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978-0-521-83787-3 - The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics

Karin Barber

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ONE



Anthropology and text

“Where there is no text, there is no object of study, and no object of thought either.”

(Bakhtin 1986: 103).

Encounter with texts

A text is a tissue of words. The term comes from the Latin *texere*, meaning literally to weave, join together, plait or braid; and therefore, to construct, fabricate, build or compose (Greetham 1999: 26). That is what this book is about: the universal human work of weaving or fabricating with words. People put words together to make a mark, to leave a trace. They do this orally as well as in writing. Though many people think of “text” as referring exclusively to written words, writing is not what confers textuality. Rather, what does is the quality of being joined together and given a recognisable existence as a form. The oral rhapsodes of ancient Greece were “song-stitchers”¹ who sewed together floating formulas to construct a remarkable, attention-worthy form. This material image suggests that people thought of their compositions not as evanescent breath, but as something with a presence: something that could be apprehended and evaluated. In some situations the oral text may even be seen as the *only* thing that outlasts death and time, and testifies to the reality of past achievements:

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What would remain of great exploits if we did not have our musicians?
 With their rich memories and vivid songs they keep them alive for ever.
 What great deed would survive without those songs?
 Who would ever remember Sunjata Keita's extraordinary courage
 if it were not for Jeli Jakuma, his talented musician and faithful companion?
 Who would remember great Babemba's supreme sacrifice
 in the blood-drenched ruins of Sikasso?
 What would remain of men's actions
 when they vanish and their bodies turn to dust?
 Nothing but obscure oblivion, oblivion like ashes
 Cold, dead ashes after a forest fire.
 For man's memory is brief.
 Not even the most glorious exploits would survive time
 without the undying devotion of singers and musicians.
 They immortalise them and keep them alive through the ages.

This is a poetic text from the West African Sahel, sung by a bard to the accompaniment of xylophones and drums, in the closing shots of Med Hondo's film *Sarraounia*. Most people would probably have no problem with classifying it as "oral literature". But literature is a value-laden and historically-specific term. Not all the texts to be discussed in this book correspond to familiar western definitions of literature, and the societies that produce them rarely have a concept that could easily be translated by the term. Text is a more neutral and more encompassing term: text, in the sense in which I am using it in this book, is utterance (oral or written) that is woven together in order to attract attention and to outlast the moment.

What, then, does it mean to understand a text? And what can we understand *from* texts – about social relations, ideas and values in the cultures that produce them? Anthropology has always had an intuition, sometimes an uneasy one, that verbal texts have the capacity to shed light, in a way nothing else can, on the inner life of societies. Locally-produced texts, composed and transmitted according to people's own conventions, in their own language, encapsulating their own concerns, do seem to speak as if from "within".

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Words are not the only form of representation or expression. People establish and convey meaning through clothing, dance, music, gesture, and through complex rituals which often defy verbal exegesis. And verbal texts are often inseparable from these other kinds of meaning-making, so that to tear a poem away from its music or from the dance that it is part of is to remove its point. Older anthropology has been criticised for being too word-centred, not sufficiently attentive to sensory, tactile, aural, gestural and visual communication, and there is some truth in this. But all the same, we cannot by-pass language or the texts which are precipitates of language. Language is far and away the most complex, exact and ambitious system of meaning-making devised by human beings. All other activities are, as it were, “bathed by, suspended in, and cannot be entirely segregated or divorced from the element of speech” (Volosinov 1973: 15).² And texts are the hot spots of language: concentrations of linguistic productivity, forms of language that have been marked out to command heightened attention – and sometimes to stimulate intense excitement, provoke admiration and desire, or be the mainstay of memory.

Texts are constructed to be detachable from the flow of conversation, so that they can be repeated, quoted and commented upon – they are forms of language, that is, which, whether written or oral, are accorded a kind of independent and privileged existence. At the same time, however, all texts, including written ones, are forms of action, speech acts embedded in the context of their emission and reception. This double existence – both as context-dependent speech act and as autonomous entity “out there” in social space – is at the heart of the questions we are addressing: what are texts? what are they constituted to do? how do they exist? how can they be interpreted? what can they tell us about society and culture, and what can anthropology in turn tell us about textual production and interpretation?

Texts are social facts. Texts are used to do things: they are forms of action. A Luba chief is not a chief until his status is ratified by the performance of *kasàlà* praises in his honour: “It’s the *kasàlà* that confirms the

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chief. If you become a chief without someone chanting *kasàlà* for you, you are not a chief at all. Even if you are a hero, you are not a hero. You have to be sung for” (Mufuta 1969: 110, my translation). If a Dinka youth seeking a favour from his father couches his request in poetry, he greatly increases his chances of a favourable response, for poetry is understood to have extraordinary persuasive power (Deng 1973). In Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s novel *In Evil Hour*, a village community is thrown into turmoil by the secret distribution, by persons unknown, of written lampoons slandering fellow-citizens; here the power of the text is the particular combination of permanence, prominence and anonymity made possible by writing.

Texts are one of the things societies produce, and one of the things people do. As such, they are interesting in the same way that kinship, ritual and agriculture are interesting, as forms of social behaviour widely distributed and generally central to people’s communal experience. Wendy James has put creativity at the centre of her “new portrait of anthropology” (James 2003). Along with dance, song and bodily ceremony, textual productions are at the core of human efforts to create form, which James sees as the most central human impulse. With texts, people perform what you might call (using an old Elizabethan term) acts of “instauration”, that is, “institution, founding, establishment” but also “restoration, renovation, renewal” (OED). People innovatively establish social forms and attentively maintain them; both the establishment and the maintenance are creative, emergent and continuous. Texts, in this view, are instances of instauration which are central to human experience.

As well as being social facts, however, texts are commentaries upon, and interpretations of, social facts. They are part of social reality but they also take up an attitude to social reality. They may criticise social forms or confirm and consolidate them: in both cases, they are *reflexive*. They are part of the apparatus by which human communities take stock of their own creations. Textual traditions can be seen as a community’s ethnography of itself – as has been observed by scholars working on texts as far

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apart as a Flaubert novella (Bourdieu 1996) and a popular play in Zaire (Fabian 1990). If you look closely at *how* texts are reflexive, you will get a sense of how a society or community understands itself. Their reflexivity is not confined to commentary on other social institutions. Texts, very often, reflect upon themselves. In this way they offer a unique insight into their own operations as acts of cultural instauration. Dance, ritual and music cannot do this; only linguistic texts, which inhabit the same medium as their own exegesis, can be reflexive in this way. And it is a peculiarly interesting way, as we shall see. For verbal textual genres are often set up hand-in-glove with explicit, elaborated genres of exegesis and interpretation. They are set up *to be* interpreted: as a challenge, a puzzle or a demand. And the means to interpret them – the repertoires of arguments, analyses, explanations, expansions and inter-textual linkages – are themselves a tradition, and one that can be just as important and revealing as the textual tradition itself, with which it is symbiotically linked. The exegesis is part of the process by which the text is established; and because it is explicitly analytical and interpretative, it has the capacity to reveal something of the inner processes of instauration.

Giambattista Vico, the great eighteenth-century philosopher, laid down the basis of a major tradition in the human sciences with his observation that we can only truly know what we, as humans, have created. We know the natural world externally, from observation and induction; but we know our own history and culture internally because we made it.³ We understand it as the product of intentional activity: that is, characterised by a human orientation to other humans. Intentional forms allow an intuitive, interior relation of understanding: “what men have made, other men, because their minds are those of men, can always, in principle, ‘enter into’” (Berlin, glossing Vico, 1976: 27). “Intentional” in this sense does not refer to a person’s aims or motives: it refers to the quality of being made by humans for a purpose which other humans can grasp. This distinction between human and natural science became the foundation of a tradition of human science running through Wilhelm Dilthey

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and Hans-Georg Gadamer into historiography, and through Max Weber into modern sociology, represented for example by Anthony Giddens and Peter Winch. If it is true that we have a special understanding of intentional forms, then verbal texts should be given pride of place amongst them: because verbal texts are not only created in order to be understood by other human minds, but are created out of language, that specially human invention.

There is no doubt that when we meet certain kinds of texts – many kinds, in fact – there is a sense of *encounter* with something other and almost beyond comprehension, yet at the same time curiously close.

A spring day at the edge of the world
On the edge of the world once more the day slants.
The oriole cries, as though it were its own tears
Which damp even the topmost blossoms on the tree.

(Graham 1965: 156)

This ninth-century Chinese poem by Li Shang-yin seems to create a kind of stillness around it. Despite the layers upon layers of impediments – difficulties of translation, unfamiliar cultural assumptions, different poetic conventions – it seems to speak clearly across the centuries that separate us from it. It commands a rapt, perfect attention in which the listening mind waits and attunes itself to intimations of alterity. It is as if we were in tune with something beyond ourselves, something extremely far away with which we nonetheless experience a relationship of interiority.

Anthropologists have always been sensitive to this quality of encounter in verbal texts in the cultures they study. It seems to me to be no accident that Michelle Rosaldo, in her great ethnography of the emotions among the Ilongot of the Philippines, resorts quite spontaneously to Ilongot songs as she approaches the heart of her exposition. At the time that Michelle and Renato Rosaldo worked among them in the 1960s and 1970s, the Ilongot were still active headhunters. Michelle Rosaldo posed to herself the most difficult of questions: how could people for whom,

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in other ways, she felt such sympathy and admiration build their sense of masculine achievement around the beheading of innocent victims? In her exploration of Ilongot conceptions of the emotions and of the process of maturation, she begins to make us see how it might be that young men could feel incomplete, unrealised, until they had killed and tossed away the head of a victim. But her insights were not gained from direct questions. Both she and her Ilongot friends maintained a tactful silence on the subject of headhunting for nearly two years; when she eventually felt she was sufficiently trusted to risk asking someone why they did it, her companion replied dully “It is our custom”. It is only in the songs composed by young men that she got a glimpse of what the emotions and aspirations surrounding headhunting might be like. Four years before he killed for the first time, one young man composed a song evoking the sorrow, heaviness and “foginess” of the unfulfilled would-be head-hunter:

Oh dear, boy, you are as a fog, and all things wait
 dear child, for the moment when you will say the head-
 hunting spells;
 warm your thoughts for the thing you desire, that you
 may, like an airplane, fly to the spirit that you will dismember
 go right on with your plans to kill!

Ah, it is fine for you grown ones to be quiet while
 your shoot here your child is all astir;
 oh, if only he had, like you old ones, chipped off the
 red blossoms of the fire tree, and returned home from
 his travels a killer,
 looking like flowering feathery grass

(Rosaldo 1980: 141)

The poignant, pitiful tone, the vivid evocation of the desired state of accomplishment and the longing for fulfilment are intended to awaken sympathy among thoughtful elders (Rosaldo 1984: 139). They are affecting, and one has the sense of *almost* understanding; yet, at the same time,

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the poem reminds one what a gulf this comprehension has to cross. In texts like these, sympathy and distance seem to coexist in one moment.

What this song does *not* do, though, is offer direct access to a particular young man's innermost thoughts. It is true that it is an example of *pipiyan piya*, "true songs", produced to express desire or emotion, rather than to fulfil a practical function as do other genres like lullabies, pollarding songs and magical invocations. But *pipiyan piya* are an established genre, and *as* a genre they have specific conventions and draw on specific resources including "stock phrases, tunes, and themes" (Rosaldo 1980: 267fn1). One of the conventions is "a sort of objectification, in which the singer speaks of himself or herself sometimes in the first, sometimes in the second, person ('oh, poor bachelor . . .') and adopts a tone associated with 'exclamations of pity' (*dimet*) – such as 'oh dear' (*qan'in*, *ngu'dek*) – which appears again to dissociate the song and singer from the self addressed in the song" (Rosaldo 1980: 268fn2). Thus the text is formed according to public, recognised conventions based upon a speech genre so well established that it has a name (*dimet*). These conventions produce a kind of split between the speaking "I" and the spoken-to "I", as if the singer-composer were both inside and outside himself. It is in and through the mode established by this genre that the singer-composer develops his sorrowful, reflective form of self-address – and it could well be that the form induced the emotions as much as the emotions gave rise to the form. This is even without broaching the larger question, to which Rosaldo devotes a wealth of discussion, of the Ilongot conception of the mind and emotions and what it might therefore be to "speak your thoughts". So to interpret even apparently intimate expressions like this song of sorrow, we need to understand the text as a form with its own mode of existence.

In general, the sense of encounter with texts is perhaps not so much because you are meeting another consciousness, as because you are meeting a form that commands heightened attention. What makes them texts rather than passing discourse is also what makes them the focus

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of interpretative activity. They are constituted to make the listener or the reader take note. Such texts seem close to you because they demand and stimulate an intensified awareness; they seem remote because, even if they are understood as personal expressions, their form – the very form that attracts attention and awareness – is a product of conventions, constructed through artifice.

The “intentional” approach certainly does not claim that through studying biographical, literary or historical texts we can experience vicariously what it was like to be a person of another era or culture. Vico himself stressed the extraordinary otherness of the past and of alien cultures, the difficulty of reconstructing what might have been the meaning of their intentional activities and products. What we can do is not intuit another individual’s consciousness, but form a sense of the repertoire, the ideational resources, what was conceptually available to people of a given time and place: in short, *what they could have been taken to mean* by their texts: a perspective that has been brilliantly articulated in the work of Quentin Skinner. Texts and other cultural products are not “windows” onto something else, some pure state of subjectivity or consciousness which we can access *through* them: they are, rather, themselves the terrain to be studied. It is the repertoire, the conceptual materials and the ways they are used that we can seek to explore as anthropologists.

Vico was interested in the way that human creative activities exceed any individual’s private and self-interested aims. By creating institutions, people entered into ordered interaction with others and thus changed themselves. He gave the name “Providence” to those things that are created as the outcome of interaction, and which go beyond any individual’s conscious project, highlighting his belief that the outcome is benign.⁴ In modern terms, we could say that in the institutionally structured activities of individuals we see “the working of wider social processes – processes which, because they are genuinely social, the product of *joint action* between people, individuals cannot account for, and of which they thus remain largely ignorant” (Shotter 1981: 273). The “moral worlds”

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thus constituted are intentional, in the sense of being oriented towards human comprehension, but unintended, in the sense that no individual could plan, envisage or control them.

Verbal texts are representatives of supra-individual creativity *par excellence*. A text is dialogic and relational. It presents itself to an interlocutor: and not usually to a single addressee, but to an implied “audience”. By being constituted to be “out there”, it signals its nature as something which exceeds the specific aims of any individual speaker or writer. It is composed in relation to other texts, sharing formal templates with them and drawing in myriad ways upon their textual resources, to the point where it could be described as “a tissue of quotations” (Barthes 1977: 146). A text is wholly intentional, but is never confined to the singular intention of a solo originator.

What kind of attention do texts command? This is a question that requires a comparative, empirical answer rather than a philosophical pronouncement. In A. S. Byatt’s *The Virgin in the Garden*, Stephanie Potter is introducing a sixth-form class to Keats’s poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. Sitting in the chilly classroom, she empties her mind of distracting thoughts and focuses wholly on the poem itself: “She required . . . that her mind at least should be clear of the curious clutter of mnemonics that represented the poem at ordinary times, when the attention was not concentrated upon it . . . The ideal was to come to it with a mind momentarily open and empty, as though for the first time . . . She sat there, looking into inner emptiness, waiting for the thing to rise into form and saw nothing, nothing and then involuntarily flying specks and airy clumps of froth or foam on a strongly running grey sea . . . Not relevant, her judgment said, the other poem, damn it, the foam of perilous seas . . .” Finally, after having read the poem aloud to them twice, she turns to the class: “‘Well’, she said to the girls, ‘well, what do you see?’” (Byatt 1978: 77–8). Here is an evocative description of one kind of attention to text, and one way of teaching it. Note the need for a clear, quiet, mental space; the interiority and privacy of the experience (despite the fact that the girls