On the Theoretical Foundations of Orality and Literacy

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It is only fair to attribute the popularity of the terms orality and literacy in many branches of humanistic studies to Walter Ong. His publication, in 1982, of *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word,* marks a significant stage in the conceptual study of oral tradition, and especially of its relation to other traditions of communication and signification. However, while the contrastive procedure in *Orality and Literacy* etched in stark relief some of what Ong considered fundamental differences between the oral and written, some markedly similar submissions had been made by him in his earlier works, notably *The Presence of the Word* (1967) and *Interfaces of the Word* (1977). To that extrent—and this does not detract from the eminence of their author or the timeliness of the ideas—the arguments of the later work do not represent such a radically novel thesis as we have seemed inclined to think in the last decade and a half.

More than this, the binarism represented by the contrast of the two terms transcends the question of alternative media or modes of communication. Ong's arguments hinge on the cultural differences that arise from, and are symbolized by, the two communicative orders. For this reason, it is useful to sketch the terminological history of orality and literacy as a binary complex. This has indeed partly been done by Ong himself, who admits his indebtedness principally to Eric Havelock, Milman Parry, and Albert Lord (*Presence* 17-110; *Interfaces* 92-120 and 272-302; *Orality and Literacy* 6-30). According to him, Parry's philological inquiries revolutionized Homeric studies and resolved, once for all, the age-old Homeric question. For Parry found that "the distinctive feature of Homeric poetry is due to the economy enforced on it by oral methods of composition" (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 21). Metrical exigencies and the constraints of human memory compelled the oral poet to take recourse to formulae, standardized themes, epithetic expressions, stock or "heavy" characters, and a copious and repetitive style. These findings by Parry were later confirmed and extended by Lord's study of contemporary Balkan epic poets in his well-known *The Singer of Tales* (1960). But it is to Havelock that Ong owes his elaboration of the consequences of the acquisition of literacy by the oral poet and an oral culture.

In a more recent essay, Havelock, while acknowledging the primacy and necessity of oral language, restated the revolutionary impact of literacy on Greek society and Western civilization—much the same point he had made in *Preface to Plato* (1963), *Origins of Western Literacy* (1976), and *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (1982). The Greek alphabet, he argues, was unique and infinitely superior to earlier Egyptian, Sumerian, and Phoenician writing systems because it "provided an exhaustive table of atomic elements of acoustic sound that by diverse combinations could represent the molecules, so to speak, of linguistic speech" ("Oral-Literate Equation" 25). The importance of its introduction into Greek

society lies in its enhanced storage and retrieval capacity—a function earlier served primitively by oral poetic rhythm. Another consequence was the replacement of the narrative, activist, agent-oriented syntax of Homeric poetry, with a "reflective syntax of definition, description, and analysis," which, according to Havelock, is typified by Platonic prose ("Oral-Literate Equation" 25). This was not a mere stylistic shift. On the contrary, it embodied a change in the psychological preconditions of the act and process of communication. In other words, it resulted in alterations in the organization and operation of the human consciousness. Therefore, it is not surprising that Havelock attributes to this shift the advances of Western knowledge and civilization. As he explicitly states, "Without modern literacy, which means Greek literacy, we would not have science, philosophy, written law or literature, nor the automobile or the airplane" ("Oral-Literate Equation" 24).

If the claims made by Havelock jar on us as somewhat extravagant, the support lent them by the alternative studies of Marshal McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* among other works, or Jack Goody and Ian Watt ("The Consequences of Literacy") soon demonstrates their explanatory currency and appeal. That they have become standard theoretical fare in cultural and linguistic anthropology is attested to by the subsequent works of Ong, already mentioned, of Goody and Dvaid Olsen, to mention only a handful of the most eminent. Perhaps a look at some of the most salient of the differences between orality and literacy under a few serviceable rubrics might provide easier access to their arguments. For this, we must turn again to Ong.

Ong begins his explorations of the contrast between oral and written communication by relating the operations of the human sensorium to the philosophical categories of time and space. Speech, he argues, is related to hearing, the auditory faculty most directly connected with time. The objects of sight, smell, taste, and touch can be arrested in time, but human utterance, the object of hearing, vanishes as soon as it comes into being:

> Words come into being through time, and exist only so long as they are going out of existence . . . . [w]hen I pronounce "reflect," by the time I get to the "flect" the "re" is gone, and necessarily and irretrievably gone. (*Presence* 40)

Other sensory experiences, on the other hand, are primarily oriented to space; that is why they can be arrested in time, unlike sound, which has a "built-in progression" through time. Admittedly, all sensory experience involves duration; but Ong argues that the perception of duration in the other senses is made possible only through scientific investigation, while that of hearing is grasped immediately. This situation can be contrasted with what obtains in the domain of writing. The faculty with which writing is concerned is sight, which, as has been seen, is oriented to space. What the technology of writing makes possible is the spatialization of sound, that is, its noetic transformation from time to space. The consequence is that human utterance ceases to be evanescent and becomes fixed, linear, reversible or retraceable, so that our beloved "re" remains intact ages after

we have crossed "flect." This commitment of sound to space through the invention of the alphabet makes such a tremendous impact upon the process of human verbalization that no less than the workings of human consciousness are altered by it.

Ong's elaboration of these consequences is such a minefield (in more senses than one) that a certain amount of reductionism is inevitable in the presentation here. But before going on to the actual mental and cultural paradigms that his description entails, we need to address the validity of his interpretive strategies and of his foundational premises. This can be done by examining his notion and use of the categories of time and space. Ong's arguments are so skillfully and authoritatively presented, with such a welter of scholarly references, that some elementary questions that need to be raised are quickly forgotten in the breath-taking force and boldness of the conceptualization. For instance, how can it be said that sound is oriented to time merely because it cannot be arrested in time? Is not the contrary equally true, namely, that sound is not oriented to time for the very reason that time cannot capture it, that it too quickly progresses through it?

On the idea of whether or not objects of the senses are arrested, we need to reconsider exactly what ordinary processes are involved in the continuous experience of sensory objects. When we see an object continuously, that is, when it is "arrested," to use Ong's phraseology, the prolonged physical and physiological experience is possible only because the object remains within our visual field. If either the object or we ourselves move away, the object becomes invisible. The mode in which the experience subsists in us in such eventuality, whether as sensation or memory or whatever, may perhaps be of professional interest to philosophers (see Rorty), but from a common-sensical point of view, what counts is that the object is arrested only because it is there *repeatedly*. In the same way, if a sound is there repeatedly and its auditors do not go away, surely they would continue to hear it. To that extent, seeing is no different than hearing. It may well be that there is some mystical connection between time and the unique physiological properties of hearing, but that is an argument that belongs in the domain of theology, not of logic or epistemology.

At the source of the problems that Ong's description raises is his conception of time and space. These two terms are notorious for the central but not always convincing stage they have occupied in philosophical debates since Newton and Leibnitz. Those debates are only of marginal concern here, but it is important to note that Ong sometimes speaks of time in chronometric terms, and at other times in a kind of philosophical absolutism that is not even Newtonian but, rather, grossly physicalist. Time seems to him to be an inert mass spread-eagled in some nondescript reality and from whose bulky continuum the spoken word is in a hurry to get away. We can compare this to the very sensible Kantian idea of time and space as a priori intuitions that do not inhere in the objects of experience, and enable us to represent them as distinct from ourselves and each other (Kant 23-37).

One source of the misunderstanding is the rather obvious difference between the auditory faculty and the other parts of the human sensorium.

The other faculties operate typically in connection with material objects in space. We see, touch, and taste objects; no secondary action of the agent is required to identify the sources of these sensations. With smelling and hearing, this subsidiary action is often required. Yet they are no less connected with spatial objects, since we naturally seek to identify the objective origins of the emanations. For the sense of smell, these objects are conceivably commonly closer to hand than with sound, whose sources can be quite distant and for that reason less materially obvious. This is one reason for the presumed immateriality of sound. For the rest, advances in acoustic sciences should put an end to any illusions about its physical nature, or rather the lack of it.

More central to Ong's argument, and correspondingly more contentious, is the claim that since oral cultures have no fixed texts, they organize and transmit knowledge and information in a unique way. Oral thought proceeds, Ong says,

> in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero's 'helper,' and so on), in proverbs . . . or other mnemonic form. (*Orality and Literacy* 34)

In other words, at the basis of oral thought and style is memory. As Havelock puts it, the "secrets of orality, then, lie not in the behaviour of language as it is exchanged in the give and take of conversation but in the language used for information storage in the memory" (24). To serve this mnemonic purpose, this language must be rhythmic and narrativized.

This mode of cofidication and structuration of knowledge can only lead to a certain type of discourse—a traditionalist and conservative one that demands continuity and stasis and eschews experimentation. This resistance to innovation of method is at one with the content of the discourse that confines itself to what is concrete and familiar in the human life world. Thus, whatever is conceptualized becomes formalized in existential terms, and skill and knowledge are passed on by way of personal participation and practice. In this manner, the categories of thought are appropriated in the immediacy of person-to-person communication and interiorized as communal knowledge (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 41-57). In contrast to this regimen, writing cultures are innovative and inventive. Since information storage and retrieval no longer present any problem, the spirit of novelty is given free rein. The foreign and unfamiliar no longer constitute a threat to a stable grasp of reality, because the ever-expanding frontiers of knowledge demand newer and newer measures of the true, the good, and the beautiful. But then the conditions of knowledge acquisition are also altered. Knowledge and information now come through books, manuals, and other nonhuman sources, become objectivized, and are appropriated impersonally as self-subsisting commodities. The production of knowledge becomes a solipsistic activity and the forms of thought generated by this state of affairs are necessarily abstract, analytic, syllogistic, and definitional.

According to Ong and Havelock, when an oral culture acquires writing in any deep way, that is, when it becomes a pervasive characteristic of the society in question, what has happened is that the culture has taken upon itself a force capable of permanently altering its state of being and direction of development. It is not a mere question of having seized on a useful technological item. On the contrary, the impact of this technology is felt no less than in the very consciousness of the members of the society. The way they reason and therefore the types of discourse they produce; their arts and sciences; the forms of government and social organization—in short, all that we would characterize as their material and spiritual culture—are determined by this one technology. To take the example of Greece, on which, by the way, Havelock (and to a lesser degree Ong) relies almost entirely for these claims, the secret of the success of its civilization "lay in the superior technology of the Greek alphabet" (Havelock 24).

The notion of the alphabet as the key to the genius of the ancient Greeks is undoubtedly a bold and challenging one. The only question is whether it is true. It has become a historical commonplace that we owe the alphabet to the Greeks. What is not clear is what we really mean by this. If this implies that the Greeks invented the alphabet, this runs counter to all available knowledge of the history of writing. As I. J. Gelb, following several other authorities persuasively argues in *The Study of Writing,* there is no question at all that the Greeks borrowed their signs from contemporary Semitic syllabic systems of writing, most notably from the Phoenicians with whom they had long established commercial contacts (see Diringer 35). The very names of the signs, no less than their form, are of Semitic origin.

How the Semitic people themselves came by their signs was no sudden stroke of genius, as is only to be expected. From early semasiographs (as Gelb calls the pictographs and different forms of mnemonic devices common to all peoples globally), it was a long way to logographic writing as represented variously by Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform or by Egyptian hieroglyphic and hieratic scripts (Gelb 191 ff.; Diringer 15). The further refinement of these ideograms into phonetic systems such as the Phoenician syllabaries of the ninth century BCE, was an extended historical process. The idea of an inventive stroke of genius is consequently a complete myth. In fact, the introduction by the Greeks of the vowel into the Semitic Aleph-Beth, commonly held to be the single most important factor in the Greek creation of the alphabet, has been shown to be, after all, not such an original event. As Gelb argues:

> [T]he Greeks did not invent a new vowel system but simply used vowels for those signs which in the various Semitic systems of writing likewise can function as vowels in form of the so-called *matres lectionis* . . . . The greatness of the Greek innovation lies, therefore, not in the invention of a new method of indicating vowels but in a methodical application of a device which the early Semites used only in an irregular and sporadic fashion. . . . [E]ven the Semitic and other Near Eastern writings in the course of time developed this method of indicating vowels to such an extent that they, too,

> were on the way toward creating a full system of vowel signs and consequently an alphabet. (181)

Even the elimination from the early alphabet of a few of the original Semitic signs and the addition of new ones until the standardization of the classical system in the transitional period of Greek history attest to the evolutionary path through which the Greek alphabet developed.

It also needs to be asked: If the acquisition and development of the alphabet is singly responsible for Greek scientific and technological achievements, what can account for the relatively low-technology of either India, which obtained the Aleph-Beth at about the same time as the Greeks, or the Semitic people themselves who later on received back from the Greeks the newly vocalized alphabet? It has sometimes been urged against this position that in these societies, literacy was socially restricted, belonging exclusively to a priestly-scribal class because of the religious or theocratic nature of these cultures. Greece, on the other hand, was not only democratic, providing access to writing for all segments of society, but even more important, it was secular, free from the mental stranglehold to which all religious tyranny subjects people. The only problem with this attractive rejoinder is that it ends up holding secularity rather than literacy responsible for the glory of Greece. The question of social classes also requires investigation.

The substantive question that needs to be addressed here concerns the claim that by the beginning of the fourth century BCE, when Plato wrote his philosophical treatises and Athenian power was being threatened, centuries of literacy had ensured the permanent alteration of Greek consciousness from an oral prototype to a so-called literate one. This raises several serious questions. We might note in passing that the lack of uniformity among the Greek city-states makes the total reliance on the Athenian model by itself a problem. From a cultural point of view, Athens, especially Periclean Athens, was a gem among the hundreds of Greek city-states. It was the wealthiest and one of the most powerful, rivalled militarily only by Sparta, to which it succumbed in the Peloponnesian war. Thus, even if it could be argued that as far as the education of Athenian citizens (as distinct from *metics* and slaves who outnumbered them) was concerned, literacy was pervasive, could we say the same, for instance, of Sparta? The Spartiatae, who numbered a mere tenth of the inhabitants of Sparta, enjoyed none but a military sort of education. As for the rest of the despised and oppressed population of that city-state, perhaps the least said the better (Mulhern 135 ff.).

What is more important, Greek speculation in science, philosophy, and mathematics had begun as early as the seventh century, that is, before literacy had become at all widespread in any state. On what form of communication-consciousness were these early intellectual efforts dependent? The argument that these speculations lacked the intellectual rigor and objectivity of subsequent works, which therefore proves that they possessed vestiges of the earlier oral culture, smacks of secondary elaboration, if not outright circularity. One problem with the monocausal view is that, from a

logical standpoint, and given the deductive approach adopted by Ong and Havelock, all that needs to be done for the thesis to be disproved is to show any number of alternative factors that could have given rise to Greek intellectual and artistic achievements.

Perhaps it would be fairer for us to address the thesis on its own ground. First of all, the presentation of the argument leaves one uncertain whether these effects pertain to individuals or subgroups or the entire culture (Street, "A Critical Look" 5). While Havelock does indeed concentrate on Plato as the quintessential literate consciousness of his time, Ong's analysis continually oscillates between individual, subgroup, and group consciousness, as if these logical and empirical subsets are coextensive or identical. Surely this methodological free-ranging cannot be calculated to inspire confidence in the outcome of the inquiry. An individual such as Plato must undoubtedly be regarded as attaining the highest degree of literate mentality in his time. But was Plato a typical Greek? That is, did he embody these values in such a way that he represented the broad spectrum of ordinary Greek consciousness? Certainly, a subculture such as the Academy (both Plato's and ours) might set up shrines in honor of rationality, objectivity, and theoretical analysis; yet these constitute ideals that are not achievable at every instance of writing. It would surely be a strange sort of person who, at all moments of verbalization, is without exception rational, objective, and theoretical. Such a creature belongs in the realm of fantastic literature, not the real world. Moreover, this kind of argument is difficult to sustain by anyone such as Ong or Havelock, for the simple reason, as Brian Street points out, that no one trapped in his own literate mentality could accordingly have access to the operations of the oral consciousness. He would have no means of gaining entry personally into the oral consciousness, if the argument is taken to its logical conclusion (Street, "A Critical Look" 1-5).

Ong occasionally provides some examples of contemporary oral cultures, especially in his *Interfaces of the Word.* But to generalize on this basis raises questions of validity no less than the Greek example. Many of the so-called oral cultures globally have undergone so many changes in their mode of life, including media of communication, that to speak of them as if they are fixed in a putative pristine oral condition is a piece of anachronism. On the other hand, not even the most rigorously literate society today is completely devoid of features of orality. And if it needs reminding, we are not even concerned at this stage with the technical communicative understanding of orality. The point is that none of those features that Ong describes as the cognitive conditions of oral cultures are completely absent in the most literate societies of our own day. This is what enables Ong to speak of "secondary orality."

What comes out clearly in all this is that a faulty principle of causality is at work here. It is not logically admissible, and equally empirically impossible, to explain the entire direction and shape of society on the basis of a single technological term, when the connection between the two terms is so tenuous. This point has been made quite forcefully by Ruth Finnegan:

> Much of the plausibility of the 'Great Divide' theories has rested on the often unconscious assumption that what the essential shaping of society comes from is its communication technology. But once technological determinism is rejected or queried, then questions immediately arise about these influential classifications of human development into two major types: oral/primitive as against oral/literate . . . . It is worth emphasizing that the conclusions from research, not only about the supposed 'primitive mentality' associated with orality, but also about, for example, concepts of individualism and the self, conflict and scepticism, or detached and abstract thought in non-literate cultures now look different . . . [and] once-confident assertions about the supposed differentiating features of oral and literate cultures are now exposed as decidedly shaky. *(Literacy and Orality* 13)

To underline the point, if we look at the distinctions drawn by Ong, there appears very little to differentiate them from the dichotomies created by earlier cognitive anthropologists such as Levy-Bruhl (*How Natives Think,* 1910) or even later ones like Levi-Strauss (*The Savage Mind,* 1966). For instance, in what is undoubtedly his most seminal work, Levy-Bruhl argues in *How Natives Think* that the collective representations of "undeveloped peoples" reveal a prelogical mentality that is based on the "law of participation," marking their sharp difference from Western consciousness conceptually or in terms of logical procedure (37-38). This participation mystique and the mentality to which it gives rise are responsible for the fact that the primitive mind is essentially synthetic, being little given to analysis; that in the life of primitives, memory plays a much more important part than it does in Western mental life; that the slightest mental effort involving abstract reasoning, however elementary it may be, is distasteful to them; that objective validity that can be verified is unknown; and that their reasoning is unrelievedly concrete (86-128). In sum:

> Primitive mentality does indeed possess a language, but its structure, as a rule, differs from that of our languages. It actually does comprise abstract representations and general ideas; but neither this abstraction nor this generalization resembles that of our concepts. Instead of being surrounded by an atmosphere of logical potentiality, these representations welter, as it were, in an atmosphere of mystic possibilities . . . and for this reason logical generalization, properly so-called, and logical transactions with its concepts are impracticable. (127)

Placing these remarks side by side with what Ong had to say seventy years later would require no further comment. While some scholars have made much of Levy-Bruhl's retraction of this position in his posthumous notes (*Les carnets de Levy-Bruhl,* 1949), it remains clear, as C. Scott-Littleton argues, that "much of what is now taken for granted by cognitive, structural, and symbolic anthropologists was in fact anticipated in Levy-Bruhl's work, especially his early work" (xlii).

However Scott-Littleton intended his conclusion to be taken, it is nevertheless true that Levy-Bruhl's work provided the inspiration for Levi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind,* even if his system of classification relied on the work of Durkheim and Mauss. Levi-Strauss argues that magic and science are "two parallel modes of acquiring knowledge" and he shows that neolithic man had a genuine scientific spirit and, further, that in the nominal and classificatory systems of primitive societies is to be found a logical categorial ability. But it is in his concept of oral or mythical thought as "intellectual bricolage" that he reveals the true direction of his thought:

> The characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task in hand because it has nothing else at its disposal. (17)

In his thought pattern, the "bricoleur" is perceptual, while the scientist is conceptual; the scientist opens up new possibilities of knowledge by extension or renewal, while the bricoleur conserves knowledge only by reorganization; the scientist creates events by means of structures, thus changing the world, while the bricoleur creates structures by means of events. Admittedly, mythical thought, bricolage, is not the necessary preserve of any cutlure and indeed all cultures have these alternative thought processes. Still, what is of importance, as later (poststructuralist) commentators have pointed out, is the framework, the (con)textual condition of this analysis, including the metaphoric import and the constitutive terms of the discourse, which elaborates not mere mental forms but structures of social and cultural organization. As Jacques Derrida says explicitly in *Of Grammatology,* this is ethnocentricism masquerading as anti-ethnocentricism (120-22).

To this extent, the work of Levi-Strauss, no less than that of Levy-Bruhl, shows that Ong's orality/literacy merely reproduces the classical oppositions of cultures: prelogical versus logical, wild versus domesticated, primitive versus civilized, hot versus cold, traditional versus modern, magical versus scientific . . . all of the discursive baggage of Western anthropological thought. It is instructive that Goody not only admits this, but actually advocates this superficial substitution in his *Domestication of the Savage Mind.*

How endemic this Western perception is can be gauged from philosophical literature on the subject as it has proceeded under the rubric of rationality and relativism (see Wilson; see also Hollis and Lukes).[1] Under the serviceable idiom of science and magic, the last three decades have witnessed an ardent debate on just what degree of rationality, if any, can be attributed to primitive thought. The variety of viewpoints, not to speak of the disparity of disciplinary approaches, makes a concise description difficult, but four basic positions can be roughly isolated, namely, (a) that primitive (oral) thought is irrational, illogical, and unscientific; (b) that it is rational and logic but not scientific; (c) that it is rational but unscientific and illogical; and (d) that it is as rational and logical within its own cultural context as the scientific in modern Western society. Presented in this

manner, the rational is clearly separated conceptually from the logical and scientific, but in reality, many of the disputants have often used these terms interchangeably.

One approach to the issue that purports to be favorable to primitive mentality is illustrated by Robin Horton's extensive exposition of the relations between African thought and Western science (197-258). In this view, traditional thought is rational and logical, often in ways analogous to scientific thought. For one thing, models of scientific theory are a quest for unity, simplicity, order, and regularity underlying the apparent diversity, complexity, disorder, and anomaly that characterize the universe of phenomena. African thought also seeks this order through the structure of the pantheon and the categorial relations of its spiritual forces. And just as scientific thought seeks causal explanations, so does African thought—for example, the causal connection between social conduct and states of disease.

For another, the two forms of thought employ similarly different levels of theory (low and high) to cover respectively narrow or wide areas of experience. They operate by first breaking up and then reintegrating objects and experiences (abstraction, analysis, and integration). In the same way, these two theoretical forms draw an analogy between puzzling and familiar phenomena in their modelling processes; and in this, only a limited aspect of the familiar is useful, and for only a while, because sooner or later, the models obscure the analogy with the familiar. While this similarity of theoretical procedure does not turn traditional African thought into a species of the scientific, it nevertheless demonstrates its rationality.

But there are also substantive differences between the two models, differences that Horton, borrowing an idiom popularized by Karl Popper, characterized as "open" versus "closed" predicaments, by which he means that traditional culture, unlike scientific culture, has no understading and toleration of alternative thought. He manages somehow to connect this with the commonplace notions of the mystical attitude to language, recourse to a personal idiom, and contextual basis of all oral discourse. In the event, oral thought turns out to be lacking in logic and philosophy in the strict sense although, Horton maintains, "most African traditional world-views are logically elaborated to a high degree" and are "of eminently rational character" (229).

The suspicion lurks that there are deeper conceptual sources for Horton's ambivalence towards African traditional thought than the thought system itself. The question arises whether the foundation for this sort of comparative analysis is sufficiently sound, whether the minimal condition of equality of the terms has been satisfied. Without prejudice to other aspects of this discourse, for example, the similarity of Horton to Ong in the characterization of oral thought, there does appear to be a fundamental problem with the categorial relations of its terms. Horton's problem, and that of many other contributors to the debate, is twofold. First, he equates all traditional thought with traditional religious thought; and second, as an extension of the first, he proceeds to compare such widely

divergent areas of human experience without a theoretical clarification of the basis of the procedure.

The assumption on which he proceeds is indeed a common one, perhaps the commonest in all anthropological-philosophical discourses of this sort. This is the notion that the magical, with its connotation of, and connection with, ritual and religion, is the dominant characteristic of all primitive thought and behavior. The volume of anthropological research, from James Frazer upwards, demonstrates that this assertion is indeed overwhelming What is not so certain is the theoretical justification for this. In addition, if it is indeed true that traditional thought is prototypically religious, or magical—to resort to the commanding idiom of the rationalist anthropologists—still the basis for seizing on it as the measure against which the scientific is to be weighed, or vice versa, would still need to be more closely specified. Why, for example, is the comparison not made within the same experiential domain, say, between traditional religious thought and modern Western religious thought? Or alternatively, between an instance of traditional nonreligious thought and science? In other words, what is to be done with the burning question of their incommensurability?

Presumably, because the scientific is regarded as the most characteristic Western model of thought, just as the religious is regarded as the most characteristic model of traditional (non-Western) thought, a comparative analysis is felt possible on cross-cultural grounds. If this suggestion is correct, and there are sufficient grounds for believing that it is, a few problems do arise. First of all, given the discrepancy between this claim and the practical reality of ordinary life and thinking habits among Western persons, as pointed out by both Horton and Peter Winch, as well as many others (see Wiredu, *Philosophy*; Appiah; and Sogolo), it is difficult to decide precisely what is meant by "most characteristic." But whether this refers to a numerical class or a mental type or level of intellectual and cultural achievement, what is implicated is a consideration of the criteria of science. While full examination of this complex subject is beyond the present interest of this essay, at least a brief look is unavoidable in order to reach some satisfactory conclusion of this discussion.

We have already seen, in the work of Horton, theoretical models as they operate in the sciences. However, in the classical model of rationality, no scientific theory can be considered valid if it is not necessary, universal, and rule-governed (Brown 3-37). It is in this sense irrelevant if these truths have been arrived at by observation and experimentation, that is, inductively, or through deductive intuition. What counts is that the results or conclusion must follow necessarily from the data or premises, and that this relation must be recognized as such; that the principle be applicable in every possible instance and domain; and that the entire proceeding should conform to the appropriate rules.

That is without doubt as it should be. There remain, however, a few questions, such as: On what basis are data or premises selected, or what makes them suitable and acceptable? Second, who makes these "appropriate rules" and how can we tell if they are really adequate? In their quest for answers to these questions, philosophers have found that the only

propositions that can fully satisfy the fundamental conditions of rationality are self-evident and self-justifying ones, since every other conceivable proposition seems to require a precedent justification, thus creating a most inconvenient, not to say infinite, regressiveness. They have also found, incidentally, that getting propositions that meet these two features simultaneously seemed impossible. When they found self-justifying propositions, these were not self-evident at the same time. Their truth could be grasped only intuitively.

This unhappy state of affairs has led naturally to all sorts of speculative and critical efforts to resolve the dilemma. Some philosophers (e.g., Popper) admit that the truth of science cannot be proven, but they insist that its falsehood can be refuted and that therefore rationality consists not in corroboration of claims, but in our readiness for their refutation, which is what empirical testing is all about. But even here, when pressed hard as to the procedural grounds for beginning this refutation (for example, on what rational basis can we accept Popper's "basic statements"?), they turn out to be no more secure than convention.

If propositional foundations are lacking, we are not luckier with foundational rules. It does not seem sufficient merely to have a logical or scientific rule for testing or evaluating the rationality of any claim. We need *appropriate* rules; and therefore we need some way of judging that any given rules are the right ones. And no metarule seems available that does not involve us in regress. As Harold Brown argues, not even the most traditionally incontestable laws of logic (for instance, the law of noncontradiction and *modus ponens*) are indubitable, as shown by intuitionist and other recent systems of logic (Brown 70-78).[2]

If the very foundations of scientific and logical rationality turn out to be no more than intuition or convention, on what grounds can cognitive anthropologists claim some truths to be irrational and others not? The position seems to be on pretty thin ice, as even some philosophers of social science have come to recognize by now. The concern that this would involve us in cultural, not to say, moral, relativism, is a genuine one, but it is not answered by evading the argument. Charles Taylor has tried, for instance, to resolve the difficulty by taking recourse to a form of appeal to force. For him, even if we can find no theoretical grounds for adducing superior rationality to Western scientific and technological culture, the factual evidence of its material achievements is irrefutable proof of its being a higher order of life than that of primitive societies:

> If one protests and asks why the theoretical order is more perspicuous transculturally, granted the admitted difference between the aims of the activities compared, and granted that the two cultures identify and distinguish the activities differently, the answer is that at least in some respects theoretical cultures score successes which command the attention of atheoretical ones, and in fact invariably have done so when they met. A case in point is the immense technological successes of one particular theoretical culture, our modern scientific one. Of course, this particular superiority commands attention in a quite non-theoretical way as well. We are reminded

> of the ditty about nineteenth-century British colonial forces in Africa: 'Whatever happens We have got the Gatling gun, And they have not' (104).

It is impossible to imagine that Charles Taylor is not aware of the patent fallacy of this argument. And if this is so we can well see why the frustrations of logic should drive a philosopher to such an ironic finish. Ironic, not just because he himself knows that the Gatling-gun argument will not pass muster, but because on this score readers could very easily mistake their author for a contemporary historical figure of the same name in the West African nation of Liberia more closely associated with clinching ethnopolitical arguments on the battlefield. It is perhaps a sad commentary on the ethnocultural motivations of the philosophical arguments that they would perforce end on such a note.

If, then, the basis of the distinction between the magical and scientific, (with all the intertextual connections to the other oppositions: savage versus civilized, prelogical versus logical, oral versus written, etc.) is hardly more than ethnocentric convention or intuition, what function can this distinction serve in the Western understanding of the culture of the Other? The point is important because surely the value of the preceding arguments lies in the various attempts made, however unsuccessful, to account for cultural differences. But if these failures in the domain of philosophy, anthropology and the social sciences are related in some way to the aims and methods of these disciplines, it is inevitable for the debate to be carried over to the fields of linguistics and literature, which may be commonly regarded as lying in the very heart of cultural communication. Orality and literacy are, before anything else, cognate concepts in the field of verbal communication. The enormous amount of research on orality and literacy in the disciplines of language and literary communication is thus to be explained not only on the basis of a certain natural disciplinary appropriation of the concepts, but because of the perception that research had come to a dead end in the social sciences. At the same time, it points to the intertextual variability of the concepts.

We come then to an aspect of the relations between the oral and written that appears less controversial. This is the connection between spoken and written language. In the main, three broad areas of research have been undertaken in this respect. Some scholars have been interested in drawing similarities or differences of a linguistic sort, involving phonological, semantic, lexical, and even more commonly, syntactical elements. Drawing on the work of G. H. Drieman, J. A. Devito, and several others, Goody (*Literacy and Orality*) has provided a summary of the supposed lexical and syntactic specificities of written language, in implicit or explicit contrast to spoken language. They include: a tendency to use longer words, increased nominalization (as against verbalization in speech), greater variety of vocabulary, more attributive adjectives and fewer personal pronouns. On the syntactical side, he found greater complexity of nominal and verbal constructions, preference for subordinate rather than coordinate constructions, for usage of declaratives and subjunctives

(rather than imperatives, interrogatives and exclamations), for passive voice, for definite articles (instead of demonstrative modifiers and deictic terms), and a higher frequency of certain grammatical features (for example, gerunds, participles, attributive adjectives, modal and perfective auxiliaries). Goody manages to come to this conclusion, even though he admits that many of these features may be language-specific, since the data are based exclusively on European languages, mostly English.

In a similar vein, some scholars (see Chafe, "Integration and Involvement" and "Linguistic Differences"; Chafe and Danielewicz) have been concerned with elaborating the discourse features of speaking and writing from the language production process itself. Wallace Chafe, for example, found that speaking is done in spurts of what he called "idea units" at the rate of about one in two seconds, corresponding roughly to our thinking rate. This can be compared to writing which is over ten times slower. In consequence:

> In writing, it would seem, our thoughts must constantly get ahead of our expression of them in a way to which we are totally unaccustomed when we speak. As we write down one idea, our thoughts have plenty of time to move ahead to others. The result is that we have time to integrate a succession of ideas into a single linguistic whole in a way that is not available in speaking. In speaking, we normally produce one idea unit at a time(36).

Chafe ("Linguistic Differences"), and especially Chafe and Danielewicz ("Properties") examined some of the linguistic consequences of this varying speed of discourse production, taking as data, samples of four discourse types—dinner table conversations, lectures, letters and academic papers—which correspond respectively to informal spoken language, formal spoken language, informal written language and formal written language. Their conclusions are that from the point of view of vocabulary, speakers tend to "operate with a narrower range of lexical choices than writers," because speaking is done "on the fly," while the editing possibilities allowed by writing increase the variety of lexical choices. According to them, the level of written language is also higher because it is richer, less hedged and more explicit.

There are differences as well in clausal and sentential construction. Spoken language moves in clause-like "intonation units," corresponding to Chafe's earlier "idea units," which are relatively brief compared to those of written language. Written language elongates these intonation units through such syntactical devices as prepositional phrases, nominalizations, and adjective attribution. Interclausal relations in sentences tend, in speaking, to be restricted to coordinate forms, unlike written sentences which evince more elaborate and complex clausal connections, because of ample opportunities available to the writer to plan, edit and construct his sentences. A few other features of spoken language include the speaker's greater involvement with his/her audience, involvement of self in the speech, and involvement with the reality he or she speaks about. This can be elicited from the speaker's frequent reference to self notable in spoken

language, his/her reference to the addressee, and references to the concrete reality, with which he/she is dealing. This contrasts with the detachment of the writer, which shows up in "interest in ideas that are not tied to specific people, events, times, or places, but which are abstract and timeless" (Chafe and Danielewicz 108).

Linguistic studies of orality and literacy such as these have about them an air of "scientific" objectivity, of dealing only with the available data, untrammelled by the assumptions of cognitive and theoretical anthropology. In fact, in many of these (for example, Chafe), there is no evidence of awareness of the work of scholars like Havelock, Ong, or McLuhan. Yet a comparison of the positions of these latter with the work of the linguists reveals very little difference. Other language scholars, for instance Deborah Tannen ("The Oral/Literate Continuum in Discourse"), frankly admit that their work is based on investigating and testing the validity of the claims of cognitive anthropology regarding orality and literacy. While some of the findings show divergence on certain specific features, most, however, validate these earlier claims. We are often left with the impression that these scholars are working backwards to answers assumed from the start.

A third approach from language and communication deals with the specific processing of narrative discourse. Two examples can be examined. The first is Tannen's study of the narrative strategies of American and Greek subjects ("Oral/Literate Continuum"). She begins with a review of the work of Goody, Havelock, Ong, and David Olson. She notes various dichotomies arising from these studies, for example: textual versus contextual, rhapsodic/formulaic versus analytic/linear/sequential; experiential versus logical as processes of knowing and knowledge production. However, departing from the dualism of the earlier scholars, Tannen is at pains to stress the interconnectedness of orality and literacy. Perhaps for this reason, she draws a correspondence between the discourse strategies identified with orality-literacy and what have been described in language studies as focused and unfocused discourses or, even more pertinently, as interpersonal involvement and message content (3).

Tannen's basic thesis is that the oral-literate paradigm, re-echoing as it does these other paradigms, has helped her in clarifying and categorizing contrasting discourse strategies from various situations including conversations, narratives, aesthetic responses, and so on. She discusses three examples from her research involving respectively Greek and American subjects, Americans and Greeks/American-Greeks, New York Jews and non-New Yorkers/non-Jews ("Oral/Literate Continuum" 4-13). Her conclusion is that the Greeks, Greek-Americans and New York Jews used discourse strategies that were "inherently oral" even though these subjects were highly literate people. These strategies include a tendency to formulaicness of language, personal/emotive involvement and internal evaluation. The American subjects, on the other hand, adopted writing strategies such as external evaluation, decontextualization, and novelty of expression. Although she admits that these strategies have become "culturally conventionalized," she nevertheless insists with surprising agility that the distinction is not along ethnic or cultural lines, proclaiming in one telling

sentence: "It will not do to label some people as oral and others as literate" (13-14).

But this conclusion is completely at variance with the substantive finding of her studies. If these strategies are culturally conditioned, surely it cannot be too wide of the mark to describe any of the study groups as correspondingly predominantly either oral or literate. And therefore her caveat is either entirely gratuitous or it serves to mask her unease with a paradigm which she repeatedly declares is merely an analytic tool. It surely cannot be very relevant to her, at least in the context of the specific work in question, whether some people are labelled one way or another. But she has a professional obligation to examine whether the constitutive terms on which she relies for the description of her research findings are reliable ones, whether there is a sufficiently rational basis for adopting them or if they run the risk of conveying more than she intended them to do. In other words, for her to avoid the charge of blindly following those she accuses of labelling, she has a responsibility to show the propriety, not to speak of the necessity, of associating those strategies with orality and literacy or indeed to jettison them altogether for carrying more ideological deadweight than she intends (something that, by the way, she managed to do several years later, long before her current gender interests, for example in *Talking Voices,* 1989). What she cannot do is to take over wholly or partially those associations only to turn round to deny that she intended anything else by them than as value-free descriptions of her research conclusions. This is especially insidious, bearing in mind her awareness of the ideological and cognitive dimensions of the oral-literate debate, as can be judged from her literature review in the first part of her paper.

A second example is Angela Hildyard and David Olson's "On the Comprehension and Memory of Oral vs. Written Discourse." This work, whose conclusions are more or less predictable, viewed from the standpoint of earlier and subsequent works of the two authors,[3] states as follows:

> In summary, it appears that readers and listeners do adopt somewhat different strategies in comprehending narrative discourse. The listeners pay primary attention to the theme of the story, building a coherent representation of what was meant. The readers, on the other hand, are able to pay closer attention to the meaning of the sentences per se, recalling more incidental but mentioned details and being more accurate in their judgements of what was in fact stated in the text. Furthermore, the acquisition of literate skills appears to involve a greater awareness of the sentence meaning, an awareness that shows up not only in comprehending written texts but those presented orally as well (31-32).

In other words, reading subjects showed superior skills in analytical tasks, those involving distinctions and discriminations between elements, particularly what a text *objectively* says and what the processing subject interprets it to have said. There are obvious problems with the claims of textual neutrality and objectivity, including the ideological foundations of these claims, but they are not of immediate concern here (see Street, *Literacy in Theory*

38-43). Hildyard and Olson state repeatedly that the children who read well, listen well also, and they offer three possible explanations for this: acquisition of specialized reading and listening skills; suitability of certain procedures for both oral and written language; learning, by good readers, to treat even orally presented stories like written texts. But one very critical factor of this research is that the seventy-two subjects are distributed into two sets (depending on school grades) of good readers, average readers, and poor readers. The question is: since what is being tested here goes beyond mere language skills, how does this reading ability correlate with other intellectual abilities? Why do the authors feel constrained to offer only linguistic or language-related explanations for the superiority in comprehension of good readers?

It is perhaps not so difficult to account for their manner of proceeding. They wish to avoid dragging in the complex cognitive questions which their findings entail. But this very reluctance or silence is the single most eloquent testament of the presence of these complexities and of the ideological attitude they adopt to them. In striving to present the picture of a scientific experiment untainted by any cognitive assumptions or sociocultural ideologies and practices, when in fact all these are implicated in their procedures and conclusions, Hildyard and Olson reveal the sort of subterfuges to which several scholars resort in the discourse of orality and literacy. There are of course many others involved in this discourse, especially in the area of literary criticism, who are profoundly unaware of all the implications of its constituent terms; this cannot render their more or less harmful repetition of stereotypes excusable, but it is nevertheless understandable.

Besides historiography, where, since the sixties when the study of African history by Africans themselves gained impetus, aided by the publication of works such as D.T. Niane's *Soundjata, ou l'épopée mandingue* (1960) and Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition* (1965), orality has been largely accepted as a valid method of historical inquiry, the formal questions of orality and literacy have been raised mainly in literary studies.[4] But perhaps "question" is too strong a word here, for only rarely, if at all, has orality commanded explicit attention in literary theory.[5] On the other hand, in many areas of literature in the developing world, and most especially in Africa, hardly any evaluation or criticism of literary texts occurs without some form of reference to oral tradition.

Many such references, however, are quite content to assume some pristine or intuitive familiarity with oral tradition, or at best have repeated by rote some of the extravagant or doubtful claims of Ong and Goody about orality. At any rate, the basis of the oral intertext in modern African literature was made clear by Emmanuel Obiechina more than two decades ago. Writers and critics are quite familiar, he says, with their own folklore, and communicate competently in their vernaculars, in spite of being Western-educated. More than this they "share the values, attitudes, and structures of feelings . . . which are implicit within their oral cultures" (27). We can construe this to mean that there are values, attitudes, and structures of feelings peculiar to oral cultures. If these exist, in the light of our arguments above,

we do not know for sure how they are to be distinguished from literate ones. And if they can be distinguished, we would still be left with the problem of whether their articulation within the domain of language stands in an autonomous relation to other ways of manifesting themselves in the culture, or indeed of how to permutate them with these other means. But perhaps Obiechina might argue that none of these questions is envisaged or permissible in the context. Nevertheless, to describe certain cultures as "oral" in contradistinction obviously from "written" cultures, already assumes a dominant relation between language and nonlinguistic features in a culture. This relation certainly need not be causal, but it is unavoidably determinative to merit the descriptive emphasis.

There is also the additional question of the character of these values, attitudes, and feeling-structures. Are they essential immutable features of a culture? If they are, presumably they would be transposed inevitably to the new literate culture in the event of a historical, cultural transformation from an oral to a writing situation. If they are not, the writing situation would necessarily lead to the formation of a new set of values, attitudes and emotive structures. But this is not what Obiechina says. The African literati, he claims, manifest these oral psychic and noetic elements in the emergent novelistic medium as an inimitable substantialist feature of their consciousness. But the contradiction here should be obvious. If there is an essential oral consciousness, then it should be matched by an equally essential literate one. In this sense, Havelock, Ong, Goody, and Olson are at least consistent. The problem arises when there is a transformational situation, where an ostensibly fixed oral consciousness acquires the technology of writing. Does it not acquire a fixed literate consciousness with it as well? If it does, surely this can only mean that either the oral consciousness was not fixed in the first place, or the subject acquires in itself two fixedly contradictory consciousnesses.

In any case, most literary critics are content merely to describe or evaluate the specific literary features of their texts and hesitate to be drawn into the wider philosophical and psychological implications of their analyses. In the context of African literature, this regrettable reluctance has not, interestingly enough, dampened the enthusiasm with which scholars produce detailed analyses of what they imagine is "the oral style" of their subjects. What does this consist of? Economy of expression, spare and uncluttered language, "normal" syntax, communal imagery and symbolism, at least according to Chinweizu and others in *Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature* (241-247). For these authors, true African fiction modelled after the oral style would reflect:

> communalist ethos; unexaggerated prominence of the individual within his society; the open and healthy treatment of sex . . . the utilization of proverbs; succinctness of descriptions . . . the use of stock characters and situations in parabolic presentations, magic, ghosts, and the supernatural; characterization through allusions, praise names and metaphors. (159)

The authors are not done with these contestable generic claims about fiction, but indeed generalize their remarks for all of literature:

> Orature, being auditory, places high value on lucidity, normal syntax and precise and apt imagery. . . . Efficient structure and logistics is valued in orature, for it takes one through to the climax without tedious or unnecessary diversions. (247)

Although it may sound as a harsh judgement to make, random and unsystematic thoughts such as the above constitute the substantive contribution of this over-rated book to the pursuit of African poetics. For all we need to ask is this: is the espousal of communalist ethos true of all African oral narratives, if indeed this is what the authors mean by "African narrative tradition"? Are these features a function of a cultural narrative style or of individual raconteurs working within recognizable repertoires of oral narrative genres, forms and traditions or even degrees of artistic skill? Can we speak of the complexity of characterization in heroic narratives as reliant on stock characters?

For the authors, African literature is one stable, unitary formation, transmissible from generation to generation. But the very nature of oral literature and the structure of its communication makes this eminently impossible. Every oral performance is in many ways a unique performance. Literary forms in oral tradition, as in written, have no eternal existence, but live and die, are resurrected and transformed in various ways. Genres and performance traditions as well as styles are as multiple, possibly more varied than in the written tradition. The idea of an essential African oral tradition is more than a pious myth; it is a laughable one. It greatly impoverishes our understanding of literature in Africa.

But above all, it is quite significant how, using almost identical language, *Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature* repeats the arguments of Ong. In so doing, it not only throws us back to the treacherous paths we have trodden so far, but actually ends up defeating the major plank of the authors' argument. For the similarity shows that there is nothing uniquely African about the oral style. All it reveals is that, as the thesis has often been presented, societies whose medium of verbal transmission is entirely oral have a certain stylistic tendency. And the truth of this position remains untested.

In the field of oral literature itself, certain literary elements have commonly been held as characteristically oral, and to this we shall now turn. Of all the features of oral poetry, the one held to be most distinctive by many scholars is repetition. As Finnegan mentions, some scholars "unequivocally regard repetition (including parallelism and formulaic expression) as characteristic of oral literature [and] even the yardstick by which oral can definitively be distinguished from written literature" (*Oral Poetry* 127 ff.). Undoubtedly, as one recent work of Isidore Okpewho shows, in African oral literature, just like other oral literatures, repetition plays an extremely important stylistic function (70-88). It is not only of practical or utilitarian value in oral performance, but it is an aesthetic touchstone of oral art in general. Repetition helps the oral artist to organise his material and master

the limitations of memory; it is also necessary for the fuller and more assured assimilation of information by the audience. More than this, many of those stylistic features which are recognisably *oral*, for example, formulae and parallelism, are merely instances of repetition, which in principle and practice range from simple lexical or phrasal recurrences to more structurally elaborate forms, including repeated motifs of theme, character, and action, and even of the binary forms of (psycho)logical life, as structuralists have argued.

However, anyone who goes on "to take the occurrence, or a specific proportion, of repetition as a touchstone for differentiating between 'oral' and 'written' styles is . . . bound to be disappointed" (Finnegan, *Oral Poetry* 130). The concept of repetition is so wide and its application so various that to delimit it in more precise definition is to lose its universality. Moreover, Finnegan further argues, stylistically speaking, repetition is at the heart of all poetry and is the means for distinguishing poetry from prose in all cultural traditions. Indeed, if there is anything we have learned from structuralist poetics, it is the repetitive nature of all literature. While oral literature might make repetition particularly explicit, it is a stylistic feature that belongs almost intrinsically to all verbal art.

Finnegan has noted the underlying premise beneath the theory of the special significance of repetition in oral art. Quoting the example of the work of J. Gonda, A. Olrik and others, she argues that repetition has often been seen by several anthropologists as part of the primeval nature of "primitive man." Since "primitive man" (Ong's primarily "oral man") is averse to change, and is dependent on constant re-enactment and repetition of old rituals, this issues in the ritualistic repetition characteristic of his literature.[6] Spells, charms, and magical incantation of all sorts are an especially apt realization of this (see Ong, *The Presence* 161-69; *Orality and Literacy* 31-77). Finnegan dismisses these and similar assumptions by the patent lack of evidence to support the claims, pointing out that oral poetry does not typically occur in the tradition-bound contexts implied by these scholars:

> In any case, it would be surprising if any one generalization about style were to be valid for all the different genres of oral poetry. On the contrary, it is clear from a study of the style of oral (as of written) poetry that it is variety of stylistic features that differentiates genres from each other both within and between cultures. (*Oral Poetry* 132)

This is indeed a fitting conclusion. For part of the reason for the more exuberant assertions made about orality comes from ignoring the integrity and autonomy of the cultural practices in which oral communication predominates. A good example is oral literature. It surely makes more scholarly sense to study a particular oral literary piece in terms of its own individual style than to make grandiose pronouncements about the oral style. Such an individual focus does not preclude attention to the generic orientation of the work, the cultural context of its production, the role of the oral performer as a creative artist or the vast range of performance

factors that come into play in its actual execution. On the contrary it calls for, indeed requires, all these as a precondition for any meaningful and in-depth analysis. Additionally, unlike the work on writing culture in the last few decades, theoretical thinking on orality has almost always been a comparative project. For various reasons, several scholars seem unable to make any serious theoretical sense of orality except in contrast to literacy. This in turn is partly the consequence of another confusion, namely, the confusion of orality as a mere mode of communication, with orality as culturally conditioned expression of psychosocial values and states. It seems clear that until clarity is achieved at these preliminary levels, the discourse of orality and literacy will continue to be bedevilled by the sort of cyclical reasoning we have seen so far.

Going over the gamut of humanistic studies allows us to see the protean shapes that the discourse of orality and literacy assumes. It is to the credit of Walter Ong that he has unearthed, howbeit unintentionally, how cognate the oral-literate dichotomy is with the variety of cultural and racial prejudices which are dignified with the appellation of science (see Vail and White 24). No field seems to be immune from this . The insidious manner in which these sanctified prejudices are deployed in different discourses within the human sciences is one more proof that Western attempts to understand the Other seem to be useful only insofar as they shed light on the peculiar mentality of those who engage in such inquiries.

NOTES

1. Wiredu has recently addressed this question extensively. *See Cultural Universals and Particulars.* See also "Toward the Decolonizing of African Philosophy and Religion," accessible on the net at *www.clas.ufl.edu.* Other significant recent works include Owomoyela, *The African Difference* and Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity.* From a different perspective, there is also Norris *Against Relativism.*
2. Richard Rorty might indeed argue, following Kuhn, that systems of logic are culturally determined (322-33) .
3. See, among a host of other materials: Olson, "From Utterance to Text"; Hildyard and Olson, "Memory and Inferences"; Torrance and Olson; Hildyard and Hidi; Olson "Mind and Media"; Olson and Torrance, *Literacy and Orality.*
4. Translated and published in 1965 as *Sundiata.* But for a useful introduction to the question from the African viewpoint, see Falola.
5. See, however, Irele "The African Imagination" and especially "Orality, Literacy and African Literature."
6. The critique of the concept of "oral man" by Vail and White is notable in this respect.

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