

Culture and Technique

Eric Guichard wishes to discuss the great question of the relationship between technique, culture and writing. Let me leave aside technique since I think writing is just that, concerned with the technology (technique) of the intellect. It enables our intellect to do more complicated things. The differences between myself and one of the analphabetic Africans in West Africa that I studied has nothing to do with primitive mentality in the one case and a modern mentality in the other, at least not if you think of mentality as a variable and not as a genetic or even cultural constant. Let me illustrate this contention from what I have experienced. I worked with a community that every year (or every four years in a particular lineage section) enacted the Bagre, the ceremonies of a medical and spiritual society that involved the initiation of individuals and the recitation of a long myth, supposed to be displaying the so-called mythopoeic thinking of Ernst Cassirer, and the '*pensée sauvage*' or *bricolage* of Lévi-Strauss and perhaps the non-logical thinking of Lévy-Bruhl. I attended these ceremonies and recorded, transcribed and translated them with my local friend, Kumboono Gandah. 'Kum' as he was generally known was one of the first in his area to go to school but had also been initiated into the Bagre in the holidays when the timing of the ceremonies were adjusted for him and other schoolchildren to take part, for his father, the administration's Chief, was very powerful in a variety of ways and wanted to initiate his many sons (and some daughters) into the society. Kum later became a senior figure and we went back to Ghana together to go and record the performances.

I would describe the recitation known as the Bagre as a myth and it presents many of the features of long oral performance. Kum undoubtedly 'believed' in the efficacy of the Bagre and in the importance of the myth itself. This did not prevent him from being converted to Islam (in opposition to the Christianity of the colonial authorities I am inclined to think), to becoming a leading politician in the new modern mode, and in seeking refuge in London where he took high-level courses in statistics and in the philosophy of science. He was employed in the British railways, working out timetables and statistics, and later in Guinness, the brewery, where he also was a statistician. And in helping me translate at the same time.

Now Kum's experience is one that thousands of Africans are going through. In my mind, it shows that our discussions of primitive mentalities are mistaken. Indeed annihilated. The difference between Kum's now and then resembles the difference that in general all of us have between the oral world of infancy (in our case a lecto-oral world because it already contains literacy) and the literate one. This difference is not due to mentality in a genetic sense, or perhaps even to culture in a commonly accepted one. The sense in which Kum had changed his 'culture' in all this is a complex one. What he had changed, due to his schooling, was the internal technology (of the intellect) which had endowed him, essentially, with the written word. The result of course is 'culture change' at a societal level but not in the sense of a specific culture but rather of human culture ('learned behaviour' as Ruth Benedict would say) in general. It is quite unnecessary to point out that with writing, with books, learning becomes quite a different process. Schools as we know them only exist with writing; although we speak of 'bush' schools and of socialization in purely oral societies, schools on the first (primary) level exist essentially for teaching the ABC and the 'three R's' as we say (in

English, reading, writing and arithmetic) – this one may speak of as ‘education’ as distinct from ‘socialization’.

Kum had gone through this process painfully in contrast to the experience of those he spoke of as ‘his illiterate brothers’ but he nevertheless participated in the same rituals and accepted a belief in some form of witchcraft, though neither was his only mode of operation. He could operate in the mode of his predominantly oral society, but his activities were necessarily influenced by his literate education. And he could equally well discuss the ‘philosophy of science’. His view of literacy certainly differed, not simply because he had studied history at school and this differed from his knowledge of local tradition and myth but also because, more widely, his idea of time had been influenced by the literate mode.

The point I am making is that Kum did not reject the oral culture in which he had been first brought up, but literate communication and learning was added on. This seems to me important in looking at the effects of literacy because we certainly have to judge the way these function over the ‘long-term’. Witchcraft was still accepted by many in Europe of the seventeenth century and in America too, witness the play on Salem by Arthur Miller. However that such a long-term effect was present at a societal level, there can to my mind be no doubt, despite the continual existence of modern ‘witches’ and similar beliefs in transcendental forces. Thus there is in some respects not a hard and fast distinction between the culture of the schooled and the less schooled, but there is of course an important difference.

How far is there a difference between the operations of Kum and his illiterate brothers? He saw it as highly important and so did they. But remember that each member of the community, whether literate or not, began with the oral situation, despite

the gulf that later existed between the brothers. Not an inability to communicate or even participate, but of knowledge and attainment. That same gulf has existed in almost every literate society from the Bronze Age til the end of the nineteenth century because in all societies until recently literates have been in a minority in their society. But it is that minority who contributed in a major way to the new Bronze Age civilization, using the word in the literal sense, that emerged. I do not mean that the bulk of the population slumbered – far from it. But they were largely on the receiving end of much of ‘culture’. The Bible and Shakespeare were created, and read, by the literates, though others could always see plays or attend the rituals. In other words they were influenced by literate creations, by literate creativity, so that their ‘oral’ culture was never the same as what I call pure oral culture that existed in societies without writing. I call it ‘lecto-oral’.

Moreover however vigorous that ‘popular’ culture may be, the difference always means that as far as communication goes, there is a stratification based on the written word.

Those who have it are more highly valued (at least in this respect). Despite the positive strengths of the practitioners of the oral culture, such as Pierre in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, there is nevertheless a hierarchical gulf between them. There is a ‘higher’ culture and a ‘lower’ popular one; it was a society of two (or a plurality) of cultures as far as communications went, not science and arts but oral and written. The latter could use the libraries; for the rest the book remained closed.

But as well as taking a synchronic view we have to take a diachronic one; we have to move from a view concentrating on the present to one taking into account the past, which in a literate society always remains with us, as we can consult the works of Aristotle in the Greek (a ‘dead’ language) or the words of God in the Hebrew Bible, long after the authors have disappeared. We can look back with greater accuracy if not

with greater confidence than to oral tradition and myth. I think this is what Mike Cole means by 'historical psychology'. In any case it gives rise to an impressive disjunction. Until you arrive at the Bronze Age (c. 3000 BC) with the invention of writing, the pace of cultural change was relatively slow but widespread, virtually universal; one hand-axe is much like another whichever part of the world it came from and it stayed around for many years. True, in the Neolithic, with the introduction of domestication, things speeded up and cultures differentiated. That period from the Old Stone Age lasted some 700,000 years, the Neolithic perhaps some 5,000 years. But from the invention of writing to the present, what prehistorians have called the coming of civilization, the culture of cities, in the Bronze Age, has taken only five thousand years. In that time, we have built cities, written literature, invented the plough, the wheel and many crafts, and according to some invented art, science, all our special fields of knowledge (or did this await Antiquity?) and produced all the features that distinguished us from them (the 'savage', the 'barbarian', the 'primitive'). In essence all this was accomplished by a minority who ensured that through their literate activity culture changed at a much more rapid pace than ever before.

The pace has continued to increase. Although there was a definite break with the arrival of literacy, the body of literate achievement obviously increased and so too did the pace of change. Not in every case or in every sphere, but in the majority over the long-term. The change is due in large part to the build up in knowledge. Every culture does this but with literacy you can look back in a different, more confident way. You can revive and in most cases build on the past. There is one major exception and that is in the transcendental sphere. Here the word of God, once spoken or rather written, remains the same and utters the truth. You look back to the Book and preserve,

conserve, every word.

The written Religions of the Book thus work in favour of conserving culture as it is. It was against the water-mill in Ethiopia, it resisted the printing-press in Islam though it did not reject all technological changes; the Benedictine monasteries played their part in improving agriculture in the Middle Ages. There were certain spheres in which immobility reigned, including about the views of Darwin in the nineteenth century, and in parts of the USA even today. The virtual absence of this teaching from some schools, the refusal of Islam to adopt printing (and hence to miss out on the move to 'modernisation' despite the earlier looking back to elements in manuscript culture, like Aristotle) was entirely due to the dominant religious beliefs, as was the early Christian prohibition on secular learning, or in secular painting and secular drama. In these areas going back to the Book, which literacy made possible, and in religion ordained, could lead to a regressive tendency and an attempt to deny alternative or additional forms of knowledge.

But to turn to Eric Guichard's wider query. This seems to be partly based on a largely American (but also a European) distinction between culture as pertaining to the 'spiritual' and technique to the material. This does not seem to me consistent with Tylor's comprehensive definition of culture nor yet with Benedict's 'learned behaviour'. It is in the latter spirit that I used the phrase 'technology of the intellect', wanting to modify that distinction. Because the way we write constantly influences the way we think and the way we act, culture in the spiritual sense. Moreover, while there are some effects of writing that are experienced straight away (and that distinguish the two modes of communication), there are others which only emerge as the result of a long encounter with the written word. The effect of writing on cultural change operates

over the long term and is interactive, producing the kind of rationality that over time has effectively eliminated witchcraft as a type of explanation of human events, even though it may live on in some pockets, and especially in fictional literature aimed at children, as with Harry Potter.