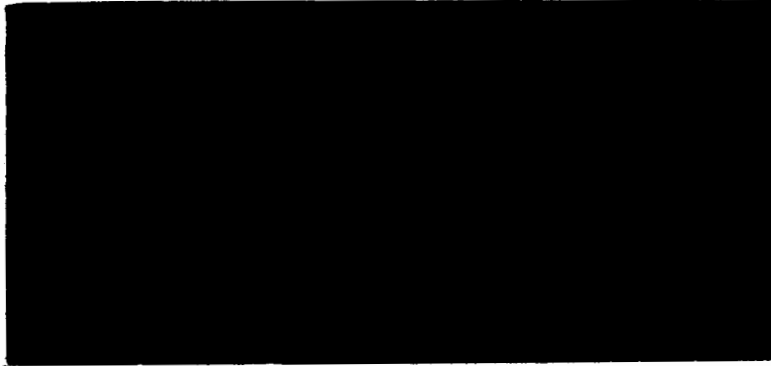




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WRITTEN CULTURE

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(not for quotation)

I would argue that in culture one "begins" with the hybrid and that "pure" genres or disciplines are the result of exclusionary procedures that are suspect on both intellectual and sociopolitical grounds.

D. LaCapra (1987:6)

Ibn Khaldun, who died in 1406, classified scholarship as one of the crafts. Like each of the other crafts, he maintained, scholarship has a specific habitus¹, a set of partly implicit dispositions anchored in bodily routines and acquired through practice and repetition in a particular form of apprenticeship, in this case academic training. He further observed, however, that an individual was decisively "colored" by the acquisition of a particular craft habitus, rendering the learning of another difficult or impossible. Taking liberties with the complexity of Ibn Khaldun's analysis, I invoke his notions to put in question, yet again, the disciplinary channeling of contemporary academic life. Does each of our academic disciplines retain a particular habitus; and to what extent are we, as a consequence, decisively "colored" by our affiliations?

These questions set an appropriate backdrop for a discussion that is rather narrowly disciplinary in nature. I want to focus on the importance of the activities of writing, and written texts themselves, as subjects of study in anthropology, while at the same time interrogating the setting and maintenance of disciplinary boundaries. The exclusion of writing, as topic, source, or data, seems virtually an organizing principle of the old social sciences. My main interest is the distinctive attitudes about writing that have characterized anthropology: I contend that an elucidation of the discipline's relation to written culture, especially that produced by interlocutors, reveals a good deal about its overall conception of culture. I intend first to set forth some (highly selective) elements of a discipline-specific genealogy of relations with the written word and then conclude with some reflections on anthropological contributions to new, interdisciplinary textual departures.

Ante-text

In the last decade, heightened attention has been directed towards the writing of anthropological accounts. Key first-generation works in this continuing movement of critical reflection on anthropological authoring include, "Ethnographies as Texts" (1982) by George Marcus and Dick Cushman; "On Ethnographic Authority" (1983), by James Clifford; Anthropology as Cultural Critique by Marcus and Michael Fischer; Writing

Culture (1986), edited by Clifford and Marcus; and Works and Lives (1988), by Clifford Geertz². Against the backdrop of an ongoing critique of positivism, and in tandem with experimentation and eclecticism in theory, such works have debunked discipline-specific versions of "neutral" scientific language, dislodged comfortable relations with stylistic conventions, and generally problematized and historicised ethnographic representation. We now understand, at least better than before, that how something is said is integral to what is said, that in the construction of anthropological texts rhetoric is not decorative but structural.

While this recent reflexive interest in "our" writings has a traceable and even respectable lineage in the discipline, an interest in "theirs", that is, in writings authored by the peoples studied, was excluded early on from the purview of anthropological research. The initial moments of this exclusion occurred during the processes of early disciplinary formation and was integral to them. According to Momigliano (1990), two kinds of history emerged, as "antiquarian" research was differentiated from "conventional history". The first, ancestor of both sociology and anthropology, took as its subject matter an interest in system and structure, in institutions and local customs, and was based on the study of artifacts, while the second, specialized in chronological issues and the great military and political events, would rely on the written record. Significantly associated with this movement of disciplinary differentiation was the displacement of the Bible, which had figured, in the view of Stocking (1968:71), as an authoritative "Kuhnian paradigm for research in the cultural, linguistic, and physical diversity of mankind." Concurrently, the discipline of comparative philology, the science of written texts, also was displaced from a central position among the disciplines. Reviewing these developments, Trautman (1992) identifies the "revolution in ethnological time," which followed from the demise of the short Biblical chronology of human history as crucial to the formation of anthropology in the 1860s. The shift to the long chronology was linked to the advent of evolutionary theory in the anthropology of the late nineteenth century. For Tylor (1960 [1881]:77), one of the leading evolutionary anthropologists of his generation, however, "the invention of writing was the great movement by which mankind rose from barbarism to civilization."

During a formative period in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the field of study that would be devoted to the newly identified expanse of prehistory and to contemporary "primitives" thus was marked by a series of defining relations to writing. These included both negative associations--a turning away from the written record, a demoting of the paradigmatic text, and a distancing from the reigning textual method--and, at the same time, the positive utilization of the presence of writing to demarcate the principal watershed in human history.

In the hands of Franz Boas, the succeeding turn-of-the-century American anthropology became anti-evolutionary in

orientation, yet three of its principal fields of study other than the biological (which is comprehensive in scope) continued to be defined by the absence of writing. Here I would cite as a reference point Boas' 1904 demarcation of the embryonic four-field terrain of anthropology as including, "the biological history of mankind in all its varieties; linguistics applied to people without written languages; the ethnology of peoples without historic records; and prehistoric archaeology" (quoted in Stocking 1988:18). Basic to the solidifying scientific identity of the linguistic and ethnological wings of the young discipline was the method of direct fieldwork, developed by Boas and by other founding fathers such as Malinowski in England. As opposed to the work of the earlier "arm chair" anthropologists, whose analyses had been dependant on the nonscientific writings of travellers and adventurers, fieldwork was predicated on unmediated contact between the anthropologist and tribal people.

Text taking

Specialized in the study of peoples "without" writing, anthropologists later would become specialists in the seen and heard, their characteristic sources observed behavior and the associated spoken word. But for Boas, fieldwork was of a very different nature. As Stocking (1992:91, cf. 1977:4) has suggested, "despite his lack of training in European philology, Boas still tended to conceive of linguistics (and indeed cultural anthropology) as the study of written documents." And, as in the case of societies studied by anthropologists, "If these were lacking, then one provided them."

Collecting texts, especially myths and stories, was the central activity of Boasian research. Such texts were taken orally from informants and written down by anthropologists, or, in some instances, written down by Boas' trained informants such as Henry Tate and George Hunt in British Columbia and sent to him through the mail. A continually expressed motivation--a chord still sounded today--was to preserve the heritages of quickly vanishing tribal societies. To do so meant to provide such societies without writing with a corpus of written texts that would begin to approximate those available for literate civilizations. One of the theorems of this inquiry was a disinterest in the present moment in favor of texts thought to pertain to a purer, more authentic past. For similar reasons, Boas used backdrops to block out telegraph wires and other evidence of the modern world from his photographs of recreated activities such as craft production. Likewise, he was relatively uninterested in witnessing actual ritual performances. In seeking such texts he sought a different register of what he referred to as "live material" (Boas 1905, quoted in Stocking 1974:123). At the same time, he rejected what he termed "secondary

interpretation", comparable to the "native exegesis" that would later figure centrally in the ethnographic research of Victor Turner. For Boas, such interpretation was inevitably flawed since it issued from idiosyncratic individual reflection, whereas his texts contained more authentic forms of unreflective and collective expression. Well-taken myth texts provided him direct analytic access to a deeper, more authoritative level of native culture. Just as he endeavored to protect his material from the contamination of degraded contemporary tribal usages, informant's personal views, and modern performance contexts, so he also, as a fundamental principle of his research, sought to avoid the imposition of outsider categories on the native texts.

Texts usually were taken in the form of dictation, requiring sophisticated linguistic transcriptions skills on the part of the attending anthropologist. Expert knowledge of the native language also was required, and again a comparison was made with the parallel work of specialists on literate societies. In a letter urging full publication of a collection of Native American texts, Boas wrote, "I do not think anyone would advocate the study of antique civilizations or, let me say, of the Turks or the Russians, without a thorough knowledge of their languages (quoted in Stocking 1974:122)." Boas' text work began with his fieldnote entries, and his eventual publications typically included three versions, a transcription of the native language text, an interlinear translation, and a narrative translation--graduated steps from the native language to English, and from the spoken word, via the written, into print. Criticism of the massive Boasian corpus of native texts focused, on the one hand, on their raw, undigested quality (only Levi-Strauss's particular ingenuity and his structural method seemed to feed easily on such materials), and, on the other, the view that the dictation method caused "informants artificially to simplify their sentence structure (Stocking 1992:90)."

Many aspects of Boas' activity of publishing native texts may be seen as equivalent to that of contemporary Orientalists, who retained philological methods. In both cases, the scholarly project was to fix a body of indigenous texts, exhibits from a more authentic or classical past, both as an end in itself and as a secure foundation for future research. While perishable oral texts were set down in writing by anthropologist, the frequently discrepant and sometimes fragmentary extant manuscript versions of a famous text were sifted through and evaluated by Orientalists to produce an authoritative standard text, which was accompanied by a translation. In both disciplines, research activity resulted in the creation of new texts, new not only as a consequence of their dissemination through publication, but also as a result of the scientific process whereby a unitary, univocal text was isolated, or reconstructed, from its cluttered surround of spoken, or written sources. Both fields emphasized the following of rigorous procedures. Of a set of Kathlamet texts collected from a man named Charles Cultee, for example, Boas wrote

In order to ascertain the accuracy of his mode of telling, I had two stories which he told me in the summer of 1891 repeated three and a half years later, in December, 1894. They show great similarity and corroborate the opinion which I formed from internal evidence that the language of the texts is fairly good and represents the dialect in a comparatively pure state (quoted in Stocking 1974:116).

In the Orientalist field also, there was a sense of a continual advance of science, as earlier efforts were reviewed and standards of text criticism and translation were debated and elaborated (Messick 1993:66-8). Orientalists also were involved in taking texts in another sense. Referring to local Arabic manuscripts, a mid-twentieth century Yemeni writer, for example, remarked that "the hands of Europeans and other visitors to Yemen of various eras have fallen upon them (cited in Messick 1993:123)." In both areas of scholarship, the powerful act of representing other societies was predicated on a thoroughgoing textual positivism, which informed the creation of authoritative indigenous texts and their translation. Such texts became, in turn, the bases of further cultural characterization, often essentializing in nature.

Stream-lined texts

In following decades, with changes in research problems and a growing sense of scientific advance in anthropology, some of next generation of American students of Boas chafed at the burden of his textual method. A revealing pair of statements in this regard are found in a 1939 American Anthropologist article, "Native Languages as Fieldwork Tools," by Margaret Mead, and an article in response to it, by Robert Lowie in the same journal the following year. Mead advocates a new method which shifts the weight of the research activity from one which emphasized the "collection of accurate verbatim texts" (p.190) and the use of interpreters (a "highly suspect method", p.192) to one that is present-oriented and which directly engages the anthropologist's eyes and ears in the "recording" of ongoing social life. The native language remains the fundamental medium of research for Mead, but it is stripped-down, efficient and strategic in comparison with the more comprehensive tool wielded by Boas.

Lowie (1940:87) refers to the old method, which he defends in a kind of rear-guard action, as "horse-and-buggy" ethnography, and to Mead's version as "stream-lined." Lowie, whose basic objective is to "record as many texts as we can," holds to the old equation where, in his example, "Ethnographer : Native Culture :: Sinologue : Chinese Civilization (1940:89)." The problem with the equation, however, is that ethnographers of

Mead's persuasion tended to work in a series of native cultures; In a footnote to her article, Mead describes the widely differing circumstances of her language usages in eight very different societies. Rather than the Sinologue's specialization in a culture area, which typically entailed a greater investment in a language or a set of related languages (as with Boas on the Northwest Coast), research by anthropologists such as Mead instead had become problem-oriented.

Mead specifically rejects what she refers to as linguistic "virtuosity", that is, any more language skill than is strictly necessary to meet the narrow requirements of the research task at hand. "The chief value" of virtuosity in native languages she notes "is in the way it feeds the fieldworker's drive (p.200)." While a developed language facility may be a source of personal "pleasure" for the researcher, "it is not a necessary part of using a native language (p. 200, emphasis original)." Among the many tips Mead offers is to practice "half-learning", which is a "time saving device which can be applied to vocabularies which are to be used only for recognition purposes." The fieldworker thus "learns to learn the English for the native word but not the opposite, and this type of learning saves a great many situations." Similar to this in effectiveness is "temporary learning or cramming."

Mead's "linguistic method", as Lowie calls it, still entails the recording of texts, but these are more apt to be in the form of direct discourse and dialogues, rather than set pieces such as myths. After a quick triggering question from the fieldworker, it is the native who speaks while the anthropologist records. The scientific motive is an old one: to avoid disturbing the data and imposing outsider categories. "[T]he fieldworker is not in the field to talk but to listen, not there to express complicated ideas of his own which will muddle and distort the native's accounts (p. 196)." Mead's advice on the key activity of question posing reflects the thrust of the scientific efficiency behind her method's rigor:

Learning to ask questions which will get an answer, which will get an answer with the smallest amount of dickering back and forth, which will get an answer from a person of given sex and status when asked by a person of the investigator's sex and status, and which will get an answer which when given will be significant-- this is part of the problem of learning how to use the language to ask questions (p.198).

A related aim of the method is to maximize the scientist's observational and recording opportunities. "Conversation", for example, is something "which naturally the fieldworker wishes to limit himself to the minimum, so that he will be free to observe what is going on around him (p.200)." She also recommends the trick of "being able to name one rare and unusual object" for purposes of quickly establishing rapport in places such as a

stranger's house, where, as elsewhere, "one wishes the maximum non-interference with one's note-taking and photography (p.198)."

Text and context

At mid-century, anthropology was at its scientific apogee. The separation from the written text model and the philological approach, which implicitly had informed Boas' work, now was complete. Gone also, at least from the American mainstream, was any interest in history. Fieldwork was resolutely synchronic and lab-like, at least in design. In their characteristic postures as "participant-observers", Mead's omnipotent observing and listening social scientists were adding systematically to the ethnographic record. It was the classical era of "field languages" and fieldnotes, the first only pragmatically known, the second the anthropologists' quasi-mythical daily inscriptions. Formal language training was undertaken in colonial "research languages", while spoken indigenous languages were acquired in-country. As one consequence of increasing specialization, cultural inquiry was divorced from anthropological linguistics. It was a time of problem-oriented research and the comparative method, the World Ethnographic Survey and the Human Relations Area Files; the associated monographic style was "realist" (Marcus and Cushman 1982). When Clyde Kluckhohn, together with representatives from history and sociology, was asked to discuss to place of "personal documents" in their respective disciplines, he focused on oral life histories (Gottschalk et. al. 1945).

By this time, however, the terrain of the field also had expanded significantly, to include peasants and later the urban centers of the literate "world civilizations". A primary concern of all social scientists of the period was "modernization theory" and development in the "new nations". Associated with this major expansion of the field was the subordinate problem of how to deal with the diverse types of written texts fieldworkers began to encounter. In a review article on peasant studies published in 1962, Clifford Geertz looked back at how anthropologists, who had specialized in tribal societies, suddenly turned to the study of peasants. Although peasants had been around since time immemorial, Geertz notes, significant anthropological attention was recent, dating to the post-war period. Before that time, "even in regions almost totally dominated by peasant culture, anthropologists searched out tribal peoples (1962:1)." The earlier generation of anthropologists had ignored the peasant life all around them in pursuit of subjects proper to their discipline, routinely passing through villages on their way to fieldwork among tribes. So the next generation, following other disciplinary predispositions, would continue to turn away from rich surrounds of indigenous writings en route to their cultural

accounts.

The solution to the dilemma of encountering written texts among peasants and others took the form of a division of disciplinary labor, whereby anthropologists such as Robert Redfield, specialized in the orally-based, village-level culture of what was referred to as the "Little Tradition," would cooperate with humanists and historians such as the Islamicist Gustave Von Grunebaum, who specialized in history and the written literature of the urban "Great Tradition." Redfield had been among the earliest students of peasant society, and his first monograph contained an innovative chapter on "Literature and Literacy" (1930:170-93). Later, during his collaboration with Von Grunebaum, he envisioned advancing interdisciplinary efforts: "The contextual studies of anthropologists will go forward to meet the textual studies made by historians and humanists of that same civilization (1967[1955]:30)." At this point in time, however, anthropologists remained specialists in "context", leaving "text" to their colleagues in other disciplines.³

Textual turns

In 1974, Keith Basso published an article titled, "The Ethnography of Writing." In it he made the sound suggestion that the study of writing systems be placed "in the context of the ethnography of communication (p.426)," a field developed within anthropological linguistics by Dell Hymes and others; he also offered as a sample an analysis of letter writing at an American university. After briefly reviewing the earlier treatment of writing systems by evolutionary anthropologists, Basso stated that his aim was to "arouse" this anthropological field "from its current slumber (p.426)." But the arousal has been slow to come: the ancestral disinclination to work with written texts, found in various versions from the before Boas forward, has remained intact until the present day. Recently, Boyarin (1989:400) remarked upon "a lingering antitextual bias among practitioners of cultural anthropology."

This is true where least expected. That anthropologists have not paused to rethink their positions regarding indigenous literature and writing may be attributed in part to the large achievements of two key theorists, Jack Goody (1968; 1977; 1986; 1987) and Clifford Geertz (1973; 1983). While the former's work has long served as the default reference on nonwestern literacy and writing, the latter early on initiated a decisive "textual turn".

Goody's comparative (social anthropological) approach to the "consequences" (1968) or, in later formulations, the "implications" of the presence of literacy or writing in societies has led to important cross-cultural insights. As with

the well-known work of Walter Ong (1982), his significant synthetic efforts have been marred by an evolutionary perspective and an ethnocentric reliance on the Greek case as a model for the transition to literacy and as the representative first literate society.⁴ Both Goody and Ong followed Havelock (1963), the leading student of the Greek case, in the view that the transition to literacy entails nothing less than a radical change of "consciousness", enabling analytic thought and the birth of the critical disciplines of history and philosophy. Such an orientation led Ong, for example, to the remarkable assertion that Muslim cultures "never fully interiorized writing" (1982:26). In recent publications, Goody has commenced an auto-criticism, revising his earlier positions on the "uniqueness of the West" (1986:xi) and specifically concerning the supposed originality of the Greeks in creating the alphabet (1987:xvii-xviii; cf. Bernal 1987).

Equally problematic, however, at least in terms of my own interests (see Messick 1993:24-6, 266-7, 313), is the fact that such approaches are generalizing, explicitly not designed to generate richly contextualized and historical understandings of particular cultures of writing. As Goody describes them, there are three possible research approaches to writing, the cultural one of "analysing a particular context," the historical or archaeological interest in "tracing situations over time", and, his own, "taking a particular thread (or even a topic) and following its changing path through time and space (1986:xiv)." Although it is not without problems, Goody's notion of "restricted literacy" ("restricted"--in relation to the Greek standard) does place emphasis on the diverse sorts of power relations that attend the unequal social distribution of literate skills and textual access. But his assessment of educational institutions in non-western "traditional societies" closes the door to an appreciation of cultural difference. The "guru system", as he refers to it generally, is characterized by "an inflexibility that is the antithesis of the spirit of enquiry which literacy has elsewhere fostered," since institutions of this type "fail to take full advantage of the potentialities of 'preserved communication' (1968:14)."

A final irony in Goody's case is that this consummate student of "writing" as a social phenomenon remains profoundly distrustful of documents as data. In his most recent book, a historical comparison of kinship systems East and West, a passage on "evidence" identifies fieldwork and observational data, the disciplinary standbys, as the only secure routes to an understanding of practice and to quantifiable fact. In their absence, he writes, "one is forced to rely on documentary evidence alone." His appended cautionary comments, however, betray the anthropologist's textual innocence regarding source criticism and underscore his total insensitivity to the analytic possibilities of the written register of cultural construction. Such evidence, he explains, is "often composed with specific purposes in mind", and "the written word can play a very variable

role with regard to custom and practice, including largely ignoring them" (1990:482).

In the opposing (cultural) school of anthropology, Geertz's interpretive approach, launched in the early 1970s, represents the principal condition of possibility for the contextual study of writing (as it is for the new "writing culture" criticism). In his foundational essay of 1973, "Thick Description," Geertz's task is the "cutting of the culture concept down to size." His intention is to forge "a theoretically more powerful concept of culture to replace E.B. Tylor's famous 'most complex whole'(p.4)" which, as noted earlier, included writing. The irony in Geertz' influential semiotic approach surrounds the venerable central image of interpretive inquiry, which is to treat culture as a "text".⁵ As opposed to Goody's scientific language (hypotheses, data, evidence, explanation) Geertz's is consistently literary (reading, construction, hermeneutics, understanding). But his usage of "text" is metaphorical, a "model" in Ricoeur's original formulation. While not specifically ruled out, examining texts in the literal sense of indigenous written texts was not the anticipated activity. Rather, in a well-known formulation (which contains an echo from Mead's era), it was the "said" (p.19,20) of social discourse that was to be "inscribed" by the ethnographer. For Geertz's question and answer, "'What does the ethnographer do?'--he writes (p.19)," an implied inverse may be supplied: "What does the informant do? He speaks." The important difference is that the Geertzian ethnographer isn't just taking texts, of either verbatim or question and answer varieties, but interpreting meanings.

Especially in literate societies, where it confronted entrenched competing disciplinary terrains, this anthropology tended to specialize in the commonsensical, the broadly public, and "shared" levels of culture, rather than in more formal, reflective, or analytic forms of thought, which often found expression in writing. "[W]e begin," Geertz writes, "with our own interpretations of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematize those (p.15)." In pointing out that anthropological interpretations are, as a consequence, "second and third order," he explains, in parentheses, "(By definition, only a 'native' makes first order ones: it's his culture)." This line is footnoted, and the note reads, in part,

The order problem is ... complex.... [I]nformants frequently, even habitually, make second order interpretations--what have come to be known as "native models". In literate cultures, where "native" interpretations can proceed to higher levels--in connection with the Maghreb, one has only to think of Ibn Khaldun; with the United States, Margaret Mead-- these matters become intricate indeed (p.15n).

The challenge of this intricacy was not brought up into the main text both because the interpretation of Ibn Khaldun was assumed

to be the province of historians and Arabists in other fields, and because higher order "native models", while considered interesting to note, were not the appropriate ground of the anthropologist's interpretive work (see Schneider 1976).⁶ Where Boas rejected "secondary interpretation" in search of the more authentic "live material" of myth, interpretive anthropologists would pass by writings containing models of many varieties and levels in search of "first order" native points of view.

As Geertz's reference to the "said" of social discourse is also a metaphor, meaning meaning, interpretive anthropology goes beyond the more mechanical logocentrism of Mead's era (still alive in Goody's branch of the discipline) whereby genuine, factual and authoritative "native" views, or data, are limited to the spoken or enacted, as heard or observed by the present anthropologist. A related, but discipline-specific logocentrism has long characterized linguistics, a kindred social science. Although famous for the extreme hostility of its founding fathers to writing and for their exclusive theoretical concentration on speech⁷, a "linguistics of writing" now has been proposed (see Fabb et. al. 1987, especially the contribution by Culler (cf. Culler 1988:217-230). As in anthropology, the processes of modern discipline formation in linguistics have involved an initiating movement of separation, the elaboration of a science identity, and an emphasis on the synchronic. Separation, science, synchrony: the hallmarks of disciplinary distance from writing?

In Geertzian practice, the "said" does not carry the quotation marks of individual speech. The familiar social science legacy of bracketing the individual in cultural accounts also may obstruct approaches to writings, inasmuch as connections exist in given settings between individuals and authorship.⁸ Although Folklore, the cognate field of inquiry devoted to "the study of the oral tale", has been vexed by the problem of the written versus oral statuses of many tales, a leveling assumption held that texts in both media are "alike in their disregard of originality of plot and of pride of authorship (Thompson 1977:5)." As with folklore, culture, at least in the hands of anthropologists, has been considered authorless in any sense except that of society as a collectivity. Referring to Geertz's well-known statement, "Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs... (1973:5)," Obeyesekere (1990:285) has inquired as to the whereabouts of the "spider": "in reading Geertz I see webs everywhere but never the spider at work." Obeyesekere observes further that "while there are plenty of studies of Western thinkers as makers of modern culture, there is among anthropologists a refusal to recognize non-Western thinkers as culture creators (p.286)." Where (indigenous) authorship presents a problem for conventional cultural theory (as it has, for different reasons, for literary critics), approaches to reading (Boyarin 1993), reception, and interpretive communities would seem more amenable. Shifting the emphasis to reading from writing might appear to solve the problem of the

unreliability (unrepresentativeness, in the scientific view) of reliance on idiosyncratic geniuses, but the communities of readers and interpreters, in their disciplinary allegiances and their debates, are equally apt to confound a homogenized view of "shared" culture.

In small-scale tribal societies, anthropologists characteristically sought out all manner of specialized and esoteric knowledges, from the ethnobotanical to the ritual and cosmological, and they also undertook translations themselves. But in "complex" societies, as a consequence of their lack of language training, respect for disciplinary boundaries, and theoretical orientations, they stopped short when the trail led through writing. Even on the terrain of popular culture, they have been unresponsive to the lively surround of everyday literate activity--from amulets and letters to magazines and newspapers. This de facto limitation upon the range of inquiry, leaving written texts mainly to other disciplines, involves a problem centering on the power associated with the written word. While anthropologists value and constitute their own work through writing, the texts representative of the literate activity of their interlocutors are accorded no value. This imbalance not only restricts access, except through translation, to many complex forms of local knowledge, it also reinforces (false) differences between anthropologists and the people they study. A persistence of the old relation of written to spoken between fieldworkers and folks reproduces disparities underpinning the politics of representing other societies that date back to the colonial era advent of this type of research (Said 1978). Echoing the views of Fabian (1983) and others, Boyarin (1991:23) speaks of "ethnography" as "part of a relationship of unequal power wherein one writes and the other is written". To transform this relation, which has also defined anthropology's place in the scheme of disciplines, anthropologists have experimented with new forms of authoring of their own texts, including new types of transcriptions, biographies and co-authored accounts. To at the same time advance interdisciplinary communication and to enable substantive criticism, from an ethnographic perspective, of interpretations, translations, and characterizations of writings, by Orientalists and others, anthropologists also must take on indigenous texts.

Written boundaries

Consider some recent examples of disciplinary boundary maintenance in the anthropology of the Middle East, a region of particular interest to Goody⁹, Geertz and myself. Talal Asad (1986), an advocate of attention to the complexities of the Islamic discursive tradition, nevertheless writes, "the historian is given a text and the anthropologist has to create one." At the

same time, however, Asad (1990) is among the few anthropologists (see also Fischer and Abedi (1990:Ch.7) to have offered a reading of Salman Rushdie's novel The Satanic Verses. Social anthropologist Ernest Gellner (1988:21), like Asad originally an ethnographer of tribal society, states bluntly that "anthropologists are the natural anti-scripturalists of the social sciences," which nicely recalls the historical connection between the exclusion of writing and the displacement of the Bible. The blinkers built into Gellner's classic study of Moroccan High Atlas society (Gellner 1969), where there is no trace of written indigenous texts, are evident in comparison with the monograph by non-anthropologist Jacques Berque (1955) on a nearby group, which contains discussion and illustrations of local notarial documents and religious texts. Gellner, whose limited view of the anthropological project remains influential (see, for example, Holy 1991:4,6), ironically credits spy Kim Philby with "the best formulation of the general distrust of documents that I know (1988:21)."¹⁰

In a review article, Lila Abu-Lughod (1989), whose own well-known work is on the Awlad 'Ali of the Egyptian Western Desert, explains that, "Like people they have commonly studied, anthropologists have tended to be nonliterate." She goes on to weigh the clear advantages of becoming literate against a region-specific "danger:" that "the pull of classical Orientalism with its privileging of textual over ethnographic Islam might shift the balance and drag anthropologists away from studying current practices, meanings, and social contexts." But shouldn't the apparently key distinction between "textual" (or "scriptural") Islam and "ethnographic" Islam (see also Antoun 1989) be understood as an artifact of 1950s scholarship that differentiated the Great (written) versus Little (oral) Traditions? Must the "textual" be divorced from "current practices, meanings, and social contexts?" In an article on ritual, John Bowen, who writes about discourses of the Muslim Gayo of Sumatra, similarly opposes the approaches of "Islamicists" and "anthropologists," with the former identified with a tendency towards "scriptural essentialism." In an article on ritual, the problem Bowen addresses is one of "fit." When he states that "Islamic rituals thus fit comfortably neither in an ethnographic discourse of bounded cultural wholes nor in an islamist discourse of a scripture-bound normative Islam (1992:656)," the problem seems to be predicated on old limits imposed on academic labor.

Work on the literate aspects of cultures of the Middle East has come a long way. We are far from the era when a sociologist (Lerner 1958:113) could state that "oral communication was the rule" in the Ottoman Empire, one of the great recordkeeping bureaucratic societies of all times; or an Orientalist could indulge in simplistic psychologizing about the "concrete" qualities of Arabic, permitting "the direct and uncushioned impact of ideas on the mind" and "unrestricted penetration to and from deeper layers of consciousness (Lewis 1958:132)." The era of

contemporary research was initiated by the studies of Eickelman (1978;1985) and Fischer (1980) on educational institutions in Morocco and Iran. Recently, Dresch (1989) has single-handedly brought the ethnographic study of tribes into the spheres of history and written accounts, and work by Fischer and Abedi (1990) and Messick (1993) have developed theories of Muslim texts derived, in part, from the perspectives of Muslim scholarship.

Writing acts

In recent years, attention to indigenous writings has been growing apace, but in contrast to the extensive critical activity that has accompanied the numerous experiments with "our" writings, the accumulating work on "theirs" remains largely uncharted and older disciplinary orientations and divisions retain currency. A second, more concrete and comprehensive "textual turn" is well underway, however. Anthropologists have focused analytic attention on such subjects as sacred texts (Obeyesekere 1984; Fischer and Abedi 1990), non-western histories (Errington 1979; Siegal 1979), legal texts (Mertz 1988; Messick 1993), and translation (Rafael 1993); and there are also widespread and diverse new usages of documentary sources, mainly in colonial languages, associated with anthropology's "historical turn" (in the 1980s). In my view, however, all this has proceeded without sufficient reconstructive comment about long-standing disciplinary predispositions.

There are analogues for these new textual departures by anthropologists. The basic pattern consists of interdisciplinary moves to join what had been a relatively bounded "science" with humanistic inquiry. Important boundary traversing is represented by new areas of study known as "linguistics and literature," "the sociology of literature," and "law and literature." Likewise, the frontier between history and literary criticism has for some time now generated significant heat and light.¹¹ But what sort of insights does the emergent anthropology of writing promise, and what will the themes of this inquiry be? I will offer a few comments.

Work on writing (a phenomenon itself based, according to Goody and others, on a "decontextualization") should not become decontextualized in research, ushering in a new era of textual positivism from the arm chair. What contextualization in research will amount to, of course, will differ according to whether writings are studied in social situ or in an archive. In the latter case it remains to be seen if anthropologists will manage to do different things with documents. It goes without saying that a cultural approach to writing also will entail one to reading (Boyarin 1993), or recitation, or other forms of reception and utilization. So also must the production and

transmission of knowledge and the literate skills, through formal education and other means, be part of the immediately understood surround of written texts. Cultural and historical contextualization must be advanced over the forms of generalization and the facile dichotomies of "oral" and "literate" that have long dominated the field. Work on writing should not become exclusive; writing should be integrated, simply given its place. Viewing writing as part of a societal landscape will enable more complex understandings of interrelationships, and passages between, writing and speaking.

I subscribe to the view, first expressed by Basso (1974), that the ethnography of writing be based within the larger field of the ethnography of communication, joining the ethnography of speaking. Earlier on, Pratt (1977) proposed a speech act approach to literature. In recent years, anthropological linguistics, or sociolinguistics, has taken extremely significant strides which have lifted its analytic attention from the exclusively technical and micro-level of the sentence to texts as wholes, and beyond immediate performances to wider contexts (see recent review articles by Hanks 1989; Gal 1989; Friedrich 1989; Bauman and Briggs 1990; Hill and Mannheim 1992). Can we now examine "writing acts"; and does writing also have a performative dimension? Clearly, at the moment of production, of inscription, writing is a vital activity, and writing acts, like speech acts may be creative, constitutive, and potentially persuasive. But what of writings in an ex-post view, when they may be viewed as "dead", or in Plato's image, like paintings, which

- stand before us as though they were alive: but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words: they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever (1952:158).

Reader-response theory (e.g., Fish 1989, or Barthes 1977), of course, remedies this problem as it opens up wide vistas for reader constituted meaning. Continuing his negative characterization, Plato touches upon an interesting aspect of writings, their circulation:

And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong (ibid.).

That writings may continue, in some sense, to be "persuasive" is obvious. Book-burning, or the destruction of earlier settlement documentation in an intractable Yemeni legal conflict (Messick

n.d.), speak to the potential perception of "danger" inherent in written texts. It is nevertheless the case that, compared with the richly layered and dimensioned performative quality of speech, written texts may be viewed as involving a "reduction" of meaning or a foreclosed "fixing." But while the performative capacity of spoken words is fleeting, that of the written may go on and on, in connection with rituals, as archival artifacts, etc.

A notable feature of the new work in anthropological linguistics and discourse analysis is that the major new theoretical inspiration has been imported from literary criticism, especially Bakhtin, but also Derrida, Raymond Williams, Benjamin, etc. It is, again, characteristic of the field as a whole that the applications thus far have been nearly exclusively to spoken "texts," although there are a few important exceptions that point to new possibilities, such as Hanks (1986; 1988) on colonial Mayan letters and manuscripts, Mannheim (1991:125-52) on colonial Quechuan writings, and Mertz (1988) on American legal briefs and lawbooks. One task before us is to redirect these theoretical influences, adapted from the study of literature and now enriched by ethnographic and socio-linguistic perspectives, back to encompass writings.

A culture of writing entails not only specific social relations of written production, but also a poetics. An account must attend not only to the circulation and use of such writings, but also to their genre constraints. Especially interesting are the methods, associated with different types of writing, for staging or framing an argument, evidence presentation, or a narrative, and the relation of these methods to the text's authority, persuasiveness, or appeal. The movements into and out of a written text, the processes of extracting and inserting elements, or "decontextualization" and "recontextualization", to use new terminology proposed by Bauman and Briggs (1990), carry an analysis into culturally specific patterns of selection and incorporation of citations, quotations (direct, indirect), and segments of reported speech or reported text. That such standards are contestable was admirably demonstrated by the summer, 1993 trial of a New Yorker writer accused of making up quotations.

A set of reservations are in order concerning approaches to written texts, to the extent that such texts are associated with "master narratives." One subdisciplinary arena where this sort of issue has been raised, in characteristic fashion, has pitted "dirt" or field archaeologists, the scientifically inclined students of material remains, against epigraphers, the humanistically inclined students of writing, over the relevance and interpretation of Mayan inscriptions (Marcus 1992:443-5; Coe 1992:271-4). While the epigraphers claimed a breakthrough "decipherment," the archaeologists countered that what the texts actually say is "epiphenomenal" and ideological.

Just as written texts, from scriptures to law books and histories, may be the closely controlled medium of the ruling elite, so are they also, in some cultures, associated with male

dominance. To ignore writings in such circumstances, however, is to miss opportunities for relational understandings of the structures of super- and subordination and of the discourses of power (cf. Williams 1977). When anthropologists "study up" in American society, they encounter culture principles inscribed in trust instruments, legal briefs, and medical reports (Marcus and Hall 1992). LaCapra (1987:2-3) states that in the field of literary criticism "the great temptation in recent 'political' readings has been to interpret all cultural artifacts predominantly if not exclusively as symptomatic expressions of dominant discourses," while Todorov (1987:165) considers the "error" associated with "overly deterministic criticism" to be the "postulating that literary works are the expression, or the reflection, of ideology."

In his study of domination and resistance, Scott (1990) refers to the discourses of resistance uttered privately and unobserved by the powerful as the "hidden transcripts". Here the metaphorical texts are, once again, exclusively oral. In a note on the next to the last page of his book, however, Scott states that "in a more literate society one might want to make some of the same connections between the importance of a written text in the popular imagination and the extent to which it embodies the hidden transcript of the public to whom it appeals (1990:226, n.42). In a similar vein, DeCerteau (1984:165-76) discusses reading as "poaching."

Other problems are connected with the historical spread of western forms of textuality. A key analytic point (going back to Boas) is to avoid tripping over the many subtle assumptions of western alphabetic literacy in approaching textual cultures otherwise constituted. Yet this is complicated in the contemporary world by the growing hegemony of western textual forms. Anthropologists in many settings may have managed to miss the advent of literacy occurring before their eyes, but the study of colonial strategies surrounding alphabetization campaigns and the production of Bibles, grammars and dictionaries is an exceptionally rich field (Mignolo 1991; Rafael 1993). So, too, is the analysis of the spread of printing and rise of the novel (Anderson 1983; Bhabha 1990). Great opportunities also exist for literate anthropologists to help retranslate and reinterpret the huge corpus of classic indigenous texts that were fixed in print decades or even centuries ago by Orientalists and others.

Conclusion

The exclusion of the written from cultural accounts is itself a cultural phenomenon, one with a specific history, partially traced here through one discipline. Will new work toward the inclusion of written culture continue to be colored by the old disciplinary habitus? Are such craft colorings cumulative or are there decisive ruptures; are the stains permanent, as Ibn

Khaldun thought, or have the colorings become soluable? Does anthropology still have a distinct contribution to make to the study of written texts and which aspects of their craft will anthropologists want to retain?

Notes

1. The Arabic term, malaka, is a borrowing by translation of the Greek exis, which was also rendered in Latin as habitus (Rosenthal 1958:lxxxiv). The concept is very similar, including even its reference to language models, to the well-known poststructuralist concept developed by Bourdieu (1977;1984). See Messick 1993.

2. More recent works include Brady 1991; Benson 1993; and Lavie, Narayan and Rosaldo 1993. For a critical view see Rabinow 1985.

3. Other period strands relevant to this genealogy may be briefly mentioned. In his writings, Kroeber (1944;1948;1952) labored to adapt the grand schemes of earlier evolutionary anthropology to contemporary times, and in this connection he made brief synthetic analyses of writing, the alphabet, and even the novel. During the war years, Ruth Benedict worked extensively from written sources, *faut de mieux*, for her 1946 classic national character study on Japanese society, The Chrysanthemum and the Sword (cf. Colby and Peacock 1973:617f.; Geertz 1988:102-128). Based on his research on China, Hsu (1968;1973) began an advocacy of studying literate societies as wholes.

4. For criticism of Goody and Ong, see Messick 1983; Street 1984; Finnegan 1988; Schousboe and Larsen 1989; Halverson 1992.

5. For a critical view see Fernandez 1985.

6. "Every people has its explicit ideology, its own sort of social theory. This is an important datum and must not be brushed aside. But it is not the same as the analyst's theoretically constructed view of the native culture, nor should the analysis of culture be confused with the culture being analysed (Schneider 1976:220)."

7. Basso (1974:425) terms the rejection of writing "uncompromising, Culler (1988:217) "intemperate". A tenet of Bloomfield's linguistics was, "Language is basically speech, and writing is of no theoretical interest (Householder 1969:886)." Derrida (1974:44) called writing "the wandering outcast of linguistics." Others have argued that, despite all pronouncements to the contrary, linguistics has a written language orientation (Harris 1980; Linell 1982).

8. In a characteristic early passage, Sapir (1949 [1932]:141; cf. Durkheim 1938 [1895]:Ch.1), for example, wrote that,

It is what all the individuals of a society have in common in their mutual relations which is supposed to constitute the true subject matter of cultural anthropology and sociology. If the testimony of an

individual is set down as such, as often happens in our anthropological monographs, it is not because of an interest in the individual himself as a matured and single organism of ideas but in his assumed typicality for the community as a whole.

Likewise, the construct of the "native's point of view" (Geertz 1983) is not the view of a particular "native", but a generalized, "common denominator" (Marcus and Cushman 1982) one. The idiosyncratic is rooted out: when, as sometimes happens, "the individual note obtrudes itself somewhat embarrassingly", Sapir notes, "the cultural anthropologist believes or hopes that such disquieting interruptions to the impersonality of his thinking do not occur frequently enough to spoil his science (p.143)." In twentieth century anthropology debate on the relation of the individual and society occurred mainly in the "culture and personality" literature (with Sapir as a founder) and, later, in the subdiscipline of psychological anthropology.

9. Goody conducted fieldwork in on the impact of Islam on subsaharan Africa (Goody 1987:125-138) and his edited volume (Goody 1968) includes studies of four societies on the Islamic margins, where there was restricted literacy in Arabic, a foreign language. It also includes an appendix on Egypt (1968:261-4), drawn from the early nineteenth century account of Edward Lane. Goody (1986) has also worked extensively on the ancient Middle East.

10. Writing about writing, Gellner, not surprisingly, sounds like Goody: "the most significant thing about writing is that it makes possible the detachment of affirmation from the speaker," and "the truly crucial step in the cognitive development of mankind is the introduction of literacy (1988:71)."

11. That the boundary is far from effaced is clear from the statement of LaCapra (1987:6): "Today...literary criticism seems in certain ways to be an unassimilable 'other' in conventional historiography, just as historical understanding may be either limited to relatively innocuous 'background information' or dismissed as unchallenging reportage in certain forms of literary criticism."

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