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WHAT IS A CULTURE OF LITERACY ?

Jens Brockmeier and David R. Olson

The "discovery" of writing as a particular form of language has produced a revolution in the human sciences. While a few decades ago the subject of writing and literacy was largely ignored, if not explicitly denied, it has become an important field of research in many disciplines. With it has come increasing differentiation and specialization of the research. Terms like "writing" and "reading," and "literacy practices" are used and understood quite differently by historical anthropologists exploring the origins of writing among the Piro of Eastern Peru than by historians counting signatures in early Rome. Similarly, “semi-literacy” means something quite different to a historian describing Medieval Europe than to an educator worried about performance on a standardized test or an international Non-Governmental Organization concerned with the consequences of universal schooling in Africa. Even within the same discipline, literacy means something quite different to a reading researcher focusing on knowledge than to a cultural or discursive psychologist focusing on social interactions. There is a widening gap between those studying the "processing" of differently shaped letters, and those that focus on the pragmatics of "language in use."

Diverse disciplinary perspectives can, nonetheless, contribute to a common understanding. The contributions to this volume include perspectives on literacy from developmental psychology, linguistics, literary theory, history and sociology of literature, philosophy, anthropology, and history of art and culture. But they share some essential presuppositions. First, even if their authors, among them leading figures in their fields, set out specialized areas of research, they do so with a minimum of technical jargon. They address not only their academic peers but also a multidisciplinary forum. This is a result of the fact that all the papers were first presented to audiences of two multidisciplinary conferences on literacy which took place in 1999 at the University of Toronto, the first as the 21st annual University College Symposium, the second as a workshop sponsored by the Social Sciences

and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Connaught Research Fund, and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Second, the papers in this volume share an understanding of literacy as socially and historically embedded activities and cultural practices. They are concerned primarily with inscriptions and documents as cultural artifacts, how they are produced and distributed, how they are consulted and interpreted, and how these activities contribute to intellectual and cultural life. This cultural-historical view is elaborated in the first part (*Written culture*) and the second part (*The shaping of modern written culture*) in papers ranging from the pre-historical beginnings of "reading signs" in the tracking activities of hunters and gatherers (J. Edward Chamberlin), to the emergence of modern literate traditions in the seventeenth to nineteenth century in Europe (John H. Astington, Ian Lancashire, Graham Falconer), and on to the implications of electronically mediated writing in times of the post-Gutenberg galaxy (Roy Harris). How literacy creates as well as reflects culture is examined in the formation of particular interpretive “textual” communities (Carol Feldman) and of genres of writing such as the academic and literary essay (Margaret Procter). Likewise, it is argued that the emergence of writing as an "epistemic subject," that is, an object of thought and intellectual reflection, is linked to the rise of electronic media (Jens Brockmeier).

All studies of the book make the point that there is no theory and history of writing that does not presuppose a theory of culture. At the same time, the papers also demonstrate that every theory and history of culture must unavoidably entail a theory and history of writing and written culture. Just what is involved in learning to live in a culture of literacy is the concern of several chapters in the third part of the book (*Literacy as cultural learning*) that represent recent advances in developmental and educational psychology (David Olson and Deepthi Kamawar, Ilaria Grazzani and Veronica Ornaghi, Emilia Ferreiro, Sofia Vernon, Janette Pelletier, Bruce Homer, Linda Philipps).

A third theme underlies a number of papers in this book, namely, the issue of narrative. The study of narrative discourse in its multifaceted forms claims a central place in what has been called the "narrative turn" in psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and other human sciences. Narrative, it is argued, is a unique linguistic and psychological form, oral and written, that integrates human experiences and social practices with the

canonical registers of a culture. In several papers of the present book, the linguistic and cognitive functions of narrative are examined. In narrating experiences, memories, or intentions, we create a mode of cognitive and emotional distancing (Jerome Bruner), a mode of distancing that can also be seen as characteristic of writing. Yet it is not only writing, but also the process of reading, the deciphering and understanding of signs, that can be described in terms of narrative and narrative interpretation (J. Edward Chamberlin). In narrative we create order and coherence, and this applies not only to linguistic discourse in the narrow sense but also to visual-iconic forms, such as pictures and paintings (John H. Astington, William Blissett) as well as children's drawings and scribbles (Janette Pelletier). In making possible sophisticated use of indirect speech and quotation (David Olson and Deepthi Kamawar), writing further develops the possibilities of narrative construction. Both writing and narrative are linguistic and metalinguistic practices. Intentionally or not, in writing and narrating we do something in and on language, we are engaged into an activity that "stages" language itself. What becomes visible when language is "staged" in this way is the question to which the chapters of the third part suggest answers.

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It is undisputed that the use made by language in the manifold contexts of writing, reading, and narrating depends on the cultural matrix that defines the functions of language. As well, there is wide agreement on the claim that the historical development of narrative as well as of writing and reading has had far-reaching cultural consequences. However, what exactly the term "culture" or "cultural" means in these contexts remains obscure. Although there has been an inflationary spread of the cultural vocabulary in the human sciences, this spread has been at the expense of precision. In many contexts, the term "culture" could easily be replaced by such terms as "society," "history," "social representations," or "politics" without any loss or gain in meaning.

The elusiveness of the meaning of "culture" is not unique to discussions on writing and literacy, nor is it a recent phenomena. In their famous survey, carried out half a century ago, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) discussed 161 different meanings of "culture" in the human sciences. This may be an underestimate given the rise and academic institutionalization of new disciplines such as "Cultural Studies," "Communication," and

"Media Studies." Consider the emergence of "Cultural Psychology." In the Editorial of the first issue of the then newly launched journal *Culture & Psychology*, the editor (Valsiner, 1995) made the plea for cultural psychologists to explicate what they mean by "culture." Five years later, the conclusion was that "the contributions received [by the journal] rarely show signs that efforts have been made to fulfill this expectation. Often 'culture' is used as a term to define a perspective through its opposition to some existing labeled perspectives (e.g. 'cognitive,' 'nativist,' etc.), rather than serving as a general intellectual heuristic for a new understanding of complex issues." (Crawford and Valsiner 1999: 262).

How, then, do we make sense of the many "cultural" approaches to literacy? And what is the idea of a “culture of literacy” that we wish to offer? Perhaps we can address the question by taking a closer look at the different ways these concepts have been used in a classical debate about the relationship between literacy, culture, and the mind. Although the problem of language, mind, and culture has been a subject of scholarly discussion at least since Enlightenment (Jahoda 1993), the issue of written language and written culture has only in recent decades become the focus of debate.

The origins of this debate on literacy and culture can be traced back to a number of disciplines, notably sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, classics, and history of literature. One line of this debate found its point of departure in a psychological context in the 1930s with the work of Lev Vygotsky, today regarded to be one of the founding fathers of the cultural-historical view in psychology. With his colleague Alexander Luria, he set out to examine how sociohistorical conditions affect human consciousness. A series of psychological field studies in Central Asia (Luria 1976) focused on the effects of modernization, including literacy, education and collectivization, on forms of perception and thought. Historically, this was a timely issue. The socialist government was carrying out literacy campaigns in the new Asian republics, and the idea of historical materialism that the social and economic conditions of life determined human consciousness was a principle of official educational and cultural politics. Vygotsky's and Luria's working hypothesis was that the effects of societal literacy would manifest themselves in such cognitive abilities as logical reasoning and systematic classification. And in fact, the findings of the Central Asia expedition seemed to confirm the view that changing cultural circumstances had an impact on individuals' mind. Among other findings, the testing results showed that literate subjects were

more able to think in a formal, abstract, and self-reflexive manner than their non-literate neighbors.

Moreover, Vygotsky and Luria suggested that the cultural institution of writing not only allowed people to think in a new, decontextualized way, but also drew attention to writing and language as the central "tools" of consciousness. As a consequence, the relationship between language, thought, and reality could itself become an object of rational reflection and, as a consequence, impinge on consciousness. In Vygotsky's Marxist view, the notion of consciousness and abstract rationality was a crucial parameter not only of cognitive and linguistic development, but also of cultural change, historical progress, and political emancipation (Wertsch 1996).

Literacy played a prominent role in this vision. As a developmental psychologist, Vygotsky (1978, 1987) reported that in learning to write and to read, children become able to understand the logic of general and abstract concepts, "scientific concepts," as he dubbed them. "Scientific concepts" also include concepts that refer to language and its structural properties, such as words, expressions, and sentences, what today would be called metalinguistic knowledge. Viewing or producing a written form makes children aware of language in its own right and as an object of thought thereby bringing thought and language under conscious and deliberate control. Language, as Vygotsky put it, offers "cultural tools" of communication and representation. Growing up in a culture of writing and other "literate tools," allows language users to become conscious of these particular tools. For Vygotsky and Luria, then, culture was the material and symbolic ensemble of communicational and representational systems transmitted across generations through the institutions of education and the practices of literacy.

Vygotsky's and Luria's approach to the dialectics of literacy, thought, and culture found new support in the 1960s and 1970s. In a series of cross-cultural studies on, among others, the Vai people of Liberia, Michael Cole, Silvia Scribner, and their colleagues compared the cognitive effects of illiteracy, schooling and literacy (Cole, Gay, Glick, and Sharp 1971; Scribner 1975; Scribner and Cole 1981). Literacy was investigated in a variety of forms: one part of the Vai population were literate in an indigenous syllabic script system, another one in Arabic, and a third one in English. While the use of Vai script was transmitted

informally, English and Arabic were taught in schools. For the researchers, these condition provided a natural laboratory to test the various relations between literacy, thought, and culture. Again, focusing on subjects' logical reasoning, problem solving, and metalinguistic awareness, the studies were intended to follow in the footsteps of Luria's investigations in Central Asia (Cole 1979: 215). Yet the conclusions drawn from the findings were importantly different from those reported by Luria. While they confirmed the influence of schooling on some forms of formal thinking, they contradicted the hypothesis that thought and, in particular, logical reasoning was a direct effect of learning to read and write. Rather, Scribner and Cole (1981) suggested that the specific profile of individuals' intellectual abilities was dependant on the social and practical context in which these reading and writing were used and taught. In this way, they argued for a more contextual and situation-specific approach to the literacy-culture relationship, linking, for example, the cognitive performance of schooled subjects to a particular mode of discourse associated with the institution of formal schooling, rather than the direct consequence of learning to read and write.

In his later writings, Cole (1996) further developed this view of culture as a set of contextualized practices and artifacts, which also had become the organizing idea of other socialcultural studies (e.g., Heath 1983; Street 1984; Gee 1990; Wagner 1993; John-Steiner, Panofsky, and Smith 1994; Hamilton, Barton, and Ivanic 1994). In this literature, the cognitive effects of literacy depend first of all on its particular social embeddedness (in terms of class, race, education, religious, national and local traditions), and on the specific situation in which writing and reading is used to fulfil a concrete function. But how can we tell different contexts and effects? Because there are numerous cognitive effects due to numerous socialcultural contexts in which writing can be embedded, these contextual effects are "difficult to disentangle from those of the ability to read and to write," write Nicolopoulou and Cole (1999: 81). Ultimately, then, the "contextual approach," while renouncing to isolate literacy as a distinctive, mode of communication and representation, suggests a fusion of the concept of literacy with that of culture, conceived of as an array of socially situated practices.

Influenced by the works of Clifford Geertz (1973; 1983) and other anthropologists and sociolinguists, this understanding of culture as a multilayered fabric (or "text") of situated practices, discourses, artifacts, and belief systems became wide-spread in the human sciences in the 1980s and 1990s. However, it sometimes tended to cut the explicit links to writing and literacy altogether; while the importance of culture generally was widely recognized, the role

of writing as a distinctive historical invention and a cultural practice was minimized, if not denied.

To be sure, this was not the case in another line of argument about the relation between literacy and culture which has had a strong impact on many discussions in this area. This line leads back to the early 1960s when a number of publications appeared that introduced what became known as the "literacy hypothesis" in sociology, history, classics, and media studies. Especially, in the writings of Eric Havelock (1963, 1976, 1982), Marshall McLuhan (1962) and Jack Goody and Ian Watt (1963, Goody 1987), and, some years later, in those of Walter Ong (1982) a theory of literacy was outlined that made strong claims for the cultural and cognitive implications of writing. It was argued that alphabetic literacy is an unique technology of representation and communication which has been of fundamental importance for the development of Western culture. According to this theory, oral language and written language are intellectual technologies which are causally responsible of two different types of culture, cultures of orality and of literacy. Some critics of the "literacy hypothesis" thus spoke of a "great-divide theory" (Finnegan 1988). The watershed, to stick to the metaphor, between speech and writing, oral and literate culture was the invention (or, once it was invented, the introduction) of the alphabet. As Havelock (1991: 25) summarizes:

> At first the alphabet was used to record oral language as previously composed for memorization in Greek epics, lyrics, and drama. The conceptual revolution began when it was realized that the full register of linguistic sound could be placed in a new kind of storage no longer dependent on the rhythms used in oral memory recall. It could become a document, a permanent set of visible shapes, no longer fleeting vibration in the air but shapes that could be laid aside until rescanned for some purposes and indeed forgotten. The mechanisms of the oral memory could then be slowly superseded in favor of documented prose, the first histories, the first philosophies, the first bodies of prosaic law, the first bodies or prosaic rhetoric. Still more, the narrative requirement, the activist syntax, and the living agents required for all oral speech held in the memory could also be laid aside, replaced by a reflexive syntax of definition, description, and analysis. Such was the prose of Plato and all his successors, whether philosophic, scientific, historical, descriptive, legal, or moral.

> European culture slowly moved over into the ambience of analytic, reflective, interpretative, conceptual prose discourse.

Patently, the domain of culture upon which literacy was expected to have its impact was exceedingly broad. Literacy was claimed to impinge upon the entire gamut of cultural phenomena from the intellectual to the aesthetic and political, including the production of science, philosophy, history, literature, art, and religion as well as the institutions of education, documented law, and democratic forms of social organization. Further, literacy was seen as having an impact on the individualism of modern Western thought along with forms of mentality (rational and logical), cognition (conceptual and analytical), memory (objective and accumulative), as well as forms of communication (decontextualized and emotionally distanced) and grammar (reflective and prescriptive). Here, the vision of culture that unfolded with literacy, printing, and the alphabet, merged with the idea of civilization in general.

At the same time, however, the idea of writing suggested by the proponents of the "literacy hypothesis" was extremely narrow and reductive in two fundamental ways. It reduced all writing to one form of writing, the alphabet, and it offered a monocausal explanation for vast social changes rather than acknowledging the multiple causes involved in social change. Havelock (1990), for example, examined the differences between the linguistic forms of Homer (oral) and Hesiod (literate) and concluded that the differences could be traced to Hesiod being among the first generation of alphabetic writers. Lloyd (1979; 1990) without denying the relevance of writing, countered that other institutional arrangements, such as the disputative nature of the Greeks and the existence of a public forum were as important and that no one cause could explain radical social change.

To understand the essence of alphabetic writing (or, as many would say, to misunderstand it) as being just a translation of sounds into graphic signs is not only characteristic of Havelock's works but wide-spread in linguistics and reading research. In contrast, Harris (1986) and Olson (1994) argued that writing is poorly understood exactly because of this assumption, namely, to treat written signs as transparent to the oral form and (mental contents) it represents. Derrida (1974) goes further to argue that both spoken and written signs tend to be ignored by the tendency to “logocentrism,” common to all Western

thought about language: that is, the view that all signs are only hints to and loose expressions of deeper meanings and truths which ultimately belong to the realm of the logos, the “pure thought” (Brockmeier 1992). Confronted with this realm, the sign always appears to be derivative, profane, transitory.

For Harris (1986: 37), to view all writing through the alphabet is the logical outcome of the "ethnocentric bias of an European approach to non-European languages.” It fails to take into account the fact that the practical utility of having separate signs for vowels and consonants, the "true alphabet," varies according to the phonological structure of the language concerned. As comparative and historical linguistics has amply illustrated, among the 10,000 or so languages on earth there are fundamental phonological and syntactic differences. A writing system viable for one language is not necessarily viable for another. Harris (1986: 36) sees the irony implicit in the prevailing teleological explanations of the development of the alphabet, "to find writing systems classified and evaluated as if they should have been designed not to meet the practical needs of particular linguistic communities, but rather to serve the universal descriptive purposes of an Abstract Phonology," – as if the historical evolution of writing systems "could be seen to have been gradually working towards the creation of an 'ideal' alphabet as its long-term goal." (Harris, 1986: 37).

The "literacy hypothesis" has been subject to even more criticism. Many authors have questioned what they regarded as its teleological and ethnocentric bias, cultural reductionism, phonocentrism, technological determinism, and the claim that written texts are qualitatively different from oral discourse because of their ability to fix decontextualized "autonomous" meanings. For a superficial observer, much of this debate on the relationship between literacy and culture might have looked like, at some point, as if there were only two contrasting positions in favor and against the idea of the great divide between the spoken and written language. However, this certainly is a too static picture of a debate in which the positions have been evolving, not least as a result of the debate itself which has continuously been fueled by new evidence from empirical and historical research. Ageliki Nicolopoulou and Michael Cole (1999: 85) have commented that "much of the most interesting work of the last few decades has involved efforts to formulate the problem in a nondichotomous fashion." Speaking from what they call the "contextualist" vantage point, Nicolopoulou and Cole (1999: 85) observe that the literacy hypothesis regarding the cultural and cognitive

implications of literacy has become a "moving target." Most of the originally strong claims have been in various ways further developed and redefined, and many initial arguments have been qualified and differentiated (e.g., Good 1987; Olson: 1994, Olson and Torrance, 2001) – again both in the light of new research and in response to "contextualist" and "sociocultural" criticism.

At the same time, basic assumptions of the contextualist line of argument, as represented, for example, by Scriber and Cole (1981), also have become subject of critique. Goody (1987; 2000) argued that Scriber and Cole's (1981) cross-cultural research applied a concept of literacy that was, first, socioculturally too narrow and, second, based on a merely mentalistic view of linguistic and intellectual operations. To understand what a culture of literacy means, Goody pointed out, it is not enough, if not misleading, to narrow the focus of analysis to the effects that writing has on an individual. Writing is a cultural resource whose implications only unfold in historical time, not in the here and now of individual behavior. Examining the influence of writing on the development of written law, Goody (1987, chapter 4) demonstrated how the listing and classification of laws gradually made legal procedures more comparable and "objective," that is, less dependent on subjective decisions based on reign, power, and local custom. On the other hand, once introduced, written law tended to become increasingly extensive and complicated. It needed to be systematized, expounded, interpreted, setting free a new cultural dynamics, again closely connected to specific literacy practices. None of these cultural dynamics, as Goody made clear, would come into light if one reduced the focus of analysis to how individuals were taught to write and to read a law code. To understand how a student learns to solve a mathematical equation does not explain why mathematics is necessary for the construction of railroad bridges, nor why the history of mathematics of the last two hundred years has been closely connected to the evolution of notations and the history of education. Thus, from this sociohistorical point of view, Scribner and Cole's (1981) research program missed an essential point of every culture of literacy: namely, that it cannot be determined by testing the direct impact on the cognitive abilities of literate or illiterate individuals.

In fact, Cole (1996) has criticized his own earlier research on Vai culture with similar arguments. Again, one can might argue that Cole's revisions might have been as much an effect of the dynamics of this debate as of further research and the development of the new Cultural Psychology in the 1980s and 1990s (Bruner 1990, 1996; Shweder 1991; Shweder

and LeVine 1984; Valsiner 1987; Wertsch 1985). In the wake of this development, for the first time, sociohistorical and cultural perspectives on language, literacy, and thought entered centre stage in psychological discussions (Lee and Smagorinsky 1999; Russel 1997).

Thus, we would argue that writing has two linguistic and psychological dimensions; both are cultural. One is sociohistorical, the other is individual. This twofold nature is reflected in two different, but interwoven, conceptual components of the term "literacy," a term which can and, in fact, has been used in both contexts of meaning. In front of these two sides of literacy, we distinguish two cross-disciplinary families of theory of literacy. The members of one family have focussed their explanatory and investigative efforts on writing as a social, societal, and historical phenomenon, while regarding the individual process (including the process of learning to write and to read) as a derivative issue. In this view, the chief issue is to explain the social functions of literacy in its historical political, economic, and ideological contexts. Once a societal system, a culture of literacy, is established, the individual seems to simply "take over" a set of given material and symbolic resources. Terms such as "acquisition", "appropriation," "socialization," "interiorization," or "internalization" of culture indicate some of the conceptual options offered. In abstracting, in various degrees, from the individual's active potentials of agency and construction, these options often have turned out to get caught in the pitfalls of social or cultural determinism.

In contrast, the other family of theories have primarily been concerned with the individual. The chief issue here is the cognitive skills and concepts acquired in learning to read and write and participate in what is vaguely referred to as “the culture.” On this view the historical and evolving set of cultural artifacts and institutions is taken for granted if not ignored. Literacy, on this view, is only mental skills, not institutional systems.

We believe that one lesson to be learned from the debate we have outlined is that neither of the two approaches can capture what defines a culture of literacy in a satisfactory manner without giving an answer to the question with which the other approach is primarily concerned. Moreover, a theory of the relationship between literacy and culture that is conscious of the arguments developed in our debate, must embrace not only the two dimensions of writing as historical system and as individual process, but also explain the interface and, that is, the mutual transitions between these two dimensions.

A pivotal function in these mutual transitions is played by the "graphic body" which is constituted by the spectrum of signs used in a literate culture: systems of writing, scripts, notations, maps, formulas, pictures, texts and paratexts. Given the central role of written signs in the modern intellectual life, it is surprising, as Harris (1996: 6) emphasizes, the extent to which psychology, in particular, has treated the sign "as something externally given, an object already provided by society for the learner to 'acquire' and utilize." Harris argues for making the analysis of the written sign itself the key to the theory of writing. For what he calls "semiological" reasons, he rejects treating writing and reading as activities made possible by the prior existence of written signs; instead, he explains the written sign by reference to the "contextualized integration of the activities of writing and reading" (1996: 7). That is to say, in this view, the written sign is not just a means (given by culture) that is used in the activities of writing and reading; rather, it is the product of these activities, their "integration."

Learning to write and to read, to master the "graphic body" is at best an introduction to the world of literacy. In learning to understand and to use written signs, children must learn to make distinctions which the culture as a whole took several millennia to produce. While it is true that children become literate not simply by being taught how to write and to read, but by being raised in the universe of discourse of a literate culture, it is nonetheless the case that in becoming literate they are actively engaged in constructing their own theory of writing. For example, they entertain a series of hypothesis about how writing systems work, what words and names mean, and how they connect to the material and social world they live in. These hypotheses about words and names, as has been demonstrated in a number of studies (e.g., Homer and Olson 1999; Homer, Brockmeier, Kamawar, and Olson 2000; Ferreiro 1997), are just those which have been exploited in culture-specific "literacy practices." That is to say, the alphabetic writing that children learn and, in the process, re-construct in their way, provides them with a model for understanding what words and names are. It offers them a model for thinking about speech and, that is, for bringing language into consciousness. Writing, in this sense, is a cultural tool of exploration of the unknown, not merely a system of signs for recording the known.

Becoming literate implies the active mastery of an ensemble of material, discursive, cognitive, and institutional practice of writing and reading – practices that are in a simplifying

fashion called "writing and reading." But they only open the entrance to the "symbolic space" of literacy (Brockmeier 2000), a space of writing that embraces the accumulated cultural resources not only of the history of writing, but also of the writing of history: that is, of storing and transmitting knowledge, of constructing and interpreting archival traditions. It would be naï ve to assume that an individual reader, just by learning to write and read, will immediately have access to all resources developed in a literate tradition.

Literacy is neither only a societal structure, and neither cannot it be reduced to a basic set of mental skills isolated from everything else; nor, as we argue, can it be captured by the exclusively linguistic-semiological logic of the written signs as such. Rather, it is a concept that embraces the cultural resources of a literate tradition – including the writing system(s) of this tradition – and the ensemble of the abilities necessary to exploit these cultural resources. Goody (1987: 222) suggested the idea of "intervening variables" between a culture of literacy and corresponding forms of thought and cognition. One of these variables are cities. Only urban life has produced social and cultural activities and institutions that need and engender writing: law, literature, science, religion, philosophy, and other forms of public discourse. It is in this sense that "cognitively as well as sociologically, writing underpins 'civilization,' the culture of cities" (Goody 1987: 300).

Literacy, then, is not simply learning to cope with a script nor to exploit the resources of a literate culture stored in books and other print-media. Literacy is a form of cultural organization itself, what we may call as “societal literacy” (Olson & Torrance, 2001). This concept has found a place in the early writings of Max Weber (1947) on bureaucracy and documentation as well as in the more recent writings of Michel Foucault (1979: 189), Dorothy Smith (1990), and Georg Elwert (2001). All of whom emphasize the role of written documents in the construction of the modern, bureaucratic social order. Our sciences, arts, literature, economy and government are all institutional practices based on accessible documentation. The loss of written records would bring a modern society to its end. Evidently, to participate in such institutions requires not only basic literacy but years of professional schooling. This schooling consists in large part in learning to handle the documents specialized to the domain of work – for example, how to read and interpret a manual or a text. Furthermore, the notion of societal literacy undercuts the somewhat romantic view that literacy is merely a convenience. To become a state already assumes

documentation, the archives to store them, and the competencies to add to, consult and make decisions based on them.

We already mentioned that the very idea of “the rule of law” assumes either a written form of law, as in the tradition of Roman Law, or an indexed archive of written cases which can be consulted and compared as in the tradition of the Common Law. Such laws must be sufficiently explicit that judgments may be transparently based upon them. In his careful analysis of the modernization of a Muslim state, Yemen, Brinkley Messick (1993) traces the shifting role of "wisdom" and documentation in legal judgment. Criticism of traditional *Shari’a* or Muslim law was based on its reliance on the opaque processes involved in the way religious judges, *muftis*, reached their decisions. Consequently, it was replaced by codified and legislated forms of law. Messick writes:

> As the simply organized patrimonial imamate gave way to proliferating bureaucratic segments and to the beginnings of representational government, and as a face-to-face society of witnesses and known reputations yielded to a citizenry of equivalent strangers, so individualized licenses for the transmission of specific texts were replaced by state diplomas, the unitary opinion of the judge by the collective voice of (…) the bench, and the stand-alone authority of the notary’s hand by official registration. In the process, the social basis of the polity is shifting from reckoning by status and kinship (…) to the imagined homogeneity of national citizenry (253-254).

Developing countries aspiring to nationhood consequently devote a substantial portion of their resources to both building the necessary bureaucratic institutional forms and training persons to participate in them.

A culture of literacy presupposes a large spectrum of social and psychological conditions. Without taking into account these conditions, their mutual interplay, and their concrete sociohistorical context, there will be neither a satisfactory notion of literacy nor of culture.

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