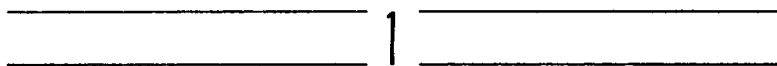


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Jack Goody

Excerpt

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## The word of God

In the beginning, we are taught, was the word. And it was, of course, the word of God, God who created the world, or the word of his prophets, then of his son who saved the world. That word was not only spoken but was written down in a book, the Holy Book, the Bible, the Testament. What difference does it make when the word, as in Judaism, Islam and Christianity, is written in a book (or an array of books) rather than being just the word of mouth, the product of the spoken tongue? Are there any general ways in which oral and literate cultures tend to differ in their religious beliefs and practices? How do systems of worship depend upon specific modes of communication? And, over time, how far do traditions of intellectual activity depend upon the earlier presence of a religion of the Book?

These are questions of a highly general kind but they are ones that are touched upon by many scholars, thought about by some, pushed aside by others and about which various assumptions are tacitly made. I want to try and give voice to these largely silent thoughts, taking as my starting point a broad contrast between certain features of African and Eurasian religions, including in the latter not only the religions of the Middle East focussing on a single book but also those that significantly depend upon writing, especially alphabetic writing, for the transmission of myth, doctrine and ritual. However, these forms taken by the Eastern religions are often more eclectic than the Mediterranean ones, modifying the tendency to an exclusive commitment of the congregation if not always of the priests. While the question of this and other differences is an important one, I am here dealing with general trends.

Let me begin by saying that at the most general level there is much

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[More information](#)

2

**The logic of writing and the organization of society**

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in common between the two; that is, in Africa the Eurasian observer would easily identify an area of belief and practice that he would designate as religious, ceremonial or ritual, irrespective of the question of his acceptance of those beliefs. For example, he would pick out the rituals centred upon the human and the cosmic cycles. The first comprises the rites of birth, marriage and death (as well as those marking various intermediary phases, pregnancy, initiation, divorce, retirement, etc.); the second includes the rituals of the annual cycle, which in most agricultural societies are celebrated at the beginning and end of the productive season. Then there are the occasional performances, often held when misfortune strikes, in the form of sickness or death, drought or floods, events whose very irregularity requires the act of divination to elicit the agencies or forces involved, whether human or not.

In studying those rites that mark phases in the human cycle, we are by definition concerned with the entry and exit of males and females into this world and the next. The mysteries of birth and death are central to religious experience. For it remains true, at least until recent, secularised times, that all human societies have some concept of the other world and of the movement of the soul (and sometimes the body) between the two. Consequently all religions are dealing with the two worlds and their inhabitants, largely humans in the one case and 'superhuman agencies', even forces, in the other, with some kind of High God being in most instances the creator of this world although inhabiting the other. Questions of life and death, the conduct of gods and men – these are the domain of religions everywhere.

While much is held in common, the very general differences between the religions of Africa and Eurasia are worth exploring in the light of their association with oral and literate cultures. This is not only a matter of synchronic contrast. The fact that the word is written in one case and not in the other is important, diachronically, to help account for the characteristic diffusing of the so-called world religions (which in Africa's case are Islam, Christianity and Judaism) by conversion and by absorption, a diffusion that was accompanied by the gradual decline, or should one say incorporation or adjustment, of the local religions.

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In the West we inevitably take as models, in courses on comparative religion for example, those that have written texts on myth, doctrine and ritual. These are the world religions, sometimes called the ethical religions. I shall suggest that there is an intrinsic connection between the features of these religions which these epithets imply and the literate mode itself, the means by which religious beliefs and behaviour are formulated, communicated and transmitted, at least in part. But first to Africa.

In that continent the only religions of the book were those from the Middle East and the important areas of their distribution were north of the Sahara. Historically Egypt provides us with one of the first written religions, a priestly temple cult in which the teaching and even use of writing came to be largely concentrated in priestly hands; as in Mesopotamia writing was critical both to religion and to the priesthood. Geographically that religion was mainly confined within the political boundaries, and it may be significant that it was only with alphabetic writing that some religions decisively broke through their national frontiers to become religions of conversion. In Africa parts of Ethiopia, like adjacent Yemen and Arabia, were influenced by Judaism at an early stage, and later by Christianity and Islam. The Carthaginians brought from Phoenicia a set of Semitic cults and beliefs which subsequently gave way to Jewish practices along the Mediterranean littoral; indeed it has been suggested that an important element of the Jewish diaspora into Europe consisted of converted Phoenicians from North Africa.<sup>1</sup> Later the same area also became the home of the Donatist Church and for a brief period Christianity extended throughout the whole of North Africa from the Maghreb to Ethiopia, embracing the Copts of Egypt and the Christian kingdoms of the Sudan. Finally it was precisely this area of Christendom that later became dominated by an expanding Islam (leaving behind small pockets of Jews and Christians) which spread across the Sahara both in the west and in the east, as well as right down the East African coast as far as Madagascar. Aside from those in Ancient Egypt, these religions were associated with alphabetic writing, which was more widely distributed within and more easily adopted without; they were therefore more likely to be 'world' than 'national' religions. Indeed one

could say that these alphabetic religions spread literacy and equally that literacy spread these religions. And it was the spread not only of a particular religion but of 'the idea of a religion'.

### **The concept of 'a'/'the' religion**

Let me first explain what I do not mean by this remark. I don't mean the idea of religion. As we have seen, one doesn't have to be much of a comparativist to recognise aspects of practice and belief in all societies that centre around notions of life and death, of the other world, of spiritual beings and of divination, propitiation and sequences of rites. But in African languages I find no equivalent for the western word 'religion' (or indeed 'ritual'), and more importantly the actors do not appear to look upon religious beliefs and practices in the same way that we, whether Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian or atheist, do – that is, as a distinct set. This difference is suggested in the way we define an African religion, not only by its characteristics as a sect or church (*pace* Durkheim, who applied the term even to the simplest societies) but as Kikuyu religion or Asante religion. In other words we define a religion in terms of the practices and beliefs of a particular group of territorially bounded individuals – a tribe or a kingdom. Indeed one can argue that it was not until the competition from Islam or Christianity that the idea of an Asante religion, as distinct from the more inclusive concept of an Asante way of life, began to take shape, first in the mind of the observer and then in that of the actor. This suggestion is given some support by the fact that when an attempt was made to define such religious systems in a comprehensive way, leaving on one side the 'ethnic' designations, European scholars then turned to labels such as paganism, animism, heathenism, that describe religions in terms of an opposition to the hegemonic written forms.

### **Boundaries**

The reason for this state of affairs is fairly obvious. Literate religions have some kind of autonomous boundary. Practitioners are committed to one alone and may be defined by their attachment to a

Holy Book, their recognition of a Credo, as well as by their practice of certain rituals, prayers, modes of propitiation. I do not claim that it is always easy to tell who is a Muslim, a Jew, a Christian, a Buddhist, a Hindu; the boundary is often far from clear. But there exists some concept equivalent to that of the *Dharmashastra*, the way. Hence some are in and others are out – and not purely on a spatial or territorial basis, though propinquity is often an important factor. Contrast the situation in societies without writing. You cannot practice Asante religion unless you are an Asante; and what is Asante religion now may be very different from Asante religion one hundred years ago. Literate religions on the other hand, at least alphabetically literate ones, are generally religions of conversion, not simply religions of birth. You can spread them, like jam. And you can persuade or force people to give up one set of beliefs and practices and take up another set, which is called by the name of a particular sect or church. In fact the written word, the use of a new method of communication, may itself sometimes provide its own incentive for conversion, irrespective of the specific content of the Book; for those religions are not only seen as ‘higher’ because their priests are literate and can read as well as hear God’s word, but they may provide their congregation with the possibility of becoming literate themselves. What I am claiming here, in effect, is that only literate religions can be religions of conversion in the strict sense, as distinct from the shift to a new Cargo Cult, medicine shrine or anti-witchcraft movement.

Despite this difference, local beliefs and practices tend to be visualised, both by actors and observers, as in some sense alternatives to ‘boundary-maintaining’ systems of religion such as Islam or Christianity. At the district court of Lawra in northern Ghana in the nineteen fifties all those appearing before the colonial Commissioner were offered the alternative of swearing to the truth of their statements on the Bible, the Qur’ān or on a local shrine, designated ‘fetish’ by one and all. Thus in the courtroom, a local, LoDagaa cult was placed on an equivocal par with the world religions and inevitably suffered by contrast if only because its oaths employed sticks or stones – an idol instead of an icon or the written word. In this context, at least, the written word of God was seen, again by one and all, as being more effective than the purely oral

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[More information](#)


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## 6 The logic of writing and the organization of society

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one, or even than the visual shrine or the envisioned idea, because of the evident performative force of that channel of communication and the hierarchical status of its practitioners.

### Change

Although I argue that in oral cultures conversion, in the usual sense of the word, is impossible, I do not mean that changes in the religious system, as distinct from changes in religious adherence, do not occur: quite the opposite. The label 'Asante religion' may conceal considerable shifts from one decade to the next, even though this ethnic way of labelling, of talking about things, appears to assume a continuity, a homeostasis, an assumption that also underlies many scholarly discussions of non-literate religions. But my point runs counter to any such assumption about the static nature of the religious systems of the simpler, non-literate societies as contrasted with those of the dynamic, changing, modern world. The contrast may well hold true for technology, for economics and for other related spheres of social action. But for religion it must be challenged. In the first place, the world religions of which I have spoken all have their Holy Book or Scriptures – the Torah, the Bible and the Qur'ān. Such works are sacred repositories of the word of God, which in themselves remain unchanging, eternal, inspired by the divine and not by man alone. While the liturgy of the Catholic Church may change over time, and while the techniques of prayer may differ as between the Qadariyya and the Tijaniyya in Maghrebian Islam, between Orthodox and Reformed synagogues, or between Calvinist and Lutheran churches, while interpretations vary, the word itself remains as it always was. (Though every reading is different, it is a misleading exaggeration of the literary critic to say that the text exists only in communication.) And it has been the prime duty of copyists, of Islamic calligraphers, of printers to the King or Queen (such as Cambridge University Press) to preserve the text in precisely the same canonical form by producing 'authorized' versions. A single misprint (and it happened) of Judas for Jesus gives rise to a scandal. It is true that Eastern religions do not focus upon one major sacred book in the same way, but they do possess a body of scriptures that are handed down in a precise form

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[More information](#)

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**The word of God**

7

and are hence 'canonised'. Not long ago (1977) in an Indian village I heard my Brahmin neighbour reciting each day his daily prayers, in Sanskrit, from the Rgveda, reputedly composed more than 3000 years ago. In Indonesia I attended a public reading and exegesis of an ancient Buddhist text; the exact words were preserved, translated into low Balinese by the puppeteer and at the same time given a broader interpretation. One can find the same Sanskrit mantras recited or read as far away as China, Tibet and Japan, in different contexts it is true but using the same texts over an enormous area of time and space. Writing is surely critical in the fact that Hinduism (even taking into account the variety of local cults and local manifestations) exists in recognizably similar forms throughout the sub-continent, whereas in Africa or New Guinea local variance in religious belief and ritual action is enormous.

It is usually the rituals, myths, beliefs and practices of the simpler societies that we consider (and certainly treat) as static, as persisting unchanged over the generations, handed down in a fixed (at least underlying) form from one to another. The evidence for this assumption has never been presented in an adequate way, if only because unwritten cultures leave little trace of the oral past. But the advent of the tape-recorder fixes the flow of speech, the words of a recitation, on magnetic tape, and the results tend to show the inventiveness of African cultures in religious matters, including ritual and myth. Indeed the great variation in neighbouring groups itself compels us towards such a conclusion. Those who have dealt with what has been called the cultic aspects of religions are satisfied that the evidence on the migration of 'medicine shrines' between ethnic groups and political units shows that this adoption and adaptation of beliefs and practices is not a new phenomenon. In West Africa the Asantehene (the paramount chief) monitored such imports from outside, motivated by political considerations rather than by any attachment to religious orthodoxy; others have sought, successfully, to profit by them. Some uniformity is undoubtedly established, some variation held in check, by a centralized political system. But shrines did circulate in pre-colonial times and however they arrived, brought in new ideas, new prohibitions, new taboos, and were never simply 'more of the same'. By so doing they often modified in significant ways the classificatory systems of the com-

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**8                    The logic of writing and the organization of society**


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munity into which they penetrated by introducing new evaluations of experience, sometimes having far-reaching effects on the political, moral and cosmological order. Such was the case with the migration of the Kungkenbie shrine of Birifu to the outskirts of Kumasi, and with the advent of Little God to the LoDagaa (Goody 1975). In the first instance the mud sculptures of Birifu became widely diffused throughout Asante; and in 1950, when I was first in the area, a Kumasi brass band made its appearance at the funeral of Chief Gandaa, who was the custodian of the parent shrine. This penetration of material culture from one society to another is indicative of other cultural transfers, and while the rhythm of the movement of shrines undoubtedly increased with the establishment of the colonial regime, such mobility was certainly present in earlier times. The Little God movement represented a rather different shift of perspective, being in part a synthesizing cult. But the potential for such a synthesis has been present at least since the advent of Islam, and even before that contradictions in the notion of a Creator God (here yesterday, gone today) made his reappearance at the human level, albeit temporary, an ever-present possibility.

#### Obsolescence

I have argued elsewhere (Goody 1957) that in certain areas of religious activity, those connected with affliction and fertility, with specific, concrete, human ends, there is a partial contradiction between what is offered and what is received, what is given and what is taken. There are times when the cult fails to deliver the cargo, to provide the hoped-for relief, so that the individuals or groups concerned are led to seek other means of satisfaction. Hence African systems of belief are open-ended in a meaningful way, encouraging the search, the quest, the journey after, yes, the truth (if I can translate in this way the LoDagaa concept of *yilmiong*, the proper way, the proper speech). You may regard this statement as indicating an overly pragmatic view of religious activity; but I am not trying to account for the whole of its scope, only to explore the reasons why African religions are more 'flexible' than many theories would allow, subject to change and absorption rather than to rejection and conversion.



The same seems to me to be true of myth, those formal recitations partially abstracted from the flow of ritual action. And here I have to extend the pragmatic explanation offered above and argue for an intellectual search (though the dichotomy is less compelling than the words suggest). Let me turn to the data I present in support of my contention that myth is more flexible than many theories allow. A number of years ago I recorded the long Bagre recitation among the LoDagaa of northern Ghana (Goody 1972). At that time I thought I had a standardized oral form that was deliberately taught and varied little over time and space. Since 1950 the use of the portable, battery-operated tape-recorder enabled us to capture many other versions over the years, some from the same settlement and others from neighbouring ones. The differences are many and profound, especially in the more speculative, 'mythical', Black Bagre. But variations occur at a number of other levels. Individuals will even correct versions of the formal, opening invocation of some twenty lines as if it were fixed, yet that short, repeated section turns out to have almost as many variants as speakers, a stark contrast to the fixity of the Lord's Prayer or the College Grace, both embodied in a written text and read or learnt 'by heart'.

Flexibility, then, is a characteristic of African religious beliefs and practices, rendering them open to internal change as well as to external imports. That is the history of Asante and its cults, many of them coming from the north. For truth involved a search, not only inside by means of divination but outside too. To find the real truth about the British intentions at the time of their invasion in 1874, the Asante court sent representatives to the Dente shrine of Kete Krachi, well outside their effective dominion. They also enquired in the Gonja town of Salaga about getting the advice of learned Muslims from Kano in Hausaland whose knowledge was seen to derive from the study of the Holy Book. The search meant taking independent advice outside the political unit, thereby drawing within itself the work of religious practitioners from other countries, from other regions.

In the literate churches, the dogma and services are rigid (that is, dogmatic, ritualistic, orthodox) by comparison; the creed is recited word for word, the Tables of the Lord learnt by heart, the ritual repeated in a verbatim fashion. If change takes place, it often takes

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the form of a break-away movement (the verb 'break away' is used for sects that separate from the mother church); the process is deliberately reformist, even revolutionary, rather than the process of incorporation that tends to mark the oral situation.

### **Incorporation or conversion**

When you have boundaries, markers of the kind involved in religions of the Book, then you get not only break-away sects but break-away individuals, individuals who are apostates or converts. Conversion is a function of the boundaries the written word creates, or rather defines.

I take as an example the advent of the White Fathers to the north-west of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast (now Ghana) in the early 1930s. Care of the sick, combined with prayers for the crops that were fortunately quickly deluged by rain, both benefits being among those conferred by local deities and their shrines, led first to a minority, then to mass adherence to the Catholic Church. Such rapid attachment to a successful new shrine was well within the scope of local practice, and new shrines as we have seen often brought new taboos. But in the present case the results were more dramatic and at the same time unanticipated. For in the longer term the acceptance of Christian beliefs and practices meant, not simply a supplement bringing limited modifications to the existing religious system, but the rejection of all else. It meant conversion, the crossing of a boundary, the exchange of one total set for another of a different, literate type. Eclecticism was no longer the order of the day. Orthodoxy took over. Truth took on a different meaning for there was a new measuring stick, the written word.

### **Universalism and particularism**

Let me now turn to examine some related features of the moral system. The written religions are often known as world religions in contrast to local ones; in his book *Primitive Culture* (1871) Tylor referred to them as ethical in contrast to non-ethical cults. The two features are inter-related because literate religions tend to be associated with more than one place, more than one time, more