

## INTRODUCTION TO 'SUBSTITUTIONS, ALTERNATIVES OR EQUIVALENTS?'

This paper was written for a seminar convened at Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya, on 21-23 August, 1991, entitled The Creative Use of Language in Kenya. At first glance, it might not seem to be of interest to JASHM readers, because there is no apparent connection with movement study in it, but there is. In the capacity of discussant for van Doorne's paper (1991), I introduced the subject of literacy. The examples of the advantages and disadvantages of literacy are always concerned, first, with movement-literacy. Readers will find these examples starting on p. 170, first paragraph.

Just as I cannot view dances or sign languages as isolated phenomena or as 'special' in the manner of the functionalist anthropologists, so I cannot view movement-literacy as an isolated phenomenon or as a 'special' subject divorced from the considerations of the literacy of the rest of the mediums of human expression in the world. I would hope, therefore, that JASHM readers will find the essay relevant to their interests in the subject of literacy in general, and the comments about Kenya and the present ethnographic situation to be interesting as well.

## SUBSTITUTIONS, ALTERNATIVES OR EQUIVALENTS?

The human word is at its origin an oral phenomenon and it remains, despite the grammatologies of antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the twentieth century, irrevocably oral at root. All real words are spoken words. The marks on pages that we call words are of themselves verbal nothings that become real words only in the consciousness of real readers who process them, in however complexly coded fashions, through the world of sound. Yet, the evolution of consciousness demands that the originally oral human word be distanced from orality, be technologized, reduced to writing and print and ultimately to computers, where it can be fed back into the oral world again (Ong, 1982:198-99, emphasis is mine).

Van Doorne poses a question in his paper, that I think deserves much closer examination. The question is, "Can a written medium provide an adequate substitute for an oral performance ... ?" (p.2). He draws attention to what he calls the social function of oral and written literatures, asking us to recognize the elements of substance, form and medium of expression. He acknowledges, I think, that the question is problematical.

No writer of spoken language texts, musical scores, or texts of body languages (rites, ceremonies, rituals, sign languages, etc.) can justifiably offer his or her written text as a substitute for a live performance, a living social situation, or anything of the kind. Who imagines that a series of marks and squiggles on a sheet of paper is a substitute for a live performance of a ballet; or that the script for a drama is an alternative for a full-scale theatrical production, a musical score for the live performance of a symphony, or that a printed poem is a duplicate of its author's oral recitation and presentation? Surely not the composers, authors, choreographers or writers; yet, in spite of the self-evident nature of these matters, the question is still asked.

The way a question is asked both restricts and organizes the ways in which -- right or wrong -- it can be answered. If we are asked, "Who made human language?", we might answer, "God made it," or "Genetics created it," or "Nature extended animal communication to include human language," "Chance dictated it all" or what you will. We may be right or wrong, but if we reply, "Nobody made human languages," or we say, "That is a silly question," we can be accused of being unsympathetic, enigmatic or cynical because what we have done is to reject the question. The questioner will simply repeat the problem, perhaps wording it differently: "Then how did human language come to be what it is?"

If we then say, "It didn't 'come to be' at all," or "Language is not a material substance; therefore, asking 'what' it is makes no sense," he or she will be truly disturbed because this kind of answer to the question renounces the basis of the thinking that produced the question. The orientation of the questioner's mind, the common-sense notions about things in general that are the bedrock for everything the questioner thinks about, is rejected. For example, everything has 'come from' somewhere and is what it is; language must have originated and developed somehow; everything has a cause and a subsequent effect; every change has to be towards some purpose and must have been made by some agent or agency; there must be an explanation somewhere -- the problem is that I am not educated (or 'smart,' 'clever,' 'sophisticated' or 'socially privileged') enough to know the answer.

These are natural ways of thinking and on the whole, they are implicit. That is, people simply follow such ways of thinking; they do not think about how they are thinking; nor do they examine the forms of the questions they ask. They just ask them, fully expecting someone, usually those who bear the label 'academic' to be able to answer, regardless of the form the question has taken.

As Langer pointed out so long ago,

A question is really an ambiguous proposition; the answer is its determination. There can be only a certain number of alternatives that will complete its sense. In this way, the intellectual treatment of any datum, any experience, any subject, is determined by the nature of our questions, and only carried out in the answers. (1942:1-2, footnote omitted).

The problems to which the question points are still there. I see them behind the distinctions we make between 'written literature' and 'oral tradition.' Fundamental to this distinction is the fact that oral traditions, whether they are musical, danced, acted, chanted or sung, like the whole of on-going social life, are not naturally literate; that is, there are no 'grapholects,' no writing systems intrinsic to communication, expression or creativity in natural languages in their oral forms. To summarize the epigraph above: In the beginning was the Word -- and the Word was not written, but spoken.

Corbett tells us that,

... we shift dimensions when we shift from the comfortable oral medium to the vexing graphic medium. The spoken language, which appeals to the sense of hearing through the medium of sound, exists in the dimension of time. The written language, which appeals to the sense of sight through the medium of graphemes [written words], exists in the dimension of space. The consequences of that difference in dimensions are enormous (1982:139).

Oral traditions in any language become literature when literate people put them into textual forms. Tutuola's inspired recreations of Yoruba folklore, Senghor's poems on themes of Negritude, Diop's protest poetry, Camera Laye's autobiography, are all parts of an African literature which began to be published in the 1930's. Authoritative sources say that "Although a genuine African literature in English did not emerge until the 1950's, writing in English by Africans goes back to the eighteenth century."

I think we are meant to understand that the mere act of writing or recording, in any language, does not constitute a 'literature'; thus, in East Africa, "... literature was only just coming to birth in 1960. Already, however, James Ngugi had emerged as East Africa's leading novelist ... But in the late 1960's the most original talent in East Africa was that of Okot p'Bitek" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 1, pp. 239-241).

My topic does not concern the values, subjects or forms of African literature, but it does concern the problem to which I

have just alluded; the fact that people are still haunted by the question of the relationship between the written texts and oral chants, songs and performances, between literacy and nonliteracy. And here, I disagree with van Doorne. I do not think that "Perhaps different kinds of societies need different kinds of literature" (p. 3 paragraph 1), as if there were no oral traditions left in the so-called "kinds of societies": Does he mean industrial in contrast to agrarian societies, or what? I have to approach the problem in more familiar human terms:

Even if we have not observed firsthand the lives of those who cannot read or write anything, it does not take much of a stretch of imagination for us to conclude that such people do not do very well in [American] society. Yes, we could all tell our own tales about businessmen or entrepreneurs, past or present, who could not write their own names but who directed with marvelous efficiency the fortunes of their multimillion-dollar corporations. But such prospering illiterates are rare in a modern industrial society and are rapidly becoming rarer. The more usual fate of those who cannot read or write is deep-pit poverty and gnawing shame. Even now, some 41 million American adults earn less than \$5,000 a year, and most of those are people with little schooling and even less proficiency in reading and writing (Corbett, 1982:143, statistics are from the N.Y. Times, September 9, 1979).

One out of five American adults -- about 23 million people -- can be classified as members of an exclusively 'oral culture' because they are functionally illiterate. That means these people have varying degrees of skills: the extreme illiterate is a person who cannot read or write anything in his or her native language or any other language. He or she cannot write a check, read street signs, billboards, newspapers or books; for such a person, reading and writing are totally inaccessible mediums of learning, expressing, communicating. There are some who are classified as functionally illiterate who can read but not write and vice versa. The term has been applied to people who can read and write -- perhaps up to an eighth grade primary school level -- but not well. That means people who, for example, can sign their names on application forms and read highway signs but cannot make sense out of the instructions printed on a can of insect repellent, or in a driver's manual, or in the printed columns of a newspaper.

I don't know what the figures are for the African continent or specifically for Kenya, but Corbett tells us that,

In 1977 UNESCO published its report on the extent of illiteracy in 179 countries and territories for the thirty year period from 1945 to 1974 (N.Y. Times, April 30, 1978, p. 23). According to the UNESCO Report, the world

illiteracy rate dropped from 44.3 percent to 34.2 percent between 1950 and 1970. But owing to the population explosion in the world during the same period, the absolute number of illiterates rose from 700 million in 1950 to an estimated 800 million today [that is, in 1981-82]. Because in most countries women have less access to schooling than men do, women today account for 60 percent of the world's illiterates (Corbett, 1982:144).

Faced with these facts,<sup>1</sup> I simply don't know what is meant by "kinds of societies;" nor do I understand why van Doorne points out that, "An oral literary tradition embodies much more [than a written tradition]" (p. 3, paragraph 1). He then draws our attention to "a living cultural identity" saying that "An abrupt interruption of that literary tradition means not only a literary vacuum; it means an identity crisis."

In other words, even though he does say, "Perhaps one should not think in terms of substitution," he still seems to want to impress upon us the fact that a text is not 'real life.' There is a sense in which Ong does that too (see epigraph), but he does so in a non-judgmental way. The inference van Doorne's statement seems to make is that a text is a poor substitute. Even when he speaks about "conservation" and "preservation," he underlines the fact that a text is second best: "... but can a tradition so be preserved or is it merely conserved: cut off from its living base?" (p. 2. paragraph 3, emphasis is mine). What always disturbs me is the notion that written texts are "cut off," evoking a picture of books and the printed page as dead things, cut off from something living as a branch is cut from a tree. But van Doorne is not alone. Indeed, I suspect that there are many more people who think like that than there are people who think as I do; that books are living things which often make more sense than their authors do when they speak, 'off the cuff,' as it were. Then too, I have yet to encounter very many positive metaphors attached to writing or to literacy and texts, as, for example, that they focus, illustrate, augment and invigorate the tedious repetitiousness of everyday social life; that they are repositories of increased awareness, perhaps, and so much more.

Maybe the reason for so many conscious and unconscious antagonisms between the notions of 'texts' vs. 'real life' (as if texts were somehow divorced from or not a part of 'real life') stem from notions of 'survival.' We see oral traditions in the form of traditional rituals, ceremonies, customs, etc., disappearing. We see them gaining new applications and content in changed circumstances (as, for example, from rural to urban contexts). We see nationalism and higher education making some segments of nonliterate populations becoming more conscious of their cultural heritage, and we see these literati then begin to collect and try to preserve the traditions in written forms. The deaths of aspects of an oral tradition always seem to be

accompanied by the births of texts. I think that the subconscious associations many people make is that the texts -- the literate act of writing is itself the 'killer'; that it somehow causes the death of the oral tradition. Perhaps I am hypersensitive, but for years, I and my students have battled with members of a basically 'oral culture' who try with indifferent success to exist in societies which are predominantly literate. I refer to groups of dancers and performers in the English-speaking world.

We have argued endlessly with them over what we conceive to be the advantages of a literate art form, pointing out examples in the field of musicology in particular, for this area of study has been literate for nearly 1000 years. Especially do dancer/performers oppose our arguments with a list of disadvantages of writing ballets, modern concert dances, etc., in Laban or Benesh movement-writing. They say that we can never, ever write down what they do, that we cannot capture their performances in writing and we agree -- but that is not what we aim to do. They argue that literacy is in principle hostile to what they do and to the aims of preserving the wholeness and 'unspoiled' nature of dances, rituals and ceremonies.

We envision libraries of texts of the works of leading choreographers. They envision a world in which spontaneity, emotion and God only knows what else reign supreme and they are quite happy with the notion that they have no history, no scholarship, no literature comparable to that of the music world; yet, they complain bitterly that they are at the bottom of the economic ladders among the extant art forms in their countries.

"You cannot capture dancing in a text," they say. "We know that," we reply. "We are not trying to capture the act of dancing, nor do we imagine that we reproduce a live performance -- we have never said that a text is a substitute for a live performance of a dance." But they do not believe us, and quite honestly, we long ago stopped trying to persuade them to relinquish their obstinate refusals to look at literacy as a potential benefit rather than a threat and literate people as potential friends instead of 'enemies.'

Van Doorne tells us that the griots<sup>2</sup> (probably, although not necessarily, nonliterate) are more "literary" than the "literati" whose texts do not include context, the sounds of singing and all the performative elements of a real life situation. Lurking about in the contrast between literate persons and griots is, I believe, an opposition: literati = inferior, nonliterati (griots) = superior, on an inverted scale of values. Moreover (as if we need to add anything to this depressing scenario), I detect vestiges of an equation between nonliterate/'developing' and literate/'developed' societies, plus an associational

misconception that is held by an extraordinary number of people, that of thinking that the word 'nonliterate' (without a system of writing) means 'illiterate,' wrongly defined as 'ignorant', 'stupid' or unintelligent. Illiteracy is a serious social handicap in Kenya and the rest of the world, but it is not rightly equated with a lack of intelligence.

But, even if we grant all of that and accept the fact that the literati don't deserve to be so stringently maligned, where does it lead us? Even if we overcome such misconceptions, does a real problem still exist? I think it does. D'Angelo puts it very well: " ... literacy makes possible modes of thinking that cannot be acquired in any other way" (1982:155, emphasis is mine).

That literate people on these grounds could justifiably be interpreted as 'threatening' to illiterate members of an oral culture is no doubt possible. To my knowledge, there are no undeniable counter-arguments to the position that a literate human consciousness is intimidating to an illiterate human consciousness, because I think that in important ways, it is. Why? Because literacy alters the consciousness of individuals who acquire it.

For example, no movement-writer or reader sees bodily movements and human actions in the same ways that nonliterate persons do. I am convinced that this is as true of spoken-language literacy or music literacy as it is of movement literacy. And, the effects of literacy can either be regarded as 'freedom' (or the reverse) depending upon the overall view of human beings that is held, who employs the writing system and for what reasons, all of which draws attention to the many moral, ethical and political dimensions of the problem. Upon what evidence are those kinds of assertions based?

Perhaps the richest source of contrasts between literate and nonliterate cognition is the study conducted by the Russian psychologist A.R. Luria in 1931 and 1932, but not available in English until 1976. [He] went to remote parts of the Soviet Union to test nonliterate people in various cognitive tasks. ... When given the task of grouping similar objects, Luria's subjects invariably arranged them according to some functional activity, a grouping that literate people might describe as idiosyncratic. These peasants saw no need to use abstract or linguistic categories. Instead, they grouped objects according to the roles they might play in the daily work experience ... (D'Angelo:1985:156-7).

One of Luria's subjects in the test to detect similarities ... was asked: "What do a fish and a crow have in common?" He replied, "A fish -- it lives in the water. A crow flies. If the fish just lays [sic] on top of the water, the crow

could peck at it. A crow can eat a fish but a fish can't eat a crow." He was then asked, "Could you use one word for them both?" His reply was, "If you call them animals, that wouldn't be right. A fish isn't an animal and a crow isn't either. A crow can eat a fish but a fish can't eat a bird. A person can eat a fish but not a crow." The subject, unable to find a common term to describe the crow and the fish, reverts to a description of differences ...

The process of defining a concept is an operation that is clearly logical and linguistic. It is one of the most basic processes of cognitive thinking. In this test of mental abilities, Luria's subjects were asked to give names for commonly used objects as well as for more abstract concepts. When confronted with these tasks, they either refused to define a concept, saying that it was silly to define things whose meaning was perfectly obvious, or they defined it by using tautologies (e.g., a tree is a tree) ... It never seemed to occur to Luria's subjects that they could clarify an idea by defining it (D'Angelo, 1982:158-159).

Lloyd-Jones asks his reader to,

Let me divert your attention for a moment to another use of literacy as it is embedded in the word literate. We hear in that second word no subliminal suggestion of minimum. Literate people are those who are well-read, cultivated, urbane. These people are probably full of knowledge in general, but even more, they have large views of the world, are able to imagine many kinds of mind, have at hand many plots and elaborations of plots into which they can fit experience. The old image of the education of literate leaders probably included a year of travel on the Continent; I recall Americans in less affluent classes suggesting that a hitch in the military would help young men not merely to shape up but also to discover other kinds of men and thus fit themselves better to be part of the world of affairs. I haven't heard much of that justification in the current political climate. We are retreating into insularity (1982:130).

I have saved what I conceive to be the crux of the problem I began with until last, letting Raymond speak for me:

The less obvious lessons [of Luria's research] are that literacy is a powerful engine of politics, that its effects can be regarded as liberation or enslavement, depending upon how we regard the system that employs it, and that forcing literacy upon a hapless people can be an act of aggression just as brutal as denying literacy in the name of order and stability. ... The sociology of literacy is almost exactly analogous to the sociology of wealth. Success depends upon a fortuitous combination of circumstance and effort. Given



extremely favorable circumstances, success is almost inevitable; given extremely unfavorable circumstances, failure is virtually certain. And in both realms -- literacy and economics -- success, failure, and even mediocrity each have an inertia that spans generations. To complicate matters, the inertia of success and the inertia of failure often run along ethnic lines, reinforced by cultural predilections as well as by traditional or legal barriers.

Literacy, then, despite its advantages, is a human problem in much the same way that wealth is. It is ironically the condition that makes illiteracy possible, just as wealth makes poverty possible. Like wealth, literacy can divide civilizations into hostile factions, the haves and the have-nots. And like wealth, literacy is a problem not only to those who lack it, but often to those who have it as well. Neither wealth nor literacy guarantees superior sensibility; either can engender a warped set of values, fashionable vulgarity and callousness toward the disadvantaged. People who are highly literate, like people who are very rich, are tempted to regard literacy or money as the measure of human worth. There are no easy solutions to either problem. The poor will always be with us, literacy will never be universal (Raymond, 1982:11-12, emphasis is mine).

While I understand why van Doorne asked the question regarding substitution, I do not agree with the common-sense analysis or the conclusions he offers, because,

... a primary oral culture cannot describe the features of orality or reflect on itself as a culture. The very concept of culture is a typographically formed concept, dependent on the feel for a mass of knowledge that cannot be accumulated even with writing, but demands print. There is no way short of a massive descriptive circumlocution even to speak or think of "culture" in classical Latin. Only those advantaged by the interiorization of writing and print, and living at the opening of the electronic age, have been able to discover what primary orality was or is and to reflect on it and understand it, and thereby to reflect on manuscript cultures and typographic cultures and their own electronic culture itself. Locked in a primary oral culture, consciousness has not the kind of self knowledge and hence not the freedom that only technology can confer when consciousness makes technology its own. Like human beings themselves as they pass through the successive phases of life and through their physical deaths, the oral word in a way must die, too, if it is to bear fruit, that is, it must lose itself in writing and print and now in electronics, and in the interaction of all these technologies, if it is to realize its promise (Ong, 1982:199).

One of the current themes of Ong's work is the way in which various media -- whether oral poetry, writing, print, African drum languages, or television -- alter the noetic habits (that is, the perceptual and cognitive styles) of the people who use them. He has often focused on the differences between the noetics of cultivated oral societies, such as the Greece of Homer, and highly literate societies, such as the Greece of Aristotle; his work has encouraged contemporary writing teachers to view their beginning students as nonliterate rather than illiterate, and to understand the cultural and psychological chasm they must cross if they are to participate in the consciousness of literate communities.

It is largely, although not solely, because of my acquaintance with this scholar's work that I cannot be satisfied with common-sense assumptions on anyone's part about how the written word makes meaning, or how readers make sense of the written word, or how we imagine that we communicate through the spoken word, or what we mean when we say that our social natures are what they are because of language in any of its forms.

Given that literacy alters the consciousness of those who acquire it, then how are we to understand van Doorne's statement about "...academic discourse as a secondary interpretation of life ..." (p. 11, paragraph 1)? "Secondary" to what and to whom?, I would want to ask. In saying this, I do not deny the problems he raises about the estrangement of Kenyan students from their native tongues and the 'short-cuts' that can arise from too much compartmentalization of 'language territories,' but what baffles me is the apparent focus on academics and the English language as 'the bad guys.' This could, of course, simply reflect the accidents of circumstance. Were this seminar taking place in Cote d'Ivoire or the Cameroon, would the arguments be the same regarding the French language? Or, if we could imagine Moi University using Swahili as the lingua franca of the classroom, what kinds of scenarios would that entail?

Drid Williams

#### NOTES

1. Facts which are now fourteen years out of date, which probably means, given the population explosion in the world, that the figures are higher at present than they were then.
2. The word 'griots' refers to a class of professional musician-entertainers among the Wolof of Senegal and Gambia. Their chanted stories, accompanied by a 'halam' are similar in some respects to the Maulidi and Zumani songs of the south Kenyan coast in that they are an admixture of African and Muslim culture.

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