorize the Bagre in the same way. You heard others recite it but when your turn came, no matter whether you could try to repeat what others had said (and in a long oral recitation of this kind, that was virtually impossible), you had to continue to speak. What you didn't recall, you had to make up. The public recitation demanded that gaps be filled. Consequently, as distinct from written rituals, each version was different, sometimes significantly so. As I have remarked, this was not simply a matter of small verbal differences, sometimes the very 'structure' of the recitation differed (and I use that word advisedly). That is to say, there could be (and was) a switch from a transcendental explanation of the origins of culture to a human one, or a shift from the role of the High God to that of intermediaries such as the beings of the wild (known to English speakers as the fairies).

The conclusion I want to bring out is this. In an oral society, the process of looking back is very different from that in a literate one. An oral society is in a certain

sense more 'creative'; the myth is never the same, although it may have elements in common. Whereas with writing, we have a firm base in 'text', one that cannot be changed because it is God's word, religious. But in other spheres of activity we look back in a more definite way, to build upon what has been written, whether in the arts where change is of a circular kind, or in science where one explanation often improves upon the earlier, builds on that. And in that context, it is not simply literacy that counts but any change or difference in the means of communication that may lead to a more accurate or more rapid circulation of information. And this is where printing, by wood blocks or by the press, by the hand, steam-driven, or rotary press, by the various forms of computer, come in. They too can circulate useful information more quickly and more widely, but they can also circulate messages of quite a different order in the same way.

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