

## INTRODUCTION

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### THE TECHNOLOGY OF THE INTELLECT

Considering the importance of writing over the past 5,000 years, and the profound effects it has on the lives of each and all, surprisingly little attention has been given to the way in which it has influenced the social life of mankind. Studies of writing tend to be histories of the development of scripts, while literary scholars concentrate upon the content rather than the implications of communicative acts. And while post-war interest has directed attention to the influence of changing communications on society, most writers have been concerned with later developments such as printing, radio and television.<sup>1</sup>

It is especially surprising that so little interest in literacy—and the means of communication generally—has been shown by social scientists. Those working in ‘advanced’ societies have taken the existence of writing for granted and have therefore tended to overlook its enabling effects on, for example, the organization of dispersed parties, sects and kin. On the other hand, social anthropologists have thought of their discipline as being primarily concerned with ‘preliterate’, ‘primitive’, or ‘tribal’ societies and have generally looked upon writing (where it existed) simply as an ‘intrusive’ element. But even where writers are specifically investigating the differences between ‘simple’ and ‘advanced’ societies, peoples, mentalities, etc., they have neglected to examine the implications of the very feature which is so often used to define the range of societies with which they claim to be dealing, namely, the presence or absence of writing.

The importance of writing lies in its creating a new medium of communication between men. Its essential service is to objectify speech, to provide language with a material correlative, a set of visible signs. In this material form speech can be transmitted over space and preserved over time; what people say and think can be rescued from the transitoriness of oral communication.

<sup>1</sup> See in particular the somewhat extravagant work by Marshall McLuhan, formerly of Toronto, which elaborates on themes developed also at Toronto by Innis (see p. 56 n. 1) and later by E. A. Havelock (whose *Preface to Plato* appeared in 1963) and others; an appraisal of the work of Innis, McLuhan and the Toronto school has recently been made by Carey (1967) and by Compton (*New American Review*, no. 2, New American Library, New York, 1968, pp. 77–94). The work of Innis and Havelock influenced the paper that Watt and I wrote (pp. 27 ff. below), but our more concrete interest in the subject arose from the wartime deprivation of written matter we experienced in different parts of the world and our sojourn amongst non-literate, illiterate or semi-literate peoples.

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The range of human intercourse can now be greatly extended both in time and in space. The potentialities of this new instrument of communication can affect the gamut of human activity, political, economic, legal and religious. In the administrative sphere, complex bureaucratic organizations are directly dependent upon writing for the organization of their activities, especially financial. It provides a reliable method for transmitting information between the centre and the periphery, and hence mitigates the fissive tendencies of large empires.<sup>1</sup> While censuses and taxes feature in non-literate states such as Ashanti and Dahomey, and the use of tallies and counters is widely attested, the efficiency of these operations is greatly increased by the use of simple literate techniques. So, too, in the organization of long-distance trade and of estate agriculture: it is writing that assists the calculation of the profit and the loss.

In the sphere of religion, it is significant that the religions of conversion, the excluding religions, are all religions of the book. In the non-literate societies of Africa, at any rate, magico-religious activity is singularly eclectic in that shrines and cults move easily from place to place. The literate religions, with their fixed point of reference, their special modes of supernatural communication, are less tolerant of change. When this occurs, it tends to do so in sudden shifts, through the rise of heresies or 'movements of reform' that often take the shape of a return to the book—or to its 'true' interpretation.

But if literate religions are in some ways less flexible, they are also more universalistic and in this sense more 'ethical'. The very fact that they represent systems to which other men and nations can, indeed should, be converted means that their prescriptions for right-doing cannot be set in too particularistic a mould. In other words, the myths they recount, the rites they perform, the rules they promote need have no specific relationship with any particular social structure with which they are associated and in some respects (as with the preferred marriage to the father's brother's daughter that so often accompanies the introduction of Islam) may significantly change the social organization of the converted. At the same time, the congregation of worshippers extends outside the clan, tribe or nation and, at least in Christianity and Islam, becomes a quasi-kingroup, all the members of which are 'brothers'.<sup>2</sup> The existence of this 'brotherhood' tends in turn to weaken the strength of primary kinship ties, as Christ himself insisted when he said, 'For whosoever shall do the will of

<sup>1</sup> I have not elaborated upon the specific uses of literacy because they are considered in a more concrete form in the work of the contributors. Both Gough and Bloch refer to writing in relation to the organization of the state.

<sup>2</sup> In the recent civil war in Nigeria (1967), General Gowon denied that this was a battle of Muslims against Christians. 'If it was,' he said, 'I would be fighting on the other side.'

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God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother' (Mark iii. 35). And, again, 'I am come to set a man at variance against his father...' (Matthew x. 35). Thus literate religions tend to be more 'salvationist'; they place greater emphasis on individual paths to righteousness. Though this difference is one of degree, it does link up with the 'individualizing' tendency of a literate technology and an elaborate division of labour that is discussed later (p. 62).

The legal implications of literacy are closely tied up with the features of politics and religion already mentioned. A universalistic legal system provides a framework within which commerce can develop, and at the same time a mode of settling disputes within the multi-ethnic communities that trading tends to produce.<sup>1</sup>

These are some of the uses of writing that affect social organization. But writing is not a monolithic entity, an undifferentiated skill; its potentialities depend upon the kind of system that obtains in any particular society.

In the first place, there are variations in the materials used which have important implications. The administrative possibilities of paper are greater than those of stone or baked clay. More importantly, there are very significant differences in the graphic form. The greater the use that is made of the phonetic principle, the more flexible the system of signs. With the coming of the alphabet, speech itself can be transcribed. Its simplicity allows a large proportion of the society to master the technique. Demotic literacy becomes possible. And the fundamental implications of this were suggested in the earlier paper, reprinted in this volume, in which Watt and I considered the special case of classical Greece, where alphabetic literacy first emerged, and in which we tried to relate certain aspects of the Greek achievement to this breakthrough in technology.

The discussion of the role of literacy in Greece owes much to E. A. Havelock, and our comments require some qualification in the light of his more recent work. In the *Preface to Plato* (1963: ix) he calls into question 'the whole assumption that early Greek thought was occupied with metaphysics at all, or was capable of using a vocabulary suitable for such a purpose'. He points out that we know the thoughts of early Greek thinkers only from sources already influenced by Aristotle (Cherniss 1935; McDiarmid 1953). The Pre-Socratics themselves were living in a period still adjusting to the conditions of a possible future literacy and wrote in the formulaic style characteristic of oral composition (Parry 1930; Lord 1960). They were 'essentially oral thinkers, prophets of the concrete linked by habit to the past, and to forms of expression which were also forms of

<sup>1</sup> See Wilks' essay for a discussion of this point.

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experience' (Havelock: x). It was only by the time of Plato that the language had changed sufficiently to express new ideas, which he sees generated by changes in the technology of the intellect, or what he calls 'the technology of preserved communication' (Havelock: xi)—more simply, communications technology.

I stress this point in order to make it clear that our original argument was not phrased in terms of technological determinism; it attempted to review the liberating effects of changes in this technology. The article should perhaps have been entitled the 'implications' rather than the 'consequences' of literacy, but it seemed unnecessary to insist (more than we did) that other factors could militate against the realization of its potentiality for change. In the study of behaviour there are few, if any, 'sufficient causes'; we are interested in the potentialities of literate communication.

Many problems arise out of the suggestions we made concerning the functions of literacy, and some of these are raised by the studies that follow. The most general is one that affects a large number of societies, in Asia and elsewhere, that were the recipients, though not the inventors, of alphabetic literacy. The Semitic alphabet diffused widely over the world, throughout the Eurasian continent up to the borders of China, in parts of the Pacific, through circum-Saharan Africa and down the east coast to Madagascar. But nowhere was the impact as radical as it had been in classical Greece. Indeed the kind of situation which so often arose elsewhere seems more akin to the 'restricted literacy' that characterized pre-alphabetic scripts (see below, p. 36). In other words, the potentialities of the medium were not exploited to anything like the same extent.

The reasons behind this situation are many, and not easy to unravel. But one way of tackling the problem is to explore the 'ethnography' of literacy in 'traditional' or pre-industrial societies, to analyse in detail the uses made of writing in a particular social setting, to approach the question from the standpoint not so much of the library scholar but of the field-worker with experience of the concrete context of written communication. This is what we have tried to do in the essays that follow.

Such an attempt seemed desirable on a number of grounds. Sociologists, we noted, have generally taken their field of study to be the advanced literate societies, while social anthropologists have mainly concentrated upon 'simple' structures, the 'elementary forms' of religion or kinship, 'pre-monetary economics', 'primitive', 'exotic', 'unsophisticated', 'practical' or preliterate societies. But, at least during the past 2,000 years, the vast majority of the peoples of the world (most of Eurasia and much of Africa) have lived in neither kind of situation, but in cultures which were influenced in some degree by the circulation of the written word, by the presence of

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groups or individuals who could read and write. They lived on the margins of literacy, though this is a fact that many observers have tended to ignore. Yet, if our assumptions about the role of writing and literacy were even partially right, then the societies of south-east Asia or the western Sudan require an analytic treatment different from that given to an Australian tribe. Let me put the point in a more direct way. In the study of the Dogon 'cosmology', the 'zodiacal' system takes on a somewhat different picture when one recalls that they live within a short distance of the Islamic centre of Mopti, and within some 150 miles of Timbuktu, the home of the medieval 'University' of Sankore (Dubois 1897); that some at least of the inhabitants claim descent from the 'Mande', a people who include many of the main transmitters of Islamic learning in west Africa; and that part at least of this learning consisted of the complicated compendia of magical squares, charms, etc. compiled in north Africa by Al-Būnī and others in the fourteenth century; and that these compendia were themselves based upon a Middle-Eastern tradition that influenced the Jewish Cabala, Eastern astrology and European magic. We cannot expect to find the same close fit between religion and society that sociologists often perceive in non-literate cultures when the reference point is not some locally derived myth subject to the homeostatic processes of the oral tradition but a virtually indestructible document belonging to one of the great world (i.e. literate) religions.

It is clear that even if one's attention is centred only upon village life, there are large areas of the world where the fact of writing and the existence of the book have to be taken into account, even in discussing 'traditional' societies. It is also clear that, for the study of institutions which have been profoundly influenced by writing (and of these religion is perhaps the most important), the village community is a legitimate isolate only in a limited sense. To suppose that one can study Burmese Buddhism in the same framework as one studies Australian totemism is to commit an intellectual solecism. In a literate world religion (and significantly the qualifiers are synonymous) the network of 'primitive classifications' cannot possibly have the same correspondence with other aspects of the social structure as they have in a small-scale hunting community. In terms of social groups, what 'fits' in Rangoon is hardly likely to fit in rural Ceylon; if a fit does emerge (outside the mind of the observer), then it is clearly relevant to generalized human experience rather than to particular social structures, and there will no doubt be a large number of alternative forms of behaviour that would be equally appropriate; for the concept of 'fit' to be of any serious interest, it must also be possible to demonstrate its absence and the alternatives (Merton 1957; Nagel 1961).

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### THE ARTICULATED VILLAGE

Part of what I have been saying in these last few paragraphs appears as a central theme in the writings of Redfield and his pupils at Chicago. In a retrospective account of this work Redfield explains how the shift of attention from the tribes of North America to the settled agriculturalists further south involved a change in perspective, a movement away from the analysis of isolated cultures and the study of complete social structures.

In his account of a Yucatan village of Chan Kom, Redfield (1934: 1) described 'the mode of life in a peasant village. . . These villages are small communities of illiterate agriculturalists, carrying on a homogeneous culture transmitted by oral tradition.' But they are 'politically and economically dependent upon the towns and cities of modern literate civilization' in terms of which the peasants 'in part define their position'.

Redfield made some attempt to see the village in terms of what he called a folk-urban continuum but this phrase was meant in an analytic rather than an existential sense. He did not free himself from the need to insist upon homogeneity, which is looked upon as one of the keynotes of the little community. In a series of lectures given in 1953, Redfield defined this community by its distinctiveness, its smallness, its self-sufficiency and its homogeneity. 'Activities and states of mind are much alike for all persons in corresponding sex and age positions; and the career of one generation repeats that of the preceding. So understood, homogeneous is equivalent to "slow-changing"' (1955: 4).

One result of the insistence on homogeneity emerges in his references to literacy. For, 'illiterate' though his peasants may have been in Maya<sup>1</sup> (it is not clear who was ever literate in that language), even when he was first there 26 per cent of those over eighteen were 'literate' in Spanish. This meant, at least, that the central government could transmit its orders indirectly. And it also permitted the circulation of two kinds of books, both connected with religion, namely, Catholic prayers and the Church

<sup>1</sup> Only the priesthood appears to have been literate in pre-conquest times. Mayan hieroglyphic writing is almost exclusively ritual and calendrical in content. The astronomical calculations of the inscriptions (which relate almost exclusively to the passage of time) are thought by Thompson to be divinatory in kind (1950: 63). The three surviving codices are also priestly books concerned with divination and astrology (23, 65). Indeed the activities of the Mayan high priests centred around their writings rather than around sacrifices, which they attended only at the principal feasts. They compiled their works and taught their sciences, which, a near-contemporary Spaniard relates, concerned 'the computation of the years, months, days, the festivals and ceremonies, the administration of the sacraments, the fateful days and seasons, their method of divination and their prophecies, events and the cures for diseases, their antiquities and how to read and write with the letters and characters with which they wrote, and [to make] drawings which illustrate the meaning of the writings' (Bishop Landa, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, c. 1566, quoted by Morley 1946: 171).

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calendars used in naming ceremonies. It is only possible to reconcile these statements with others to the effect that Chan Kom was 'a world of oral and face-to-face communication' and 'without books' (Redfield 1934: 6, 11) by assuming that the author was trying to describe an earlier phase of a long-term historical process, where the urban elements (including books) were seen as recent intrusions into the homogeneous culture of this peasant world. Certainly there is a surprising lack of fit between the reality and the model.

Another result of the move into Latin America was the search for 'general and comprehensive patterns of thought in the minds of these Indians' (Redfield 1955: 23). The peasant village was different from the tribe, but it displayed the self-same features upon which tribal sociologists had insisted, a culture, comprehensive patterns of thought, illiteracy, homogeneity and self-sufficiency.

Middle America brought certain modifications in approach; India pushed the process yet a stage further. In 1965, a year after the appearance of *The Little Community*, Redfield wrote, 'In that book I thought of small communities as independent of things outside them. In the present chapters there is a very preliminary exploration of one kind of dependent community, that of peasants. . . ' (1965: vi). The change came about through the work of Barnes in Norway and of Singer, Marriott, Lewis and others in India. Redfield now saw these communities as ones 'where the local culture is continually replenished by contact with products of intellectual. . . social strata; the local (or little) community is culturally heteronomous—dependent on norms coming to it from without, from the great community' (Singer 1959: x).

The soggy language of sociological discourse sometimes obscures what Redfield wants to say and the proliferation of phrases like 'the social organization [or 'structure'] of tradition' do little to clarify the issues at stake. The concept of a little community is not so much an abstraction as a distraction and has led to a dialogue of little moment. Reconsidering his contentions, Obeyesekere attempts to show, in the Sinhalese context, that 'cultures are integrated' and 'peasant cultures are wholes' (not halves). He appears to do this by deriving local Buddhism from local factors—'there is good ideological reason for giving the Buddha a presidential status in the pantheon', which he sees as a 'structural unity'; and the trend of his remarks is illustrated by the assertion that the little community or peasant society 'is after all the focus of anthropological enquiry' (Obeyesekere 1963: 143, 146). Leaving aside the confusion caused by the idea of 'a culture' and the problems of deciding when a culture is not integrated, a structure not unified, the question is not where scholars pass their time

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but whether such a frame of reference is adequate for the analysis of any part of a complex field of social relationships that clearly extend beyond the village. To this any observer who is not mesmerized by the concept of culture must answer negatively. The point was made by Dumont and Pocock in their general discussion of village studies (1957); it is made more specifically by Ames in his own account of Sinhalese religion. This, he writes, 'is Buddhist-dominated rather than specific to any village because the monkhood, which is nationwide rather than village-centred, is the dominant status group in the religious system' (Ames 1963–64: 21). He rejects the same village fallacy of anthropologists working in the Eurasian field that Skinner criticizes in his work on Chinese markets. 'Anthropological work on Chinese society, by focusing attention almost exclusively on the village, has with few exceptions distorted the reality of rural social structure.' But, even for Skinner, the approach in terms of boundary-maintaining 'communities' or 'traditions' presents an analytical problem. For he goes on to argue that the important culture-bearing unit is rather an 'intermediate social structure', the standard market *community*—'the locus in the Chinese case of Redfield's "little tradition" . . . Insofar as the Chinese peasant can be said to live in a self-contained world, that world is not the village but the standard marketing community' (Skinner 1964: 32). While this could be so for an individual's range of physical movement (though clearly trade and government provide many an exception), the Chinese countryman (whether peasant, gentry or bureaucrat) clearly did not live in a self-contained universe; for with the possibility of written communication (not to speak of the more overt influence of national government and institutions), the physical community no longer limits the field of socio-cultural interaction.<sup>1</sup>

But the work of Redfield's students does demonstrate a concern with the interaction between town and village, for example, in Miner's study of *The Primitive City of Timbuctu* (1953) and especially in the work of Singer (1959), Marriott (1955) and others on Indian society. Here, too, there is an implicit rejection of the myth of a village world that encapsulates Indian culture. Country and town are seen as part of an inclusive field of socio-cultural activity, even if the full implications are somewhat dulled by analysing this social field only in terms of the interaction between the great and the little communities, with the great tradition providing an umbrella overall.

There is still overmuch concern with the quasi-metaphysical problem

<sup>1</sup> Freedman has done much to redress the balance of the earlier village-centred studies of the Malinowskian tradition by taking a regional view. He writes: 'Chinese civilization was agrarian, but its rural society was not uniformly peasant.' Since one out of every ten village families (in Kwangtung) was that of a merchant or official, 'the countryside was far from being a homogeneous peasant sector of Chinese society' (1966: 76).



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of wholes and parts.<sup>1</sup> For Redfield peasant societies are part societies. But in Islamic or Hindu societies, what is the 'whole'? In all except the simplest structures, the boundaries of a field of social action differ for the various activities in which a man engages; the norms and interests that guide his action can be only inadequately described in terms of 'a culture' when in one context a man behaves 'as' a Muslim or Hindu, in another 'as' a trader, in another 'as' a member of a particular caste or patronymic group.<sup>2</sup>

This kind of situation, where the social fields of individuals or groups have no single socio-cultural frontier, is common not only among peasant societies, as I understand the term,<sup>3</sup> but also in many of the centralized societies of pre-colonial Africa; it exists, for example, wherever markets are found. Indeed, it is the market that Redfield, like others, seizes upon as the institution that 'pulls out from the compact social relations of self-contained primitive communities some part of men's doings and puts people into fields of economic activity that are increasingly independent of the rest of what goes on in the local life' (Redfield 1956: 46). In his north Indian study, Lewis (1955; 1958) emphasized, as others have done, the extra-village ties based upon caste, kinship and marriage: 'Rampur, like other villages in North India, is fundamentally a part of a larger inter-village network based upon kinship ties' (1958: 313). Marriott, on the other hand, stresses the religious aspects of the continuous process of communication between a little, local tradition and the greater traditions that have their place 'partly inside and partly outside the village' (1955: 218). But too little attention is paid to the nature of this system of communication, to the fact that peasants—in Redfield's sense of 'the rural dimension of old civilizations' (1955: 29)—belong to societies that possessed the important technology of writing, that all the 'world religions' are literate religions (although the writing down of the Rig Vedas was late), that a significant aspect of what is inside the village (in terms of the 'great tradition') consists of books and their interpreters.

That such a fact should be of primary importance to a society is the argument pursued in the paper by Watt and myself which follows this introduction. The implications for the study of such societies are hinted at in Redfield's final work. 'If we enter a village within a civilization we see at once that the culture there has been flowing into it from teachers who

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Singer 1959: xi; Marriott 1955: 209 (little communities are characterized by 'the paradox of isolability within nonisolability', though the author realizes that the holism of the community approach is inadequate); Redfield 1955.

<sup>2</sup> 'as' requires some more clumsy periphrasis if it is to indicate what is involved. While the concept of 'a culture' seems to me to have little value, the concept of 'culture' as learned behaviour does have a limited utility.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of African 'peasants', see Faliens 1961.

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never saw that village, who did their work in intellectual circles perhaps far away in space and time' (1956: 70).

Indeed the process of 'sanskritization', so important a feature of recent discussions of Indian culture, is itself linked inextricably with the extension of literate activity in the shape of a legal code and holy scriptures (Staal 1962–63). As Mayne remarked, Hindu Law has 'the oldest pedigree of any known system of jurisprudence, and even now it shows no signs of decrepitude. At this day it governs races of men, extending from Cashmere to Cape Comorin, *who agree about nothing else except their submission to it*' (1892: ix, my italics).

It follows that the analysis of social action in the structural-functional framework used by tribal sociologists in their studies of societies outside the range of literacy can hardly be adequate here without important modifications. Significantly enough, the original proponents of the functionalist approach (Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown) worked on small islands, under conditions which their students have often tried to duplicate in their search for bounded, isolated and 'primitive' communities in the major continental areas of the world.

For the study of those vast areas where world religions are part of the social horizon, the limitations of this approach are obvious. Indeed it would seem hardly necessary to make the point if we were not at a juncture in intellectual life where concepts and approaches originally developed with specific reference to preliterate societies are being increasingly employed in the study of literate culture. Durkheim's work on primitive classification is being applied to societies within the orbit of the major civilizations. The polarities and oppositions of *la pensée sauvage* turn up in ancient Greece, and tools developed in the study of the narratives of American societies are applied to the Oedipus story, the Book of Genesis and even contemporary literature, with little sense of the basic incongruity involved.

Polarities of some sort are of course present in all societies; their significance, however, varies widely. Aristotle describes one Pythagorean theory in the following terms:

Others of this same school say that there are ten principles, which they arrange in twin columns, namely:

limit	unlimited
odd	even
one	plurality
right	left
male	female
at rest	moving
straight	crooked