

The link between writing, technology and development: insights from Jack Goody

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Abstract

In today's information age, information is power. This article examines Jack Goody's pioneering theories, as found in two of his major books, and applies them to the African society. Lack of information means no progress or development. Useful information is acquired mainly through reading and writing. And these two life skills are in turn acquired in the process of education. Reading and writing, that is to say literacy, are therefore directly linked to development. Because of this link, people are either progressive or retrogressive. This dichotomy of human society may not be so distinct today as individuals are increasingly getting literate. Goody is a British social scientist who has studied human societies from a historical-anthropological perspective. He places written communication centre-stage in the evolution of human societies. It emerges, from the two books, that his theories are highly pertinent to the developing world, and especially to Kenya.

KEYWORDS: Writing, literacy, development, Kenya, Jack Goody.

Introduction

While the fundamental significance of the spoken language for human interaction is widely acknowledged, that of writing is less well-known. Few people, perhaps none, have contributed towards understanding the role of written communication as has Jack Goody. This is why we have chosen to look critically at two of his greatest books in relation to a developing country, Kenya. His work as a whole gives great insights into some of the major challenges in the world today. And if more people in Kenya and in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole had greater awareness of his research work, we are in no doubt that there would be reason for more optimism and hope in Kenyan (African) society than at present.

Before giving a brief academic profile of J. Goody, we shall shed light on the terms "writing" and "development". The profile will be followed by a presentation of the main pertinent points in Goody's two better-known books, which presentation will in turn be followed by a discussion linking the two books to the Kenyan (African) case. Thereafter we wind up our study of Goody and provide a concise bibliography.

Lead Terms

Due to structural reasons, "lead terms" in this article refers to the two concepts of "writing" and "development". This is in a bid to distinguish them from "keywords" as given in the abstract. And for the sake of thoroughness, we shall try to give exhaustive definitions of the lead terms while also indicating the specific meanings they are accorded in this paper.

Writing

According to I. J. Gelb (1973: 8)¹, writing manifests itself not through objects but through marks (traces) on the objects or on any other support. It is a system of signs realized most often by the action of hands which draw, paint, scratch or make cuts. Different languages attribute a similar meaning to the verb “to write” which corresponds to the French verb *écrire* and to the Old Norse (origin of Nordic languages) term “rita” (to engrave), and to the German *reissen, einritzen* (to tear, to incise). In Greek, Latin, Gothic, Slavic and Semitic languages, the same meanings are attributed to the concept of writing. Gelb, who coined the term “grammatology” which is the science that studies writing, defines writing as a system of intercommunication between human beings by means of visible, conventional signs (op. cit., p. 15). Writing began, he notes, when man learnt to communicate his thoughts and sentiments using visible signs that could be understood not only by himself but also by any other person more or less initiated into this system.

Writing as it is today evolved from early forms whereby man used images (drawings, paintings) to communicate. There exists three main types of writing today: logo-syllabic writing, syllabic and alphabetic writing. Logo-syllabic writing is both logographic and syllabic, using one sign (logogram) to represent one or more words in a language, while at the same time a sign can represent one or more syllables in the same language. Examples of logo-syllabic systems are Sumerian, Hittite and Chinese. Syllabic writing is a simplification of logographic writing. Here there are completely no logograms. Examples of syllabic writing are the Japanese, Cypriot, western Semitic writing (Phoenician, Hebrew and Aramaic) and the Elamite cuneiform. In the third writing type, alphabetic, a sign generally stands for one or more phonemes of a language. In English, for instance, **b** represents the phoneme /b/, although **c** is valid for /k/ and /s/, as in the words *commence* and *concern*.

The isolation of the individual sounds in writing is the distinctive mark of the alphabet, and thus the Greeks were the first to create an alphabet, improving the egypto-semitic syllabary they had earlier borrowed. Three types of alphabet are in use today all over the world and they vary from one another by the way vowels are written. Alphabetic type I alphabets include the Greek and Latin alphabets where vowels are indicated using distinct signs: a, e, i, o, u. In type II alphabets, vowels bear distinct diacritic marks, e.g. ì, !, ð, ”, attached to the sign (consonant) or an internal modification of the sign (consonant) indicates a vowel². Examples of type II alphabets are the Aramaic, Hebrew and Arabic. In type III alphabets, the diacritic marks attached to the sign or an internal modification of the sign indicates a vowel. Examples of type III alphabets include the languages of India and the Ethiopian alphabet³. There exist hundreds of alphabets worldwide today which appear different

¹ We wish to point out that many of the references for this article were read in the French language version.

²The diacritic mark has to be on a consonant because the only difference between a consonant and a vowel in Type II alphabets is the presence/absence of the diacritic mark (Gelb1973: 219).

from one another but all of which apply the principles of the Greek alphabet. Alphabetic writing is found in all the four corners of the world and it dominates man's civilization at present. In summary, writing can be said to have evolved from the Egyptian logo-syllabic form, to the western Semitic and eventually to the Greek alphabet (Gelb, 1973: 227). This is what could be termed a full (complete) life cycle of writing. "Writing" in this paper thus includes all three types mentioned above.

Development

The term "development" is multi-faceted. In this paper the concept is used with a socio-economic bias. It is viewed as "change plus growth" (Colm & Geiger, 1962, cited in Ayot & Briggs, 1992: 88) creating a society with certain basic qualities which are (Ayot and Briggs, 1992: 86 -114):

- a). Sufficiency – the absence of want; the reduction and elimination of poverty, unemployment and inequality.
- b). Security – law and order, national defence and freedom from abuse by officialdom, employer, landlord, etc.
- c). Satisfaction – changes in attitudes, beliefs and customs; life should be enjoyable, i.e. sufficiency should be achieved but not at too high a cost in terms of the overall quality of life.
- d). Stimulus – it should be a society of individual opportunity to develop one's full potential; the right of the individual to take part in decision-making at all levels in his society.

J. Miguda-Attyang' (in Owino 2002: 293) defines development as "the absence of poverty and improved living conditions for the marginalized poor" (sic) and she says that "by poverty one generally implies the following characteristics: small per capita incomes, poor health and educational systems, lack of industrialisation, absence of economic growth and development, a legacy of large-scale illiteracy and lack of skills and modern attitudes" (loc. cit.).

Research confirms a direct correlation between education (perceived as literacy – the ability to read and write) and development. Even if education is defined philosophically as both the process of bringing up and of instruction, as both a process and a product, it remains a *sine qua non* condition for development. Serious studies reveal that "increases in literacy affect the output per worker. They also affect life expectancy (Ayot & Briggs, op. Cit:98-99). In a survey of 83 less developed countries (LDCs) the World Bank (1984) found that the ten fastest growing economies during the period 1960 - 1977 started with above average literacy rates. The study was made with regard to adult literacy rates (which reflect primary education, basic education, adult education and so on). Japan and South Korea have achieved outstanding growth

³ Gelb (1973: 208) names the Indian alphabets as the Kharosthi and the Brahmi (this script gave birth to the Devanagari writing which is part of Sanskrit today). Though he does not give details of the Ethiopian writing, it is known that the Amharic script was one of the best known forms of early Ethiopian writing (cf. Battestini 1997: 63 - 105).

rates, for example, that seem clearly to have been associated, in large part, with early mass literacy and numeracy and advanced education (see more on S. Korea in the Discussion below). The crucial role of education in development had been confirmed from as early as 1960 by names like T. W. Schultz, Heinrich von Thunen (1968) and M. Todaro (1977, 1982).

When scholars were beginning to recognise the importance of human capital in development in the very early 1960s (Ayot & Briggs, op. cit.), Jack Goody had already published several ethnographic works from his studies of West African indigenous communities. In 1954, he had written *The Ethnography of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, West of the White Volta* (London: Colonial office). In 1957 he published "Anomie in Ashanti?" in *Africa*, 27, 356 - 365. One of his latest publications is a book titled *La peur des représentations (The Fear of Symbols)*, out in 2003. Jack Goody takes an anthropological view of literacy. From his work he has come to classify human beings into two clear categories: the written cultures (those that have practised reading and writing over many centuries) and the oral cultures (those without a writing tradition). We now provide a brief profile of this anthropologist, after which we shall proceed to give highlights of two of his greatest books.

Jack Goody

A former chairman of the department of social anthropology at the University of Cambridge in England, Goody is now Emeritus Professor at this University. He has written extensively since the 1940s. The major themes of his written works include social organization, orality and writing. Many of his books have been translated into French, German, Italian, Spanish, inter alia. Some of his acclaimed titles translated into the French language appeared in 1977, 1986, 1987 and 2003 (see Bibliography).

It is his two books which appeared in 1977 and 1986 that we study in this article since they outline the theoretical and conceptual framework of Goody's work. The versions on which this study is based are those in the French language (1979 and 1986 respectively). Following are the highlights of the two books.

Highlights (1)

GOODY Jack (1977) **The Domestication of the Savage Mind**. London: Cambridge University Press. [French version : *La raison graphique, la domestication de la pensée sauvage*. Paris: Minuit.1979.

The first chapter of this book opens with a citation of L. S. Senghor: "Emotion is black, reason is Hellenic." The chapter then quotes Claude-Lévi Strauss (*La pensée sauvage*, 1962) who categorizes all mankind as either primitive or civilized. This dichotomy is between the wild and the domesticated, to use the words of Lévi-Strauss who gives more distinctive characteristics of the two categories as follows,

Domesticated	Wild	Page number in Lévi-Strauss (1962)
cold	hot	309
modern	neolithic	24
uses science of abstraction	his science is concrete	3
scientific thinking	mythical thinking	33, 44
scientific knowledge	magical thought	33
he is an engineer	he uses crude tools	30
abstract thinking	relies on intuition, imagination and perception	24
uses concepts	uses signs	28
uses historical information	timeless (a-chronological) thinking	348

At the end of this chapter Goody asserts that the adoption of written forms of communication was an intrinsic condition for the development of nation states and of more abstract and impersonal systems of government. He says further that once the simple verbal exchange could be replaced, less importance was now attached to face-to-face meetings which previously had quasi-religious significance (p. 57).

Chapter two narrates how West African traditional societies came into contact with Islam, the Arab culture and with Arabic writing. This gave rise to what Goody calls a "limited writing culture" in northern Nigeria and to the north of Ghana. By the end of the 19th century, one al-Hajj 'Umar was running a school in a small town called Salaga in the north of Ghana. He had by this time published his first book in Cairo and he also ran a library which he had inherited from his father. Among the individuals who formed the small African intelligentsia in the region were Dan Fodio and his brother Abdallah. Writing, though limited, had introduced a specific intellectual tradition in this part of Africa.

Whereas the earliest proof of writing in Ghana is the Gonja Chronicle which was written in the 18th century AD (op. cit., p. 164), the earliest known schools in ancient Syria go back to the 18th century BC. Finally, written communication is more esteemed than oral communication but the price of book knowledge was the reduction in spontaneity of expression.

Highlights (2)

GOODY J. 1986. **The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society**. London: Cambridge University Press. [French version : *La logique de l'écriture, aux origines des sociétés humaines*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1986].

Pursuant to J. Goody's thesis on the critical role of writing in economic and scientific development, this book sort of takes off from where the previous one stopped. It gives more details and more evidence on why writing is a valid yardstick for classifying humanity into oral and written cultures. In Chapter One, on pages 16 - 17, we learn that in the simplest societies (those without writing), religion was an

ethnic affair. Each ethnic group had its own religion into which new members were born and initiated. The author cites two examples: the Kikuyu ethnic group of Kenya and the Ashanti of Ghana. He says that one had to be a Kikuyu to practise the Kikuyu religion and likewise for the Ashanti. This ethnic religion was also in a constant state of flux. It could vary greatly over centuries. Whereas the religions of written cultures (religions of the Book, as Goody calls them, e.g. the Christian Bible, the Muslim Quran, the Hindu Vedas) are generally those of evangelization (proselytization), those of oral cultures were not. Each ethnic group spoke its own language and they hardly bothered about neighbouring ethnic groups except in times of conflict.

When Arabs came into contact with sub-Saharan Africa, bringing along Koranic education, access to reading and writing was for the very few. Religious chiefs (zealots) exercised a near-total monopoly on education, especially on advanced training in matters of writing.

The religions of the Book had a lot of access to property, notably to land which they used to build hospitals and schools (p. 30). The schools in turn kept the Church close to the ruling elite. But the twin bureaucracies, Church and State, sometimes disagree and even quarrel.

Writing made book-keeping possible. When people were able to count, they began to keep accounts. This boosted more organized commerce and businesses became more profitable and lasted longer too. The mastery of figures also lent more precision to science. Measuring and observation instruments were invented. Technology had arrived. The keeping of books was in large part responsible for the birth of science, contends Goody on page 72.

The organized storage of information allowed the separation of the person and the office in business. Without this separation, an enterprise easily dies with its founder as all the assets are sub-divided and shared out among the family members. The only way that the enterprise can continue to exist is when its break-up into small units is avoided. For this to happen, family members have to distinguish between the continuity of the organization and sharing out the assets among heirs (p. 115).

By way of written wills, writing helps reduce wrangling within the family and within the society (pp. 150 - 153). But on the other hand it is writing which causes social stratification, promoting the exploitation of the ignorant masses by the privileged literati. And if none of the big faiths of the world today, namely Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Taoism and Islam, is either African or American in origin, it is because the written cultures of China, India, Japan and the Middle East protected their societies not against military defeat but against a cultural onslaught from the marauding European powers. The written cultures reduced the hegemonic effects of contact with the conquering nations.

Since early times, writing always conferred a privileged status on whoever practised it. In ancient Egypt, scribes were second in rank only to royalty by virtue of their ability to read and write (pp. 14ff). In pre-colonial days, the first people to get formal education formed a thinking elite which started questioning the administration of their society. This is how writing played a major role in the attainment of political independence earlier in Asia than in Africa (pp. 93 - 94).

Discussion

The two books of Goody are very well researched and informative. Indeed the author bases himself on either documented proof or particular cases prior to making a pertinent observation. For instance when he says that African traditional religions were ethnic and pantheistic, or that written wills reduce family feuds, it is true information that can be proved so even today. This is why we find the two books challenging, albeit with one or two begging questions, as we now explain. Firstly, let us look at the earliest dates of writing in Western Europe and in Africa.

While it is clear that the Romans were writing in Latin even before the French and German languages got to be written in 842 A.D., Goody states that in sub-Saharan Africa writing does not go back earlier than the 18th century AD. This prompts one to wonder whether Goody was aware that in Ethiopia and in Madagascar specific forms of writing, not based on the Greek alphabet, existed well before 1000 AD. (S. Battestini 1997: 85, cf. I. J. Gelb). Or did he find that Ethiopia and Madagascar had little to do with black Africa? Even so he should have been aware that Arab traders started visiting the East African coast as early as the 7th century AD. S. N. Bogonko, a Kenyan professor of education, claims that Koranic schools (madrassas) existed along the Kenyan coast in the 7th century AD, teaching Africans "how to read and write and do arithmetic in Arabic script." (Bogonko 1992: 11). Come the 16th century, Europeans (especially the Portuguese) were setting up dwellings along the Kenyan coast. Arabs had already been there and the Kiswahili language had already been born of mixed marriages between the Arabs and African Bantu coastal ethnic groups. Goody says nothing at all of this early Islamic presence and its cultural effects on local populations.

The economic gap between Western Europe and sub-Saharan Africa is beyond dispute. It could most logically be explained by the different degrees to which formal education has marked both Western Europe and sub-Saharan Africa⁴. Europe had its industrial revolution from the renaissance period of the 16th century. At this time writing was already available to the simpler citizens of Western Europe. In France, for instance, one out of four French people was literate at the beginning of the 17th century (R. Lancrey-Javal 2001: 528). This early culture of scientific awareness is what explains, for example, that leading global industrial concerns today such as Bouygues, Lagardère, Michelin and Peugeot (from France), Fiat from Italy and the American group Ford all started as family enterprises, as did the world's number 1

⁴ Some theories of economic development have it that the economic gap between Western Europe and sub-Saharan Africa is a direct result of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Our perspective is that even this Trade could have been a direct result of the scientific gap that existed, and still exists, between the two regions.

supermarket chain Wal-Mart. Today they are major world economic players. Sub-Saharan Africa has no enterprises that can be compared to such established names, save for one or two names from the Republic of South Africa which would predictably belong to some white person. On the economic front, the success of the West (a written culture) has no parallel in sub-Saharan Africa. Even countries of the Orient which have had written cultures are economically way ahead of sub-Saharan Africa. According to S. Bindra (2003), the three richest individuals (men) in the world (all from the USA) own(ed) more wealth than the twenty-eight poorest nations on earth combined (virtually all of these countries are in sub-Saharan Africa). Does wealth creation today not go hand in hand with good book-keeping and planning?

Lastly, the role of the religions of the Book in fostering education can be seen in the fact that early Christians founded some of the first institutions of higher learning in the United Kingdom (Cambridge and Oxford), in the United States (Harvard, Yale and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)) and even in Africa, Muslims built a university at Timbuktu in Mali in the 16th century and made the city a revered centre of learning. We have already quoted Bogonko (1992: 11) affirming that Koranic schools existed along the Kenyan coast in the 7th century AD. As for western formal education, again it is the Christian missionaries who built the first primary and secondary schools in Kenya: Maseno (Primary) School in 1906 and Alliance High School in 1926. The latter was the first secondary school in Kenya and opened its doors to African children on March 1st 1926. Europeans in Kenya already had primary schools for themselves, e.g. the Rift Valley Academy at Kijabe was built by the African Inland Mission (AIC) in 1902 while Catholics opened a similar school in Nairobi in 1903 (Bogonko, *op. cit.*, p.24). Between 1902 and 1950, school education was largely in the hands of (western) Christian missionaries. This meant that when Kenya became independent in 1963, the new government was composed of Africans who had gone through the Christian schools. As of 1968, for instance, three-quarters of cabinet ministers in the Kenyatta Government were former students of just one secondary school, Alliance High School, which had been founded by the Church Missionary Society (today called the Anglican Church), African Inland Mission (Church) and the Presbyterian Church. The Mwai Kibaki Government (of Kenya), 2002 – 2007, was composed of ministers most of whom attended these same Christian schools, mainly Mang'u High School which was built by the Catholic Church and remains Catholic, and Alliance High School which is still protestant. President Mwai Kibaki, his Vice-President Moody Awori⁵, Education Minister Prof. George Saitoti, Agriculture Minister Kipruto Arap Kirwa, among others, attended Mang'u. Powerful Justice and Constitutional Affairs Minister Kiraitu Murungi, Prof. Peter Anyang'-Nyong'o, Minister for Planning and National Development, David Mwiraria, Finance Minister, Ochilo Ayacko, Energy Minister, Amos Wako, Attorney-General and Evan Gicheru, the Chief Justice, are Alliance (High School) alumni, while the Health Minister Charity K. Ngilu is an alumnus of the Alliance Girls' High School, sister school to Alliance High and founded in 1948, the first secondary school for girls in Kenya, by the same Protestant missionaries. Most of the best public secondary schools in Kenya today in terms of academic performance were founded by Christian groups which have continued to lead even in the provision of university education by

⁵ The Vice-president had attended Maseno School before joining Mang'u High School.

establishing private universities in Kenya. Therefore, as J. Goody notes, the religions of the Book, in this case the Church, remain very close to the seat of power in Kenya. The religions of the Book (Christianity and Islam) also constructed health facilities in addition to educational ones. Catholic mission hospitals are common in Kenya, whereas the best eye hospital countrywide belongs to the Presbyterian Church. PCEA Kikuyu Hospital which houses this eye unit is situated in the same place as the two Alliance Schools.

But as Goody observes still, the Church and the State may fall out at times. In Kenya this is very true. During the Daniel T. Arap Moi regime (1978 - 2002), the Church constantly kept the Government on its toes on matters of political reform and governance. Even on matters of health, when the Government supports modern methods of family planning, the Catholic Church, which counts 28 % of Kenya's population (Atlaséco 2004: 144) among its faithful, has preferred traditional birth-control methods such as abstinence and strongly opposed even the introduction of sex education in the school system.

On the economic front, that Kenyans were poorer in 2003, 40 years after political independence, than they were when they obtained this independence in 1963 leaves a lot to be desired. Between 2003 and 2007, Kenya's economic growth picked up dramatically even though income distribution continued to be unequal with the richest 10% of Kenyans owning over 90% of the country's wealth. Does it have to be said that the privileged few who control the country's resources are more literate than the suffering masses? The rich have greater access to educational and medical facilities. Education, as Goody writes, has once again proved a tool for social oppression.

As we already noted earlier in this article (pp. 6, 12-13), education correlates directly to development. To corroborate Goody's theories, S. Bindra (2003) compares Kenya's development record with that of South Korea. When Kenya became politically independent in 1963 it had many things in common with South Korea. "Both countries were mired in grinding poverty, with little or no industrialization to speak of. Both had similar, very low, per capita income levels"⁶. By the dawn of 2003, 40 years later, Kenya was on its knees; in 2006, 60% of its citizens lived in absolute poverty with less than US\$ 1 to spend in a day⁷, it was "an international pariah." South Korea, on the other hand, had emphasized education and research. Knowing its own market had limited capacity, it targeted export growth. It instilled discipline in its workforce. It used foreign aid wisely and judiciously. It recorded average annual economic growth rates of over 8% throughout the 1970s and 1980s. By 2003, it was no longer a "developing" country. It enjoyed a per capita income close to that of European nations with centuries of growth behind them. A modern miracle!

⁶ in the *Sunday Nation* newspaper, May 11, 2003, p. 16.

⁷ P. Redfern, in *Sunday Nation* newspaper, 10.12.2006, p. 7.

⁸ In early 2004, two-thirds of South Korea's households had broadband Internet connectivity, confirms *The Economist* magazine of 12 May 2004, p. 15.

That same year, 68% of South Koreans were connected to a broadband internet service, compared to 8% in Western Europe⁸. Kenya had no broadband connectivity to speak of; it had below 2 million mobile telephone connections and just 300, 000 fixed telephone lines. South Korea had 25 million landlines and nearly 30 million mobile connections.

How did the Koreans do it? Planning. They had a strategy. They thought things through. After the Korean War which ended in 1953, the S. Korean Government used American aid specifically on infrastructure: a nationwide network of primary and secondary schools; modern roads and a modern communication network. Koreans emphasize education and knowledge, and place great value on its acquisition. Literacy levels are extremely high. Almost 40% of high school graduates enter college each year. S. Korea has a very highly developed university system, with particularly aggressive investments in engineering. The country (measuring 99, 000 km² compared to Kenya's 582, 000 km²) has over 100 regular universities and colleges and an additional hundred technical colleges⁹. S. Korean companies over a certain size are required to provide training as a matter of law. Most senior managers hold advanced degrees and doctorates. Research and development (R & D) is given great emphasis, both at company and country levels; over 3% of S. Korea's GNP is invested in research, as compared to 3% for the USA, only 1.5% for countries of the European Union, and just 0. 02% for Kenya¹⁰. Kenya is still struggling to guarantee (free) universal primary education introduced in January 2003 while less than 1% of Kenya's children in the eligible age-group receive university education¹¹.

"Economic development provides the basis for all other kinds of development, including (the personal development of the) individual"¹². But education is also more directly useful at the individual level. Wherever one looks in the world, one finds that there is a positive correlation between the amount of education an average individual has and his level of earnings. Many such calculations have been made and the resultant earnings profiles have been drawn up both for more and less developed countries and the results are always the same. The more education an individual receives, the more he earns in his lifetime. Research has further shown that more educated couples have fewer, healthier, more-intelligent and longer-living children. Similarly, it has been proved that more educated women get married at an older age and get fewer children. What's more, more education makes a better-informed individual with better health¹³. Nabiswa M. W. summarizes it all by saying that education is the single most vital element in combating poverty, empowering women, promoting human rights and democracy, protecting the environment and controlling population growth¹⁴.

⁹ In October 2005, Japan (surface area of 377, 801 km²), the world's second economy, had more than 1000 universities, with 120 universities being in Tokyo alone (*The Daily Nation*, Kenya's number 1 newspaper, October 4, 2005, p. 9). Kenya has 25 universities in total in 2008, of which 10 in Nairobi.

¹⁰ According to C. Allègre in *L'Express*, 9 November 2003, p.31, for the European Union, and Caleb Atemi in the *Sunday Standard* newspaper of 30 October 2004, Nairobi, Kenya, p. 31, for Kenya.

¹¹ S. Bindra, *Sunday Nation*, 14 September 2003, p. 15, cf. Stiglitz, 2005: 15.

¹² Ayot & Briggs, op. cit., p. 27.

¹³ Op. cit., pp. 101-107.

¹⁴ Achola, Mondoh, Ngong'ah & Shiundu, 2004: 107.

Conclusion

Jack Goody concludes that writing is a valid criterion for calling human beings either primitive or civilized. Simon Battestini concurs that literacy “provokes, stimulates and consolidates all development” (1997: 192). But the latter insists that sub-Saharan Africa had its own forms of writing. “The concept of writing entails alphabetic, syllabic, mythographic as well as logographic forms of writing and sub-Saharan Africa had more of the last three forms than the first one”¹⁵. For this reason, Battestini observes that the debate as to whether black Africa is a written culture or not “should remain open and it should take into account the African input” (op. cit., p. 168). Battestini notes that the best book in the French language written by Goody is *La logique de l’écriture, aux origines des sociétés humaines*¹⁶. But the bibliography of this book does not contain a single author from sub-Saharan Africa (Battestini, op. cit., p. 168). Goody does not even mention in his works the theory that writing in ancient Egypt could have been borrowed from black civilizations of the Upper and Mid-Nile regions such as the Nubians¹⁷. Battestini therefore accuses Goody of harbouring prejudices which render his argument euro-centric and lop-sided.

Another major authority on writing is D. R. Olson, a cognitive psychologist who has researched the concept of writing a lot and published his findings widely. In his book titled in English *The World on paper: the conceptual and cognitive implications of writing and reading*¹⁸, he analyses Goody’s theories on writing and dismisses them as incomplete. He says that writing per se does not make one person superior to another. What writing does is that it transforms how the human brain thinks and uses language. Quoting Vygotski and Luria, Scribner and Cole, inter alia, Olson affirms that writing turns speech and language into objects of reflexion and analysis (Olson 1998: 50ff). In other words writing organizes and structures man’s thinking, reasoning and memory, making man more effective and more efficient in his work.

Reading and writing enable man to plan how best to utilize limited natural resources at his disposal in a sustainable manner. That, at least, is proof that writing is useful to man. Aristotle said that writing is a representation of speech, but Samuel Johnson said that words are the signs of ideas, and it is now clear that writing does much more than represent speech.

Failing to plan is planning to fail. This is why we still find Goody’s reasoning pertinent to Kenya’s development. And we wonder, if sub-Saharan Africa had a written culture, why did it (the culture, tradition) not help Africans against being dominated by other races? Why does (black) Africa remain a pariah continent in matters of development today? While the debate rages as to whether the black African culture is written or oral, one truth is that literacy promotes economic development and sub-Saharan African countries such as Kenya should urgently accord priority to

¹⁵ Battestini, op. cit., p. 274.

¹⁶ Paris, Armand Colin, 1986 (original version: *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*).

¹⁷ Van Sertima, 1989, cited in Battestini, 1997: 388ff.

¹⁸ London: Cambridge University Press. 1994. The French language version is *L’Univers de l’écrit*. Paris: Editions de Retz. 1998.

literacy, education and manpower development before they can achieve meaningful economic progress. Nathan O. Ogechi is of the same conviction as he says (in Owino R., 2002: 329) that “formal education is crucial to the attainment of improved socio-economic development in Kenya.” However, development planning should guard against the phenomena of jobless university graduates and investing in low quality education which is counter-productive.

Finally, sub-Saharan Africa needs to take development planning all the more seriously because according to the World Bank’s Human Development Report 2004, this is the only region in the world where poverty increased between 1980 and 2004. And going by current development trends in the region, the attainment of World Bank advisor Professor Jeffrey Sachs’ Millennium Development Goals by 2015 is but a pipe-dream.

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