

## 2. Some Psychodynamics of Orality

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### *Sounded Word as Power and Action*

**A**s a result of the work just reviewed, and of other work which will be cited, it is possible to generalize somewhat about the psychodynamics of primary oral cultures, that is, of oral cultures untouched by writing. For brevity, when the context keeps the meaning clear, I shall refer to primary oral cultures simply as oral cultures.

Fully literate persons can only with great difficulty imagine what a primary oral culture is like, that is, a culture with no knowledge whatsoever of writing or even of the possibility of writing. Try to imagine a culture where no one has ever "looked up" anything. In a primary oral culture, the expression "to look up something" is an empty phrase: it would have no conceivable meaning. Without writing, words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. They are sounds. You might "call" them back—"recall" them. But there is nowhere to "look" for them. They have no focus and no trace (a visual metaphor, showing dependency on writing), not even a trajectory. They are occurrences, events.

To learn what a primary oral culture is and what the nature of our problem is regarding such a culture, it helps first to reflect on the nature of sound itself as sound (Ong 1967, pp. 111-38). All sensation takes place in time, but sound has a special relationship to time unlike that of the other fields that register in human sensation. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word "permanence," by the time I get the "-nence," the "perma-" is gone, and has to be gone.

There is no way to stop sound and have sound. I can stop a moving picture camera and hold one frame fixed on the screen. If I stop the movement of sound, I

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have nothing—only silence, no sound at all. All sensation takes place in time, but no other sensory field totally resists a holding action, stabilization, in quite this way. Vision can register motion, but it can also register immobility. Indeed, it favors immobility, for to examine something closely by vision, we prefer to have it quiet. We often reduce motion to a series of still shots the better to see what motion is. There is no equivalent of a still shot for sound. An oscillogram is silent. It lies outside the sound world.

For anyone who has a sense of what words are in a primary oral culture, or a culture not far removed from primary orality, it is not surprising that the Hebrew term *dabar* means “word” and “event.” Malinowski (1923, pp. 451, 470–81) has made the point that among “primitive” (oral) peoples generally language is a mode of action and not simply a countersign of thought, though he had trouble explaining what he was getting at (Sampson 1980, pp. 223–6), since understanding of the psychodynamics of orality was virtually nonexistent in 1923. Neither is it surprising that oral peoples commonly, and probably universally, consider words to have great power. Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power. A hunter can see a buffalo, smell, taste, and touch a buffalo when the buffalo is completely inert, even dead, but if he hears a buffalo, he had better watch out: something is going on. In this sense, all sound, and especially oral utterance, which comes from inside living organisms, is “dynamic.”

The fact that oral peoples commonly and in all likelihood universally consider words to have magical potency is clearly tied in, at least unconsciously, with their sense of the word as necessarily spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven. Deeply typographic folk forget to think of words as primarily oral, as events, and hence as necessarily powered: for them, words tend rather to be assimilated to things, “out there” on a flat surface. Such “things” are not so readily associated with magic, for they are not actions, but are in a radical sense dead, though subject to dynamic resurrection (Ong 1977, pp. 230–71).

Oral peoples commonly think of names (one kind of words) as conveying power over things. Explanations of Adam’s naming of the animals in Genesis 2:20 usually call condescending attention to this presumably quaint archaic belief. Such a belief is in fact far less quaint than it seems to unreflective chirographic and typographic folk. First of all, names do give human beings power over what they name: without learning a vast store of names, one is simply powerless to understand, for example, chemistry and to practice chemical engineering. And so with all other intellectual knowledge. Secondly, chirographic and typographic folk tend to think of names as labels, written or printed tags imaginatively affixed to an object named. Oral folk have no sense of a name as a tag, for they have no idea of a name as something that can be seen. Written or printed representations of words can be labels; real, spoken words cannot be.

### *You Know What You Can Recall: Mnemonics and Formulas*

In an oral culture, restriction of words to sound determines not only modes of expression but also thought processes.

You know what you can recall. When we say we know Euclidean

geometry, we mean not that we have in mind at the moment every one of its propositions and proofs but rather that we can bring them to mind readily. We can recall them. The theorem "You know what you can recall" applies also to an oral culture. But how do persons in an oral culture recall? The organized knowledge that literates today study so that they "know" it, that is, can recall it, has, with very few if any exceptions, been assembled and made available to them in writing. This is the case not only with Euclidean geometry but also with American Revolutionary history, or even baseball batting averages or traffic regulations.

An oral culture has no texts. How does it get together organized material for recall? This is the same as asking, "What does it or can it know in an organized fashion?"

Suppose a person in an oral culture would undertake to think through a particular complex problem and would finally manage to articulate a solution which itself is relatively complex, consisting, let us say, of a few hundred words. How does he or she retain for later recall the verbalization so painstakingly elaborated? In the total absence of any writing, there is nothing outside the thinker, no text, to enable him or her to produce the same line of thought again or even to verify whether he or she has done so or not. *Aides-mémoire* such as notched sticks or a series of carefully arranged objects will not of themselves retrieve a complicated series of assertions. How, in fact, could a lengthy, analytic solution ever be assembled in the first place? An interlocutor is virtually essential: it is hard to talk to yourself for hours on end. Sustained thought in an oral culture is tied to communication.

But even with a listener to stimulate and ground your thought, the bits and pieces of your thought cannot be preserved in jotted notes. How could you ever call back to mind what you had so laboriously worked out? The only answer is: Think memorable thoughts. In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulaic expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero's "helper," and so on), in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form. Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems. Mnemonic needs determine even syntax (Havelock 1963, pp. 87-96, 131-2, 294-6).

Protracted orally based thought, even when not in formal verse, tends to be highly rhythmic, for rhythm aids recall, even physiologically. Jousse (1978) has shown the intimate linkage between rhythmic oral patterns, the breathing process, gesture, and the bilateral symmetry of the human body in ancient Aramaic and Hellenic targums, and thus also in ancient Hebrew. Among the ancient Greeks, Hesiod, who was intermediate between oral Homeric Greece and fully developed Greek literacy, delivered quasi-philosophic material in the formulaic verse forms that structured it into the oral culture from which he had

emerged (Havelock 1963, pp. 97-8, 294-301).

Formulas help implement rhythmic discourse and also act as mnemonic aids in their own right, as set expressions circulating through the mouths and ears of all. "Red in the morning, the sailor's warning; red in the night, the sailor's delight." "Divide and conquer." "To err is human, to forgive is divine." "Sorrow is better than laughter, because when the face is sad the heart grows wiser" (Ecclesiastes 7:3). "The clinging vine." "The sturdy oak." "Chase off nature and she returns at a gallop." Fixed, often rhythmically balanced, expressions of this sort and of other sorts can be found occasionally in print, indeed can be "looked up" in books of sayings, but in oral cultures they are not occasional. They are incessant. They form the substance of thought itself. Thought in any extended form is impossible without them, for it consists in them.

The more sophisticated orally patterned thought is, the more it is likely to be marked by set expressions skillfully used. This is true of oral cultures generally from those of Homeric Greece to those of the present day across the globe. Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963) and fictional works such as Chinua Achebe's novel *No Longer at Ease* (1961), which draws directly on Ibo oral tradition in West Africa, alike provide abundant instances of thought patterns of orally educated characters who move in these oral, mnemonically tooled grooves, as the speakers reflect, with high intelligence and sophistication, on the situations in which they find themselves involved. The law itself in oral cultures is enshrined in formulaic sayings, proverbs, which are not mere jurisprudential decorations, but themselves constitute the law. A judge in an oral culture is often called on to articulate sets of relevant proverbs out of which he can produce equitable decisions in the cases under formal litigation before him (Ong 1978, p. 5).

In an oral culture, to think through something in non-formulaic, non-patterned, non-mnemonic terms, even if it were possible, would be a waste of time, for such thought, once worked through, could never be recovered with any effectiveness, as it could be with the aid of writing. It would not be abiding knowledge but simply a passing thought, however complex. Heavy patterning and communal fixed formulas in oral cultures serve some of the purposes of writing in chirographic cultures, but in doing so they of course determine the kind of thinking that can be done, the way experience is intellectually organized. In an oral culture, experience is intellectualized mnemonically. This is one reason why, for a St. Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430), as for other savants living in a culture that knew some literacy but still carried an overwhelmingly massive oral residue, memory bulks so large when he treats of the powers of the mind.

Of course, all expression and all thought is to a degree formulaic in the sense that every word and every concept conveyed in a word is a kind of formula, a fixed way of processing the data of experience, determining the way experience and reflection are intellectually organized, and acting as a mnemonic device of sorts. Putting experience into any words (which means transforming it at least a little bit—not the same as falsifying it) can implement its recall. The formulas characterizing orality are more elaborate, however, than are individual words, though some may be relatively simple: the *Beowulf*-poet's "whale-road" is a formula (metaphorical) for the sea in a sense in which the term "sea" is not.

### *Further Characteristics of Orally Based Thought and Expression*

Awareness of the mnemonic base of the thought and expression in primary oral cultures opens the way to understanding some further characteristics of orally based thought and expression in addition to its formulaic styling. The characteristics treated here are some of those which set off orally based thought and expression from chirographically and typographically based thought and expression, the characteristics, that is, which are most likely to strike those reared in writing and print cultures as surprising. This inventory of characteristics is not presented as exclusive or conclusive but as suggestive, for much more work and reflection is needed to deepen understanding of orally based thought (and thereby understanding of chirographically based, typographically based, and electronically based thought).

In a primary oral culture, thought and expression tend to be of the following sorts.

#### (i) Additive Rather Than Subordinative

A familiar instance of additive oral style is the creation narrative in Genesis 1:1-5, which is indeed a text but one preserving recognizable oral patterning. The Douay version (1610), produced in a culture with a still massive oral residue, keeps close in many ways to the additive Hebrew original (as mediated through the Greek from which the Douay version was made):

In the beginning God created heaven and earth. And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved over the waters. And God said: Be light made. And light was made. And God saw the light that it was good; and he divided the light from the darkness. And he called the light Day, and the darkness Night; and there was evening and morning one day.

Nine introductory "ands." Adjusted to sensibilities shaped more by writing and print, the *New American Bible* (1970) translates:

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw how good the light was. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day" and the darkness he called "night." Thus evening came, and morning followed—the first day.

Two introductory "ands," each submerged in a compound sentence. The Douay renders the Hebrew *wə* or *wa* ("and") simply as "and." The New American renders it "and," "when," "then," "thus," or "while," to provide a flow of narrations with the analytic, reasoned subordination that characterizes writing (Chafe 1982) and that appears more natural in twentieth-century texts. Oral structures often look to pragmatics (the convenience of the speaker—Sherzer, 1974, reports lengthy

public oral performances among the Cuna incomprehensible to their hearers). Chirographic structures look more to syntactics (organization of the discourse itself), as Givón has suggested (1979). Written discourse develops more elaborate and fixed grammar than oral discourse does because to provide meaning it is more dependent simply upon linguistic structure, since it lacks the normal full existential contexts which surround oral discourse and help determine meaning in oral discourse somewhat independently of grammar.

It would be a mistake to think that the Douay is simply "closer" to the original today than the New American is. It is closer in that it renders *we* or *wa* always by the same word, but it strikes the present-day sensibility as remote, archaic, and even quaint. Peoples in oral cultures or cultures with high oral residue, including the culture that produced the Bible, do not savor this sort of expression as so archaic or quaint. It feels natural and normal to them somewhat as the New American version feels natural and normal to us.

Other instances of additive structure can be found across the world in primary oral narrative, of which we now have a massive supply on tape (see Foley, 1980, for listing of some tapes).

### (ii) Aggregative Rather Than Analytic

This characteristic is closely tied to reliance on formulas to implement memory. The elements of orally based thought and expression tend to be not so much simple integers as clusters of integers, such as parallel terms or phrases or clauses, antithetical terms or phrases or clauses, epithets. Oral folk prefer, especially in formal discourse, not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess, but the beautiful princess; not the oak, but the sturdy oak. Oral expression thus carries a load of epithets and other formulary baggage which high literacy rejects as cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight (Ong 1977, pp. 188–212).

The clichés in political denunciations in many low-technology, developing cultures—enemy of the people, capitalist war-mongers—that strike high literates as mindless are residual formulary essentials of oral thought processes. One of the many indications of a high, if subsiding, oral residue in the culture of the Soviet Union is (or was a few years ago, when I encountered it) the insistence on speaking there always of "the Glorious Revolution of October 26"—the epithetic formula here is obligatory stabilization, as were Homeric epithetic formulas "wise Nestor" or "clever Odysseus," or as "the glorious Fourth of July" used to be in the pockets of oral residue common even in the early twentieth-century United States. The Soviet Union still announces each year the official epithets for various *loci classici* in Soviet history.

An oral culture may well ask in a riddle why oaks are sturdy, but it does so to assure you that they are, to keep the aggregate intact, not really to question or cast doubt on the attribution. (For examples directly from the oral culture of the Luba in Zaire, see Faik-Nzuji 1970.) Traditional expressions in oral cultures must not be dismantled: it has been hard work getting them together over the generations, and there is nowhere outside the mind to store them. So soldiers are brave and princesses beautiful and oaks sturdy forever. This is not to say that

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there may not be other epithets for soldiers or princesses or oaks, even contrary epithets, but these are standard, too: the braggart soldier, the unhappy princess, can also be part of the equipment. What obtains for epithets obtains for other formulas. Once a formulaic expression has crystallized, it had best be kept intact. Without a writing system, breaking up thought—that is, analysis—is a high-risk procedure. As Lévi-Strauss has well put it in a summary statement “the savage [i.e. oral] mind totalizes” (1966, p. 245).

### (iii) Redundant or “Copious”

Thought requires some sort of continuity. Writing establishes in the text a “line” of continuity outside the mind. If distraction confuses or obliterates from the mind the context out of which emerges the material I am now reading, the context can be retrieved by glancing back over the text selectively. Backlooping can be entirely occasional, purely *ad hoc*. The mind concentrates its own energies on moving ahead because what it backloops into lies quiescent outside itself, always available piecemeal on the inscribed page. In oral discourse, the situation is different. There is nothing to backloop into outside the mind, for the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered. Hence the mind must move ahead more slowly, keeping close to the focus of attention much of what it has already dealt with. Redundancy, repetition of the just-said, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track.

Since redundancy characterizes oral thought and speech, it is in a profound sense more natural to thought and speech than is sparse linearity. Sparsely linear or analytic thought and speech is an artificial creation, structured by the technology of writing. Eliminating redundancy on a significant scale demands a time-obviating technology, writing, which imposes some kind of strain on the psyche in preventing expression from falling into its more natural patterns. The psyche can manage the strain in part because handwriting is physically such a slow process—typically about one-tenth of the speed of oral speech (Chafe 1982). With writing, the mind is forced into a slowed-down pattern that affords it the opportunity to interfere with and reorganize its more normal, redundant processes.

Redundancy is also favored by the physical conditions of oral expression before a large audience, where redundancy is in fact more marked than in most face-to-face conversation. Not everyone in a large audience understands every word a speaker utters, if only because of acoustical problems. It is advantageous for the speaker to say the same thing, or equivalently the same thing, two or three times. If you miss the “not only . . .” you can supply it by inference from the “but also . . .” Until electronic amplification reduced acoustical problems to a minimum, public speakers as late as, for example, William Jennings Bryan (1860–1925) continued the old redundancy in their public addresses and by force of habit let them spill over into their writing. In some kinds of acoustic surrogates for oral verbal communication, redundancy reaches fantastic dimensions, as in African drum talk. It takes on the average around eight times as many words to say something on the drums as in the spoken language (Ong 1977, p. 101).

The public speaker's need to keep going while he is running through his

mind what to say next also encourages redundancy. In oral delivery, though a pause may be effective, hesitation is always disabling. Hence it is better to repeat something, artfully if possible, rather than simply to stop speaking while fishing for the next idea. Oral cultures encourage fluency, fulsomeness, volubility. Rhetoricians were to call this *copia*. They continued to encourage it, by a kind of oversight, when they had modulated rhetoric from an art of public speaking to an art of writing. Early written texts, through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, are often bloated with "amplification," annoyingly redundant by modern standards. Concern with *copia* remains intense in western culture so long as the culture sustains massive oral residue—which is roughly until the age of Romanticism or even beyond. Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–59) is one of the many fulsome early Victorians whose pleonastic written compositions still read much as an exuberant, orally composed oration would sound, as do also, very often, the writings of Winston Churchill (1874–1965).

#### (iv) Conservative or Traditionalist

Since in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation. Knowledge is hard to come by and precious, and society regards highly those wise old men and women who specialize in conserving it, who know and can tell the stories of the days of old. By storing knowledge outside the mind, writing and, even more, print downgrade the figures of the wise old man and the wise old woman, repeaters of the past, in favor of younger discoverers of something new.

Writing is of course conservative in its own ways. Shortly after it first appeared, it served to freeze legal codes in early Sumeria (Oppenheim 1964, p. 232). But by taking conservative functions on itself, the text frees the mind of conservative tasks, that is, of its memory work, and thus enables the mind to turn itself to new speculation (Havelock 1963, pp. 254–305). Indeed, the residual orality of a given chirographic culture can be calculated to a degree from the mnemonic load it leaves on the mind, that is, from the amount of memorization the culture's educational procedures require (Goody 1968, pp. 13–14).

Of course oral cultures do not lack originality of their own kind. Narrative originality lodges not in making up new stories but in managing a particular interaction with this audience at this time—at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation, for in oral cultures an audience must be brought to respond, often vigorously. But narrators also introduce new elements into old stories (Goody 1977, pp. 29–30). In oral tradition, there will be as many minor variants of a myth as there are repetitions of it, and the number of repetitions can be increased indefinitely. Praise poems of chiefs invite entrepreneurship, as the old formulas and themes have to be made to interact with new and often complicated political situations. But the formulas and themes are reshuffled rather than supplanted with new materials.

Religious practices, and with them cosmologies and deep-seated beliefs,

also change in oral cultures. Disappointed with the practical results of the cult at a given shrine when cures there are infrequent, vigorous leaders — the “intellectuals” in oral society, Goody styles them (1977, p. 30)—invent new shrines and with these new conceptual universes. Yet these new universes and the other changes that show a certain originality come into being in an essentially formulaic and thematic noetic economy. They are seldom if ever explicitly touted for their novelty but are presented as fitting the traditions of the ancestors.

(v) Close to the Human Lifeworld

In the absence of elaborate analytic categories that depend on writing to structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience, oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings. A chirographic (writing) culture and even more a typographic (print) culture can distance and in a way denature even the human, itemizing such things as the names of leaders and political divisions in an abstract, neutral list entirely devoid of a human action context. An oral culture has no vehicle so neutral as a list. In the latter half of the second book, the *Iliad* presents the famous catalogue of the ships—over four hundred lines—which compiles the names of Grecian leaders and the regions they ruled, but in a total context of human action: the names of persons and places occur as involved in doings (Havelock 1963, pp. 176–80). The normal and very likely the only place in Homeric Greece where this sort of political information could be found in verbalized form was in a narrative or a genealogy, which is not a neutral list but an account describing personal relations (cf. Goody and Watt 1968, p. 32). Oral cultures know few statistics or facts divorced from human or quasi-human activity.

An oral culture likewise has nothing corresponding to how-to-do-it manuals for the trades (such manuals in fact are extremely rare and always crude even in chirographic cultures, coming into effective existence only after print has been considerably interiorized—Ong 1967, pp. 28–9, 234, 258). Trades were learned by apprenticeship (as they still largely are even in high-technology cultures), which means from observation and practice with only minimal verbalized explanation. The maximum verbal articulation of such things as navigation procedures, which were crucial to Homeric culture, would have been encountered not in any abstract manual-style description at all but in such things as the following passage from the *Iliad* i. 141–4, where the abstract description is embedded in a narrative presenting specific commands for human action or accounts of specific acts:

As for now a black ship let us draw to the great salt sea  
 And therein oarsmen let us advisedly gather and thereupon a hecatomb  
 Let us set and upon the deck Chryseis of fair cheeks  
 Let us embark. And one man as captain, a man of counsel, there must be.

(quoted in Havelock 1963, p. 81; see also *ibid.*, pp. 174–5). Primary oral culture is

little concerned with preserving knowledge of skills as an abstract, self-subsistent corpus.

(vi) Agonistically Toned

Many, if not all, oral or residually oral cultures strike literates as extraordinarily agonistic in their verbal performance and indeed in their lifestyle. Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. It separates the knower from the known. By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle. Proverbs and riddles are not used simply to store knowledge but to engage others in verbal and intellectual combat: utterance of one proverb or riddle challenges hearers to top it with a more apposite or a contradictory one (Abrahams 1968; 1972). Bragging about one's own prowess and/or verbal tongue-lashings of an opponent figure regularly in encounters between characters in narrative: in the *Iliad*, in *Beowulf*, throughout medieval European romance, in *The Mwindo Epic* and countless other African stories (Okpewho 1979; Obiechina 1975), in the Bible, as between David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17:43-7). Standard in oral societies across the world, reciprocal name-calling has been fitted with a specific name in linguistics: flyting (or fliting). Growing up in a still dominantly oral culture, certain young black males in the United States, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, engage in what is known variously as the "dozens" or "joning" or "sounding" or by other names, in which one opponent tries to outdo the other in vilifying the other's mother. The dozens is not a real fight but an art form, as are the other stylized verbal tongue lashings in other cultures.

Not only in the use to which knowledge is put, but also in the celebration of physical behavior, oral cultures reveal themselves as agonistically programmed. Enthusiastic description of physical violence often marks oral narrative. In the *Iliad*, for example, Books viii and x would at least rival the most sensational television and cinema shows today in outright violence and far surpass them in exquisitely gory detail, which can be less revulsive when described verbally than when presented visually. Portrayal of gross physical violence, central to much oral epic and other oral genres and residual through much early literacy, gradually wanes or becomes peripheral in later literary narrative. It survives in medieval ballads but is already being spoofed by Thomas Nashe in *The Unfortunate Traveler* (1594). As literary narrative moves toward the serious novel, it eventually pulls the focus of action more and more to interior crises and away from purely exterior crises.

The common and persistent physical hardships of life in many early societies of course explain in part the high evidence of violence in early verbal art forms. Ignorance of physical causes of disease and disaster can also foster personal tensions. Since the disease or disaster is caused by something, in lieu of physical causes the personal malevolence of another human being—a magician, a witch—can be assumed and personal hostilities thereby increased. But violence in oral art forms is also connected with the structure of orality itself. When all verbal communication must be by direct word of mouth, involved in the give-and-take

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The other side of agonistic name-calling or vituperation in oral or residually oral cultures is the fulsome expression of praise which is found everywhere in connection with orality. It is well known in the much-studied present-day African oral praise poems (Finnegan 1970; Opland 1975) as all through the residually oral western rhetorical tradition stretching from classical antiquity through the eighteenth century. "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him," Marcus Antonius cries in his funeral oration in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (v. ii. 79), and then proceeds to praise Caesar in rhetorical patterns of encomium which were drilled into the heads of all Renaissance schoolboys and which Erasmus used so wittily in his *Praise of Folly*. The fulsome praise in the old, residually oral, rhetoric tradition strikes persons from a high-literacy culture as insincere, flatulent, and comically pretentious. But praise goes with the highly polarized, agonistic, oral world of good and evil, virtue and vice, villains and heroes.

The agonistic dynamics of oral thought processes and expression have been central to the development of western culture, where they were institutionalized by the "art" of rhetoric, and by the related dialectic of Socrates and Plato, which furnished agonistic oral verbalization with a scientific base worked out with the help of writing. More will be said about this later.

#### (vii) Empathetic and Participatory Rather Than Objectively Distanced

For an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known (Havelock 1963, pp. 145-6), "getting with it." Writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for "objectivity," in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing. The "objectivity" which Homer and other oral performers do have is that enforced by formulaic expression: the individual's reaction is not expressed as simply individual or "subjective" but rather as encased in the communal reaction, the communal "soul." Under the influence of writing, despite his protest against it, Plato had rejected the poets from his Republic, for studying them was essentially learning to react with "soul," to feel oneself identified with Achilles or Odysseus (Havelock 1963, pp. 197-233). Treating another primary oral setting over two thousand years later, the editors of *The Mwindo Epic* (1971, p. 37) call attention to a similar strong identification of Candi Rureke, the performer of the epic, and through him of his listeners, with the hero Mwindo, an identification which actually affects the grammar of the narration, so that on occasion the narrator slips into the first person when describing the actions of the hero. So bound together are narrator, audience, and character that Rureke has the epic character Mwindo himself address the scribes taking down Rureke's performance: "Scribe, march!" or "O scribe you, you see that I am already going." In the sensibility of the narrator and his audience the hero of the oral performance assimilates into the oral world even the transcribers who are de-orologizing it into text.

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## (viii) Homeostatic

By contrast with literate societies, oral societies can be characterized as homeostatic (Goody and Watt 1968, pp. 31-4). That is to say, oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance.

The forces governing homeostasis can be sensed by reflection on the condition of words in a primary oral setting. Print cultures have invented dictionaries in which the various meanings of a word as it occurs in datable texts can be recorded in formal definitions. Words thus are known to have layers of meaning, many of them quite irrelevant to ordinary present meanings. Dictionaries advertise semantic discrepancies.

Oral cultures of course have no dictionaries and few semantic discrepancies. The meaning of each word is controlled by what Goody and Watt (1968, p. 29) call "direct semantic ratification," that is, by the real-life situations in which the word is used here and now. The oral mind is uninterested in definitions (Luria 1976, pp. 48-99). Words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs. Word meanings come continuously out of the present, though past meanings of course have shaped the present meaning in many and varied ways, no longer recognized.

It is true that oral art forms, such as epic, retain some words in archaic forms and senses. But they retain such words, too, through current use—not the current use of ordinary village discourse but the current use of ordinary epic poets, who preserve archaic forms in their special vocabulary. These performances are part of ordinary social life and so the archaic forms are current, though limited to poetic activity. Memory of the old meaning of old terms thus has some durability, but not unlimited durability.

When generations pass and the object or institution referred to by the archaic word is no longer part of present, lived experience, though the word has been retained, its meaning is commonly altered or simply vanishes. African talking drums, as used for example among the Lokele in eastern Zaire, speak in elaborate formulas that preserve certain archaic words which the Lokele drummers can vocalize but whose meaning they no longer know (Carrington 1974, pp. 41-2; Ong 1977, pp. 94-5). Whatever these words referred to has dropped out of Lokele daily experience, and the term that remains has become empty. Rhymes and games transmitted orally from one generation of small children to the next even in high-technology culture have similar words which have lost their original referential meanings and are in effect nonsense syllables. Many instances of such survival of empty terms can be found in Opie and Opie (1952), who, as literates, of course manage to recover and report the original meanings of the terms lost to their present oral users.

Goody and Watt (1968, pp. 31-3) cite Laura Bohannan, Emrys Peters, and Godfrey and Monica Wilson for striking instances of the homeostasis of oral cultures in the handing on of genealogies. In recent years among the Tiv people of Nigeria the genealogies actually used orally in settling court disputes have

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been found to diverge considerably from the genealogies carefully recorded in writing by the British forty years earlier (because of their importance then, too, in court disputes). The later Tiv have maintained that they were using the same genealogies as forty years earlier and that the earlier written record was wrong. What had happened was that the later genealogies had been adjusted to the changed social relations among the Tiv: they were the same in that they functioned in the same way to regulate the real world. The integrity of the past was subordinate to the integrity of the present.

Goody and Watt (1968, p. 33) report an even more strikingly detailed case of "structural amnesia" among the Gonja in Ghana. Written records made by the British at the turn of the twentieth century show that Gonja oral tradition then presented Ndewura Jakpa, the founder of the state of Gonja, as having had seven sons, each of whom was ruler of one of the seven territorial divisions of the state. By the time sixty years later when the myths of state were again recorded, two of the seven divisions had disappeared, one by assimilation to another division and the other by reason of a boundary shift. In these later myths, Ndewura Jakpa had five sons, and no mention was made of the two extinct divisions. The Gonja were still in contact with their past, tenacious about this contact in their myths, but the part of the past with no immediately discernible relevance to the present had simply fallen away. The present imposed its own economy on past remembrances. Packard (1980, p. 157) has noted that Claude Lévi-Strauss, T. O. Beidelman, Edmund Leach and others have suggested that oral traditions reflect a society's present cultural values rather than idle curiosity about the past. He finds this is true of the Bashu, as Harms (1980, p. 178) finds it also true of the Bobangi.

The implications here for oral genealogies need to be noted. A West African griot or other oral genealogist will recite those genealogies which his hearers listen to. If he knows genealogies which are no longer called for, they drop from his repertoire and eventually disappear. The genealogies of political winners are of course more likely to survive than those of losers. Henige (1980, p. 255), reporting on Ganda and Myoro kinglists, notes that the "oral mode . . . allows for inconvenient parts of the past to be forgotten" because of "the exigencies of the continuing present." Moreover, skilled oral narrators deliberately vary their traditional narratives because part of their skill is their ability to adjust to new audiences and new situations or simply to be coquettish. A West African griot employed by a princely family (Okpewho 1979, pp. 25-6, 247, n. 33; p. 248, n. 36) will adjust his recitation to compliment his employers. Oral cultures encourage triumphalism, which in modern times has regularly tended somewhat to disappear as once-oral societies become more and more literate.

#### (ix) Situational Rather Than Abstract

All conceptual thinking is to a degree abstract. So "concrete" a term as "tree" does not refer simply to a singular "concrete" tree but is an abstraction, drawn out of, away from, individual, sensible actuality; it refers to a concept which is neither this tree nor that tree but can apply to any tree. Each individual object

that we style a tree is truly "concrete," simply itself, not "abstract" at all, but the term we apply to the individual object is in itself abstract. Nevertheless, if all conceptual thinking is thus to some degree abstract, some uses of concepts are more abstract than other uses.

Oral cultures tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract in the sense that they remain close to the living human lifeworld. There is a considerable literature bearing on this phenomenon. Havelock (1978) has shown that pre-Socratic Greeks thought of justice in operational rather than formally conceptualized ways and the late Anne Amory Parry (1973) made much the same point about the epithet *amymōn* applied by Homer to Aegisthus: the epithet means not "blameless," a tidy abstraction with which literates have translated the term, but "beautiful-in-the-way-a-warrior-ready-to-fight-is-beautiful."

### *The Interiority of Sound*

In treating some psychodynamics of orality, we have thus far attended chiefly to one characteristic of sound itself, its evanescence, its relationship to time. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. Other characteristics of sound also determine or influence oral psychodynamics. The principal one of these other characteristics is the unique relationship of sound to interiority when sound is compared to the rest of the senses. This relationship is important because of the interiority of human consciousness and of human communication itself. It can be discussed only summarily here. I have treated the matter in greater fullness and depth in *The Presence of the Word*, to which the interested reader is referred (1967).

To test the physical interior of an object as interior, no sense works so directly as sound. The human sense of sight is adapted best to light diffusely reflected from surfaces. (Diffuse reflection, as from a printed page or a landscape, contrasts with specular reflection, as from a mirror.) A source of light, such as a fire, may be intriguing but it is optically baffling: the eye cannot get a "fix" on anything within the fire. Similarly, a translucent object, such as alabaster, is intriguing because, although it is not a source of light, the eye cannot get a "fix" on it either. Depth can be perceived by the eye, but most satisfactorily as a series of surfaces: the trunks of trees in a grove, for example, or chairs in an auditorium. The eye does not perceive an interior strictly as an interior: inside a room, the walls it perceives are still surfaces, outsides.

Taste and smell are not much help in registering interiority or exteriority. Touch is. But touch partially destroys interiority in the process of perceiving it. If I wish to discover by touch whether a box is empty or full, I have to make a hole in the box to insert a hand or finger: this means that the box is to that extent open, to that extent less an interior.

Hearing can register interiority without violating it. I can rap a box to find whether it is empty or full or a wall to find whether it is hollow or solid inside. Or I can ring a coin to learn whether it is silver or lead.

Sounds all register the interior structures of whatever it is that produces

them. A violin filled with concrete will not sound like a normal violin. A saxophone sounds differently from a flute: it is structured differently inside. And above all, the human voice comes from inside the human organism which provides the voice's resonances.

Sight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer. Vision dissects, as Merleau-Ponty has observed (1961). Vision comes to a human being from one direction at a time: to look at a room or a landscape, I must move my eyes around from one part to another. When I hear, however, I gather sound simultaneously from every direction at once: I am at the center of my auditory world, which envelopes me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence. This centering effect of sound is what high-fidelity sound reproduction exploits with intense sophistication. You can immerse yourself in hearing, in sound. There is no way to immerse yourself similarly in sight.

By contrast with vision, the dissecting sense, sound is thus a unifying sense. A typical visual ideal is clarity and distinctness, a taking apart (Descartes' campaigning for clarity and distinctness registered an intensification of vision in the human sensorium—Ong 1967, pp. 63, 221). The auditory ideal, by contrast, is harmony, a putting together.

Interiority and harmony are characteristics of human consciousness. The consciousness of each human person is totally interiorized, known to the person from the inside and inaccessible to any other person directly from the inside. Everyone who says "I" means something different by it from what every other person means. What is "I" to me is only "you" to you. And this "I" incorporates experience into itself by "getting it all together." Knowledge is ultimately not a fractioning but a unifying phenomenon, a striving for harmony. Without harmony, an interior condition, the psyche is in bad health.

It should be noted that the concepts interior and exterior are not mathematical concepts and cannot be differentiated mathematically. They are existentially grounded concepts, based on experience of one's own body, which is both inside me (I do not ask you to stop kicking my body but to stop kicking me) and outside me (I feel myself as in some sense inside my body). The body is a frontier between myself and everything else. What we mean by "interior" and "exterior" can be conveyed only by reference to experience of bodiliness. Attempted definitions of "interior" and "exterior" are inevitably tautological: "interior" is defined by "in," which is defined by "between," which is defined by "inside," and so on round and round the tautological circle. The same is true with "exterior." When we speak of interior and exterior, even in the case of physical objects, we are referring to our own sense of ourselves: I am *inside* here and everything else is *outside*. By interior and exterior we point to our own experience of bodiliness (Ong 1967, pp. 117–22, 176–9, 228, 231) and analyze other objects by reference to this experience.

In a primary oral culture, where the word has its existence only in sound, with no reference whatsoever to any visually perceptible text, and no awareness of even the possibility of such a text, the phenomenology of sound enters deeply into human beings' feel for existence, as processed by the spoken word. For the way in which the word is experienced is always momentous in psychic life. The

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centering action of sound (the field of sound is not spread out before me but is all around me) affects man's sense of the cosmos. For oral cultures, the cosmos is an ongoing event with man at its center. Man is the *umbilicus mundi*, the navel of the world (Eliade 1958, pp. 231-5, etc.). Only after print and the extensive experience with maps that print implemented would human beings, when they thought about the cosmos or universe or "world," think primarily of something laid out before their eyes, as in a modern printed atlas, a vast surface or assemblage of surfaces (vision presents surfaces) ready to be "explored." The ancient oral world knew few "explorers," though it did know many itinerants, travelers, voyagers, adventurers, and pilgrims.

It will be seen that most of the characteristics of orally based thought and expression discussed earlier in this chapter relate intimately to the unifying, centralizing, interiorizing economy of sound as perceived by human beings. A sound-dominated verbal economy is consonant with aggregative (harmonizing) tendencies rather than with analytic, dissecting tendencies (which would come with the inscribed, visualized word: vision is a dissecting sense). It is consonant also with the conservative holism (the homeostatic present that must be kept intact, the formulary expressions that must be kept intact), with situational thinking (again holistic, with human action at the center) rather than abstract thinking, with a certain humanistic organization of knowledge around the actions of human and anthropomorphic beings, interiorized persons, rather than around impersonal things.

The denominators used here to describe the primary oral world will be useful again later to describe what happened to human consciousness when writing and print reduced the oral-aural world to a world of visualized pages.