

Literacy in Primitive Society

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The Bible translator working in a society which does not have a tradition of literacy is often concerned with the problem of the small number of people who can read what he has so laboriously translated, and what the Bible Society has published at so great a cost. Sometimes he is puzzled by the evident lack of interest in learning to read. He may be disappointed to find that people whom he persuades to begin learning rapidly lose interest. He may become resigned to the situation and see his lifetime of translation work used by only a handful of people, or he may work hard to overcome the resistance.

Of course, that resistance may be due to any number of factors, including faulty language analysis reflected in an inconsistent writing system, or faulty translation, so "wooden" that nobody can read it with pleasure. These kinds of difficulties have found their place in the discussions which have taken place in *The Bible Translator*. One other extremely important facet of the problem has so far been neglected, however. It is the problem of motivation for reading. Literacy within its cultural framework deserves to come in for some study.

A great humanitarian ideal of a literate world has motivated governmental and private groups to provide the world's nonliterate population with the opportunity (not always the motivation) to share in the world's information. No one in this age is likely to say that such an ideal is not a worthy undertaking. However, there exists a type of literacy romanticism often displayed by the public as well as by religious groups in which some of the basic factors of the societies forming the nonliterate world are too lightly passed over. A consideration of these matters does not necessarily lead to a solution, but it at least cautions one against an undue enthusiasm and consequent disappointment in what might often appear as a translator's failure in promoting his translated product.

Literate and Nonliterate Societies

The use of the printed page is a basic criterion for separating the modern society from the peasant or primitive one. A distinction lies, of course, in the fact that the former is literate while the latter two (especially the last) are nonliterate. However, this is not the heart of the distinction between these three kinds of societies. In a modern industrialized society there are individuals who do not read. In many peasant and some primitive societies there are often people who are literate. Whereas a modern society cannot continue to enculturate its young without the use of printing and literacy, a primitive society is by no means so structured. Somewhere between these two, depending upon religious factors and the degree of economic and political dependence, are found the peasant groups. A peasant society may display a high rate of literacy, but normally its role is very secondary in the

transmission of its traditions unless, for example, the religious form carries a written tradition which is used. Where reading and writing are not necessary for the adequate learning of one's culture, literacy is forced to undergo a re-evaluation which takes on various forms according to the structure of the local society and culture.

For example, the Quechua Indians of the Andes mountains of Ecuador are oriented toward the white population in a peasant dependency status. However, there is little desire on the part of these Indians to accept the value system of the white population. The transmission of traditional Andean Indian farming and stock raising is in the minds of these Indians completely sufficient without the use of reading and writing. A child possesses a considerable store of knowledge long before he would be able to learn to read or write. The introduction of printed material in the instruction in agricultural methods is regarded as emanating from nonnative sources and therefore suspect. If a child learns to read and write, he does so only after a large part of his enculturative experience has sounded the key of his value system. At least in Quechua society anything read can have little or nothing to do with the most basic aspect of his village life, viz. the maintenance of a peasant *status quo*. Consequently, literacy is considered by most middle-aged people as of no value for the kind of life which they visualize as a permanent and relatively secure one. Because of the complex socio-economic factors at work in Ecuador, a young Indian literate whose social horizons were beginning to lift tapers off by middle age and soon fits into the pattern of his society. Reading is simply of little value, since most realize they will end up about the same as those who do not learn to read.

Status Through Education

In French West Africa an African realizes that his enculturation is quite adequate to live in the village, make a plantation, procreate, and die. However, one's status in an African village is quite as important as eating, procreating, and dying. Status for the older males has been defined by traditional values such as possessing plural wives, owning material possessions, possessing special tribal knowledge. However, the younger generation finds that status (defined usually by wealth) can be more rapidly achieved by seeking employment among the whites. Such employment is had by taking on an encrusted kind of school education over and above traditional education. For the youth the school has been the road to fulfillment of status. In West Africa an overriding desire for literacy is for the acquisition of status. The youth who are seeking their position in this way admit that they will not possess much status in the eyes of the old men, but they compare themselves with their contemporaries, not with their elders.

Reactions to Literacy

A detailed analysis of the reinterpretation of the printed page in Quechua and West African societies would require a discussion of the

relation of literacy to such phases as mechanics, esthetics, and even the religious aspects of these cultures. More valuable for the present purpose is an attempt to find some common characteristics in the reaction of nonliterate societies to the introduction of reading and writing. We are concerned here mainly with those factors which tend to set limits to the effective penetration of literacy.

The most obvious set of factors are the physical. The matter of getting a living demands a great deal of time and energy. Leisure time is not available in the sense that it is in a modern society. Time not spent in actually rearing a livelihood from the ground, river, or ocean is needed to replenish the constantly depreciating material equipment. Reading does not come easy for eyes which are adjusted constantly to nature and in the bright sunlight. Houses of many primitive or semiprimitive groups are built with very little opening for light. Many houses serve for both cooking and sleeping, so that when the occupants are in the house they are preparing food in a smoke-filled room. Nighttime is needed for rest, and people retire early to begin the day's work before sunrise. Anyone who has lived in a primitive village knows there is little time for quiet, undisturbed concentration for reading.

More important than these purely physical factors are social ones. The life of a primitive people is oriented largely about the affairs of one day, today. Tomorrow is not terribly important because it does not carry the news of today. In a primitive village the happenings of the villagers and their contacts with nonvillagers are as important social items as major news flashes from a radio station. Every individual is geared to an awareness of events. The smallest happening is extremely important in primitive societies, and it usually requires retelling numerous times and in various ways. Hours may be needed to discuss an event fully and to arrive at a consensus of "official" village opinion. In some groups this village gossip may be restricted to the men's clubhouse, while in others it may be an affair entirely within the family. This situation is quite similar in the modern society to the flood of city workers scanning the evening papers on their way to the suburbs. In village life no detail is too small to be elaborated, and where decisions for action are required the discussion of these matters often continues well into the night.

Communication Nets in Society

The role of interpersonal relations defines in any group the types of "communication nets" which are set up for the purpose of passing information. A communication net describes the relations which hold between people who talk and listen to each other. These relations vary a great deal from group to group. Especially variable is the kind of information which can pass within communication nets. For example, in some societies no talk takes place between mother-in-law and son-in-law. If information is to be passed between these people, it is rechannelled through another net, e.g. son-in-law and wife. In primitive

societies these communication nets are closely regulated as the result of well-defined kinship relations. Consequently, it is often the case that the information on a printed page falls into a restricted category of communication which is not shared in by some members of the group. Even if all members of the group receive the information, they may not be free to send it on to others. Here the nature of the information is normally defined by pre-existing information categories and is treated like these.

There is a tendency in all communication nets to achieve a uniformity of information and to increase the uniformity of opinion. It is probably true in most primitive societies that a uniformity of opinion is valued more than uniformity of information. Where well-defined political structures exist, this uniformity is often achieved merely by passing along the official opinion. Hence the need to ascertain the nature of the information requiring opinion is reduced and the elaboration of the opinion takes the place of discussion of the original information. Material read from a book in a primitive society enters very often as new information. If opinion about this information is felt necessary, then the information often falls into a very secondary role and there is little reason to keep going back and studying the original information. Material read from a book which requires no opinion often reflects the fact that it communicates nothing meaningful in the first place.

Related to the give and take of information on the level of interpersonal relations is the relation of only "taking" from an impersonal page of print. Information from a page comes from a source outside the local group. Hence if the group is seeking to be accepted and adopts the way of life of the outsider (e.g. Europeans), the printed page may be given a great value. If there is no desire toward acculturation, the value of the book as a source of valid information will be considerably less. However, in both of these cases there is a tendency to feel that reading a page of print is a poor substitute for a live verbal encounter in a well-defined socio-psychological setting. Hence, a kind of literacy fatigue is often soon evident in many newly-literate societies.

Individualism and Reading

Some societies tend to prepare their members toward cooperative ends, while others are more competitive in their behavior. It is my experience that neither cooperation nor competition in preliterate societies seems to hinder or help the cause of literacy. However, individualism does appear to be a strong determinant, provided, of course, other motivations are likewise present. One may be justified in stating that literacy which results in the *reading* of information in order to possess that information and to increase information is an individualistic task and is not normally accomplished to any degree outside of an individualistic orientation. This should not be construed to mean "rugged individualism" which is competitively striving to exploit others. It rather means the high evaluation of information which can be for the most part only self-appropriated. This is precisely why many non-

literate remark, "If X learns to read, that will be fine for him; it won't help me any." Aside from the self-appropriation of printed information as an individualistic act, literacy in primitive societies tends to appropriate very little information on a personal level. Hence the church service or any other ritual which imparts information in a group act is much more readily utilized. However, this information is often on the level of public opinion and does not enter the sphere of the individual's own reflective thinking in the way in which the individual's self-appropriated information does.

No society is static. New information via a printed page or through a verbal communication net introduces change. However, information which arises from written symbols is doubly important in acculturation, since it means a change in the way in which change itself can come about. The acceptance and utilization of reading and writing accelerate the rate of flow of information and require a more rapid adjustment to change. It is often the case that the partial acceptance of literacy and books in a primitive society so rapidly increases information requiring opinions and adjustments that the innovation of reading is granted a tightly compartmentalized sphere of activity where it does not upset traditions too quickly. Hence the school and church, which are the institutional carriers of literacy, become the sole province of literate activities and thereby are divorced from the rest of the society. In many cases the church and/or school replace political structures and meaningful values without continuing to pass along the information needed to make the other aspects of life intelligible. The result of this process is the moral breakdown of a society such as one witnesses in much of Roman Catholic Latin America. Even the individual self-appropriation which is *effective* literacy may sometimes result in the overextension of individualistic behavior to the detriment of the individual in his ongoing society.

Creative Writing in Society

The above statements have been concerned with some aspects of restrictions upon literacy in simple societies. There is still another facet to be considered. Missionaries are often distressed at the fact that Christians who have had a literate tradition based on the Bible and other religious as well as some secular literature do not attempt to write creatively. There appears to be little desire to prepare written material for the reading native public. The truth of this matter seems to stem from two major factors: (1) motivation for writing and (2) audience. These two factors are clearly related. A person may be motivated to write to communicate a message, to earn money or prestige, or simply because he has an impelling desire to write, just as he has at times a natural impulse to speak. Motivation in complex societies may be a combination of these. Observations of literates in several primitive societies show that most writing is done to communicate a message whose content is related to the daily matters of concern to individuals in the group. In the simple societies money reward for

writing is practically out of the question. The would-be writer is aware of the restrictions of his audience. He knows the small number of his people who would read because they are interested in possessing book information. He is also aware of the fact that the native language is usually restricted tribally, and only a European or other national language would be widely read to accord him rewards. The desire to write as an end in itself is probably the result of a very long literate tradition in which people feel constrained to write without knowing quite for sure why. Knowledge for knowledge's sake and scientific method which issues in the dissemination of findings and reports is not a product of primitive thinking. Social horizons are limited in primitive society and ethnocentrism is a dominant aspect of its life. Only when a tradition has broken through to a broad view of man and a reduction in ethnocentric values is there a possibility of seeing the fruit of reading for knowledge and writing from a creative desire.

In spite of all this, there are individuals who are writing in these societies. African writers have produced works in various major tribal languages. Hausa writers have written on history, Islamic theology, and epic poetry. The Peul have a grammar based on an Arabic model. Other languages which have produced considerable writings are Swahili, Zulu, Kanuri, and Nubian. In spite of these writings which Islam has inspired, their content remains a secret to the masses. African writers see little reward in writing in their own languages for their own people. Consequently, the African participants attending the first Bantu writers' conference in South Africa as far back as 1936 insisted upon their right to publish their works in a European language. Writing and the making of books is still a very foreign idea in many parts of the world where literacy has made considerable progress. This is true mainly because of the fact that books still play a very secondary role in the transmission of the cultures in these places. Many Africans are quite willing to attempt translation but do not think in terms outside of the framework of translation from a European language. The original works in African languages are not of great interest to African readers. This coupled with the fact that these writers will prefer to address themselves to a European audience for recognition makes the problem of the development of writing in a simple culture extremely retarded.

In brief, the human factors which join together in a primitive society to restrict the development of literacy and writing are a complex of socio-cultural forces which cannot be overcome short of the gradual evolution of these societies. There are primitive groups which exhibit a high degree of literary interest, but no anthropological studies have been made of these in the light of communication. It is to be hoped that Bible translators who are encouraging literacy will investigate the nature of these problems, as much information can be gained which is in turn extremely valuable to the successful task of Bible translation and distribution.
