The cultural impact of literacy

by Julie Nelson

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1. Introduction

In the last few decades, there has been an apparent shrinking of the world. Due largely to political upheaval and insufficient resources in rural areas, the amount of contact minority people groups have had with the outside world has dramatically increased. It is not uncommon in today’s global society to find speakers of minority languages in major urban areas, both in their country of origin and in foreign countries. Because of this globalization and urbanization, the cultural identity of minority communities is changing. There is, however, a desire to see the cultures of these people maintained. In academic circles, a frequent issue of debate is how to preserve the cultural identity of minority peoples. The opinions on this issue range from creating “outsider-free” zones where sections of land are guarded so that no nonnative person can enter, to trying to help the minority people learn to function in the national community by immersing them in the national language and culture. One issue of discussion is the role literacy plays in cultural change. Should literacy be promoted in oral cultures? Does it preserve a culture or destroy it?

Dennis Malone, in his article, “Dear Nolly…: Ruminations on the effects and practice of literacy in traditional societies” argues that cultural preservation is impossible. Whether or not literacy is introduced will not change the reality that cultures change. What needs to be discussed instead is whether literacy (1999). Notes on Literacy, 25(3–4).
brings a positive or negative change to a society (Malone 1994). He notes that literacy is not a change agent introduced into a society while its members sit passively by. For literacy to take place, the members of a society must participate in the process of learning to read and write. To determine the effect that literacy has on oral cultures, a broad spectrum of societal elements must be considered. Much research has been conducted on the impact that literacy makes upon oral cultures, but generally these studies look only at one element of culture. To adequately evaluate a cultural innovation, various aspects of the culture must be considered.

This article will examine the effects that literacy has on three elements of culture. First, its psychological impact will be considered. The changes that occur in the mind affect the individual first, but as many individuals are changed, the culture changes as a whole. Next, the impact of literacy on the social structure of a community will be considered. Finally, developmental changes caused by literacy will be discussed. This article will affirm the reality that literacy causes cultural change, but it will show that the benefits of this cultural innovation far outweigh the costs.

2. Psychological impact of literacy

When considering the impact of literacy on culture, a study of how learning to read affects the mind of the individual is necessary. Because a culture is made up of individuals, if there is a major change in the way many individuals think, the culture will be changed. Walter Ong is one of the better-known commentators on the psychological impacts of literacy on oral peoples. This article will discuss three of his observations: the impact of literacy on memory, its impact on methods of reasoning, and its impact on the understanding of meaning.

2.1. Memory

In a preliterate culture, the use of one’s memory is an integral part of communication. In a literate society, however, the use of memory is not essential, nor is it common. Because information can be stored on a piece of paper, it does not need to be stored in the mind. In an oral culture, memorization is necessary for communication and sharing of information. Memorization, however, is not necessarily the verbatim recitation that literate cultures hold to. Oral texts, which are used to entertain as well as to impart knowledge of the culture, traditions, and current news, make use of mnemonic devices such as rhythm, rhyme, and formulas (Ong 1982). The exact recitation of these stories and texts is not required. The orator takes the story and puts it in a framework of his or her own formulae. The resulting story communicates the required information but in the style of the speaker.

In a literate society, the concept of memorization changes. When a text is written, it has a decided form. Therefore, the memorization of that text needs to be exactly as it was written. The speaker is no longer in control of the text, rather the text controls the speaker. “Learning to read and write disables the oral poet…. It introduces into his mind the concept of a text as controlling the narrative and thereby interferes with the oral composing processes” (Ong 1982:59). The introduction of literacy into a culture affects the concept of memorization and hinders the creativity of oral poets. When oral cultures rely more and more on written texts for their entertainment and information, the creativity involved in memorization becomes obsolete.

2.2. Abstract reasoning

The way the mind deals with concepts changes from oral to written cultures. In oral cultures, concepts are considered on a situational level and not on a broader, abstract level. Ong (1982) cites a study by A. R. Luria to illustrate this point. In his study, Luria questioned illiterate and literate people on a variety of topics. He found that illiterate people, when given a list of objects, were not able to state, which did not belong. The literate people were able to group the words “hammer,” “saw,” and “hatchet” together, while excluding the word “log.” Illiterates, on the other hand, were not able to distinguish the tools from the nontool because the tools are used on the log. In another test, Luria looked at the logic skills of the literates versus the illiterates. When given the information that precious metals do not rust and that gold is a precious metal then asked if gold rusts, the literates had no problem answering that gold does not rust, whereas the illiterates were unable to answer the question correctly.

Ong explains that the issue at hand is one of familiarity. “An oral culture simply does not deal in such items as geometrical figures, abstract categorization, formal logical reasoning processes, definitions, or even comprehensive descriptions, or articulated self-analysis…” (page 55). When a person learns to read and write, they begin to organize their world in a different manner. They are forced to develop skills that are more abstract, such as understanding that symbols can be put together to represent words and texts that contain meaning. This change in thinking develops the skill of abstract reasoning.

This aspect of psychological change as a result of literacy, in particular, has been challenged. Evidence has been presented that questions whether literacy is what causes these psychological changes or if the changes are caused by education. A study of the Vai people of Liberia seeks to answer this question. The Vai people have two different scripts, one that is taught in the schools and the other taught at home. Sherri Rae Clark discusses this study, saying that by studying the effects of literacy in the Vai culture, it is possible to separate the effects of literacy from the effects of education. “Scribner and Cole (1981) found little evidence that literacy per se caused transformations in cognitive processes. Schooling had much greater impact” (Clark 1984 LL). So there is some doubt as to the amount of impact literacy has on the development of analytical thinking. It cannot be denied, however, that because literacy does involve creating associations between symbols and sounds, a certain amount of abstract reasoning skills is developed.

2.3. Understanding of meaning

In written cultures, dictionaries have been created to standardize meaning. The meanings that dictionaries archive are based on history. These definitions are almost entirely composed of other words. When there is doubt of the meaning of a word, written societies turn to the dictionary to find its definition and confide in that meaning. It affects how, and in what context, a word will be used. In contrast, oral societies, where dictionaries do not exist, base meaning only on the present use of the word. Meaning in oral cultures is not comprised only of other words, rather, it is made up of gestures, facial expressions, and vocal inflection. A word’s meaning is based on the contexts in which it is, at present, being used. Because of this, Ong argues that oral societies live in the present. Historical information that is no longer relevant is disregarded. This implies that “the integrity of the past [becomes] subordinate to the integrity of the present” (Ong 1982:48). In other words, truth is based on what is known at the time. Stories can be altered (1999). Notes on Literacy, 25(3–4).
to present what is believed to be true in the present, whereas in cultures with writing, the past has been made concrete; it is harder to change facts to make them agree with what is believed in the present. Words maintain “layers” of meaning, even though many of those layers are not in common use. Meaning can only be changed or erased over long periods of time, as the layers become so obsolete that they are no longer valid.

3. Sociological impact of literacy

In considering the effects that literacy has on oral cultures, it is necessary to examine how societies as a whole have been changed, both for the positive and for the negative. Surprisingly, little study has been done on the positive effects that literacy has had in the social structures of oral peoples. Two positive results of literacy that have been observed in several areas are a higher view of self and culture and unification of ethnic groups.

3.1. Positive effects

James Daggett and Mary Ruth Wise have studied the effects literacy has had on a variety of language groups in Peruvian Amazonia. For many centuries, Peruvian tribal groups have been exploited and cheated. Traditionally, their education has been in Spanish, even though they do not understand it. “Each year the children returned illiterate, the barrier of Spanish language and culture too high for them to hurdle. After many years of this, the Chayahuita concluded that they were inferior, lacking the capacity to read like Spanish speakers” (Daggett and Wise 1992 LL). When a bilingual school was opened and people began to learn to read and write in their own language, their self-image was dramatically improved. The realization that their language was readable and transcribable helped the Chayahuita realize that their culture is not inferior to the dominant Spanish-speaking culture and that their language has value.

Another positive effect that has been observed in several areas as a result of literacy is the unification of language groups. “Part of the task of committing a language to writing is the selection of the most suitable dialect, since not all dialects can be written, and some are more central, prestigious, or easily understood than others” (Langdon 1997:23). As a result of the standardization of language through a writing system, speakers of different variants of a common language can begin to identify with each other, because they share a writing system. This phenomenon has been observed in Peruvian Amazonia. “There is an increased sense of ethnic identity and unity….This is substantiated by the appearance of organizations serving the entire group and by the development of literature and an improved self-image” (Daggett and Wise 1992 LL).

3.2. Negative effects

Along with the positive social changes that have been observed to take place when literacy is introduced into oral communities, several negative factors have also been noted. While literacy has frequently brought unity to language groups, occasionally different dialects want to have their own set of materials.

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Rather than coming together as a language group, the variant dialects separate themselves from the “standard dialect.”

In these cases, instead of increasing ethnic identity, literacy has served to divide it. In addition to dividing ethnic groups, the introduction of reading and writing can also bring about division within a community because of an increase in individualization.

In oral societies, all communication is through interaction. Without writing, communication cannot take place except through personal contact. Writing, on the other hand, allows information gathering to be done alone. Reading, although it can happen in groups, is normally an individual event. The members of a society, instead of interacting with each other, are able to isolate themselves. Whereas in oral cultures, entertainment happens as a community, “most daily activities are informal and oral” (Mogre 1987 LL); in written societies that sense of group is not necessary for entertainment. Because of literacy, a culture that traditionally would value interpersonal interaction begins to grow more individualistic. The sense of group identity can grow weaker, because there is no longer a focus on personal interaction for learning and entertainment.

In an oral culture, knowledge is shared interpersonally. Because of literature, there need not be personal contact when knowledge is imparted. Writing “separates the knower from the known and from other knowers. The individual acquires … a primacy in literate cultures unknown in oral cultures” (Clark 1984 LL). In addition, in an oral culture, since the collective knowledge of a people is entirely what the individuals know and remember, any one member can have a fairly large knowledge base relative to the total stock of cultural knowledge. In written cultures, since the memorization of information is not necessary and because of the vast amount of technical knowledge that has been acquired through research, the collective amount of knowledge of a society is as large as its literary base. “The mere size of the literate repertoire means that the proportion of the whole which any one individual knows must be infinitesimal in comparison with what obtains in oral culture…[thus the] individual [is prevented] from participating fully in the total cultural tradition to anything like the extent possible in non-literate society” (Goody and Watt 1968:57). Because the percentage of information that any one individual can know is so small, there is a sense of alienation and distancing within the culture. There is no longer a central knowledge base, rather everyone has a command of a distinct, small section of the corporate knowledge.

In addition to the isolation and distancing that can take place between the members of a society when it becomes literate, a shift in child/adult relations has also been observed. “The role of the aged becomes weakened. The literate persons who are knowledgeable question the authority of the old” (Mogre 1987 LL). This happens because of the new information gathering skills that are learned. Instead of relying on the teachings of their elders, children learn through reading. They are then able to refute what they had been taught by the older people of their community. In Samoa, schools have furthered the age conflict (Duranti and Ochs 1986). Traditional Samoan culture gives greater respect to the elders than to the children. Children are expected to accommodate their behavior and speech when relating to adults. The teaching of literacy has brought Western teaching techniques into the classroom. “In the classroom, the adult verbally accommodates (in terms of simplification and clarification) to the child to a greater extent than do adults outside this setting. In the classroom, the interactions are more child-centered; in other village settings, the interactions are more adult-centered. The net result is a shift in social expectations surrounding the roles of adult and child” (Duranti and Ochs 1986:227).
On the social level, there are significant changes brought about by the introduction of literacy in oral cultures. On the positive side, literacy can bring a higher view of the culture by demonstrating that the language is just as good as any written language. Literacy can also unify divergent dialectal groups. Negatively, though, literacy can cause an increase in individualism and distance and can upset the adult/child role. These negative factors need to be weighed, because they significantly affect the society.

### 4. Developmental impact of literacy

An adequate study of the effects that literacy has on oral cultures cannot be complete without a look at its effects on development. Development can be defined as “a process which enables human beings to realize their potential, build self-confidence, and lead lives of dignity and fulfillment” (South Commission 1990:10). Literacy, in and of itself should not be considered development, rather the inherent results that come from literacy. “The mere capacity to read and write will not in itself bring about development of any kind. The use of that capacity is crucial” (Robinson 1992 LL).

#### 4.1. Empowerment

Through literacy, people groups are empowered. For people who have been exploited by the outside world, literacy is the key to breaking that dominance. “Literacy is seen as an aspect of power distribution. Promoting literacy among the disadvantaged has the purpose of increasing their bargaining skills and therefore their power vis-à-vis exploitative structures and people” (Robinson 1992 LL). It is through literacy that communities can learn the rights that they have as citizens of their country. This empowerment can be seen in the indigenous groups of Peru. “Peruvian ethnic groups cannot escape [exploitation]: they cannot even initiate a just and fair dialogue with the governing civilization if they do not possess this weapon (literacy), the most powerful one in the Western world” (Ortiz in Daggett and Wise 1992 LL).

Historically, the tribal people of Peru have not known their rights. Many did not know how to count above three, and therefore they could not stand their own in business deals. They were defenseless to the encroachment of outsiders. Since literacy has been introduced, organizations have grown up amongst them, and they have had the power to lobby the government and demand their rights. Ideally, the Peruvian Amazon peoples would not have so much contact with outside forces, but the reality of the situation is that contact has come and will continue to affect their communities. According to Daggett and Wise (1992 LL), the “ability to relate to the pressures of outsiders is essential to the preservation of an ethnic group,” and that ability will only happen through literacy.

Only as literate communities can these people groups adequately deal with the pressures of the outside. Through literacy, communities defend themselves, and they speak out for themselves. Literacy gives communities a public voice. “Literacy is about having an outlet for your own view of the world” (McCaffery in Hamilton and Barton 1989:35). Having a public voice is key to self-preservation. Without literacy, a community has no public voice. Without a public voice, a community is powerless against the outside world.

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4.2. Women and literacy

It can be argued that the group most benefited by literacy is women, but overcoming the cultural forces that block women from learning to read and write is a significant task. The main obstacle that blocks women’s literacy is the role of women in traditional male-dominated societies (Latif 1996). Women are relegated to the background of society. They are expected to be virtuous wives and mothers who care for their families; their role is therefore in the home. Women’s literacy threatens that status quo. Practically, caring for a family is time-consuming. Women who have the responsibility of caring for children and husbands have little, if any, free time after gathering wood, cooking, cleaning, caring for crops, and any other responsibilities they may have. This problem is multiplied by early marriage. Girls, who would normally have opportunities for education, marry and have children at a young age. In addition, literacy is seen as being just for men. Culturally, it is more appropriate for men to learn to read and write than for women. Men are seen as having a greater ability to learn to read and a greater earning potential than women. If a family can afford to send only one person to school, it will be a male.

But, when these obstacles are overridden, “women’s education, [it has been found] plays an important role in reducing infant mortality, increasing the life expectancy of future generations, and improving child rearing and development” (Sands 1995:21). Since women are typically the caretakers of the family, increasing their health and hygiene practices has a direct influence on the health of the upcoming generations. Through literacy, women can learn how to care for themselves and others. One study showed that “a one percent increase in women’s literacy rate is three times more effective in reducing infant mortality than a one percent increase in the number of doctors” (page 21). Increased knowledge in nutrition, disease control, and general health practices greatly affects the health of a community.

Literacy among women also has been found to encourage the education of future generations. “Literacy makes women very conscientious and committed to the education of the next generation; it helps them to encourage their own children in their studies” (Sands 1995:23). When a woman learns to read, she is more likely to encourage her children to persevere in education. Since she has learned to read through time and effort, she knows how to relate to her children in the learning process and can encourage them to continue. Also, mothers who have learned to read are able to read to their children, which in turn, encourages them to learn to read.

In many societies, women take on the majority of the household work. They are responsible for the well being of their family, meaning they have to work all through the day and late into the night. In many societies, they are exploited and looked down upon. Literacy “enables women to increase their self-confidence, improve their self-esteem, become aware of their civil rights, improve their income-earning capabilities, and play an active role in family and community decision making. Literacy is a means for women to participate on equal terms in the process of social development and change, therefore, literacy is a tool for women’s empowerment” (Sands 1995:24). As in communities as a whole, women are empowered by literacy. Literacy increases their knowledge of the world and their rights within the world. Being able to read impacts the health of entire communities, since women are the main caregivers in families.

5. Conclusion

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The reality that literacy affects culture both for the positive and for the negative cannot be denied. On a cognitive level, literacy alters society. How the mind sees the world and processes it is changed. Socially, roles are redefined and the concept of a social community is altered. At the same time, the society’s self-image is strengthened. Developmentally, literacy empowers communities and individuals and gives a foundation for development in health and agriculture. If cultures were isolated and had no contact with each other, it could be argued that literacy has an overall negative effect on cultures. However, the world, as it is today, is not made up of many isolated people groups. Communities interact with each other. The technological world has not created a sanctuary for preliterate peoples, rather it has sought to use and exploit those cultures for its own benefit. Given this reality, literacy is essential for maintaining ethnic identity. Because of the amount of crosscultural contact in today’s world, it is clear that the benefits of literacy far outweigh the costs.

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Citations


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