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978-0-521-33962-9 - The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society

Jack Goody

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Studies in Literacy, Family, Culture and the State

**The logic of writing and the
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Literacy

Literacy in Traditional Societies (edited, 1968)

The Domestication of the Savage Mind (1977)

The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society (1986)

The Interface between the Written and the Oral (1987)

The Family

Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain (1977)

The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe (1983)

Culture

Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology (1982)

The State

Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa (1971)

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Studies in Literacy, Family, Culture and the State: an introduction

The books in this series are the result of a journey that began in Western and Mediterranean Europe, then took a more academic turn to West Africa and to western India. Vicariously it reached backward in time and outward in space, buoyed up by a conviction in the unity of the social sciences, the value of which lay not so much in a generalized theory and a set of abstract, high-level concepts but in providing an incentive to tackle intellectual problems of the human situation, past and present, without being constrained to one field and one method.

The different fields that we call anthropology, sociology and history, are all aspects of the wider enquiry into human interaction that in more specialist contexts gets broken down into economics, politics, demography and religious studies. Each major field concentrates upon a certain set of societies ('simple' or 'complex', present or past, particular or general) and utilizes different methods and sources of information (fieldwork observations or written documents, deductive or inductive procedures). But substantive problems are best dealt with not by utilizing one method or confining the discourse to one field, but by trying to pierce the heavy curtains of instituted and institutionalized boundaries and by drawing upon as wide a range of resources as are available.

There are three threads running through the various studies. One is methodological. Among the reasons I originally undertook fieldwork in West Africa was the wish to lay out more clearly for myself some features of western society, for example, in the contrast between the written and the oral. Once there, I became deeply involved, personally and academically, in West Africa and have remained so ever since. Having carried out field research, I wanted

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to try to assess the conclusions more widely by looking at similar situations in other parts of the world, sometimes by way of informal comparison but also on a more systematic level (for instance, in *Production and Reproduction*, 1977, and in various demographic papers). For 'crucial experiments' through intensive fieldwork, and even the critical comparisons of neighbouring or regional peoples advocated by many anthropologists, are not in themselves always adequate, although I have made use of all these procedures at different times and for different ends. The result of this methodological quest was obviously to lead from ethnography back to earlier interests in comparative sociology (or social anthropology) and comparative history. Indeed if one is concerned with problems and topics rather than boundary-maintaining fields of study, such an interlocking of interests is essential, even if the results fall well short of a 'unified social science'.

The second thread has to do with the content of these studies. While there are many detailed differences in human societies that require very specific explanations (and I have attempted to look at some of these in two neighbouring communities in West Africa in my book *Death, Property and Ancestors*, Stanford, 1962), there are other more widespread features (similarities as well as differences) that call for some more general hypotheses. On one level these features relate to the assumptions that people make about the differences between, and the similarities within, oral and literate, simple and advanced, cold and hot societies. On another level they have to do with the ways people win a livelihood. The first set of problems were central to my study of the implications of changes in the means and modes of communication (*The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, 1977, and the present volume), the second to the analysis of aspects of domestic and political life in the context of changes in the means and modes of production and of destruction (*Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa*, 1971, *Production and Reproduction*, 1977).

The hypotheses suggested inevitably need refining and further testing. Any empirical situation involves a variety of factors other than those I have considered. But to understand the general flow of human history one has to start with some theoretical perspective and from some specific point of departure. In looking at family and

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marriage in West Africa, I first studied particular differences and similarities between two small ethnic sub-groups of the LoDagaa, then turned to look at some regional differences (*Comparative Studies in Kinship*, Kegan Paul and Stanford University Press, 1969), finally at certain general features of difference between Africa and the major societies of Eurasia (e.g. *Bridewealth and Dowry*, with S. J. Tambiah, 1973). Struck by certain inconsistencies between my model and early European systems of marriage and the family (the story of the last two hundred years raises other questions); I was led to examine the historical role of the Christian church in promoting and to some extent establishing new norms of domestic life (*The Development of Marriage and the Family in Europe*, 1983). That study in turn raised other questions, firstly about transformations over the last two hundred years, usually approached from the standpoint of the present (and always from that of Western Europe) but which need to be looked at comparatively and from the past, secondly about the possible implications of other temple cultures for marriage and the family as well as the role of charity more generally. But these are other problems for other enquiries and enquirers, which will benefit from improved data, concepts and methods in comparative social research, combining intensive observation, extensive surveys and documentary study.

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This book attempts to spell out some of the general differences between the social organization of societies without and with writing and the process of transition from one to the other. It is a ludicrously wide topic, but one that calls for some preliminary treatment as well as a few opening comments. Of necessity I have confined my attention largely to two such situations, one with writing, one mainly without: the Ancient Near East, that is, where writing emerged, and contemporary West Africa, where its uses have proliferated over the last fifty years. Different systems of writing have, of course, different implications in different societies at different times. But there are also important features that a number of these particular contexts have in common and it is to these I have wanted to draw attention.

I am not concerned simply with differences for difference sake. In the first place I am trying to provide a more satisfactory explanation, for myself and for the reader, of certain widely used concepts, sociological and anthropological, historical and common-sense, that have been used to describe the major differences or transitions in the history of human societies. This attempt leads me to shift part of the emphasis put on the means and modes of production in explaining human history to the means and modes of communication. At the same time, I find it necessary to challenge certain notions about the uniqueness of the West as far as the explanation for the emergence of the 'modern' world is concerned, since I see some of the pre-conditions more widely distributed than many current theories allow. But these aims, especially the last, do not always hold the centre of the stage, since I am dealing with

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aspects of an 'earlier' adoption of writing rather than with later developments in literacy.

The present form of this study came about largely as the result of my having been invited to give four lectures at the University of Chicago in October, 1984, to honour L. A. Fallers and his work. Significantly, his research spanned not only the 'simple' East African state of the Busoga as it adjusted to colonial rule, but the much more complex Turkish nation, the Islamic heirs of Asiatic nomads as well as of the plant, trade, population, government, and to some extent the traditions of the Byzantine empire centred on Constantinople. This shift of research from Africa to the Middle East did not come about by asking that only too frequently heard anthropological question 'Where shall I go next?', but by posing the same query with an intellectual rather than a territorial reference. Fallers' interests in the writings of Max Weber as well as the contemporary setting in which he worked – the emergence of the new nations of Africa – and his own reactions to these events pushed him towards a comparison of the nature of and the transition between simple and complex state formations. He moved towards an enquiry into the features and factors behind this dynamic contrast, a contrast that is certainly neither binary nor linear but represents a process with significant breaking points which one must be able to specify if any plausible reasons are to be teased out for social change, for the decline as well as the rise of states, empires and nations.

It was because I knew him to be concerned with such problems, and I use the verb with Quakerish implications, that when I was at the Center for Advanced Studies in Stanford in 1960 and he was preparing to participate in that significant collective move with Geertz and Schneider from Berkeley to Chicago, I sent him, for comment, an article, written by Ian Watt and myself, brashly entitled 'The consequences of literacy'. His reply was encouraging. At that time we had been working together on plans to publish a new *Journal of Social Anthropology* (see Stocking 1979), but since this proposal was very much in the air he suggested the piece should be sent to that important and already established journal, *Comparative Studies in History and Society*.

I followed up aspects of this article in a number of subsequent

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publications. An edited work, *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (1968), collected articles on the ethnography of writing from a number of societies from different parts of the world. A volume called *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977) considered some of the implications of the graphic representation of language for cognitive processes, especially the partially decontextualized use of language in formal contexts, the list, the table (that is, paired lists forming rows as well as columns), the matrix (a more complex table), together with the development of more precise notions of contradiction, of forms of 'logic' (in the specialized sense), including the syllogism and of other types of argument and of proof (Goody 1977, Yoffee 1979).

The second aim of my enquiry into the implications of writing has been to consider the interface between the oral and the written, not only for cultures but for registers and performance within written cultures. This interface I have discussed in a number of recent essays, mainly on 'literacy' or 'art' forms, which I am presently trying to put together into a book (though it will always be depressingly incomplete).

The third aim, forming the present study, has to do with the long-term effects of writing on the organization of society. Let me try to clarify this goal. One part of the enterprise is to take certain features that sociologists and others have seen as important in the analysis of social institutions – for example, the particularistic–universalistic dichotomy or polarity used by Talcott Parsons as one of his pattern-variables (and derived essentially from Max Weber) – in order to see how far we can explain differences in their incidence in terms of developments in human communication. It is the same with discussions of legal systems. In all of this my own interests are close to those of Fallers, who was not worried about crossing the boundaries between anthropology and sociology, between synchrony and diachrony, between European and other cultures, because he was more concerned with proposing solutions to intellectual problems than with disciplinary or geographical boundaries.

Much of the material I use on the differences and transition between societies without, and societies with, writing comes from work, my own and that of others, on West Africa. The rest comes from the earliest literate cultures of the Ancient Near East; despite

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the thinness of my knowledge these are of obvious importance because we are dealing with the first developments in the uses of writing, with the beginning of a written tradition that, in a broad sense, fed into Greece and Europe. And in dealing with law I have discussed briefly the development of the use of writing in Europe during the Middle Ages as another transitional period.

The problems involved in any such effort are many and open to misunderstanding, more especially as the irony of the title of the 'domestication' study has not always been appreciated. For present purposes I examine these problems under the three headings of causal implications, categories and evidence.

My anthropological colleagues are used to analyzing a particular context, one they have either observed in the field, heard about from others ('informants' as they are sometimes barbarously called), or read about in books and documents. The analysis involves an unravelling of the threads that make up this human situation, and seeing how the various factors interact in the particular socio-cultural setting. My historical and archaeological colleagues are more used to tracing situations over time and establishing, among other things, chronological sequences of development, some of which, like the transition from hunting and gathering to farming, tend to repeat themselves under a variety of conditions. A third form of enquiry consists in taking a particular thread (or even a topic) and following its changing path through time and space. This is what I have tried to do and it is a form of enquiry with a respectable lineage. One might mention here, in the field of communication, Eisenstein's work on the implications of printing (1979) or Turkle's on the effect of computers on the 'human spirit' (1984), or, in the field of agriculture, White's work on the plough (1940) and on medieval technology more generally (1962).

These are broad types of enquiry loosely linked to particular academic disciplines. They do not exhaust the range of possibilities, which would include enquiries like that of Thomas (1978; 1983) on aspects of the changing consciousness at the time of the Renaissance, or like the admirable socio-historical account of medieval life in Homans' *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (1942). But for the present the tripartite categorization will do.

At various times I have attempted all three forms of enquiry.

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Each has its costs and gains. One obvious cost of enquiring into the possible implications of the plough is that some readers will regard the approach as one of single-factor determinism. On the other hand an enquiry into the total factorial or causal network in a field situation makes it difficult for the author to avoid being seen as a convinced proponent of a structural or functional approach. A historical study is often viewed as part of a wider perspective of evolutionary development, sometimes even characterized as unilinear. But tempting as these characterizations are, they need to be avoided.

In taking writing and the written tradition as my topic, for example, I do not imply for one moment that these are the only factors involved in any specific situation, only that they are significant ones. In these enquiries one would like to be able to assess the relevance of different elements and to produce a path-diagram that weighted, in some more or less precise way, the factors involved. Unless of course one is content to leave the analysis at the functional level of showing that everything influences everything else, or at the structural level of indicating abstract homologies or underlying principles. But that more exacting mode of assessing the contributing factors, so widely used in economics because of the numerical nature of much of the data, is hardly possible, at least at present and possibly in prospect, for many of the situations with which the softer social sciences are dealing. As a consequence, choosing a topic to investigate means not only that one runs the danger of inflating its importance but, worse, of being seen as believing that human affairs are determined by a single factor. Some writers even appear to assume that what is meant by 'causal relations' are those determined in just this way – that is, situations that have one cause, everywhere, all the time.

I do not accept such a view of socio-cultural analysis, nor the oppositional nature of social theory and practice that it embodies. To some extent, however, misunderstandings arise from the different kinds of enquiry to which we have called attention. The point is clearly put by Cole and Keyssar in a recent paper:

There is also agreement that the general causal impact of literate knowledge is not unidirectional from technology to activity. Activities provide greater and lesser opportunities for particular literate technologies to be

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effective. As recorded in Goody (1977), or Schmandt-Besserat (1978), the interplay of socio-economic and literate/technological forces represents a classical case of dialectical interacting systems that are always incipiently in a process of change. (1982: 4)

That some readers should interpret the argument as unidirectional while others recognize the two-way, multi-factored influences may be due to the difficulties of written as distinct from oral communication, rather than to a failure to understand. But there is also the question of a willingness to suspend not one's disbelief but one's 'beliefs', one's ideological commitments, one's predetermined categories of the understanding. It is to try and avoid some of these misunderstandings that I have chosen for the title a form of words suggested to me by Marshall Sahlins, 'The logic of writing . . . '.

That was not the only positive result of my visit to Chicago. R. T. Smith was an excellent host and I had useful comments from B. Cohen, T. Turner, E. Shils and others as well. Earlier I had reason to be grateful to J. Flanagan for reading various chapters. Carolyn Wyndham and Antonia Lovelace did the word-processing and helped with references. John Baines and Keith Hart have been of very great help with the manuscript as a whole while John Dunn and A. L. Epstein have read particular chapters. I have to thank the University of Cambridge for giving me the early retirement needed to finish the manuscript and St John's College for providing a room and the proper atmosphere in which to continue working. In the Spring of 1985 I gave the lectures in altered form at Le Collège de France (thanks to an invitation initiated by François Héritier-Augé) where the warm social and intellectual climate of a Parisian spring stimulated me to return to the task of revision; the effort of preparing the course for a different audience helped me reformulate parts of the argument, as did working with my translators Anne-Marie Roussel and Anne de Sales. I am also most grateful to Patricia Williams, to Anne Nesteroff of Armand Colin, and to Michael Black of Cambridge University Press.

I have a final caveat. Although I have divided the topics of the chapters along the lines of the frequently accepted sub-systems of society – that is, religion, economy, politics and law – a number of the themes and features crop up under each of these headings, which are in any case overlapping. This duplication is inevitable as

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I am trying to pull out a number of general factors rather than go into a detailed examination of particular situations, partly because in some cases this latter has been undertaken in other writings. Anthropologists will no doubt be irritated by this lack of field data in my presentation, historians by the absence of specific accounts, sociologists by the paucity of references to published social theory. They will all, from the standpoint of their particular domains, be justified in their comments. Worse still I have omitted a treatment of a number of topics such as ritual action, kinship and education, my excuse being that I have tried or am presently trying to deal with these topics in other contexts.

But enough of this preface; let us get down to the arguments themselves. I begin in the first chapter by dealing with the influence of writing on religion because this raises most of the major issues at stake. I first consider how far the presence of writing has affected the notion and the study of religious phenomena. Here, as I think with law, the written book leads us to different ideas of what religion is, ideas that also relate to substantial matters of form and content. Form, because of the fixing of a boundary to 'belief' as well as to practice, which brings out questions to do with the nature of belief, truth and of conversion. Content, because of the tendency of writing to over-generalize norms. In both ways religion acquires an increased measure of autonomy in relation to other aspects of the social system. But the emergence of religion as one of the 'great organizations' (not simply as a partially differentiated aspect of, say, intra-familial interaction) implies autonomy at another level: the autonomy of the church as an organization. It is the partial autonomy of these organizations that requires us to qualify Durkheim's attempt, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, to use the term 'church' in an all-encompassing way (as other anthropologists have done with law), as well as to modify those social theories, of many different inspirations, that assume religion, even in its ecclesiastical form, to reflect the dominant themes of the rest of the socio-cultural system in any tight structural or functional way. The 'great organizations' with their literate tradition acquire a certain independence of their own, promoted by their custodianship of the books as well as their interest in earthly continuity and other-worldly salvation.