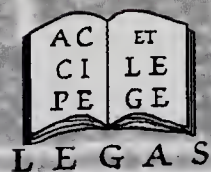


Simon Battestini

AFRICAN WRITING AND TEXT



Translated
by
Henri G. J. Evans



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Cover: *A Nsibidi text.*

From Talbot, P.A. 1912. *In the Shadow of the Bush*. London: Heinemann.
Story (8), Appendix G, p. 459.

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P211.3 .H3B3713 2000

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Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

Simon Battestini

African Writing and Text

(Language, Media & Education Studies; 10)

Translation of: *Écriture et texte*.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-894508-06-8

1. Writing communication--Africa. 2. Writing--Africa.
3. Africa--Civilization. 4. Semiotics--Africa. 5. African literature--
Social aspects. 6. Discourse analysis--Africa.
I. Evans, Henri G.J. II. Title. III. Series.

P211.3.A3B3713 2000

302.2'244'096

C00-901104-8

For further information and for orders:

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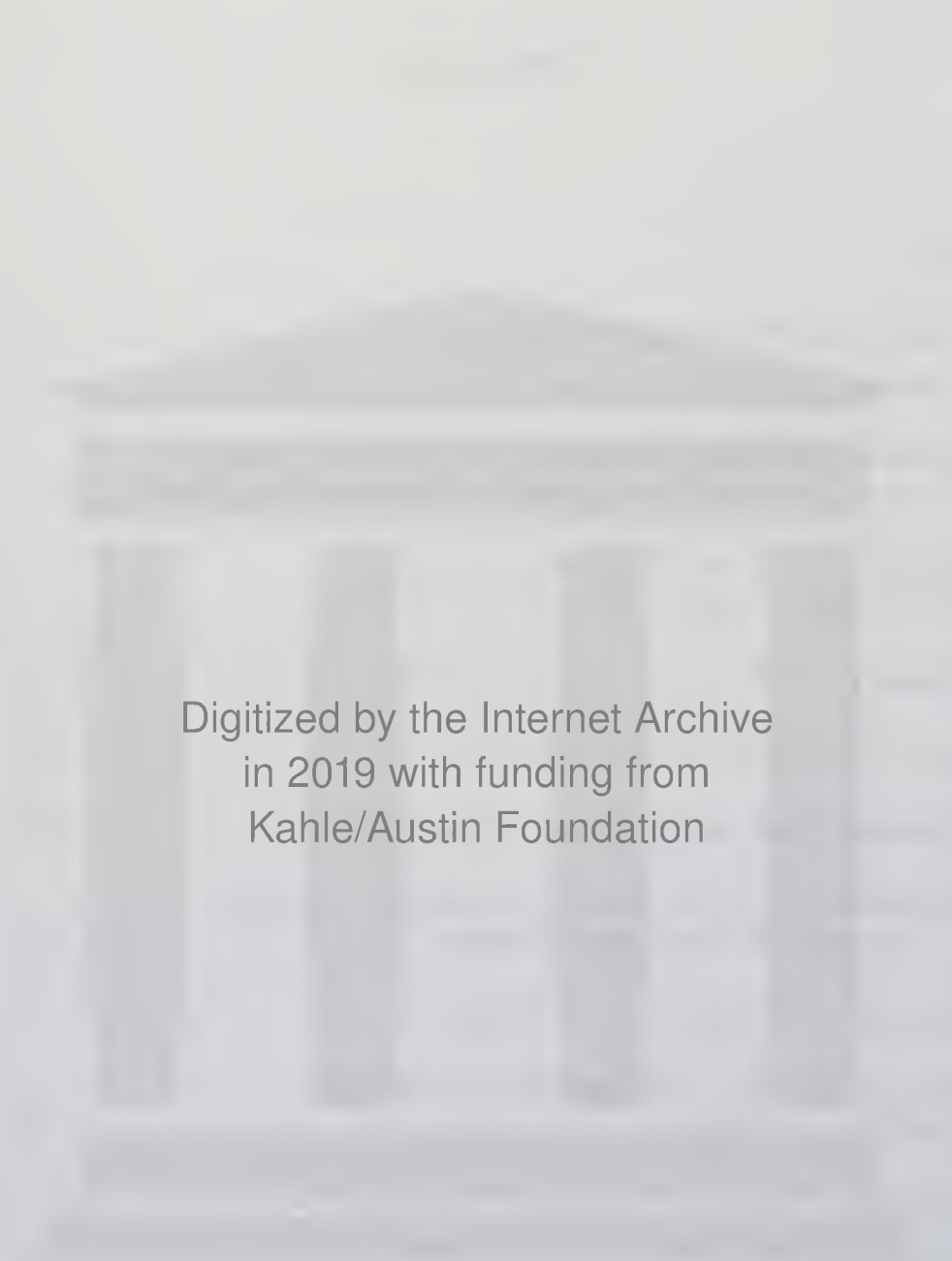
M6B 3S8

Printed and bound in Canada

*A ma mère
et
pour Françoise-Mélitta*

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Foreword

The real purpose of forewords seems to lie in enunciating the rules of a new game, starting from facts and their old articulations, but tilting at their usual meanings and announcing new articulations, thus generating new meanings. Let it be said at the outset, that the present project seeks to widen the notions of writing and text, and rearrange their relationships. The underlying data and reflections are the fruits of nearly four decades of sporadic research of them in Africa.

In retrospect, we have a feeling that this program has matured more or less by itself all along those vagrant years and without much conscious willing on our part. Its intermittent growth may, with hindsight, be articulated into three moments. Having collected, between 1951 and 1993, and at first out of sheer curiosity, documents on writing in Africa and elsewhere, our first approach had been perforce encyclopedic. We were preparing a dictionary of African writing systems, from which our attention was only momentarily diverted by the drafting of the present text. As we surveyed the documents that amounted to an ordered descriptive inventory, the need for an analysis of the whole impressed itself upon us. At the base of the West's refusal to see writing and text in the African symbolic and literary landscape, could there not lurk an interesting motivation? Could not the means by which writing was eliminated from Africanist discourse help to explain the turn taken early on by the Africa-West relationship? We were sailing into new waters, an ensemble of concrete data that might conceivably lead to a critical renewal of Africanist discourse¹ and, beyond it, of the ways sciences constitute themselves and of their responsibilities. Out of the ordering of these data emerged the need to question the concept of writing and then of text, a need grown out of Africa but ultimately weaned from her. This book as a whole begs to stand as prolegomena to writing, the begetter of text.

Our study addresses linguists, semioticians, communication specialists, experts, students and teachers of writing, African art critics, as well as Africanist scholars and observers of Africa. Nevertheless, the

¹For C.L. Miller (1985. *Blank Darkness: African Discourse in French*. Chicago: Chicago University Press), Africanist discourse must be critical of itself. It cannot achieve any valid synthesis. Miller sees the confirmation of this in Céline, Ouologuem, Rimbaud and Mudimbé. M. Diawara acknowledges this in "The Other(s) Archivist. *Diacritics*, Spring, 66-74.

leading role we assign to the concept of writing, in the rapport of the world to Africa, prompts us to look for an even broader audience. Beyond the theme of writing, we are putting the question of authentic decolonization. Having compiled all those facts and attitudes, having noted a general absence of these facts in the discourse on writing, we could not but feel the need for a critical dynamic. We had to begin with an analysis of a few seminal texts, like Gelb's on writing or Goody's on literacy in Africa, and then of the generality of African discourse, all fences down. Decolonizing African discourse is not only to decolonize our daily chatter, but also to chivvy up revision of the assumptions on which sciences built themselves that include Africa in their purview. In other words, maybe, to foster a better perception of Africa, and hence more constructive relations with Africans. Therein lies, in our view, the condition for an integration of African values in the universal sphere but also of a real modernization of the African continent.

Decolonization, cultural roots, reality of pluralism, internal *jihad*, deconstruction: all these seem to belong to the semantic field of Africa of the 1960s and of that post-industrial society prophesied by Pierre Fougeyrollas in Dakar a generation ago. Even before the Independences there was felt to be an overwhelming need for an inventory and revision of African values.

However, the development models proposed by the Western world led African countries to transform themselves, for a while, into societies that could be compared with those of the 19th century in Europe. Africa can only profit by a revisitation of certain leitmotifs of Africanist discourse, such as the one about "peoples without writing".

Along the same line, it would seem logical for the West, in the face of these new perspectives on writing and text, to agree to modify the deontology of the Africanist sciences.

The averred modes of thought conservation and communication of an Africa hitherto denied writing invite us to reconsider and widen the concept of writing and text. A new theory of writing is now called for, that will embrace text-linguistics, discourse analysis and narratology. It should rest on the Peircian conception of Sign, a thing not to be deciphered by an interpreter but a constitutive element of a process of which the interpreter himself is part and parcel: a semiosis (Peirce: 1979, 5.473).

Whilst **speech** may be made to be seen, thought is apprehensible only through signs. Paradoxically, writing renders speech dumb and secret, freezes thought, forcing us to resurrect it, but otherwise (Chapter 1). The various types of writing note down structured thought or text. **The Semiotics of writing** will be methodologically and in its theory challenged by the vast spurned domain of signs in the **Africas**. On this

theory of the linguistics of discourse and of the Semiotics of narrative will rest and rise a useful reflection on the relationship of text and writing. Africa deconstructs our knowledge on writing because she has been excluded from it (Chapter 2). In the absence of a universal theory, every **history** of writing reduces heterogeneous multiplicity to a scientifically unfounded continuum. An examination of the relations existing between history and writing will help to understand how the definitions of writing and text, the Eurocentric stereotypes that have determined Euro-African relations, come into being (Chapter 3). Writing tends to knit humans together, to impose uniformity upon them, enabling political power and its day-to-day management. Writing in its wider meaning concerns most social activities and the life of institutions. A scrutiny of the part played by writing in an African **society** which is both alike to and different from many others will make it possible to appreciate the various ways in which writing functions, in areas as diverse as politics, economy, religion and culture (Chapter 4). The relations of writing with the **arts**, which are also critical signs and discourses, are complementary, mutually enriching and integrative, as well as politically, religiously, esthetically and morally affirmative. Art is symbolic and as such may signify; but it often goes and is associated with writing, each deriving added powers from contact with the other (Chapter 5). The various forms of **speech** are exercised in the social text that is acted by them; signs and symbols, denoting the underlying thought, emanate from a texture which generates them. Text-linguistics and discourse analysis, an internal approach to literature will suggest inventories of data, of textual logic, and creative potentialities sensibly associating the two faces of living speech and writing (Chapter 6). Knowing demands mastery and generation of ideas, articulation of analysis and intuition, science and imagination power. Africa's modes of **knowing** are yet to be inventoried, explained, and understood, above all in their manifestations (Chapter 7). The ways in which knowledge is distributed, broadcast, and assumed suggest the all-powerful presence of a dynamic structure, **one texture**, for each culture, of a pre-cultural cultural process (Chapter 8): we are back in a problematic of the writing of **literatures**, on the planes of content and expression. A reversal takes place in Africa-West relations. As it already happened in painting and sculpture, some Western artists are consulting African images and writings, and feeding them into their works (Chapter 9). African signs, formerly negated, masked or confidentialized, now recognized and integrated, the diversity of symbols and their modes of association: all these are not only asserting socio-cultural **texture** (15th century: **the process or art of weaving**), but the

need to include the notions of sign and text in the universal theory of writing, as writing generates and modifies the text, and is limited by it.

The spelling of African names results from a compromise between their pronunciation by Anglophones and a certain fidelity to African linguistic rules — such as the absence of gender and number.

Based on a research of almost half a century, my argument crystallized slowly, focusing on African writing systems and texts. Parts of the content of some of my papers and published articles may be recognized even when completely rewritten in the light of information that is more recent and of the argument developed in this book. Direct and indirect contributions of many of my African, European and American friends and colleagues are so numerous that I cannot name them all. I must thank them mainly for the debates, their critical views and novel information, which all added moments of excitement to a long-term and mostly solitary research.

In the early stages, Rosalind I.J. Hackett, a specialist of new religious movements, has been particularly helpful. Recently, Janet Stanley, the Librarian of the National Museum of African Arts, Washington, DC, offered many directions of research and the help of the Smithsonian translator volunteers for some parts of my text. N. Catach, of the *Histoire de l'Écriture et des Sciences de l'Orthographe* (HESO) of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), demonstrated interest for some parts of our project and helped us to consider as worthy of publication what was a hobby and a life long project. Special thanks are due to Professor Claude Hagège of the Collège de France, and Professor Valentin Y. Mudimbé of Stanford University, for their careful readings of my early manuscripts, which raised valuable points and offered precious encouragements. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Monique Battestini, my spouse and the best secretary I ever had, for reading so many versions of my manuscript, and this in spite of my moments of discouragement and absent-mindedness. The numerous debates we had helped me to articulate arguments where I had first seen obvious facts or ideas. I am deeply indebted to Dean Serafina Hager of my Faculty of Languages and Linguistics of Georgetown University for her financial support towards the cost of translation and to Dean Richard Cronin for his earlier material help. The translation of the totality of my text from French into English, by Professor Henri G.J. Evans helped to eliminate ambiguous statements, and to straighten my argument.

Preface

Truly seminal books are set apart by their capacity to engender what Thomas Kuhn termed a "paradigm shift," that is, to redefine the conceptual framework which shapes our thinking and guides its development. Radical change can only occur when heretofore-unknown epistemic fields are opened up, and require that we reconsider with critical eye fundamental concepts and notions that we had come to take for granted.

Simon Battestini forces us to confront three notions — writing, text and Africa — which alone might well seem unproblematic but which, when juxtaposed, turn oxymoronic: do we not consider Africa the continent of the spoken word and of peoples without writing? We "progressive" Westerners have become all too conscious lately (and somewhat ashamed) that projecting upon Africa our intellectual, economical and political structures yields disastrous consequences; so much so, in fact, that we have striven to recognize and respect the "orality" that Africans themselves often claim as a distinguishing characteristic — "An old Negro who dies is like a library which burns to the ground," as Amadou Hampaté Bâ famously put it.

Have we not deliberately rejected the axiomatic proposition that the absence of writing —and therefore of history, as defined by our usual criteria— indicates the absence of civilization? Have we not managed to adopt the view that modes of expression peculiar to Africa should be examined instead as evidence of civilization?

By endeavoring to question all such "certitudes" that a century of dedicated scholarship had forged, Battestini aims not only to alter our understanding of African reality (and its understanding by Africans themselves as well), but also to (re) discover signifying systems which allow us to rethink our own notions of writing and text, once we shed some of the most entrenched nostrums of modern linguistics. Before we embark on this journey of discovery, however, we must begin by transcending the purported partition between our intellectual schemata and that of the Other, the Absolute Other that Africa is thought to embody. Only when Africa ceases to be treated as a bogeyman or a whipping boy can it become a mirror in which, beneath the pall of otherness, we may unveil an image of our long-obnubilated selves.

By antithesis, the simple elegance of Battestini's reasoning lays bare the ideological tangle which has surrounded writing in the West, and which stands in mutual implication with our mythical vision of Africa — a vision that we have not completely relinquished to this day. When European powers gathered at the 1885 Berlin Conference

proceeded to pick apart the black continent for their benefit, all they knew of it were fringes, a thin coastal strip wrapped around a huge hinterland which fed various imperialistic fantasies, such as the mission to subdue and alleviate savagery through the civilizing effect of colonization.

Yet, the time had passed when Europeans, with brutal naiveté, could land haphazardly on some unknown shore, put up their flag and claim the land for their king and country under the bemused gaze of a handful of natives. By the end of the nineteenth century, invaders felt that they had to soothe their conscience by invoking the "white man's burden" and the manifest destiny of evolved nations to bequeath civilization on less fortunate peoples — which had to be properly identified as "primitive" before being cast in the crucible of Western culture. The lack of writing thus served as the keystone of a pseudo-rational construct of Africans as inferior, which made it possible to justify the unjustifiable.

Such an ideological foundation explains - but certainly does not excuse - the extraordinarily misguided efforts by scholars who, as they honestly attempted to improve knowledge of African languages and cultures, actually reinforced the "primitive" thesis. It is no coincidence, to be sure, that the development of modern linguistics occurred synchronously with colonialist expansion, and that it was largely founded on the quest for a mythical common ancestor to all Western languages — an Aryan Indo-European tongue whose existence corroborated the theory of a common Caucasian race and culture. Surrounded with a scientific aura, these theories would in time lead to the edenistic utopia of a "universal grammar" and the conceit of linguistics as a global science, albeit little concerned with non-Western contributions.

Saussure's work, to which all of linguistics would for a long time constitute but an extended footnote (as was once said of philosophy in relation to Plato), established a *de facto* hierarchy of semiotic systems with language at the top. As a phonologist, Saussure also posited that the nascent linguistic episteme should be built around the spoken word, of which writing could only be a transcription. In so doing, he set the science of language apart from (and above) that of signifying systems in general, semiology, although —by Saussure's own reckoning— the former was supposed to be a part of the latter.

To proclaim the superiority of language and of its transcription was tantamount to asserting (implicitly at least) that modes of expression and communication based on other semiotics were inferior; and it so happened that such semiotics were prevalent in non-Western cultures. This does not mean, of course, that the West neglected non-linguistic systems altogether — see for instance the current proliferation of pic-

tograms in public spaces or software interfaces, Battestini points out. In fact, the primacy of the written word derives not from matters of functionality as much as from a quasi-metaphysical belief in the "perfection of the Roman alphabet," echoing the perfection of the civilization, which created it.

Hence was born a curious paradox: on the one hand, writing supposedly fulfilled a *sine qua non* condition for civilization — although the presence of cities, etymologically at least, might have seemed an equally valid criterion; on the other hand, linguistics rejected writing as an object of study, until Derrida contested the Saussurian dogma. While imbued with enormous ideological value, writing eschewed critical examination as a scientific construct.

The discovery of African cultures by European linguists and ethnologists, which was marred by this epistemic flaw, reinforced prejudices instead of dispelling them. Consequently, the relationship between the two continents would long remain contingent upon an axiological structure where writing and orality, civilized and primitive, rational thought and instinct stood in opposition. Within this paradigm, anything that could be conceived and expressed became inevitably destined to confirm that Europe's domination over Africa was indeed fully justified.

Battestini's genuinely semiotic approach, however, could well change this relationship in a radical manner. Quite a few of his fellow "specialists" will no doubt find their intellectual habits challenged and react with uneasiness, especially since a backlash against placing language and other semiotics on a par has emerged lately. Gone is the heyday of structuralism, when Barthes or Eco would relish stepping out of the linguistics paradigm to perform intellectual pyrotechnics by tackling genres traditionally excluded from academic purview (fashion, advertisement, comics, etc.) and combining diverse semiotic systems.

One should therefore salute Battestini's determination in maintaining the principle that we must define as "text" any signifying sequence that forms a coherent, legible whole, and as "script" (a term with a broader meaning than "writing") any material system which can serve to elaborate a text. This principle, which moves forcibly away from linguistic self-centeredness, opens up two fresh perspectives: first, it leads us to recognize —at long last— that a number of African signifying practices, which transcribe thought rather than speech, should be treated as so many forms of writing; second, it suggests that we draw all possible consequences from widening the notions of text and writing, beyond our perception of Africa (and Africa's perception of itself) and into the realm of a general problematic.

The opening of such perspectives, through our confrontation with the exoticism that Africa always represents, does not necessarily equate with a foray into the great unknown; it is also, in a way, a return to our own past before the triumph of modernity which, Battestini insists, should not be confused with any sort of "superiority" of the West on a global scale of cultural evolution. It is well known that, until the end of the nineteenth century, the dominant state of illiteracy in Europe allowed non-linguistic scripts to thrive: to take only one celebrated example, cathedrals have frequently been described and analyzed as texts of instruction for the illiterate masses, prompting for instance John Ruskin to speak of "The Bible of Amiens."

Largely, emerging modernity in Europe meant that ancient signifying systems, such as symbols, emblems, masks, allegories of all kinds, were deemed backwards and suspicious, and therefore discarded. Science was to succeed magic, and the strict application of reason was to replace instinct. Nevertheless, the rationalist episteme, which propounded an analytical grasp of reality, never fully took hold, challenged as it was by Neo-Platonic tradition that held that the highest form of knowledge (*noesis*) implied an intuitive grasp of Form (*eidōs*).

Pre-modern semiotics of this noetic variety favored connotation over denotation, and images over writing — cryptic images such as symbols, emblems, glyphs, pictograms and various systems of the same ilk known since the Renaissance as *Hieroglyphica*, and which all match Battestini's definition of "script." The word *hieroglyphica* reflected a general belief that all these signifying systems originated from Egypt, the mythical birthplace of occult practices — magic, alchemy, necromancy, but also gnosis and freemasonry — which were gathered under the heading of "hermeticism." Hermes Trimegistus ("thrice great") was an equally mythical character whose writings, collectively known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, had been rediscovered in the fifteenth century, immediately translated, and adopted as their bible by the then numerous scholars who blended philosophy, physics, chemistry and the occult. This tradition, whose impact on European thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth century should not be underestimated, found its origins in Alexandria, long considered to be the nexus of intellectual interchange between the West and the Orient. Much like the river Nile, hermeticism was reputed to draw its sources from even more mysterious regions in darker Africa, about which anything could be believed, since virtually nothing was known.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the increasing defiance and contempt towards this exogenous and anti-rational heritage laid the foundations for what was to become a complete misunderstanding of African semiotics by Europeans whose zeal in deriding these systems

was fueled in part by the desire to distance their own culture from the "primitivism" it had only recently cast off. Dichotomies were proclaimed where continuity had in fact existed: Battestini reminds us that the common and scholarly practice of treating North Africa as if it were unattached to the rest of the continent has no basis in fact, as shows for instance the spread of Islam and of 'ajami (scripts based on Arabic characters) in sub-Saharan areas.

Equally baseless is the denial of civilization to Africa, by dint of fabrications which, to say the least, do not reflect very positively on the "scientific" frame of mind that the West likes to claim as one of its greatest achievements. The near-Eastern origins of our own civilization and the role of Africa have been systematically downplayed or distorted; the "Orient" as a forerunner of the West could well be stretched Eastward to the banks of the Indus river, as the need arose, but it could never be extended further south than the Mediterranean shores of Africa, as if the coast was cleanly cut off from its hinterland.

With regard to writing, we have forgotten a bit too hastily that for the most part of our history, non-Western and ideogrammatic scripts were in fact dominant, and that they were only denigrated when a belief set in that, owing to technological progress, civilization was "evolving" towards ever superior form of expression and communication — a positivistic conceit which is far from disappeared in our supposedly post-modern era.

Battestini wield here an irrefutable demonstration: we failed —or did not want— to recognize that writing existed before speech, and that it continued to exist independently from it. We thus overlooked an impressive variety of scripts documented in Africa for centuries: mythograms, pictograms, wall drawings, symbols and ideograms inscribed on miscellaneous surfaces (textiles, *libers*, household objects, furniture, walls, liturgical and ritual objects), as well as forms of writing in the more traditional sense, such as the Vai script and the myriad 'ajami.

We also neglected to acknowledge the existence of specifically African textual forms, or "texture," as Battestini calls them collectively, which may well turn out to be important than the scripts themselves, insofar as their "weaving" (*tissage*) reflects a cultural dynamics while remaining invisible beneath the text proper. It seems hardly surprising that confusion still reigns as to what would constitute an essentially African literature, since the word itself is overly bound to the written form —*litera* referring to an alphabetic character—, whereas literariness is in fact a quality of discourse (which makes possible a term like "oral literature"). Perhaps we should consider Battestini's "texture" as form of substance (in Hjelmslev's terminology), i.e. as a

structuring structure (*forma formans*) for an original mode of thought and text production, which should be confronted with its Western counterpart in order to reach a synthesis.

Battestini's impressive inventory of scripts and texts, gathered by feats of erudition as well as experience, should convince the most skeptical among us that his is not a casual theory put together on the basis of scattered evidence in order to promote neglected cultures. The author does not attempt to prove, as other africanists have done, that the black continent simply "invented civilization": his goal is rather to make us all —Europeans and Africans alike— consider the cultural, social and even political consequences of a global re-conceptualization of text and writing in light of African contributions. After specifying Africa's intrinsic cultural logic, Battestini proceeds to integrate it in the general debate on writing and text where African voices no longer stand out as discordant. Africa is only brought forward to buttress an argumentation that must ultimately transcend continental boundaries in order to be meaningful.

Unlike ethnologists, linguists, educators and other missionaries who, with the best of intentions, sought to "rehabilitate" Africa, give it (back) its dignity and promote its development by bringing it up to a state of civilization whose criteria were imposed from the outside, Battestini invites us to approach Africa in its semiotic specificity, without projecting into it our fantasies of a "universal humanism" which always turns out to be eurocentric. With this perspectival change, the lack of writing and text, construed as evidence of uncivilization, appears to stem from a bad case of Western myopia, which semiotics is fortunately able to cure.

Although Africa was the prime victim of European reductionist thinking, it will obviously not be the sole beneficiary of Battestini's magisterial redefinition of writing, text, and therefore civilization, as we know it. His contribution, as he very modestly calls it, opens wide new vistas to research in a truly global perspective, where Africa does not stand alone in its irreducible difference but joins as a full partner in the human adventure of producing and transmitting meaning.

By reading this book, we linguists, semioticians, Africanists, ethnologists, and historians find ourselves face to face with our responsibilities; it now behooves us to take them seriously.

Guy Spielmann

Semper ex Africa aliquid novi.

Pliny

*When studying the works of the Masters,
I watch the working of their minds.*

Lu Chi

L'encre du scribe est sans mémoire.

Léopold Sédar Senghor.

Chapter 1

Visible speech, seized thought

The notions of "writing", "text", "Africa", and "Semiotics of Writing" are to be tackled with increased accuracy as we sail along. In the wake of their changing meanings, we hope to conjure up new modes of critical relation to the objects and theories they represent and new meanings for each of them.

Let us posit an initial, necessarily limited and provisional meaning for each.

Writing: all encoded traces of a text. By trace, we mean the materialized result of a gesture originating the intention to communicate a text, in time or space. The system of a writing is a finite whole of elements and of their articulatory possibilities, produced by a choice of signs, collectively accepted and used (a script), aiming at constituting these traces and so conserve and communicate text.

The name *Africa* points to different areas, has many meanings, and, even in context, lets loose a polysemy of no definable limits. The enormity and complexity of the Continent have been falsely represented by a history of biased and foreign origin, which had set its sights on it. Let us note that recent Africanist discourse sometimes uses the word in the plural or is at pains to emphasize the plurality or multiplicity of the concept. For us, the word marks the whole of the Continent, and its physical and cultural extensions.

The word *Semiotics* designates here a methodological practice rather than a theory. It is to mean study of signs, and especially, throughout this work, of signs which serve to communicate and preserve thought. For Semiotics, Africa is a science in itself and writing the manifestation of a kind of thought whose substance is visual. Greimas

& Courtès (1979) recall the debate about the relationship between writing and speech:

The advocates of the derived status (Jakobson for example) lean on data from the history of writing, whereas the assertion of its autonomy (Hjelmslev) deviates research towards the establishment of a typology (113).

They tentatively suggest the following types:

- A— **Narrative** (or syntagmatic) writing in which each drawing corresponds to a narrative statement (Inuit, Alaska Indians).
- B— **Morphematic** (or analytic) writing where to a grapheme corresponds a morpheme-sign (Chinese, Egyptian writings).
- C— **Phonematic** writing, where graphemes and phonemes correspond (e.g. Western languages). The yet inadequately known history of writing shows, of course, that “pure” types of writing are rare or nonexistent (113).

One can see that (a), being not derived from speech, is not regarded by Jakobson as writing; that alone (c) would be authentic writing; that (b) could only be considered pre- or proto-writing, although it applies the rule of (c) “one sign for one sound”, but non-exclusively.

Kristeva (1989) points out the absence of a satisfactory theory of writing, of the kind that would study it as a signifying praxis, but without reference to its text-producing function (which she sets out elsewhere). She gives, unwillingly, a phonocentric classification of writing systems, in which she distinguishes the following categories:

- A — **Phraseograms**, in which the message is synthetic (Février: 1948), and ignores any reference to language. They are pictograms and conventional signs. In her view, they do not amount to a form of writing.
- B — **Logograms** or **Ideograms**. These are Février’s word-signs. They denote semantic units of discourse (syntactic, logical, or phonemic). They imply the perception of language as a coded system of differentiated marks. They include ideographic and phonemic hieroglyphics.
- C — **Morphemograms**, or marks of different parts of the word, the morphemes.¹

¹The terminology is not agreed. We call morphemography a type of writing that denotes the idea generated by a word or a sign referring to a substance-situation. Morpheme-

D — **Syllabograms**, or syllable marks.

E — **Phonograms**, i.e. one sign for one sound (27-30).

To these universal (minus Africa) attempts to classify writing systems, let us compare one local African ordering of their own inventory of signs. The Dogon conceive four "levels" of writing in relation to the object or idea represented. According to Calame-Griaule (1968), the Dogon signs and symbols are divided into:

A — **Trace**, or the graphic memory that the object leaves of itself. It is allusive and requires to be learnt before it can be properly interpreted.

B — **Mark**, a drawing more accurate and detailed than trace.

C — **Diagram**, a stylized or simplified drawing of the object or of another object that suggests it.

D — **Intentional sign**, conceived to communicate (225-7).

A specialist of Asian systems of writing, Coulmas (1989) ranks writing high in the inventions of mankind. However, in equating it with non-African forms of civilization (Africa being ignored), he unwittingly segregates certain cultures. His postulate, that writing hierarchizes cultures, is not new; but to the usual chronological argument, he adds a vertical scale of values based on functional criteria:

A — Mnemonic function.

B — Distancing function (expansion of the communicative range).

C — Reifying function (stability, tangibility).

D — Social control function (the letter of the law).

E — Indirect interactional function.

F — Esthetic function (literature, calligraphy) (11-5).

He explains:

The invention of writing can be seen as a kind of social problem solving, and any writing system as the common solution of a number of related problems. An important feature of such solutions is their *conventional character*. This implies that there is a variety of solutions. The main purpose of this book is to give an overview of the most important and most interesting such solutions. It presents an introduction to the great multiplicity of writing systems, scripts and orthographies, and then goes to investigate their relative merits and demerits and to discuss the question

mography comprises first articulation units, which are significant. Phonography, which concerns second articulation units, is opposed to morphemography (or ideography).

of whether and how criteria can be defined for the evaluation of writing systems, scripts and orthographies. In so doing, it focuses on the systematic make-up of writing systems. One of the central questions to be pursued is how the various writing systems relate to language. How far are they adapted to particular languages, and how do they differ regarding their suitability for representing that language? In some cases, it will be necessary to go into rather technical details to see how writing systems work. In the context of this book, this question is of interest, however, only inasmuch as it enhances our understanding of how writing represents language, and whether and how it affects language (15).

Apart from the recurrence of elitist terms in the search for a hierarchy in writing systems, it can be seen that Coulmas does not link speech or thought to writing, unless he means both in his use of the term "language". No more than Derrida does he seem to realize that "language" is an abstract, laboratory produced entity. Language is a superposition of an infinite number of concrete spoken utterances. It cannot be represented otherwise than by Linguistics. The technology of writing can only note thought or utterances that do not necessarily and simultaneously imply one another. Mythographic writing tends to represent thought only, without necessarily involving language; and logographic writing represents above all and foremost speech. Thought intervenes later, but with often-divergent interpretations. Modern reading, with articulatory organs disconnected, transforms the text into pictograms stultifying all kind of phonocentrism, producing an internal soliloquy of impressions, feelings, and images that have nothing more in common with the loud and stumbling reading of our forefathers. The linguist's incapacity to feel that reality results from his deontology. As early as page 33, Coulmas says:

The decisive step in the development of writing is *phonetization*: that is, the transition from pictorial icon to phonetic symbol. The ultimate consequence of phonetization is the alphabet.

Back we are in the Greek miracle, "the domestication of savage mind" through the invention and learning of writing, the fascination of the Latin alphabet² and the Judeo-Greco-Roman-Christian origin of civilization. The hierarchization of human groups goes with the debasing Eurocentric perception of the Other. It seems to us, quite apart from any demagogic generosity, that the theory of writing to come will have to

²The Latin alphabet may owe only one letter to the Greek alphabet: <y>, our <g>. A new train of thought attributes the origin of the Latin alphabet to the Etruscan who would have borrowed and adopted the Phoenician alphabet, dropping the graphs for <ph, th, kh> and keeping, for example, <q, h>.

integrate all means —excluding none— of conserving and communicating thought.

Every science has an upper limit to the number of objects it fastens onto, so that it has to allow for the unknown on its boundaries and elastically anticipate its own transformations. Serres would say that a theory of writing should be translatable in all languages, but that "when this maximum is not reached, we are over in other cultural spaces", which should be included, for "difference is only in fact variation". We believe that it should be possible to construct a theory of writing including those of all mytho- and logographic semiotic systems. The common-place that the peoples of Africa are writingless³ is false and will be shown to be. However, to assert that the whole of Africa writes and has always written would be equally false. The fact is that some Africas have known writing very early in the history of mankind. Others have endowed themselves with writing very recently. Certain African peoples have never had "writing" in the sense the West has recently acquired of this activity. They have nevertheless been able to conserve their collective memory through time and to communicate it through space, by using communicative structures transmitted from generation to generation. There is no single culture without a system, however rudimentary in our view, of conservation and communication of certain messages. The support of this common memory and the material of coded communication are essential for group cohesion, collective identity and permanence, and for contact with other societies.

Tajan (1982) studied psychomotricity applied to the act of writing: graphomotricity is the link between the body and writing, the writer's use of space and his individual development. Without contradicting Goody, he insists however in his conclusion that it is because writing has allowed the reading of texts that the latter enabled the development of the human mind. The diffusion of texts and eventually critical reading accelerated the process. While the teaching of literary criticism, for example, is highly valued in the West, Tajan notes that "writing [itself] is no longer considered a value, even by those teaching it". Schweeger-Hefel (1978), apropos the drums of Lurum, which he presents as a system of signs, analyses a complex system of thought: "The Kurumba possess also their own sign language that works as a symbolic code for the initiated. This language (by drawings) permits the representation of abstract ideas." (438) He describes with great ac-

³The Western world tends to equate the concept of "print culture" with "learned culture". If many parts of Africa are writingless, in the restricted sense of writing, most of the Continent, was, until recently, "printless". As the non-African world depends upon external sets of technologies, and more so adopts a technological attitude toward the rest of the world, Africa being "printless" must be "cultureless".

curacy mottoes "inscribed on a skin attached to sticks.» An interesting study, in that it reveals for the first time levels of reading, e.g. two readings for the same text, the one "literal" or "stenographic", and the other "stylized" or "literary." The levels depend on hierarchized readings on the scale of initiatic knowledge, allowing for increasingly complex connotations and interpretations. Figure 2 (446) shows signs on the Ayo's drums, the monarch of the Kurumba in Lurum (Burkina-Faso), which concern the second and the third phases of his election. It is noteworthy that these signs are conceived as the Sise drums themselves, identical to the objects they represent for us. Thus, the span of potential readings depends on degree of knowledge of the secrets. It would be easy to establish a parallel with degrees of reading of an identical text according to levels of education in the West, from parrot reading to professorial exegesis. The latter, even if it returns to the African mode in its use of esoteric language, aims at sharing with readers or students, not at acquiring power through ever greater confidentiality. Whatever the quality and the quantity of knowledge owned by an African, it is pragmatic knowledge, stored with a view to action, constantly at the disposal, in its application, to everyone in the vicinity. The prestige of those who know rests on their ability to serve their society well, as a group and individually.

This instance is enough to show up as pejorative the view that Africa has no writing. Such a generalization implies a deliberate will to blot her out of the world scene. A revision of the minimalist definition of writing should be a natural consequence of a serious study of past and existing African systems for the conservation in time and the communication through space of texts, their inventorying, classifying, analyzing and conceptualizing.

While it is quite easy to demonstrate the presence of writing in Africa to those who have not observed it there, it might be interesting to analyze their reactions to being informed of facts which they find so incongruous although they themselves could probably mention quite a few of them, out of context, such as these, all linked with writing and its semantic field: Egypt, St. Augustin, Bishop of Hippo (later Bône, and now Annaba) and his seminal work for Christianity, Apuleia and Cornelius Fronton, Carthage and its brilliant culture, the library of Alexandria, all the kingdoms of the Upper Nile (some of them mentioned in the Bible: Æthiopia, Meroë, Kush), Ibn Khaldun (The Berber father of socio-history), Averroës (Moroccan and Andalus), Cheikh Nefzawi (of Ifrikyia or Tunisia), the diffusion of a religion of the Book (Islam) in half of Africa starting as early as the 7th century, perhaps even the Vaï of West Africa, king Njoya of Cameroon and his six Mum script avatars, the Nsibidi script of the Efik and Ekoï. Implicit in this

disparate pharmakon of Western culture are the ideas of book, of complex thought, of literature and written history, of library and museum, of rhetoric, grammar and rational knowledge, of elaborate religion, of eroticism, of sciences such as medicine.

Hence, the need to question the permanence, in the West as well as among westernized Africans, of the *primitive, writingless peoples* of Africa stereotype in the human sciences, the mass media, libraries, museums and art traders and amateurs.

It is remarkable, for example, that for such an elevated spirit as C.G. Jung (1964), the primitive was a being devoid of consciousness or a neurotic, and that he maintained this position, borrowed from *L'âme primitive* (1963), although its author, Lévy-Bruhl, later revised his own view, without really remedying the prejudice caused, to Africa in particular.

One of the obvious manifestations of this attitude consists in reshaping the geography of the Continent. Partitions are raised between Africas. Some parts write; others do not. The former becomes marginalia of the European or Asian cradles, the latter serve to comfort the pejorative stereotypes. These divisions rest on self-justificatory considerations which have nothing to do with African reality. This point of view, very common among university people and institutions in Africa, flouts the history of cultural contacts and exchanges in Africa and the African's capacity to adopt and adapt. Many simply take over pre-existing definitions, categories, and frameworks without bothering to verify them.

In Africa, along the Nile in Antiquity, the invention of writing was attributed to two animals, the sacred ibis, and the hamadryas, that symbolized the same divinity, Thot. We can assume that these choices were not entirely innocent. This baboon figures in the Linnean nomenclature (1758) under the name *Papio (Papio) Hamadryas* (in Greek, *Mantelpavian*). He is much like the baboons in our zoos. The newborn has a pink face and a black coat, which must have made him conspicuous in an Egypt peopled with White, Black and Brown peoples. As it grows older, the pink face turns black, and the black hair to gray-brown, or white, gray, or even stays black. One could be tempted to see in him a symbolic alliance of the two Egypts and Nubia, if one did not know that the division of peoples on the lines of skin color is a very recent development in the history of mankind. Egyptians were not blind to color differences but attached any hierarchy, segregation, or prejudice to them (Snowden: 1983). This social baboon's habitat covers North Africa, Southwest Arabia, the Red Sea coasts, and the Savanna, generally in dry, rocky, steep, semi-desert cliff and mountain regions. He sleeps at night in trees or on rocks. Every day he makes a round jour-

ney of about six miles. He takes a shaded siesta around midday. He moves around in a military-like formation, rank according to sex, age, and role. Affectionate grooming expresses friendship, attention, concern, and reward and reinforces cohesion. His "language" is a one or more syllable bark. A "Wah-Wah" with a nod and tail wag indicates complete satisfaction. Oow-oow-oow" is a sign of dissatisfaction. Purring or a soft "ik-ik" expresses surprise. As a sign of friendship, he curls his lips, as to smack a kiss. His cries of fear and pain are very close to ours. He can be carnivorous without apparent need and can even eat carrion. He cohabits with kindred or other baboons in areas close to their respective habitats, notably around 15° North on the Nile, near Khartoum. He can be domesticated to behave like a shepherd dog, e.g. guarding cattle, watching over residences at night, or hunting. He can be very faithful. His powerful jaw makes him dangerous, especially for other animals. He is omnivorous, but essentially vegetarian. A myth of the Ekoï of the Cross River region of Nigeria attributes to Cynocephali the invention of their writing, the Nsibidi script.

The Hamadryas, then, was honored in Egypt as a divinity named Thot, Theuth, Thoth, a scribe of the gods. Its representation is often associated with the *wajda*, the "eye of knowledge."⁴ Four statues of Hamadryas should be framing the pedestal of the obelisk of Luxor on the Place de la Concorde in Paris, as they did in Egypt, sitting or squatting and facing the light, their sexual organs erect, like the sacred ibis's beak, a similarity of image. But French prudery condemned these four statues to remain in the vaults of the Louvre instead of openly and legitimately being allowed to support the obelisk along the east-west axis of the Champs-Élysées, facing the direction of the rising sun and the morning renewal of knowledge. The Egyptians had noticed that these baboons greeted the rising sun with their barks. The sun-cult of Amenhotep III, for instance, accordingly gave a prominent place to this baboon deified as Thot, and through him to intelligence, the scribes, physicians, and architects. He came to embody all those who honored enlightenment.

The god of writing is often represented as the *chreskiornis aethiopicus*, the sacred ibis. Here again is black associated with white. His plumage is white, but his head and neck are black and featherless. Purple-black feathers adorn the lower part of his back, making it easier to identify him. The fledgling's body is bare and his head and neck are covered with tufts of black and white feathers. Generally silent, the bird can emit a brief raucous cry. Its main habitat is now

⁴According to Haltenorth & Diller (1977), *The Collins Field Guide to the Mammals of Africa including Madagascar*. Lexington, MA: The Stephen Greene Press.

Ethiopia, but it is common in the whole of East Africa. It is encountered near lakes, marshes, swamps, rivers, and in pastures, tillage, and flood plains. Among the Senufo, a large wader (ibis or calao) which digs in the mud with its long beak is represented in sculptures in which the bird is shown to be pregnant, allegedly with the signs of writing. The beak is assimilated to the penis or calamus, and penetrates the large belly on which are painted female genitalia. The search for food, the extremity of its long beak in the mud, suggests the movement of a reed in the act of writing. The fertilization of human thought by writing is compared to animal or human procreation. The beak figures a penis in a vagina and/or a stylus dipped in ink. Further north in Africa, in Egypt, the sacred ibis was honored as a divinity (Plato), as the genius that had invented many arts, sciences, and techniques, including writing.⁵

Hamadryas and ibis, rock monkey and marsh bird, upstream and downstream, both soil searching, with finger or beak, leave traces in it, which evoke the gesture of writing. These two symbolic animals bring Lower and Upper Egypt together and with their Nubian and Ethiopian neighbors, in the same evocation of Thot, the god of writing and knowledge. One may see certain myths of Central and West Africa as echoing these remote and distant legends.

Thebes, the city of the god Ammon, sometimes assimilated with Thot, is situated halfway between the swamps of the delta in the North and the rocky third cataract in the South, which marks the boundary with Kush. The first capital city in the world, of the first centralized political, economic and theocratic State, which federalized and later unified two countries, is symbolized in writing by a schematized crossroads within a circle, which is also the hieroglyphic sign for Thot. The city is actually situated at the crossing of the Nile and of the east-west road which joins Mesopotamia to the oases of Siwa, Murzuk, Kufra, all inhabited by Berbers. Beyond these economic neighbors lie open Asia to the East and what is to become the Maghreb (in Arabic, the West), the Mediterranean world to the North, including the Greek world, and possibly Central and West Africa.

Symbol writing, zoology and human geography instruct each other. Zoology shows that the choice of certain animals, even if it is metaphorical, reveals a fine-tuned observation of the nature and culture of some of its elements. The highland monkey and the floodland bird were chosen to symbolize writing by a culture of economic transit at the time when it was endowing itself with political and religious power.

⁵According to Williams J.G. & N. Arlott, 1980, *The Collins Field Guide to the Birds of East Africa*, Lexington, MA: The Stephen Greene Press.

Nowhere —this must be affirmed— has writing been spontaneously generated. In all times and all cultures, there have been means of conservation of the collective memory and communication through space of information. Following this, no script should be imposed on a culture. No culture has ever been denied the right to choose a place of origin (and a myth?) for the system of writing it uses. This choice says more about its ideology than about the concept of writing. It is nevertheless sufficient and satisfying for that culture, or for a group of close or associated cultures. This is true of the Latin alphabet for the so-called Western World. The truth is that there are only local writings. Proof of this is that a typology of writing is impossible; specialists have often pointed out that only the principles, which govern writing, can be classified.

Defining concepts: Writing and Thought and/or Speech

The 18th century in France granted primacy to writing over speech.⁶ It tended to see an opposition rather than a link between written and spoken language. Writing was simply a representation of speech, but in a complex way, it was also capable of existing in its own right. Thus, Egyptian hieroglyphics were understood “in the primitiveness of an autonomous writing ... Speech requires the anteriority of writing” (Auroux: 1979, 35-40). For the Encyclopaedists, the difference lay in the presence of sounds in the one and of figure in the other. Figure was the material trace of the intention and/or of its process. They observed that Roman numbers were not letters but figures representing gestures that expressed numerical quantities. Nevertheless, figure was also the direct representing of concept and its symbolical and allegorical function.

⁶See for instance the collection of texts chosen and presented by G.Bergounioux, *Aux origines de la linguistique française* (Pocket-Agora, Les Classiques, 1994)). It exemplifies the central place of writing in pre-Saussurean Linguistics. We can imagine the impact of Baron de Gérando's work (author born 1772, died 1842), *Des signes et de l'art de pensée, considérés dans leurs rapports mutuels*, an aborted dimension of linguistics, which we parallel with this project. As an *Idéologue* and minor philosopher of the School of Condillac, which influenced Destutt de Tracy, he dreamt of discovering “the principles of organization of thought in a cognitive dimension, writing, logic, grammar, ethics, economy, philosophy and history, around a unitary conception of the mind, and the status of sign” (15). He is also the author of a work on how primitive peoples should be approached (with an open mind and esteem) a welcome rarity in view of the fact that French imperialism remained practically indifferent to the languages and cultures of conquered countries, between 1860 and 1914 (Bergounioux, 32), in spite of exceptions like the first courses on Sudanese languages (1900), dialectal Arabic, Abyssinian languages (1909), Berber and Malagasy (1914), aiming at providing military officers and colonial administrators with a means to more efficient power (45).

Figure allowed two types of writing: one —used in China and Egypt— was founded on picture drawing, giving birth to the notion of object, and then to the thought of the subject, or its mental representation. The other first and foremost phonetic.

The generality of work on writing systems is little diversified. It can be divided into Histories of Writing (Jensen: 1935; Vachek: 1939 and the School of Prague; Février: 1948; Gelb: 1952; Cohen: 1958; Higounet: 1964; Diringer: 1968; Trager: 1974; Jackson: 1981 and Gaur: 1985), and a Semiotic of communication through graphic signs (Baron: 1981; Sampson: 1985). Between these two extremes lie the works of Haas (1976), Derrida (1977), Nakanishi (1980), Harris (1986), Goody (1987a, 1987b) and Coulmas (1989), plus Hill (1967), Catach (1987) and now Daniels & Bright (1996) for classification and description. These last approaches diverge but none return to the historical perspectives, even if Goody and Coulmas take over some of its assertions. A review of Semiotic works on writing can be found in Nöth (1990, 251-66 & *passim*). However, Harris (1993) constructs the most comprehensive semiotic study of writing. The common problems to be solved, according to Catach, concern the following points:

- 1 — The greater or lesser autonomy of writing [in relation to speech].
- 2 — The relations between them at all levels (language, signs, distinctive units).
- 3 — The search for universals and general typology (169-70).

She further points out that the group she led at the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) in France made a distinction between oral language, fundamentally a *bodily technique*, and writing which is a craft, a tool or an *artificial technique*. Taking into account both the universals of language, and the socio-cultural plasticity of adopted solutions, one can analyze in particular, in all their complexity, the structures of present-day European writings. Contrary to erroneous views that place them in the “alphabetical” systems, they are in the “plurisystems” which contain not only second articulation but also first articulation units, or *pleremes*. These radically new views open many prospects to the description of African writing systems. However, Catach, as a linguist, maintains the oral-written link.

Escarpit (1973) inventoried and explained the relations of *L'Écrit et la communication*, associating them closely. His reflections at that time, often original, based on a synchronic perspective and on communication and information science, opened the way for a theory of writing. Starting from writing rather than on communication, Haas (1976), and the texts he edits, practiced the inventory, description, analysis and

classification of writing systems and principles of their functioning, contributing some early fruits to the theory of writing.

For the semiotician Nöth, the definitions of writing rest on a misconception. Neither speech nor writing constitutes thought. Both, using their own specific means, serve to convey and conserve thought, but none is, obviously, identical to it. It will be seen that we oppose the series {script, text, folklore} of useful but instantaneous instances, to the series {writing, texture, culture} as dynamic production processes. Since Zeno, however, everyone knows that the trajectory of movement is paradoxically constituted of fixed points or snapshots of successive steps.

Language is an abstraction constructed with a set of speech utterances. Speech is many-sided and difficult to codify; each spoken sequence is unique. Therefore language cannot be written, and no system of graphic notation has ever been capable of effectively reducing speech. What are written are the trace of thought and the potentiality of thought, which is going to decipher the trace. This thought was once independent of language and will be relatively free of it after the passage through writing or speech. It matters little to descant on the precedence of either over the other. For thought to offer itself as writing there were two possibilities, both exploited by many cultures. One transcribed thought into stylized images, which were sufficient to evoke it for all: hence symbols, pictograms, mythograms, and hieroglyphs. The evidence of image was adequate for a time (Jung: 1964). The size of the inventory soon required sparing the means. The other was to note that the sequences of sounds, which constitute speech, were finite. Each element could then be fixed in a medium through a sign: hence, the systems of phonetic writing. Neither of these two methods exists in a pure state. The essential function of both is to conserve and/or communicate thought. To paraphrase Hjelmslev, the quality of writing would be to denote form of expression and/or to connote form of content. Speech is foremost form of expression. It belongs to Linguistics, whereas writing, from this point of view, is rather on the semiotic side. The use of an intermediary medium between the writer's and the reader's thought has led to confusing the medium with thought itself. The traditional mind-body dichotomy is contested by post-Joycean literary writing, which tends to recreate a soliloquy, necessarily written but deep down experienced as speech linked to the humors and intimately assumed as raw thought.

We have to wait for the last decades of the 20th century to see the first lights of a radically new perception of writing. Thus, Catach (1987) defines it as "the set of organized signs which allow the communication of any message constructed without necessary recourse to natural means." Chapters VI and VII of Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique*

Générale (1916) deal with writing. He points out that if the faculty of speaking is avowedly located in the third left fold of the brain (Broca), language and writing are also accommodated here [56]. Indeed, it would seem that Broca's fold is the site of the faculty of signifying thought and translating it into coded signs, graphic, phonic, or otherwise. Yet, he remarks that a dumb person may write, which seems to prove that the two faculties are autonomous.

Saussure excludes writing from the field of linguistics, and takes pains to demonstrate the inconsequences of writing and incoherences of the Greek (sic), actually Latin alphabet. He rejects the morphemographic system for obvious reasons. Saussurian language is first an organized chain of phonemes, subsequently endowed with meaning. If it relies on phonemes to signify, these are discrete units, without meaning. Ditto for letters. Saussure, one could say, reaches meaning only through the syntax of sounds. For him, speech is air stream variously segmentable. No one discerned that Saussure and his followers reduced the object of Linguistics to two writing systems: phonetic and phonemic notations. The subject matter of Linguistics is to be the successiveness of *images sonores*, or sound-pictures, and Guillaume, and more recently Culioli and the latter-day Chomsky will try to analyze the semantic level in relation to lexis and syntax. The morphemographic systems were directly connected with meaning.

If the notion of language is an abstract entity arisen from the superposition of all languages, the concept of writing could designate the phenomenon which results from the common traits of all scripts, and not only from the Greek and Latin alphabets. There would then be writing, faculty of the human species, variously exploited, multiform and diverse. A script would then be the scriptural equivalent of the mother tongue, also acquired, and conventional. Individual writing would then recall speech and be answerable to graphology and stylistics.

One cannot attribute to Saussure, a precursor of Semiology, the idea of a science of writing. Semiology was to grapple with those systems of communication that he had decided to ignore, including writing. Yet, the would-be linguistic phonocentrism of Saussure's Epigoni was blind to any system of signs other than language. One must remember that Saussurian structuralism has influenced many disciplines such as literary criticism and most of the human sciences. It was Saussure who divided communication between the object language, reduced to what it is not, and the other means, which he dispatches to Semiology. Nevertheless, hurled out of Linguistics, writing returns everywhere in Saussure's discourse:

Language is a system of signs expressing ideas, hence comparable to writing, to the deaf-and-dumb sign language, to symbolic rites, courtesy rules, military signals, etc., etc. Only it is the most important of these systems [72].

One can therefore conceive a science that would study the life of signs within social life; it would form part of Social Psychology, and therefore of General Psychology; we shall call it Semiology (from the Greek *se-meion* or sign). It would teach us what signs consist of, what laws rule them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot tell what it shall be; but it has the right to exist, its place is determined in advance. Linguistics is only a part of this general science; the laws to be discovered by Semiology shall be applicable to Linguistics, which will thus be attached to a well-defined domain in the realm of human facts [73]...we think that in regarding rites, customs, etc.... as signs, these facts will appear in another light, and the need will be felt to group them in Semiology and to explain them by the laws of that science [74].

Saussure must have perceived the abusive reductions that he was inflicting on communication to arrive at a solid, well-defined, and scientifically analyzable object. From this point of view, the heterogeneous object of Semiology may look like a set of all rejects from Linguistics, a surplus of leftover modes of communication and interpretation. Some of these serve to both conserve social memory and communicate coded messages. Those that fulfill these two conditions may be regarded as writing systems.

Meurant (1986), to forestall terminological confusion, proposes a set of useful definitions:

A *sign* is a means of recognition of a perception, or the product of a formal convention (10th century: *signum*); a synonym of symbol or emblem. Most general term to designate any kind of graphic representation.

A *drawing* creates a mental picture, suggestive or not of one or more divisions of the substance-situation and imagined world, by making form-producing lines; a set of graphic signs whose outline organizes a surface.

A *symbol*, in the proper meaning of the word, is the coincidence or complementation of the parts of a whole. Esoterically: a representation or formal convention within a group, synonym of emblem; a badge or insignia (*symbols*, classic: signal of recognition). In the case of a geometrical design as foreign to our culture as that of Equatorial Africa, or of our own Prehistory, it is necessary to retain the most esoteric, i.e. the most complex meaning. Neither the whole nor the parts are expressed; the whole is not represented, it is ideal; the parts are signs whose ideal total would collect the different facets of the whole.

A *figure* (*figura*, 10th C., form; *figurare*, 16th C, to create). Visual representation of a natural form or of an idea. In Geometry (16th

century) points, lines, surfaces, volumes considered in themselves. Dance (17th century): path described by choreographers, a design of dancers' footsteps and definition of their movements on stage. In the case of a geometrical design, which does not aim at being a concrete tool for the measurement of nature but to describe progressions in time and space (eventually strictly measured), the term, will designate a path unit, simple or compound, eventually forming a symbol.

A *motive* (*motivus*) designates a repetition of figures. (5)

The Histories of writing, from Jensen (1935) to Harris (1986), organize and reduce to an arbitrary and fictitious continuum isolated facts and events that are or whose links are in no way attested and have no real consecutiveness or consequentiality. The vast majority of them are scattered in time and geo-cultural expanses. The ever-invoked figment of a continuum from pictograms to Latin alphabet is vested with universal value. Writing is ever understood as denoting speech. Nobody seems to wonder at the arbitrariness of the extremes of this so-called "chronological axis." Why should this alphabet be rather the Latin than the Greek, Phoenician or Meroitic alphabet? Why posit the beginning at that moment on the axis rather than at another? Why should one be better than others to represent all the languages of the world should? Moreover, who should decide?

At the origin of these, Histories are sited proto- and pre-writings, such as those using pictograms defined as primitive, whereas contemporary societies are saturated with them.⁷ At the point of arrival is planted the Latin alphabet of Western Civilization which is presented as being as remote as possible from the first glimmers of wild humanity, those that shone on rock drawings and paintings. Curiously, the West forgets its own violence, the last two hideous wars, the Slave Trade and the Indian slaughters, racism and pogroms, religious persecutions, colonial exploitation, state terrorism and the gigantic death arsenal of the West. The Barbarian is always the other one and one's own history lapses are not seen as proofs of mental infirmity or savagery, but rather as incidents on the way to perfection.

⁷The word and the sign pictogram is vulgarized, for example, for the user of the French Train à Grande Vitesse (TGV), where it regains its usefulness for speakers of different languages. Its use is generalized in modern international means of transport and all "non-lieux" (Marc Augé) i.e. airports, railway-stations, restaurants, sea-ports, streets and highways, olympic stadiums, as well as on electronic appliances and gadgets. Here necessity and business rule, not conservative feelings. Yet, many of these non-places or objects make the homogenization of cultures possible and so may give the illusion of transcending vernacular mentalities of travellers and users, a functioning experience of the construction of universality. One can see then that pictography, being equally conducive to communication in a primitive or universal situation, is independent of it.

According to this "history," the efforts of mankind to acquire writing have ended up after five millennia with the triumph of a graphic system, which has allowed the literary and scientific development of Europe and its extensions. The remote origins of writing are ascribed to different times and cultural or religious areas between Mesopotamia and Egypt according to the historians' ideological affinities.

The informed observer wonders at this type of discourse that claims to be historical, and therefore tending towards scientific objectivity. He finds that the historian has imagined this chronological axis. Even more surprising is the use of this axis as a scale of references to evaluate communication and graphic modes that were not part of the data collected before the elaboration of the axis. Thus, a contemporary culture credited with no system of communication and material conservation of its thought (supposing that such a culture exists) is defined as *not yet having* writing rather than being *without one*. This society, contemporaneous with us, is labeled "primitive" since it is confabulated by us according to our perception of the original state of mankind.⁸ The primitive may be conceded a cosmogony, maybe even a religion, but no complex thought, no philosophy, no literature, and no history. Each domain of the local knowledge is amputated of "writing". Medicine without writing becomes magical practices; literature will be "orature," and so on. Facing a body of local knowledge, blind to the local system of communication and conservation of thought and experience, the ethnologist will see a primitive ethnic group, a tribe but not a people, a nation or a society. Cazeneuve (1970) confirms this:

Writing has enabled civilization to become cumulative by constituting archives, in a way that its progress has accelerated as it was recorded. It was writing again that produced a class of learned individuals, and imparted social importance to knowledge (83).

A real demonstration is still awaited. This class constitutes often the societal regulating body. Every society produces archives of some sort, if only because memory feeds upon itself and never ceases to devise mnemonics. Everywhere there are artifacts whose forms are directly or

⁸Spencer (1907, 1984) is at the bottom of the dross that still clogs up the discourse of the Human Sciences and newsprint-lore. He built up his evolutionism on the myth of the primitive, the comfort of all forms of colonialism. Yet, the anthropological discovery of the plurality of cultures ruins every ambition of seeing a continuum in the universal and denounces evolutionism as a marxian ideology, the enactment of a phenomenon whose foundation is more in what it conceals than what it claims to explain, and which will disappear as soon as the historical conditions which permitted it shall cease to be compatible with its existence.

implicitly associated with texts. The need to reduce the wealth of events to mental schemes that could facilitate interpretation has not been a negligible factor in the growing complexification of the brain and has enabled the creation of complex political and economic structures. One could indeed return to the negative arguments of Thamus in Plato's *Phaedrus* (1990). As for the clan of learned men and the prestige of knowledge (tied to power), both characterize the majority of African societies. Thanks to our long experience of Africa, we have been able to observe the greater wisdom, compared to European or American, of many African old men. Stoetzel (1968) adds a discordant note to the concert of voices:

Great is the prestige of the elders with peoples without writing, in which oral tradition rests on memory alone ... In the West, with the spread of writing has coincided rejection of authority (472).

Writing permits the State but subverts authority, by creating distance from "virtue." Its rarity for a restricted élite can reinforce the literate minority's regulatory power and certainly contributes to stabilizing it. Its spreading creates contestation and debate. We claim that writing, text, and society are so united that the theory of the first must include the study of the other two. The depiction of finite and isolated writing systems has a right to exist but will do nothing more than Phonetics did to understand communication.

Writing, as defined by its historians, is considered to be fated to occur in all societies, and finally but ideally, to be at worst an avatar of the Latin alphabet. The absence of writing in a given culture is then perceived as a provisional, or congenital, incapacity to develop this cultural feature which is inherent to any progress. This tribe is, so to speak, primitive at the outset in relation to its own future, but also by comparison with others. It will then pass from the primitive state (of "contemporary archaism") in which, at best, there existed infantile pictographic systems, to the state of a complex, adult, developed, literate and industrialized society, thanks to the adoption of the Latin alphabet. International and governmental organizations, vast missionary undertakings, isolated initiatives, all these compete to land a hodgepodge of efforts aimed at alphabetizing millions of Africans. These massive but hasty literacy campaigns, which find little consolidation in religious literature or other usages and are therefore precarious, are everywhere carried out in the "Latin alphabet" and its variants. To say so may sound strange to many. Yet, there is no fatality in this field.

To subvert an established concept is not easy. If we oppose the notion of "common sense" to that of "meaning", we see that the one is relatively more dynamic than the other. The former would be rather a received truth, one taken for granted. The second is less conservative. It has to be made and remade overtime. It designates a process by which meaning is established, but arbitrary, provisional meaning, since it is less inherited from a tradition, from an immutable authority. The common notion of writing is at the center of the Western episteme. For the majority, it takes on the form of the Latin alphabet and a few other predated graphic curiosities. To subvert it implies a considerable modification of its associative field, which happens to be the culturalized whole of the Western world. The Latin alphabet, a model and a referent, is enshrined at the heart of Western societies, themselves long considered models for the rest of the world. The semiotic notion of writing opens new perspectives and increases the collection of facts from previously unsuspected systems of preserving and communicating thought.

It is not easy to substitute one standard value for another. One of the aims of this work is to get the value judgments "writing" and "Africa" to slide away from their present denotations and connotations, and more through refinement of existing models than through substitution of others. In short, to integrate the African contribution in the fields where reflection and research on writing are applied. The resulting meaning-slides should enable us to show how the way sciences were set up may have been the origin of their blindness about their objects.

The contemporary study of writing has inherited a Eurocentric, philological and —especially since the fifties of our century— linguistic historical tradition. A series of fractures has variously fragmented the perception of written language since Gelb (historical), Goody (anthropological), and Derrida (epistemo-logical). This order is significant. The more recent and less partisan works require more research and less ethnic and ideological polarization, new perspectives that are more liberal and less finality in language sciences, especially on writing.

Throughout the Greco-Phoenician tradition, writing is conceived exclusively as a representation of the sounds of language, following the rule "one sign for one sound." Phonetics (the word has the same etymology as Phoenician) gives itself the same rule. It is agreed that writing is a representation, usually graphic, of language. This is the phonocentric vision rightly denounced by Derrida, but grounded on another misapprehension. The phonic and graphic aspects that we give to thought should not occult the reality of speech and writing as social codes created to exchange and conserve it in time and space. In these histories,

this notion of writing is posited as a premise by the author and for the reader, as phonogrammatic and not semantic or semiotic.

Not only did linguists rarely go beyond the sentence before Semantic Anthropology provided them with discourse analysis, but they fastened on description of the form of expression in its materiality. Recourse to meaning to verify the grammatical correctness of a phrase appears only after Chomsky introduced into Linguistics the notion of creativity and grammaticalness. Before this, linguists could not accept that an utterance could be a lie or an image like the one "that hat eats up her face". Similarly, they eliminated whisper, chant, supra- and infralinguistic facts, the communication situation, the referent and the interlocutor. It was through reduction of its object that linguistics could be recognized as the only exact human science. The current return of semantic and semiotic data in its field of study weakens the prestige and maybe the precision of linguistic analysis. The total exclusion of thought, a condition of the promotion of Linguistics together with the delusional rejection of writing, shows the autonomy of thought vis-à-vis writing or speech. That a same script can be read differently by different people, even if they speak the same language, is as obvious as the possibility of using a script to denote several languages, or, a fortiori, to produce diverging interpretations of a same text. Forster (1988) demonstrates that the essential function of most ancient systems of writing was to store information known to all or some, and not to transmit information. He contests that writing is solely the representation of speech, and he has of course no trouble proving that the present spellings of English or French are mnemonic. He reminds us that an Englishman has as many difficulties learning to read Italian, as an Italian attempting to read English. He insists that even the most sophisticated and best language-targeted system of phonetic notation offers nothing but an approximation of the way its speakers really speak it (62). The autonomy of writing, and therefore its arbitrariness vis-à-vis speech, is only possible, he argues, because of this mnemonic quality of writing. Like Derrida, Forster emphasizes Socrates' thought that:

Written words are unnecessary, except to remind him who knows the matter about which they are written (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275d).

He omits to mention the distinction in *Phaedrus* between *hypomnème* and *mnème*, where Socrates makes a joke of the former. We know that he is all for writing when it is addressed to intelligence, goes beyond and forgets the text, and is therefore responsible for the complexification of the mechanics of the brain; but that he disapproves of writing

when it kills the intellect by turning it into a passive contemplation, falsehood, lack of spontaneity and vivacity (59-62).

The primacy of thought and writing has suffered in the last half-century through that accorded to speech and to the language-writing association. The historian of writing conceives it from a phonogrammatic, thought-disconnected perspective, with the result that writing in Africa is crippled. Grammatology privileges the study of graphic forms and of their evolution and diffusion, as against that of their adequacy for the representation of thought. Thus, and we shall return to this point, a "morphemographic" or "mythographic" writing will be perceived as limited, lacunose, ambiguous, lapidary, but nevertheless as an apparently necessary step in the progress of mankind towards the Latin alphabet and its cultural and other consequences. Its major advantage, which is that it can be read in several linguistic contexts, is then occulted. The wealth of complementarities arising from the impossibility of synthesis gives way in the face of reduction to a dominant common denominator. The fact that it allows a certain creativity to come out and economizes on our orthographies and grammaticalities—being in direct contact with the thought of the text—is suppressed. A comparison with the thousand avatars of the Latin alphabet would not turn out to the advantage of the latter. Hence the return to pictograms on city walls and in city streets. The arrow, one of the very first pictograms, has never ceased to be present in all cultures since earliest Antiquity. Those who have had to pass from hand- to electronic writing could not but realize that the 25 letters of the Latin alphabet used in French, however essential they might be, were nevertheless a minority among a vast array of parameters and graphic conventions, which only the printer was aware of before the marketing of personal computers.

A tradition set up by non-African intellectuals, of partly Jewish but mainly German origin attributes the invention of writing to Semites. Working these up into a people or race stands out as Western Orientalist myth rather than science. The term Semite is of Biblical origin. In Genesis, it refers to the descendants of Sem, one of Noah's three sons, the two others being Japhet and Ham (The one Noah ostracized and who is supposed to have become Black). Antiquity and biblical history agreed to identify the "Semites" with the Arameans, Arabs, Hebrews and Assyrians, Canaanites, Ethiopians, Egyptians, Phoenicians, all Semitic peoples which had writing systems. The Aramean script, which was Jesus', appeared one or two centuries later than the Hebrews', who date the origins of their own script around 1000 BC. The earliest evidence of Arab script dates from the beginning of the sixth century AD. It may have been preceded by diverse attempts dating back at the earliest to the third century AD. As to the Phoenicians,

theirs is no older than 12th century BC and their 22-letter alphabet was partly borrowed from the Egyptians, while the Romans adopted the Etruscans'. Jackson (1981) tries to unravel the various claims to priority. The Greeks, from whom we commonly believe we have inherited a passably unlatin alphabet, sometimes ascribed its paternity to Prometheus; but Æschylus informs us that the gods regularly went to Egypt to replenish their sources. They borrowed from Egypt, and, according to Herodotus, from the Phoenicians. Plato tells and discusses the invention and use of writing by Thot in Egypt. These three ancient authorities are thus agreed on two points:

- 1— The non-invention of writing by the Greeks (and a fortiori by the Latins).
- 2— Its African origin, as Egyptian, Phoenician or Punic of Carthage.

Researchers have also agreed on the very probable influence of the many Mediterranean writings, e.g. the three Egyptian scripts, cuneiform scripts, Cretan consonantal writing, the Ugaritic model of Syria, and the Etruscan alphabet. These ancient writings, whose cultures stem from or were in trading contact with Africa, influenced the script invented by the Phoenicians and its Punic extension (present-day Tunisia). These last evolved the "one sign for one sound" ideal rule, taken up later for "Ancient Hebrew, Carthaginian Punic and other North African languages" (Jackson: 1981, 27). The study of African writing systems counsels caution: the ethnocentric, evolutionist, diffusionist and biblical visions should not be accepted without serious critical examination. Gaston Maspéro, against his master Mariette, demonstrates that Egypt (its art and civilization) was the product of African soil. He proved that Egypt's borrowings were not important and that their substance was rapidly assimilated, without much impairing the homogeneity of fifty centuries of Egyptian civilization. The Western "universalist" theories were conceived naturally outside Africa, from a corpus that largely ignored the African contributions, and for the sake of non-African objectives. None of them takes into account a major fact of African experience: all the so-called historical stages of the development of writing are present in contemporary Africa and some different scripts have been extant side by side for a long time or are used alternately for the same language. Moreover, the recent discoveries in Upper Nubia suggest that "pre-dynastic" Nubians jointly used cursive and pictorial graphic modes.

Three types of definition of writing seem conceivable: classificatory, functional, and topological. But whatever it is, a definition (of writing as of any object of knowledge), to have a right to be taken seriously, requires long and patient observation, rests on the recurrence of a

phenomenon in the field of experience, should make it possible to recognize that phenomenon in its manifestations and in many and varied situations. If the token varies in quantity and quality, the type can be modified. It is no different with human artifacts. If we name tokens that are new to us by a term in use in our culture, therefore resulting from our own perceptions, from the divisions we imposed onto our own substance-situation, and from our own memorized experiences, we have a choice between two attitudes. We can apply to the novelty the cipher of our own values, with well-known consequences, such as bad translation (like naming "king" an African chief), thus forcing foreign significance onto a local reality. Or else we can integrate the original elements of those formerly unknown or exotic tokens in the corpus used as a base for our definition, and in this case the enunciation of the definition will be modified, becoming more general and universal. Truly, a definition should apply only to an inclusive class of tokens, which precede it in its field of experience and form its foundation. Forcing a culturally foreign definition on a class of tokens or experiences can only cause modifications of significance, with consequences on the perception, explanation, and understanding of phenomena associated with them. Since the 1930s, ethnology has had recourse to the method of situational analysis, the parent of phenomenology. Greimas & Courtès (1979) have pointed out that in practice definition does not precede analysis but follows it.

In the matter of writing, it could be tempting to adopt Hjelmslev's two types. He suggests a distinction between formal and operational definitions. The former aim at situating the object in our vision of the world in its relation to other objects (similarity), and with regard to certain fixed notions (difference). The latter exist only provisionally to facilitate future developments and would solidify eventually in formal definitions (he argues) only in an idealized finality. The code of conduct of Semiotics can only satisfy itself with formal definitions and refuse all finality to preserve a critical style that is essential to it and ensures the perennity of reflexive discourse, based on the single requirement of provisional, arbitrary logical coherence.

A definition is a relative artifact, dated and localized, often limited to a culture, an *epistèmè*, an ideology, and a vision of the world, capable by successive extensions of the fields of experience of attaining maximum effectiveness. This extension (*praxis*) implies modification of theory (*theoria*) which in turn induces new ways of doing, thinking and feeling (*poiesis*). It is, or should be, in this unstable dynamic that definition finds its ground. Useful and necessary a while in a milieu, it needs constant reconsideration in the time of that milieu and in contact with an ever greater number of perpetually evolving cultures.

The late inclusion, concerning reflection on African writing, of the Continent and its systems of signs can only transform foreign assumptions, by exposing to criticism all discourse that existed before this inclusion. Such a revision will question our perception of African intellectual ability but more so our understanding of the development of the brain linked to the emergence of writing. No one can be satisfied with Goody and Laborit's axioms. Donald (1991) proposes three original stages for the evolution of cognition and culture. The difficulty of clinical work and the scarcity of studies permit only of speculative conclusions. Nevertheless, Donald innovates. For Goody, modern man, of technology and complex society, emerges with the creation and use of writing. Laborit (1970) insists on the biological structure of the brain, new associative powers working on elements and the recognition of their organizations. He thinks man is at the center of phenomena that he rules and exploits only when he has understood them. For him, the transformation of our cultural, political and economic environments is not enough to free him from his alienation. However man should achieve the complexification of his mental schemes by better knowledge of his biological conditioning, and consequently innovates modes of action on his environments: this will be his liberation. Laborit modifies Whorf's hypothesis (1956) that thought must be conditioned by language. In the same perspective, Goody will see the cause of the radical transformation of mind and society in the emergence of writing.

Donald cites neither Goody nor Laborit. The former is an anthropologist who has much published on literacy. The latter is a psychiatrist, physiologist, and biologist. The one works on society, the other on the individual. Donald is a professor of cognitive psychology. He sites his object, therefore, in the rapport of man to his culture. He studies the processes of cognition of natural and cultural environments. Hence the singular interest of his work. Moreover, he gives a large place to writing, principally to communication through codified symbols.

He proposes for the human species an evolution in three stages: mimetic, mythic, and symbolic. *Homo erectus*, who lived a million years, learnt to imitate nature. His knowledge would have been limited to the mimetic reproduction of the perceived and the given. The next stage, he argues, saw the development of the human being, still simian, into *Homo Sapiens*. Endowed with language, the human species then constituted complex (sic) societies and cultures that were however ignorant of writing. He believes there are still in our time many societies of this type. In the third stage, many symbolic systems see the light of day. Writing, and other functionally similar systems of communication and conservation, enable man to conserve knowledge, to

communicate it afar, to complexify it constantly, by multiplying his sources of information.

Donald espouses the theory of the Semitic origin of writing and develops it in an interesting argumentation that links the collection and storage of symbols with a stage in cultural evolution which he names "theoretical culture", preceded by an "episodic" and a "mimetic" stage. Theoretical culture is characterized by a departure from the mastery of speech and oral narrative forms of thought. The present-day return of symbol leads society to endow itself with a "hybrid modern mentality." One can see originality in Donald's thinking, although it is similar to Goody's, who combines in a logic development of writing, evolution of the brain and history of humanity.⁹

For an advocate of the exclusion of pictographic and morphemographic symbols, Chao (1968) gives pretty good definitions of them, in two chapters devoted to writing and symbolic systems. The first (101-112) specifies the nature of the problem of the existence of writing in communities with an oral tradition: every sign representing a specific part of language is writing; a sign that represents a thing is not. This chapter gives examples of Chinese ideographs and pictographs. The chapter on symbol (194-225) defines it in its relation to its object and through its value in communication systems. Chao poses the necessary features of a "good" symbol: simplicity, elegance, and ease of reproduction, repetition, and transmission. Finally, a good symbol, stylized, refined, is one that is not far from giving birth to a letter, e.g. by becoming part of a rebus.

The African continent is rich in two- and three-dimensional symbols. Be they pictographic or morphemographic, these conserve and transmit meanings. It has been suggested that these graphic symbols originated in Ancient Egypt, whereas it could have been possible to assert, with equal assurance, in accord with a mass of Greek evidence, that cultural diffusion proceeded from South to North. Iconography and mythology tell us that Thot's wife, Seshat (she-who-writes) records the exploits of kings, marking their names on a tree in the temple of Heliopolis, while her husband counts the years on a tally. The archeology of the Upper Nile has delivered the most ancient tally document in Africa, the so-called Ishango bone, first estimated 8,500 years old (Marshack: 1991) but apparently much older, possibly 20,000 to 25,000 (corrective note, *op. cit.*, 32). The site, which produced it, is close to the sources of the Nile, to those Mountains of the Moon, where, according to the Greeks, all the wisdom of the world and its gods originated. Ishango is halfway between Lakes Albert and Edward, West of

⁹Pages 285-340 were the most convincing.

Lake Victoria, at the foot of the Ruwenzori Range, the highest in Africa (Mt. Stanley). However, since 1934 the official southernmost source of the Nile is situated at Rutovu in Burundi, South of Lake Kivu. From Ishango to Heliopolis is more than 3,000 miles, but the two sites are linked by the oldest means of transport: floating on the Nile.¹⁰

The Ishango excavations are continuing, awaiting the results of recent techniques (such as genetic) to allow for new propositions. The only certainty is that cultural diffusion followed the natural course of the Nile, as well as the "exclusive" upstream direction advocated by the majority of western Egyptologists.

A substitutive theory advances that Egypt was not a sudden explosion of culture, the "gift of the Nile", and that the first fruits of civilization were rooted in prehistoric Sudan, in which progressive desertification of the Continent forced many different peoples to survive together in this still humid region, therefore constituting a rich syncretic culture. In this case the hieroglyphs themselves would have come out of more ancient symbolic and graphic traditions, an African "Down Under", perhaps that of the rock-paintings and decorative arts of the Lake Region, and why not of cultures similar to the Ishango.¹¹

¹⁰Beware of the triumphalist press: there will yet be discoveries of new origins, witness two events in 1994. A piece of cedar wood in Greece dated 5,260 BC is engraved with 30 inscriptions yet to be deciphered: A bad omen for the champions of Semitic Phoenician and Egyptian origins. The discovery of the Cosquer grotto (Simonnet: 1994) near Marseilles, with two series of rock inscriptions, may also lead to surprises. The most ancient (27,000 years) are stenciled paintings of hands with fingers folded in different ways, suggesting a gestural code and figuration of writing. The other series is more recent (18,500 years) and more diversified. In addition to the black and red hands of the former, it includes paintings and engravings of penguins, bison, horses and one feline, as well as arrangements of dots and strokes like a "childish writing". A dozen or so of geometrical signs without apparent decorative intent show these prehistoric men's ability to analyze and simplify perceived objects, to reduce them in various ways to a few recurrent essential lines, recognized by some and therefore codified. This type of activity preludes to the creation of pictograms, ideograms and even hieroglyphs. The concordant proximity in time with the Grimaldi grotto of Nice allows for speculation that at least the hands could have been the work of Negroes from Africa.

¹¹Let us recall that the first stone tools appear in the area covered by present Ethiopia. They are 2,500,000 years old. According to a recent consensus, the *Homo habilis* (1,800,000 years) was a gatherer and scavenger of seeds, shells, fruits and plants, and also (unlike a former view) of carrion left over by carnivores. He was neither sedentary nor a hunter. His grottoes were merely places of worship and/or temporary refuge. If one stacks up in this Nile Region early cultural innovations such as the domestication of animals (cats, dogs, monkeys, oxen, elephants, etc.), the first agricultural experiments (barley and other cereals), supporting techniques of writing (like the *liber* and the papyrus, inks and calami), and surveying and inventorying, accumulation of wealth and capital, the creation of the state and administrative regions (nomes), the concept of capital city (Thebes), long distance economic intercourse, a prestigious architecture that survives in

All African cultures use visual symbols (Bramly: 1975; Thompson: 1983), which they have often embodied to decorate their ordinary implements, e.g. the *adinkra* (Akan), *adire* (Yoruba) and *ukara* (Efik) cloths, the Pygmies' *libers* and many other objects. Some question the boundary between the definitions of symbolic notation and writing. Cartry (1963) mentions "veritable tablets of writing" and talks of "writing to be read"; apropos the graphic signs of the Gurmanche geomancians of Burkina-Faso, he does not hesitate to publish in the *Journal des Africanistes*:

It behooves us to ask about the ultimate *raison d'être* of this system of signs, which from many points of view constitutes a veritable writing. These fragments of calabash preserve the geomancian's ritual inscriptions from the failures and corruptions of memory and guarantee the correct execution of sacrifice (275).

Not all the histories of the alphabet relegate to the childhood of humanity the symbols that serve the communication and recording of collective memory. Clodd (1970) published *inter alia* "The Story of the Primitive Man", "Pioneers of Evolution", "The Story of Creation."¹² He points out that Taylor (1899) neglected earlier attempts at communication and conservation of the memory of men by writing. Widely broadcast, this notion was not retained by academic circles. As a historian of writing, he himself falls into the trap of perspective. His determinism leads him into Latin alphabet triumphalism. But publishing as he does at the beginning of the century and for an imperialist and racist public, he takes risks which are worth noting when he challenges Taylor with the massive adjunction of graphic documents from Asia and North America. The writing of Ancient Egypt, the Copts, the Phoenicians, and those of Muslim peoples are not ignored, but treated as contributions to humanity that cannot be ascribed to the African continent. Widening the database, he reactivates the issue of the definition of writing, with a tendency, while not neglecting phono-centrism, to attribute more value to the sign that depicts than to the sign that sounds. Such dis-

many of the West's cities (churches, parliaments, townhalls), one can only wonder at the displacement towards Sumer or Greece of the origins of Western Civilization. These are indubitable facts bearing witness to the existence of a remarkable focus of creativity since the origins of humanity, — without of course extinguishing other sources of radiance (like neighboring Mesopotamia or Phenicia, and distant India, Central America and China), whether they be original or subsequent cultures.

¹²Clodd justifies his undertaking in two ways. First, he wanted to be understood by the many, and especially by young people. Clodd's book is in small format and dedicated to his granddaughter. His second aim was to achieve better knowledge of the history of the alphabet by integrating values excluded by others.

tancing from the usual frames of reference of the scientific world will yield its true significance only half a century later with the writings of Derrida. The popular success of this work of Clodd's bears witness to its sympathetic reception and its novelty places him with Derrida, Foucault, then of Saïd, Mudimbé, Samir Amin, in the deconstructive perspective.

Beyond these symbols, numerous in Africa, there are (non-linguistic) elements of communication which are codified and conditioned by the social context but can nevertheless, according to Dramé (1986), not be assimilated to any mode of writing. Jensen's classic work (1970) argues in the same direction as Clodd, but has not been more influential.

Jensen (1970) describes most of the writing systems in the whole world. The first chapter, "First Steps towards Writing", accords an honorable place to the Yoruba's *àrokò*, a peculiar mythogram in which he finds evidence of the rebus stage, an important moment in the origin of writing. Further on, he adopts the contemporary perspective about the origin of writing, according to which early writing was not so much an imitation of speech as a non-phonocentric system of communication deriving from earlier (symbolic) pictographies, morphemographies, and logographies. Thus, writing he sees coming from the drawing of the imagined and the perceived, not from the graphic codification of the sounds of language. His chapter II, "Idea-Writing (Pictography)", agrees to name script any graphic system that includes the intention¹³ to communicate. The presence of stylization of signs, directional or spatial organization, codification attested by different configurations, Jensen firmly believes, is incontestable proof of the existence of a form of writing. He thus contributes to a renewal of the perception of writing, hitherto tainted with cultural relativism, totally centered on the Latin alphabet, not on the fact and the function of writing. Chapter VIII is devoted to Africa. The Nsibidi, Mum, Vai, Mande, and Somali systems of writing are presented, with tables (217-27). Martinet's article "Graphie" (1968) is also useful, in this respect, although it is resolutely phonocentric.

For Aristotle, spoken words are the symbols of a mental experience and written ones of speech but not necessarily of thought. Rousseau asserts that writing is nothing but the representation of speech. Nevertheless, he finds it strange that more attention should be given to image than to its *raison d'être*.

¹³"Intention", as a criterion of the act of communication, spoken or written, is a difficult notion to handle, witness the diatribe between Derrida and Searle & Austin on iterability. In fact, intention, in most cases, has to be assumed; in other cases it is betrayed or overtaken.

For Saussure:

psychologically, outside its expression through words, our thought is a shapeless and indistinct mass ... without the help of signs, we should be incapable of distinguishing two ideas clearly and constantly. *Per se*, thought is like a nebula in which nothing is necessarily delimited. There are no pre-established ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language (224-25).

Then he points out, using a curious metaphor for speech:

Language can also be compared to a sheet of paper: thought is the recto, sound the verso. Likewise, in language one cannot isolate sound from thought or thought from sound: that would only be possible through an abstraction that would take us into pure psychology or pure phonology (226-27).

Saussure's metaphor reveals his innermost thought. Recourse to paper, the medium of writing, to explain the link of two aspects of language, sound and idea, and not graph and idea, reveals a confusion that is not confined to him. Malmberg (1974), in his critique of Derrida, recalls some basic notions. For instance, the concept of sign, with its two inseparable faces, signifier and signified, is not originally Saussurian, as Derrida believes. It was borrowed by Saussure from the Stoics, from Saint Augustin, from the Middle Ages (Ockham), from the Renaissance and virtually from Port-Royal. The signifier relates to form. As for glossematics, it is desubstantialized. According to Derrida: "First there are systems of concepts which are independent of linguistic conventions." Malmberg agrees on this point with Derrida and finds examples in science, in ideological systems and hierarchies, in religion, in politics: "The celebrated opposition between the continuum of physical reality and the classification and divisions applied to this continuum by linguistic conventions which are different from one language to another (colors, age, time...) causes "a confusion —rather current in psychology and philosophy— between SIGN and SIGNIFIER". Hence the thesis that sign is arbitrary has often been understood as the arbitrariness of the signifier. Derrida (1972, 30) preaches in favor of the independence of thought vis-à-vis language. But Malmberg, (1974) says:

in criticizing the Saussurian thesis, does not apply the fundamental distinction between language and speech, between system and its manifestation. Writing is not, as claimed by Derrida, a representation of speech but of language... Phonetic writing that represents the auditory manifes-

tation...the spoken text, the written text and the text realized in gestured letters or Braille alphabet, remain the same text (189-99).

Derrida's silence on Hjelmslev's glossematics is all the more curious since Hjelmslev it was who criticized and expanded Saussure and, above all, awarded him the dimension of a theory. Note Malmberg's slide from the notion of writing to that of text.

It is generally accepted that language, an abstract entity, is the objectivized consciousness of an ordering of the substance of our cultural material and mental universe. Writing —and especially Saussure's Latin alphabet— cannot be the medium for the representation of thought. It is easy to demonstrate that writing is a set of generally graphic signs. Their function is to represent that organization of sounds that makes up the phonic signifier of language. The nature of the link between writing and the phonological system of a language has been the subject of many studies, in particular pedagogical. The logical and poetic thought conveyed by a given language is autonomous from its writing, and all the more as it claims to be phonetic.¹⁴ Let us note that French and English use the Latin alphabet but that despite this their phonological systems are not reducible to each other — enough to demonstrate that the "one sign for one sound" rule, diversely derided by Bernard Shaw and Raymond Queneau, is not functionally universal, since the same sign represents different sounds in different languages and, in the same language, the same sign can be pronounced —and the same sound written— in different ways.

Saussure's views are easily contestable, and have been contested by Derrida. The idea of the nebula has been taken over by Hjelmslev who calls it "purport": nothing intelligible could ever emerge from the chaos of our thoughts before it is ordered into a system of signs. However, what about lying, in which thought asserts itself and makes a play-thing of the face value of language? What about Proust's existential asthmatic experiences, which nothing forced him to metamorphose into words? What about imagination and dream? Revealed thought? Scientific intuition? They can all, after they have arisen, be shared thanks to speech and writing; but they exist before they come out: think before you talk, they say, and there is no proof that the thinking is done with actual words or even language forms. What about Surrealist automatic writing, unconscious of itself and of what it writes (Stevenson: 1978). Without sharing it, one can perhaps cite here, out of

¹⁴A distinction is made between the old logic, which studies the forms of reasoning, and a new logic, closer to Semiotics, which tries to mathematize formal systems. For us, the word logic designates the study of reasoning, formalized or not; of a reality grappled with in writing; the modes of representation of thought.

memory, Lacan's reading of Freud that the structure of a dream is similar to that of a sentence, or rather of a rebus. Freud was referring to a form of writing we would call mythographic, and by the way, he also mentioned Egyptian hieroglyphics, Chinese characters, and primordial morphemography. Conscious or no, thought is more closely associated to writing and text than to speech. Psychoanalysis is based on confession, on patient-practitioner verbal exchange and would then be essentially the interpretative reading of a sub-text. We know what influence psychology has had on the developments of linguistics, and particularly on Saussure's and Bloomfield's.

On this theme of relation of language and thought, Benvéniste (1966) has this to add to Saussure:

Of the language we speak, we make infinitely varied uses, counting which would be tantamount to listing all the activities the human mind is capable of. Despite their diversity, however, all these uses have two characteristics in common. One is that the reality of the language in use remains generally unconscious; except when we purposely study what we say, we are but dimly and fugitively aware of what we are doing as we speak. The other is that, however abstract or particular the operations of thought, they find expression in language. We can say everything, and we say it as we wish. Hence the widespread conviction, itself unconscious like everything that touches on language, that thinking and speaking are by essence two distinct activities, which join up for the practical sake of communicating, but have each their own independent possibilities, those of language consisting of the resources offered to the mind for what is called the expression of thought...

Assuredly language inasmuch as it is spoken is used to convey "what we mean" or "what we have in mind" or "our thought" (or any other name), is a thought content, very difficult to define in itself, unless by marks of intentionality or as psychical structure, etc. This content is endowed with form by language when it is enunciated and only then. It receives this form from language, the mold of all possible expression, from which it cannot dissociate itself and which it cannot transcend. Now this language is configured as a set and as an arrangement of distinct and distinctive "signs," capable themselves of being split into inferior units and grouped into more complex ones. This great structure, which encloses smaller structures at several levels, gives the content of thought its form (63-4).

In short, then, Flaubert's *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, born of his repeated observation of a stained-glass church window, would have remained chaos unless he had narrated it. According to linguists, it is Flaubert's discourse that put the narrative into shape. Yet painting, sculpture, music teach themselves their own intentionally organized

forms and signify immediately and comprehensively. A wink at the end of a speech may wholly put it back in question. Lying, flattery, irony, double entendre, metaphor should therefore not be capable of expression in language. Magritte, among others, plays with words and with language when he takes fun in representing fixed and figured expressions. A steam engine emerges from an apartment fireplace, spurting out smoke: in Parisian colloquial French, one says of an inadequate fire that it "fume comme une locomotive." Magritte has pictured the image. He often humors clichés. We can all entertain ourselves recognizing popular expressions like shoes that "vous vont comme une seconde peau", the suspension bridge which "se perd" in the haze, the castle on a rock "suspendu entre ciel et terre", a picture "plus vrai que nature", "l'envers vaut l'endroit" (Much of a muchness), "Le jour et la nuit" (Chalk and cheese), "L'amour est aveugle" (Love is blind). This is because Magritte intentionally confuses proper and figurative meanings, getting back to the origin of the expression. A picture belonging to André Breton, titled *Les six éléments*, brings together six French idioms, in English "a wall of flames", "the tree that hides the wood", "a lead curtain", "it's just for show", "the sky of a painting", "the naked truth". One can see that these elements are interchangeable: a curtain of flames, a naked wall...

The game is apparently about French idioms but really about the relations of thought and language. Breton used to say that the word "knife" never killed anybody and Magritte liked to paint under a painted pipe with the caption "this is not a pipe." Some languages and modes of representation are pre-Socratic in their intentions. The poetic apprehension of knowledge has recently joined up with mathematics. Brute thought, like Antonin Artaud's, chaotic before it is molded into language, gives birth to an apparently more authentic perception of the logos in the arts, and now in the sciences. The etymon of "thought" is "form" but what to do of the phonetic similarity of "thought" and "Thot"?

Meanwhile, Africa, whose languages often have recourse to metaphor, music, symbol, metonymy, continues to enshrine her noetic-poetic thought in her multiple modes of communication, including her arts and systems of writing.

Since one of the main functions of writing is memorial, experimental psychology (which studies pictography, the elements of image, conventionalization, perception, recognition, memorization) should be useful in evolving a theory of writing. Saussure had prophesied its importance. The cabbie who mentally figures out the most convenient journey does not think in language. The blueprint of a hospital under construction features not a word but can be read (apprehended) at a glance. The

tennis or chess players, thinking out complexes of anticipations and counters, would lose precious time putting them into words, spoken or written. They simply "figure out" their action, their mind being entirely concentrated on immediate and effective action. The fast reader, who scans the ideas of a printed text without using the organs of phonation, builds himself a new semantic world at the dynamized confluence of the author's and his own as it was before he started (Bartlett: 1977). They are different in their natural means of setting themselves up, like writing and image. Neither is by right superior to the other. The Game belongs to Thot's realm. It is complex, codified, subject to chance. The intellect's ability to adapt to unforeseeable situations seems to characterize that sharp-witted, impish actor, our Thot. Between chaos and geometry, confusion and reason commutes the experience of Man. Thot's model fashions a "reasonable" being, who achieves order a bit better than others and tries to kid us that he can manage disorder with some success: a politician in the oldest sense. The myth of Thot "does not seem to be a little story invented by Plato" (143). According to Robin (1968), "Egypt ... was visited by him. For an Athenian, such a voyage was no adventure. It is said that Plato made it as a trader of oil from his olive groves, which he sold at the market of Naucratis in the Nile delta. He was then able to proceed to Cyrene [now in Libya]" (5). It was Plato who said "You Greeks are ever children: A Greek is never old", whereas in Egypt, "since Antiquity all is written". This form of writing (*mnèmè*) allows thought to unceasingly complexify by ever reducing his acquisitions. Plato contrasts it with the form that is merely mnemonic (*hypomnêsis*). Writing, of whatever kind, is in direct touch with thought, not with speech. In a nutshell, for Plato the Greeks talked too much, while the Egyptians had engraved in stone some of the basic principles which had enabled them to rule their society for over (already) a millennium, a fixed corpus inscribing the nucleus of a perennial order which the Greeks lacked at the time. The child (or the Greek according to Plato) is one who governs itself without benefit of experience, or must be governed by those who, being social beings, act, think and feel in terms of an acquired texture and have been able to draw profit from reasoning on their past experiences. But logos and myth are living things, while writing materializes and tends to deaden thought: To say that thought is a set of psychical phenomena proper to man is not enough to define it. The serial hypothetical constructions of the philosopher's meditation or the jealous man's vagaries are instances of manifested but not verbalized thought. From this point of view, myth is an organized sequence of pictures that tell a story which, rolled out, may be compared to a strip cartoon (Blanchard: 1969).

African writing is sometimes thought by Westerners to be linked with magic, religion, mysticism, secret or occult power. In Africa, thought is often assimilated to breath, like conscience and intention. Imported, phonocentric writing was there at first perceived as the concrete form of the White Man's (European or Arabo-Berber) logos, a perception later reinforced by the various religious proselytisms and their holy and sacred writings. Psychiatry distinguishes waking from oniric (or autistic) thought. The one is reason, judgment, logic, and is conditioned, socialized and therefore communicable. The other is private, soliloquizing and close to the symbolic function which differentiates the human from the beast. It can be taken in charge by psychoanalysis. But experience shows that autistic thought comes before, prepares for and conditions logical thought. There is an intermediate zone in which the analyst's convenient categories interfere with one another, masking the continuum of authentic experience. Behaviorists confuse speech and reason, as the Platonic logos invites them to do. For them, thought is an abortive speech of the type of subvocal reading. Language and thought develop along parallel lines, but it is noteworthy that the child has a more vivid imagination than the adult and that the latter generally believes that what he says he thinks or that he can give his spoken word the form of his thinking. There is therefore recurrent influence of thought and language, although they are two phenomena that, by constitution, function and their signifiers, are autonomous. Note that one can speak without having anything to say, or think without wanting to speak. Laborit (1970), in an essay on political biology, as we have seen, offers a challenging prospect. For him, what distinguishes man from animal is his ability to generate new structures that remodel his perceived, memorized, recognized and imposed environment. This faculty is conditioned by natural and cultural factors. Their recognition is the necessary premise for the liberation of man from his estate. Laborit's major point bears on the constraint that originates in the biological constitution of our brain. Wishing to change the world and society is meaningless so long as the structure of the brain is not perfectly known. This seems to allow the view that the direct link we establish between thought and writing makes the latter determine the evolution of the former, a well-known fact, but independently of spoken language. The case of vocal reading would be different. Here the sequences of read writing and the forms of content and expression are intimately associated. For an audience, speaking and thinking may dispense with writing. The action of the reader and the object he reads take on a more or less imprecise, prestigious or mysterious character, linked with the phatic function of this type of communication, together with the cir-

cumstances of the reading, the content and style of the text and the mode of reading.

In Plato, according to Robin (1968),

writing cancels itself in the metaphor of writing, i.e. in speech. It now designates no more, under the banal simile of "inscription", than a writing that does not write any more but rejoins the soul, that silent internal language which is thought. This would confirm that writing is not the birthright of silence, since the silence of speech just as well defines thought. (120)

Derrida (1972) yet distinguishes between two avatars of writing:

It is self-evident that the structure and history of *phonetic writing* have played a decisive role in the determination of writing as a reduplication of sign, as a sign of sign, signifier of the phonic signifier. Whereas the latter would stand in the animated proximity, the living presence of *mnêmê* and *psuchê*, the graphic signifier, which reproduces and imitates it, recedes from it somewhat, falls out of life, pulling life out of itself and putting it to sleep in its duplicate type. (125)

Derrida's *La Dissémination* will at least have had the prime interest of again putting the question about writing, of inviting consultation of Plato's *Phaedrus* and even Warburton (1977). Joly (1974) points out that

absolutely to treat the Platonic theme of writing meant in fact to confine oneself to the structural, most apparent opposition between the *gegrammenon* and the *legomenon*, sometimes reduced to that of the letter and the spirit. In reality, i.e. in the concrete depths of text, this opposition covers and foments another, meticulously exhibited by Derrida, between two writings, so true it is that "the conclusion of the *Phaedrus* is less a condemnation of writing in the name of ready speech than a preference for our kind of writing over another". (118)

These two writings refer to two types of memory. The first, *mnêmê*, may be provisionally understood as living memory. Active, it fastens on details only to better analyze the whole. It is capable of extension by systematic gradual practice, but it is limited and not infallible. It enjoys Plato's favor. For him, it is the one that stimulates and grounds the intellect, the faculty of reasoning from the greatest possible sum of diverse and repeated experiences. The other is a sum of written genres, the tools of memory, inventories, chronicles, genealogies, copies, indexed relations, lists, notes, archives, quotations, references, diaries and calendars ... All these are aids to memory, which, according to Plato, sterilize it rather than help it. The one favors Montaigne's "Tête

bien faite", the other his "Tête bien pleine". One may concede that a well-filled head is a necessary preamble to a well-made head, but the reverse first requires questioning innateness. For Plato, according to Derrida, "writing is essentially bad, outside memory, and produces not knowledge but opinion, not truth but appearance".(78)

In *La Pharmacie de Platon*, he engages in a minutious commentary of *Phaedrus*. He begins by showing how this text has been denigrated in the name of the author's youth, and then of his senility. The critique of *Phaedrus*, before Derrida, aimed at minimizing the importance of this work. Plato's *Dialogues* are numerous and diverse, hence for some the idea that they were trivial. It was advanced that the secret of his doctrine was taught exclusively to members of the Academy and was therefore esoteric. Yet the recurrence of themes in the *Dialogues* suggests a reflection preluding to the elaboration of a system. The fact that this system was constantly reconsidered shows Plato's concern for the need to determine applications and deepen principles. A contemporary school (Tübingen) attempts to demonstrate the doctrinal unity of Platonism. That he gave primacy to speech over writing logically invites, it is argued, lending more attention to his *Dialogues* than to the rest of his work. But what writing does Plato challenge?

Plato takes up arms against the logographs. These were, for example, the individuals who wrote the speeches of politicians. From behind the backdrops of the political scene, they hurl falsehood in the form and contents of their texts, which have two essential functions: convince the people in order to gain and retain power. They are men of non-presence and non-truth, of a type still recognizably invisible in our time. True and false would then seem to pair like sincerity-orality with mendacity-writing. Book is dead knowledge. Writing is then seen as producing pharmacopoeia or codex. It has little in common with the art of medicine. The issue of writing is moral, psychical. The notion of writing in Derrida denotes an arch-writing that rules over and conditions logos and speech, the latter being constrained to submit to the "grammaticality" and logic peculiar to that culture.

Psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics were later to intervene in the debate over the influence of the advent of writing on the complexification of the human brain. Laborit's and Goody's theses will remain scientifically unfounded so long as it has not been proved that the use of writing and the practice of reading, for a same human group over a certain period of time, has caused a modification, if not of brain structure, at least of intelligent behaviors.

Bouton (1984) points out that the first text that established a relation between the human brain and language was *Imhotep's papyrus*. He was an Egyptian of the archaic era, who may have been an architect

and priest and was deified in the 27th century BC. The papyrus was found in 1862 by Edwin Smith, whose name it bears. Bardinet (1995), a physician, demonstrates the value of ancient Egyptian medical conceptions (see ch.7). Then it was under the reign of Ptolemy I in Alexandria, with Herophilus and Erasistrates, that understanding of the functioning of the nervous system developed. Among the first African medical texts, some of them more than 4,000 years old, are to be found more than the first fruits of neurolinguistics. This ancient science has not yet produced a critical reaction capable of confirming or invalidating the hypothesis, cracked up as dogma, of the simultaneous and consequential emergence of writing and of a complex brain, and of civilization.

Present-day neurobiology and neurophilosophy, studying the relations of brain and mind, of both and culture, suggest that the front cortex intervenes both in the genesis of hypotheses and intentions, and in the build-up of critical sense. Neurons and synapses would enable a representation of the world. As a whole, it seems to be capable of three types of evolution with regard to phylogeny, homogeny and cultural dynamics. The invention of writing belongs to the last type, "not linked with a manifest change in the predispositions of *Homo sapiens'* encephalus, but on the contrary exploiting predispositions that are innate and previously fixed in its genes during its palaeontological history"¹⁵. Yet, images help more efficiently than the written word to track down stored information and treat perception accordingly. Western experimental psychology, using literate subjects, tends to prove that reading an image is slower and more complicated than reading a written word. The converse could be true in a culture using symbolic pictures to conserve memory and which make of training it an essential task.

Writing is generally perceived as a substitute for speech. The developments of linguistics, a science that analyses speech to construct the abstractions that are languages and theorize about them, have created a persistent misunderstanding. Speech would express orally, with the help of a phonic system, the film of thought; and writing would denote, in accordance with a graphic code, the thread of thoughts. It is true that while both systems materialize thought differently both signifiers account for thought. But it is false to say that one is a substitute for

¹⁵D. de Kerchove & C. Lumsden, 1988, *The Alphabet and the Brain*, Berlin : Springer-Verlag. For an inventory of implicitly anti-Goody propositions, see *Raison et plaisir* by J.P. Changeux (1994, Paris: Odile Jacob). The attempts of biology, psychology and sociology to articulate the problem logically, both in itself and with regard to the evolution of mankind, do not yet allow anymore than a discourse richer in hypotheses than in conclusions. The debate shows how sciences as well as "literary" approaches are influenced by philosophic theses. About this debate see *Biologie de la conscience* (J. Delacour. 1994. Paris: P.U.F.).

the other. Even when a graphic sequence reproduces almost faithfully the sounds of language, what the sender emits and the addressee receives is foremost and above all, through the signifying phonic and graphic materials, a brute thought that he interprets. We can agree that there are thought, writing and speech, that these three systems, however interdependent they may be, however much they may influence one another, two by two or all together, may be considered autonomous, their substances being different. Derrida, like the abbé Charles Michel de l'Épée, does not seem to have seen the autonomy of the thought-speech pair vis-à-vis the thought-writing pair. The fact that the thought of a cultural group may be conserved and communicated in different ways stands in favor of the autonomy of thought vis-à-vis all these systems. Only in the most minute phonetic transcription (such as no orthography is capable of) can the speech-writing pair show any high degree of homogeneity. It is by the way noteworthy that linguists see in Phonetics, its experimental research, phonetic transcription, as well as in its theory, scientific activities which are independent of their own. The first level of linguistic analysis is phonological. There are other systems that concretize thought, enabling its communication and conservation, such as the gestured languages of the Amerindians. None is more important than any of the others. It is by dint of a methodological choice, without epistemological fracture, that Saussure gives "parole" and "langue" privileged positions. The hermeneutician Ricoeur (1976) stands up against the assimilation of language to discourse. He posits that only writing constitutes the true manifestation of discourse and describes the changes that affect language when it is no longer spoken. His analysis of the metaphor/symbol relation (45-63) opens up a theoretical debate on writing in the wider sense, and also on that between speech and writing (25-43).

Artaud's cry or Robbe-Grillet's soliloquy, the liberated imagination of Sartre's prisoner, the artist's and the scientist's intuitions, the poet's inspiration are before anything else pure affectivity, responses to internal and/or external experience. That they are later "promoted" to the status of speech or writing proves nothing but the possibility of a change of status.

Systems of signs denoting thought but not generally regarded as writing are differentiated into mythography and pictography.

Mythography is substance and does not concern speech, except in the rebus case. It is materially visual but may address touch. Compared to speech it is perennial. For its representation it has recourse to objects, for instance knots, notches, grooves, scarifications. Marks for calcula-

tion, possession, identification, protection are often natural traces reclaimed, purified and/or stylized.

Pictography is also of the order of substance. It is made up of figurative drawings with a communicative attributed value and function. They signify by denomination and serve to identify, qualify and describe; and by representation, association and connotation they open onto rich and complex communication, be it limited to a cluster of cultures. Pictography expresses fragments of discourse ranging from a simple idea to a "fable", the essential minimum of a possible narrative or argumentation. This type of written communication is generally used by a dominant fraction of society, often secret. The number of signs constitutes an open series, codified by local authorities jealous of their identity and power, which vary in the cultural space and whose internal dynamics modifies the stock of signs through oblivion, taboo and spontaneous creation (Ducrot & Todorov: 1972).

It is more difficult not to see in logography a graphic system of language, close to writing in the traditional sense. It seems to proceed from mythography. All writings regarded as such by non-semiotician Westerners are in this category. The diversity of the principles which govern the constitution of scripts is less than that which presides over the organization of a text. A typology of these principles is possible, whereas the identification of the modalities of writing, text and their internal and concomitant relations seems to be more delicate. Scripts often comprise several principles, which may be schematized. When the sign is the representation of a signifying linguistic unit, it expresses concept, object, image, and sentiment. If there are two synonyms, two different signs are needed (morphemography); but the existence of semantic determinatives, as in the Mum script, or of key-signs, makes it possible to distinguish between graphically similar units. Besides, mythography is richly ingenious; its best-known invention is the rebus; but there is also borrowing from a foreign writing system and the acrophonic process that has produced the <A>, originally an ox's head.

The sign may be phonographic if it represents a non-signifying linguistic unit, a sound (alphabet), or a group of sounds (syllabary). The first Semitic written signs were syllabic. The Phoenician was consonantal. From it the Greeks borrowed consonantal signs to note the vowels of their language (Lancel: 1992). No now extant, or dead, writing constituted itself on a single principle, hence the difficulty of constructing a coherent theory of writing without involving the text. In a phonetic alphabet, a letter may represent several sounds, several letters may represent one sound, and some letters are not pronounced. Punctuation, numerals, scientific symbols and formulae, the return of mythograms in all urban landscapes should also be considered. Numerals are hiero-

glyphic. The text of an exhibition catalogue (Shen Fu, Lowry & Yonemura: 1986) demonstrated that there are writings, like Chinese, which, being originally morphemographic, represent chains of concepts without necessarily referring to the sounds of language. Several so-called phonetic writings have fanciful orthographies, so complex that some words have become images, which have to be visually memorized. This is what lurks under the label "conventional spelling". Inasmuch as the graphic representation of a language is always more or less autonomous and arbitrary in relation to its phonology, its graphic system can in extreme cases be seen as a set of graphs more immediately representing concepts than sounds. Ancient Egypt, like Islam and Asia, have types of writing whose function is esthetic and whose rapport with thought or language, if it still exists at all, is now accessory and superficial. Europe has known Gothic script, uneconomic, impractical, illegible, now fallen into disuse like the illuminated medieval manuscripts, the Kufic monumental and ornamental inscriptions of North Africa, the square Hebrew writing,¹⁶ or the latter stylized Mumscrip. Three reproductions of manuscript pages of the Koran (two from North Africa, 9th and 10th century, 36-7, and 13th century, 40-1, and one from Egypt, 14th century, 44-5) illustrate the consummate calligraphic art of these texts of great esthetic value. Reading them is indeed possible but unnecessary since their owners were supposed to know their content to the letter and able to recite or chant them with eyes closed. It seems that the psychological perspective tends to see writing as the graphic representation of language (phonological system, morpho-syntagm, pleremes and cenemes, script, alphabet, syllabary), whereas linguistics tends to regard it as a representation of speech (style, discourse, and text). So Greimas (1970), who thought he could be a semantician before being a semiotician, bombastically declares: "Maybe it is not the horse, but writing, that is the noblest conquest of Man". The separation of the perspectives is not clear-cut, and the stylistician Marouzeau used to teach that writing was an esthetic mode or element of the representation of speech.

The advocates of the derived perspective cannot accept the Ishango bone as writing. The recent most radical text of the speech-writing link seems to be DeFrancis' (1989). For him, writing is visible speech. Of his 250 bibliographical references, 2 only are African. Thus ignoring the modes of thought conservation and communication of one of the five continents, along with the Antarctic, he cannot lay claim to giving an authoritative answer to the propositions he posits, such as "What is Writing" (II), or drawing a final appraisal of the state of the art: "A

¹⁶Cohen (1958) gives a table of a Jewish-Arabic script of Tunisia.

Critique of Writing about Writing" (III,6); or concluding on "The essential Oneness of Full Writing" (III,7), without banning all the facts that challenge his brilliant but Eurocentric premises and theses.

And yet, DeFrancis' ambition is to define the universals of writing. He proposes the principle of duality, according to which writing uses two series of signs, the ones phonetic and the others non-phonetic and non-iconic. This leads him to the rule: "The better a system represents a speech phonetically, the less it uses non-phonetic signs" (253). The criterion "that is particularly helpful in illuminating the subject of writing" (162) consists of two aspects. The first is the tendency of writing to be conservative as compared to speech; the second the persistence of die-hard attitudes towards the subject. DeFrancis ignores the developments of Mum script over three decades, of multilingual morphemographic Nsibidi, the abundance of mythograms functioning as acronymic or phonetic rebuses. He metaphorizes his "universal" criterion under the title "The Dead Hand of the Past", he himself confusing logical explanation with chronological description. The author is not moved by the contemporary holocaust of writing systems: they were in the way, they had to get out. The "universals" he proposes will suffer the same fate as those Geertz (1983) had provisionally ridden us of. Post-modernity can do with diversity, contradiction, and integration of differentiated non-hierarchical values. Leaning on good-quality but limited information, DeFrancis constructs a coherent, convincing whole, which reminds us of the advent of the Renaissance and 18th century "universals"¹⁷ in a Europe that believed it was the whole world. The foundation of all its prejudices, real and ideological, towards the East and Africa, does appear to be writing. One failing of the Human Sciences could very well be that they are incapable of questioning their own constitutions through an extension of their terms of reference, and therefore of perfecting their methodologies and theories as they develop.

¹⁷The *Guide alphabétique de Linguistique*, edited by Martinet (1969, Paris: Editions Denoël) devotes a chapter to writing. It is completed for linguistics and extended to semiotic and literary studies by the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage* by Ducrot & Todorov (1972, Paris: Editions du Seuil). Both are essential for any type of reflection on writing. One passage in Martinet, about language, could be applied almost word for word to writing as we see it:

The only universals which the linguist could accept are those which would follow from the very definition of language, the implications of this definition, its limits and the discretion allowed. If one posits that language is an instrument of communication doubly articulated and of primarily vocal character, and if one takes into account the economy factor, one can accept "universals" that arise therefrom, but only as "tendencies", leaving open all the structural possibilities, past or future, discovered or yet to be discovered, of languages (329).

The recent evolution of audio-visual and computer technologies influences the diffusion of writing. The former reproduces speech better than writing, so much so that it was thought for a while that they would supplant writing. The latter are opening up a new career to writing. One of the grounds for the supremacy enjoyed by the Latin alphabet was its economy of means, its greater efficiency in relation to all other types of writing. Software writing in pixels, pels and character cells along with sub-codes may allow conversion into any script, existing or to be discovered or invented. The computer offers a chance of survival to all writings, mythographic and logographic, for the moment excluded by prejudices and the inequality of economic chances. Lavelle (1942), at a time when a minority had seized power in Europe through the loud-speaker:

It is not writing, but the record that fixes speech and repeats it infinitely. Writing, which appears to materialize speech, makes it mute and secret, so that it is not speech that it keeps, but thought, which it compels us to resurrect, test, prolong and extend indefinitely. (174)

This remark seems to contain the promise of a type of literary writing that was to surprise the Western world under diverse names, from *Stream of consciousness* to *Nouveau Roman*, and spread everywhere. German, American, Japanese, French, Brazilian, British, Italian, Senegalese, Zairese, Algerian, etc. writers invented a soliloquizing literary composition and style whose missing half was to be imagined by the reader, who therefore had to reflect on and criticize the text as much as its constructions. Western writing thereby recaptured the virtue of symbolic writing, a form rich in potential meanings, which for every sequence of signifiers unchains a range of interpretations, a form whose function is no more to tell a story, to be a "mirror on the road", but to challenge the mind to activity. This movement has become more discreet, but it has penetrated the whole spectrum of literary narrative as well as the media and entertaining arts. It is remarkable that for Le Clézio (as in *Onitsha*, *Désert*) and Tournier (as in *La Goutte d'or*), (see chapter 9), Arabic and Tifinagh writing, Nsibidi and the Ibo's *uli* symbols figure and assume a part in the narrative. In Tournier, the opposition of image and writing constitutes the framework of a whole novel. For Le Clézio, the construction of legends from rare and discreet signs belongs to the essence of literature.

It seems to us possible to propose that all kinds of writing are semi-otic systems. This system consists of a materiality in which the form of the substance is the corollary, through codification, of the form of con-

tent. It can be intentional (Mounin: 1982).¹⁸ Its function is to be a tool and a technique that can serve beyond the immediate environment and record memory and thought for as long as can be useful. It can be converted into words, without any necessary corollary between the phonology and writing of one or several languages, but on condition that verbal interpretation is similar or analogous for messages, read and inscribed. Of the five senses, it only uses sight and touch. Its mode of existence can be two- or three-dimensional.

For writing in two dimensions, the supports and media of its inscription have but one condition to satisfy: to establish a durable contrast between the latter and the former, by playing on light, colors and forms.

The mythogram in three dimensions, like some logograms, requires sequentiality, spatial organization of the elements, which is often homeomorphic with discourse or narrative but arbitrary from culture to culture, although codified for each.

No writing has ever been created *ex-nihilo* and all types and functions of writing exist today simultaneously. The history of a writing system is possible, provided it sets up as a representation of its evolution, independently of the techniques of all other writings. Understood as a seizure of speech, writing became its accessory tool, which paradoxically gave access to a seizure of thought. Perceived in its relation to the text in the wider sense, it directly stages a moment of thought, a stasis of texture, which is the flow, or the sum total of all teleological displacements of possible meanings.

¹⁸Mounin grapples with one of the most pertinent reflections in the realm of the theory of writing, with one of the most serious components of the definition of writing, which should allow to discriminate between writing and non-writing in Africa. For us, as soon as there is a set of graphic signs, organized according to a vision of the act of linguistic communication, with intent to communicate at a distance and/or to conserve a text in time, it can seriously be hypothesized that a writing is in being.

The humanism of tomorrow, after Freud and Bachelard, can no longer take shelter under iconoclastic exclusiveness...More than ever we feel that a science without conscience, that is to say without the Mythical assertion of an Expectation, would mark the definitive decline of our civilizations.

Gilbert Durand

The subject matter of semiotics is often said to be 'the communication of any messages whatever'(Jakobson) or 'the exchange of any messages whatever and of the system of signs which underlie them'.

Thomas Sebeok

Chapter 2

Africa and Writing: Introducing an omitted continent of writing systems and texts as a critique of current writing studies

To expose perceptions of African symbolism as they appear in Africanist discourse and to compare these perceptions with the conceptions of writing found in scholarly works dealing with the subject, especially when they mention African sign systems: such is the aim of this chapter. The concordances, discordances and omissions that will appear should make it possible to construct the type of rapport of these two topics —Africa and Writing— in scientific discourse.

Recourse to Semiotics, the theory of signs,¹ a science capable of studying the functioning of these systems in themselves and in their cultures, should make it possible to explain the ideological foundation of the production of texts on writing and Africa.

Writing in the semiotic sense is present all over Africa. Writing in the restricted sense has also been practiced there since Antiquity in the North and since the Middle Ages everywhere. The trouble with persistent stereotypes in Africanist discourse is that, apart from Egypt, Kush

¹In the 1930s, Charles Morris' pragmatist Semiotics aspired to unify the various scientific discourses in the wake of Leibniz' ambition to construct paradigms and models on the notion of the structuration of cells and molecules. The notion of sign systems is borrowed from the so-called exact sciences (1970. *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*. Chicago: Chicago University Press).

and Meroë, the Carthaginian empire, the Greek and Latin former colonies, it is impossible to forget that the African Sahara, Sahel and Savanna are Muslim and that Islam, a religion of the book, came from the North and East. The presence of Islam eliminates the European myth of the Sahara as an obstacle to cultural diffusion towards the South. Koranic writing may have influenced a part of the local writing systems of so-called Black and Sub-Saharan Africa. Hundreds of 'ajami are used to write African languages. They are derived and adapted scripts from the Arabic consonantal alphabet.

A satisfactory classification of African languages based on an exhaustive set of scientific descriptions is yet to be made. Greenberg's inventory (1963), although provisional, has the merit of existing. There is nothing comparable for writing or sign systems. Dalby's *Africa and the Letter* (1986), the catalogue of an exhibition initiated by Souililou and Dalby, evinces number and diversity. It is the first attempt to offer a fair description of African writing systems, as seen by a linguist. The abundance of illustrations, many of them rare, and the quality of comment make it an important reference work, the only one on the subject. It is easier to classify writings than languages, since they are, here as elsewhere, less numerous and often similar.

For Greenberg (and us), the word Africa means the whole of the African continent and offshore islands, plus certain neighboring areas historically and culturally linked with them, such as Southern Spain, the Middle East, Arabia, the Indian, Georgian and American diasporas. Too many Africanist works are synecdoches. A work on so-called "African Systems of Thought" (Karp & Bird: 1980) ignores for example Sufism in Black Africa, and nine tenths of the African "cosmogonies".

To the limited but important number of writings fronting the extensive and varied African cultural landscape must respond a science capable of describing and interpreting all the signs, without scientific or cultural preconceptions. The advantage of semiotics over history is that it is capable of appreciating all the particular modes of perception and production of writing and text in Africa. The number and diversity of writing phenomena on the Continent require a global, interdisciplinary approach, founded on the identification of features common to all particular systems, be they recognized in their restricted or semiotic sense. If writing requites Derrida promoting it to a future as "the most general concept of semiology", perceived as producer of the text constitutive elements, then it will become the prospect that will yield a dynamic theory of the relations of writing and text.

Recourse to the African domain, hitherto banned, for the study of a new theory of writing should enable us to shift our usual terms of reference. The Latin alphabet and its prestige dominate percepts, affects

and concepts relating to writing. The injection of a new field of data opens up, with a critique of our usual modes of approach and study, new prospects. For instance, our idea of writing, or of the social role of text, should thereby be extended and renewed.

Post-Saussurean linguistics claims speech as its object, brushing aside writing which, it is argued, hides the reality of language. But it was Saussure who, assessing the number and import of the fields of communication that he excluded from structuralist linguistics, suggested the creation of semiotics.

At the time of first contacts with Africa, Europeans showed curiosity for all its cultural aspects, including various forms of writing. This interest waned with colonization and its lay or religious ambitions to alphabetize the subject peoples. Schooling through the Latin alphabet or its many avatars wiped out many indigenous systems of African scripts of thought conservation and communication from local memories, or reduced them to curiosities or insignificant isolated phenomena. Even after Independence, westernized African elites felt nothing but unease, contempt or distrust towards these systems, if they knew about them at all.

No continent has been more partitioned, derided, obliterated, exploited, ignored and forsaken than the African by world economy, international politics, scientific research, the media and Western education. That Fry (1799) mentioned only the Amharic alphabet is yet understandable. But that Fyfe in 1976, purporting to offer a panorama of Africanist research, could barely allude to Meroitic writing (176) vacuously demonstrates the unanimous indifference of Africanist research to this field since World War II. Balandier (1965) is happy with the fact that

orientation towards African studies [of students and scientists] continues apace. This is not the result of a sudden passing vogue but of a thirst for new knowledge, for a scientific curiosity widening to the dimensions of the world now being built. Africanist research was first a product of colonization, when the pioneers are colonial civil servants (M. Delafosse, H. Labouret, L. Tauxier, etc.) or missionaries (R.F. Trilles, R.F. Van Wing, R.F. Roscoe, etc.), or soldiers (Lts Desplagnes and Le Hérisse, etc.). These first studies aimed principally at taking stock of facts and traditions, at setting up archives and encyclopedias of peoples whose only means were oral tradition and the symbolic "books" composed by Negro arts. In these conditions, the researcher had to be an Encyclopedist: he

collected *all* the observations and the ethnology² he practiced appeared first as a contribution to the recording of exotic knowledge (51-2).

After 1930, African studies become more scientific (Lévy-Bruhl, Mauss, Rivet) and center on three requirements: The *inventory* which continues, *synthesis*, and *knowledge in depth*. Synthesis comprises two stages: re-grouping of knowledge concerning seemingly related peoples; thematisation. The last requirement, deepening of knowledge, is illustrated by the work of Griaule, and his numerous team and followers, on the Dogon. After 1945, Balandier continues:

at a time when mutations are at work in African nations that modify the working conditions of Africanists, the study of Africa can no longer remain attached, as to a "fetish", to the image of pure and preserved societies. It has to recognize the incidences of history, orient itself slowly (not without resistances and reticences) towards an examination of social or cultural dynamics and the specific problems of moving societies (54-5). Hence specialization, diversification and multiplication. African Africanists are appearing on the scene, some even schooled in Africa, then in America, the USSR, Japan, Poland...[who] lead to internationalization and therefore, sometimes, to divergence of perspectives. Slowly, since 1954, Africanist chairs of Sociology and Ethnology have been created, of History in 1962, publications arise and Study Centers multiply. (55)

In conclusion, Balandier stresses the value of these works for present-day Africa, which can be defined in terms of time: inventory of the *past*, the keyword here being transformation; synchronic analysis of present-day situations or of the social *dynamics* in the researcher's own time; definition of the socioeconomic plans of action turned towards the *future*. In the end, Balandier speaks in the conditional. He warns and begs Africanists to recapture the sense of societies and civilizations "in action". On this condition will their disciplines find a new élan, let alone shake themselves out of their habits, and renovate the whole field of the social sciences. It may be regretted that, on the whole, this message has not been heard. The desired renovation is dependent on a complete overhaul of the terms of reference, a radical change in the working preassumptions and methodologies, including for instance a re-

²The Social Science that divided peoples on the basis of presence (Sociology) or absence (Ethnology) of writing does not exist anymore, Professor Tardit has assured us. Works like Eric de Rosny's *Les Yeux de ma chèvre* or Françoise Héritier's *Les deux soeurs et leur mère* (on the ethnology of incest) prove it abundantly. The former is rather ethnological, the latter rather anthropological, but the distinction of sociology and ethnology has become blurred.

vision of the Eurocentric definition of writing. However, in all this, not a word about writing. Yet, it cannot be just ignorance. Thus, MacGregor (1909) remembers that, in 1905, during one of his lectures at the Institute now named Hope Waddell (Calabar, Nigeria), one of the students protested. MacGregor had been explaining that the civilization of the peoples of Nigeria must be primitive since they did not know writing (210). Some of the Efik students knew the Nsibidi script, invented by their ancestors around 900 BC (Ekpo Eyo's recent discovery in Calabar) and well attested since around 1700. It is in limited use today.

One of the first writers on the subject, MacGregor tells us it has 98 signs or groups of signs, which is not true. Apart from his ignorance of local literacy, he had also erred by omitting to mention that Nigeria has a large Muslim population, whose religious and economic life has integrated writing and literature for at least a century for ordinary people and four or five for the literate élite. A European was thus telling Africans who could write (in Nsibidi) that they were illiterate. He learns that he is mistaken and becomes one of the firsts to reveal the existence of an African script to the rest of the world. The teacher became the learner.³ His presence and function were challenged.

Astonishment coupled with feeling a pioneer quickens Zetmer (1924) when he publishes the "existence of a non-Arabic alphabet in French-speaking Africa" in the *Bulletin du Comité d'Etudes Historiques et Scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*. His astonishment tells the tale of prevailing incredulity, comforted however by this isolated case, which does not put into question the global vision (the exception confirms the rule). There were many of those "exceptions", out of which no generality emerged. It must be recalled that, about 50 years before Fry, Warburton (1741?) published his *Essay on the Hieroglyphs of the Egyptians, In Which One Sees The Origin and Progress of Language and Writing, The Antiquity of the Science in Egypt, and the Origin of the Cult of Animals*, a monument of erudition, quoted by Condillac, Rousseau and the *Encyclopédie*. He was, and perhaps remains, one of the founders of Western thought on the origin and evolution of writing. From the blurb of the 1977 French translation we read:

Under this monument of Egyptological erudition we find the key to its erstwhile fame: the imperious need Christian anthropology was under to

³Regarding the teaching of culture, we once had a similar experience at the University of Ibadan. Having graduated at Dakar, lived and taught 16 years in Savanna countries before being at Ibadan, we were confronting our Nigerian students with an Africa they did not recognize themselves as being part of. Since then, we ourselves have had to learn about *Africas*.

rediscover its original conviction of a state of innocence lost in the thread of time when symbolic hieroglyphs became a weapon of political domination. In a powerful systematization, Warburton aims at showing that, following the model of writing, pagan myths, idolatry and especially animal cults, rhetoric as elitist dispensation of truth, judicial astrology and dream interpretation as hermetic knowledge, all were originally simple, natural figures of mental representation. The main point of the *Essay*, then, seems to be the relationship between symbol, politics and history. With all its flaws and contradictions one can see, under the ostensible rescue of Christian dogma, a remarkable logical overture to materialism.

Because Africa conserves its texts and its social memory, because she can communicate in very many ways, even over long distances, she can help us lay the foundations of a theory of writing and text. It is no exaggeration to say that no other continent is more apt to deconstruct our most widespread definitions of writing, from the most ancient and tenacious to the most recent and perhaps best accepted.

Fédry (1977) is a priest and a linguist. He knows the Sara country in Chad. He has read and studied oral tradition, and yet he concludes in favor of "the absence of writing in traditional Africa" (592). His information seems to be limited by his missionary and linguistic antecedents, and by the cultural horizon of the Sara; but he inflates his partial, vernacular, prejudiced experience to the dimensions of the Continent. He ignores, like MacGregor 72 years earlier, the 250 to 350 million Africans who are in touch with Koranic writing, through hundreds of 'ajami, i.e. with another book religion than his own. He excludes all the regions of the world where people have been writing since remotest Antiquity and all the systems that do not fit his European definition of writing. He has a Eurocentric vision of the Latin alphabet and of its many avatars that have been used for missionary purposes. He chooses, essentially, to limit his reflection to a present>future perspective, ours being past>future. Success is unlikely if each stage in the process is not envisaged from an African, or at least Africanized perspective, based on sound analysis of concrete African data. Fédry's view may be no more nor less well founded than ours. Simply it stems from different assumptions leading him into partial blindness and, from it, erroneous extrapolation.

Yet Lacouture (1991) explains that no other missionary order has had the reputation of being as open-minded towards the Other's culture as the Jesuits, even to the point of becoming one with it. He tells us that this singular faculty emerged in the 16th century in Japan, under the influence of Francis Xavier. In China or India, he had not felt the need for his own metamorphosis. But in Japan he was seized at the out-

set with respect for the "Japanese writings". True, he was helped by the Japanese Jesuit, Father Anjiro, known as Paul de Sainte Foi. A few reflections of Francis Xavier's, may help understand the cultural shock and its impact on an unparalleled missionary:

He [Anjiro] has told me that these [The Japanese] are people governed by reason alone (134)...inquisitive, ever questioning everything. They hate theft, which they punish with death, do not know drunkenness, they are discreet and speak softly, despise foreigners who raise their voices. They are a religious people (135).

Here then are a people though not Christian, yet respectably civilized. He adds that he is sailing towards Japan

with the intention of going first where the king resides and then to the universities where they study (135). When I have seen the Holy Writings of Japan and have talked with people in the universities...I shall not fail to write to the University of Paris, so that all other universities are informed (136).

These quotations are from the *Correspondence* (1535-1552) of Francis Xavier, Apostolic Nuncio to Asia, who must have scandalized his fellow-Christians when he attributed divine origin to the Japanese books. More: he announces that the Other One may participate in the universal, and that the Humanism of the Renaissance, Greco-Roman in origin, however important it may be, is not the only possible model, thereby putting an end to the illusion that Europe is a model for the rest of the world. Apropos Japanese writing, he writes to Loyola on January 14, 1549:

They write very differently from us, from top to bottom. So I asked Paul why they do not write after our fashion. He answered: "Why should we not write after their fashion?" and he gave me for reason that as man has his head in the air and his feet down below, so when he writes he must do (135).

The Vatican must have been surprised. The missionaries we met in Africa, from 1951 to 1983 (see also Taylor: 1984) were generally much more open-minded about African cultures than some priests we have met in Europe. Missionaries like MacGregor and Fédry are quite a minority.

The classic descriptions of writing have hitherto largely ignored Africa as a source of data. Some historians of writing reported the obvious influence of ancient Phoenician on the Tifinagh script of the pre-

sent-day Tuareg, or of the Ancient Egyptian Demotic script on Coptic writing in present use, or yet again of Greek and syllabic Devanagari on Amharic, of Arabic on the innumerable 'ajami,⁴ of Egyptian hieroglyphs on Meroitic, of Egyptian scripts on the writings of the Western world and some African writings. The Mum writing of Western Cameroon evolved in three or four decades, whereas ours took several millennia. But this one was not topologically oriented towards the triumph of the Latin alphabet.

A naive Darwinism places the present African in the past of mankind. Nataf (1973) explains that primitives communicate with spirits, whilst the civilized "perceive" reality. The primitive knows no separation or opposition between the subjective and the objective. Nataf conceives however that some of their works of art could be signals or embryos of writing. This last feature contradicts the first proposition. Abélanet (1986) recognizes symmetry in prehistoric, neolithic art, as well as a will to magic power over nature, which suggests a sense of the nature-nurture opposition. Like Leroi-Gourhan, he sees in it sex differentiation and coherent systems of religious concepts. The persistent African-primitive stereotype could explain the overblown interest paid the Dogon rather than the Sufism of their immediate environment, or the numerous libraries of Islamized Savanna (Wilks: 1968; Battestini: 1986). A biblical episode, Noah's curse on one of his sons and his lineage, part of which was exiled to the south, long supplied the advocates of Apartheid with chapter and verse for their view that Africans, the sons of Ham, burnt by the sun, were damned. Christian charity prescribed that these poor souls simply had to be saved by civilizing them, but of course only as far as possible and without encroaching on White supremacy. Manipulation of time and space is one of the characteristics of the discourse on writing in general and on Africa in particular. The expression "without writing" still commonly goes with "African peoples". Thus the age-old Europe-Africa relation, founded on falsehood and injustice in the past, is now perpetuating the initial prejudice. Probably nobody has better demonstrated how the West constructed for itself "sites of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*), keepers of legendary references and myths, than Saïd (1974) in *Orientalism*, one of recent works that have strongly contributed to explaining the ways in which the Other's culture is constructed. Since Barthes and his *Mythologies* (1957), many authors, in different fields, have shown how

⁴The term 'ajami today designates all writings inspired by Arabic — and similar to it at first glance -- that serve to transcribe the languages of *non-Arabic* (= 'ajami) Islamized peoples. Originally it referred to the Spanish-Andalus Literature, called *aljamia* or *aljamidia*, of the Morescoes Spanish Muslims officially converted to Christianity after the fall of Granada in 1498.

it was possible to expose ideologies, whether implicit or overt, by the study of their concrete signs and their configurations. Thus Foucault's works on the Western episteme and madness, Derrida's on writing, Eco's on contemporary culture, Mudimbé's on Africanist discourse, more recently Samir Amin on Eurocentrism are so many enterprises characteristic of a culture Léo Bersani calls redemptive, and Baudrillard post-modern. It would seem that these discourses are the consequence of the Western cultural shock that followed on the barbarities of World War II, forming a logical series of "questionings" and then of dispersed inquiries in literature as in the sciences, since 1945. The study of African systems of writing finds its place in this continuum. Foucault had analyzed in terms of power, subjectivity and epistemology the history of European culture, which had long advertised and imposed itself as a universal model. The integration of the culture of Others in a humanism long dominated by the West implies a revolution in perceptions and terms of reference.

Christianity was born, in the heart of Jewish religion, out of the struggle of a Living Word fulfilled in action and a conservatism frozen in sacred texts, rites, powers and privileges of intercessors, like Protestantism later out of Catholicism. As soon as textual knowledge permeates individual and social behaviors, as soon as open criticism is allowed, every human being can renew itself incessantly and the philosopher can declare the death of humanness, the Jesuit may ideally do without Jesus, or the Buddhist without God. Writing, Plato tells us, kills the spirit, establishes social and political falsehood, subverts the course of democratic institutions and legitimates powers, stiffens and perpetuates totalitarian factions, dogmas and theories. According to others, it is the accomplice of capital and class-consciousness. If we look at the text of Plato's myth of Thot as presented by Derrida (1972), we find the arguments over which the West, fascinated by the Latin alphabet and the prestige of its literature, has perhaps not meditated enough:

Socrates: Very well. I have heard it told that in the region of Naucratis in Egypt there was one of the old gods of the country, the god represented by the bird called, as you know, ibis, his own name being Thot. He it was who invented numbers and calculation, geometry and astronomy, not to speak of draughts and dice, and above all, let me tell you, the characters of writing (*grammata*). Now the king of the whole country at that time was Thamus, who dwelt in that great city of Upper Egypt that the Greeks call Thebes of Egypt, whose god is called Ammon. To him came Thot, and revealed his skills, saying "they must be imparted to the Egyptians". Thamus asked what was the use of them all, and when Thot had explained he condemned what he thought the bad points and praised

what he thought the good. On each skill, we are told, Thamus had plenty of views both for and against, and went on and on. When it came to writing, Thot said: "Here, O King, is a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wiser and more capable of remembering...; my discovery provides a recipe (*pharmakon*) for memory as well as wisdom" (84-5).

But Thamus replied:

Most ingenious Master of Arts, O Thot..., to one it is given to create the things of art, and to another to judge what measure of harm and good they have for those that shall employ them. And so it is that you, in your quality as father of the characters of writing...have by reason of your tender regard for your offspring declared the very opposite ... of its true effect. For if men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls. They will cease to exercise their memory because they will rely on that which is written by means of external marks ... and no longer from within themselves, to call things to remembrance... What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder... As for wisdom..., it is only its semblance...that you offer your disciples, not its reality..., for by telling them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much and so burdens to their fellows because they will be filled not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom (274e-275b), (116).

The Egyptian myth of Thot teaches that writing can exist only alongside a strong centralized power. But Thot's invention may also favor the emergence of a counter-power, for he "also frequently takes part in plots, in treacherous operations, in maneuvers of usurpation against the king" (101). "It [writing] shall be shared with the commonalty only inasmuch as it serves the purpose of power and is adequately controlled, so that not a shred of power is spread among the governed". "The father always suspects and keeps an eye on writing", "*Logoi* are always children", (Derrida: 86 & 88). Unlike writing, the Living Word is live for having a father..(87). For Plato, this Word is an organism: an own differentiated body, with a center and extremities, joints, a head and feet" (89). That is to say that this Platonic logos is a palpable, obvious verifiable reality, that has even been confused with God: "At the beginning there was the Word [or the Logos], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). According to Derrida, it was in the passage from *mythos* to *logos* and in the gap between them that Western history appeared (98). Confer Baudrillard's (1972) chapter "Fétichisme et idéologie: la réduction sémiologique" (95-113), in which he establishes for us, but through analogy, the pertinence of the

fetishism attached to the Latin alphabet.⁵ Comparing his conclusions with Derrida's will make it easier to appreciate the essential function of writing (= Latin alphabet) in the Western episteme.

To understand how Europe established relations with the African continent on the basis of a misunderstanding, it is necessary to consult some Western masters of thought. Hegel (1952), in establishing his philosophy of law and history, clearly illustrates the prejudice the West still inflicts on the peoples of Africa (thus evidencing Western perception of the Continent), when, using metaphors to mask his ignorance, he asserts that Africa, having received no input from abroad, has remained in infancy and therefore has no part in the history of the world. Denying her any contribution to humanism, he forestalls the reference to Egypt, Kush, Meroë, Napata by attaching this part of Africa to Asia or Europe. Hegel's Africa is pure brute nature (199). The trouble is that he pronounces judgment without having read the brief and forgetting his own statement that a thesis contains its own antithesis and consequent synthesis. Maybe he should have been born a bit later. He would then have known that the now attested presence of "pharaohs" and pre-dynastic writing in Upper Egypt at Hierakonpolis and in Lower Nubia, let alone Ishango, would tend to prove an initial influence of Black Africa over Egypt, merely (by the way) confirming through archeology the ancient testimonies of the Greeks which the West had refused to take seriously. And yet, the idea of rooting Egyptian civilization in Black Africa is anything but new. Moret had an inkling of it in 1941, like Museur (1969) working on Meroitic writing. Leaning on the Greeks, the monk Raban More had earlier seen the origin of knowledge and writing in a South located in the south of Upper Egypt. More recently, Williams (1987) seems to confirm Heinzelin (1962). Historico-comparative linguistic description, in the wake of Homburger (1957), aimed at demonstrating the fundamental unity of African languages, tracing their origins to Egypt and, beyond, to Asia. Cheikh A. Diop and Obenga adopt similar diffusionisms. Between these reductionist intentions and the "fragmented belts" of languages created by so many linguists, a happy mean will have to be found in Africa. There are far fewer African languages than claimed, and it is established that they do not all have Egyptian for their mother tongue. It has been said that there are as many African languages as African(ist) linguist! King Honesty of Calabar said to the missionary Hope Waddel (1863) that it was quite true that one person out of ten, at the market, spoke a different language and that crossing his kingdom,

⁵One of the most representative paeans to the Latin alphabet (but there are hundreds) is G. Gusdorf's *La parole*, 1988 [1952] Paris: P.U.F. (109-114).

he observed that one village out of three also spoke a different language. But, he added, he would be very interested to know why everybody understood everybody. The truth is that, on the same linguistic criteria, what is called English in Oxford, Dallas, Edinburgh, Ho Chi Minh City, Guam, Antigua, Edmonton would not be one but as many languages.

Thot (Derrida: 1972) created multilingualism, and he is *hermeneus*, interpreter. High up above all the rules of languages, games, calculation, rational knowledge, he is the one who may play with the fundamental law, the Logos that governs thought, action, feeling, and intention, production of signs, interpretation. He initiated human beings into "Belles Lettres and the arts", and he "created hieroglyphic writing to fix their thoughts" (102). During a battle, Thot had separated the belligerents and, as god-doctor-chemist-magician, "had cured them of their mutilations and sewn up their wounds" (102). It is he who put the body of Osiris together again. For some Egyptians, Thot created the world through the power of his Word. He had two consorts: Maat, goddess of the order of the cosmic and ethic world, and later of truth; Seshat, "the-one-who-writes", protectress of archives and libraries. Seshat was scribe to kings as her husband was to gods. He is a sort of joker, he can stand in for any god. He is never there, but omnipresent. He rules over the occult sciences, astrology, alchemy. He is the god of spells to appease the sea, of secret narratives, of hidden texts. Semeiology belongs to this African god.

The need for a polyvalent god of genius like Thot seems to have been at the origin of many foreign deities, like Greek Hermes, Roman Mercury and the Babylonian and Assyrian Nabû. He also evokes the mischievous Yoruba Eshu. He could figure in the pantheon of any religion that has deified heroes and tricksters as grounding myths.

Whether it assigns the birth of writing to Egypt or Mesopotamia, contemporary reflection always associates it with city and state, capital accumulation and often with its exploitation of man by man, but above all division between city and country dweller. In the city are the temple, the school, the seat of government and the Model. In the country the anti-model, the villager, the pagan, the aborigine, the yokel, who has to be ruled because he cannot rule himself. These savages, hardly out of nature, Molino tells us (1991)

have no right to writing, an intellectual technique that transforms the cognitive capacities of the species, but at the same time draws an uncrossable line between the knows and the know-nots...To such a divided society corresponds an equally divided culture: Those below, slaves, peasants, handworkers, mechanics, all these are savages, outside civilization, which is city and élite...So deepens the chasm between the cul-

ture of below, popular and oral, ignored or despised, and the culture of above, written, conscious and assured of its worth. The same gap divides all realms of culture, from literature to the plastic arts. (86-7)

To help appreciate the encounter of Western intellect with African cultures, and notably writing, Michel Leiris' notebooks (1934) offer a precious, because representative, confession. In 1930, Griaule invited him to take part as secretary in one of his first scientific expeditions that lasted two years. Leiris consigned his impressions in his diary, "*tristes tropiques*" before the letter. The young surrealist holds up to the mission, and to himself, a critical mirror of their relation to Africa. The paradigmatic city vs. country polarity will serve as a key in the perusal. Here a series of reactions to some rock-paintings, taken from the early period of his stay:

- 16 July...One of the first things that strike my eye is...an entanglement of ocher-red lines, double lines regularly crossed by small bars, also two by two. The whole is obviously a drawing, but it is difficult to see what it represents.
- 19 July... Larget even discovers an overhang covered with graffiti.
- 27 July...maybe we will discover some clues as to why the natives are so scared of the mountains. Maybe we will even be able to get as far as to explain the graffiti.
- 28 July... Griaule, Lutten and I go to the mountain, to photograph the first graffiti discovered...All that talk about the dangers of the mountain that has got to us, would they be trying to intimidate us?...About the graffiti not a clue yet ... Griaule ... has just learnt through a girl in the Catholic mission...that they bury the big shots (in the mountain)...and that is why the inhabitants don't like to see us poking our noses in all those holes, overhangs, nooks and crannies.
- 31 July...Griaule is making traces of the graffiti, which he has already photographed...

The sustained interest shown by our explorers exposes the mental debate taking place between the legitimacy of their vision and assumptions and the concrete facts which they will have to integrate ultimately, but minimizing their subversive effect on themselves. The observer often changes the thing observed. Here it was the opposite. First they were puzzled, could only see lines, then a geometrical pattern "but difficult to see what it represents", so: without any representational value. Nevertheless, they suppose an "intention". Three days later, they perceive graffiti that are neither pictograms nor morphemograms, whose meanings they look for nevertheless. At the time, the ethnographer's code of ethics made him blind and anxious in the face of the

probable existence of mnemonic devices or some sort of writing in a primitive people. And what if these inscriptions should, as they will, turn out to be similar to our own mathematical and scientific symbols? Let us not forget that in the Dogon cliff of Bandiagara there is a pictogram that describes the ellipsoidal movement of Sirius, which is invisible to the naked eye!⁶

The concept "city" inspires that of "civilized" West and constructs the Third World as the scene of heathen peasant actors chary of ideas and texts. Extending the contrast to the whole planet has of course not killed it. Still Africa cannot have writing because she is primitive, therefore necessarily inferior. She will have to be governed, converted, exploited, educated, civilized by those who invented the myth of the European Renaissance, born on the ruins left by the Reconquista of the Arab-Berber — African civilization of Spain and Morocco in Al-Andalus. The recent choice by the West of a Judeo-Greco-Latin origin is based on a myth, that has been used to demote other centers from which it has borrowed, like Asia, the Middle East, the Maghreb, Andalusia and the Omayyaads. But the 19th century is also the time when the spirit of lucre, with undoubted pragmatism, emerges and tends to supersede the hitherto theological conception of the universe. From the 14th century onwards, the many "discoveries" of cultures will compel Europe gradually, of necessity, for the sake of self-protection, to maintain these cultures on its periphery, to marginalize them, to lump them by reduction into a single folklorized⁷ Other, a primitive "them" different from a civilized "us". All the more since this Other could occasionally seem to be distinctly superior. According to Garaudy (1978),

The cotton and palm-fiber fabrics of the Congo and Guinea were as strong and fine as the cloths of Europe, the tanned and decorated hides of the Hausa (Nigeria) were already appreciated in Europe...The copper metallurgy of Katanga and Zambia, the iron of Sierra Leone were of better quality than what was later imported by force...and all the present deposits of copper and gold were already exploited (271).

⁶Well-sinkers know that stars and planets can be seen in the daytime from the bottom of deep wells and excavations. This was confirmed to us in the 1960s by gold-diggers in the Siguiri region. From the depths of cliff grottoes, or of wells, the Dogon may have been able, by observing the sky, to discover elements known to other cultures, but which they alone, apparently, have strongly integrated in their culture.

⁷It may be pertinent to recall that the notion of folklore was invented "in town" and still generally applies to the "corpsified cultures" (Duvignaud) of the countryside. Thus a costume, a dance, an unchanging repertory of songs, a body of tales, proverbs and legends, plus a few gew-gaws, constituted a folklore. The absence of cultural dynamism was even looked upon as a proof of lasting vitality.

Such an economic inventory may indirectly justify the inception and direction taken by ethnological research. The choice of the Dogon by Griaule and his team for the most searching study of Black African peoples ever undertaken by French ethnology can be seen retrospectively as having been grounded solely on the "archeological" decision to seize, while there was still time, the originality of a tribe, a relic of the old Continent, of the long forgotten first steps of humanity, a surviving witness to the substratum on which Islam had already started to work but on which henceforth western assimilation would be grafted. The problem was to assess the past in the present; not to construct a model of what Africa was already no more.

Periodically, the contribution of Africa to the universal has to be proved again. UNESCO once asked Armstrong (1975) to produce a text on this theme. Under the title "African Culture and its Continuing Relevance to Contemporary Life", the Africanist linguist recalled⁸ wearily:

These African languages have for the most part not been written until recently and then usually quite poorly. This is because the highly tonal nature of most of their sound systems, along with numerous other difficulties, means that adapting them to the Latin or Arabic alphabet is usually a task for professional linguists rather than for amateurs. When the job is well done, however, the enthusiasm of the native speakers is so great that it leaves one in no doubt as to the relevance and usefulness of this work of opening a language area to written communication with the rest of the world (46-7).

For Armstrong, the existence of African scripts was of no significance, because for a linguist at that time writing was already more a matter for semiotics, and the few scripts he knew of and acknowledged were of no economic or other use for the development and integration of Africa in the rest of the world. There were fewer languages than he thought and many more local scripts, but his statement is still valid to many. The tone of this paragraph, redolent of paternalism, is in contradiction with Armstrong's career: he worked till his last breath in the service of Africa. Another example, Oreh (in Kalu: 1978), seems to prove the persistence of these stereotypes. He surveys in a few pages the means of communication of Southern Nigeria, principally Ibo, but omits to mention writing *per se*, long attested in this region (Mum, Nsibidi, Eghap) of the border with Cameroon. Yet some Ibos have claimed the creation of Nsibidi.

⁸Roneotyped, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

How can we explain Griaule's and many others' fixations on the Dogon, if not through the need to describe a "ghost" Africa, as remote culturally as required from Garaudy's past Africa? According to Dumont (1962),

Africa must learn at the same time writing and money, the plough and central government, which Asia has long known; and at the same time to approach industrial revolution (Introduction).

Such a declaration shows a real lack of historical and cultural information and puts into question the expert's authority. This early jewel augured ill of the remedies he was proposing for Africa, the fate of which is now well known.

African history contradicts such assertions and demands a more moderate tone. After all, we know that the introduction of the plough had already occasioned ecological catastrophes, through erosion and leaching of fertile soils and creation (and expansion) of desert and famine wherever it was persisted with. Money has been attested since the Middle Ages as well as the letter of credit and payment in gold. And yet all is not to be rejected in Dumont. One would thus be tempted to agree when he writes: "The most urgent decolonization now is that of most African leaders [who do not seem to know that] a well-ordered humanism does not begin "at home", but puts the world before life, life before man, respect for others before *amour-propre*" (Ch.5). The economic or technological missionary will not be worth much more, from this point of view, than his forerunner. According to Van Dis (1993), commenting his own book:

Africa is the White Man's dumping-ground. Between the sentimentalism of the third-worldly do-gooders, the arrogance or ignorance of the silent majority and the smug Afrocentrism of young intellectuals and their good news that pharaohs had black skins, how is one to choose? ... the only studies concerning African culture are anthropological. Africans have been robbed with total impunity of their languages, their religions, their frontiers, their memory (Conversation with C.Argand, *Paroles*, 1994).

It may seem outrageous to parallel Taylor (1898) and Dumont, but there do appear to be some analogies. Two-thirds of a century before Dumont, this bishop is quite representative of the missionary discourse of the end of the 19th century. Now he seems to have been a racist, but with a good conscience since he was as naive and ill-informed as Dumont. An illustration buttresses his thesis: "Coming out of a cave, dressed in a loincloth, bow in hand, a savage looks like a statue. Behind him, on the rock, three symbols refer quite evidently to rain, the sun and the

idea of reunion" (618). Yet, Taylor mentions the Vey (i.e. Vai) people as exceptionally "remarkable for their intellectual development, attained thanks to a syllabary invented by one of their chiefs, Doalu Bukere who was their king about sixty years ago and is supposed to have been under the influence of a dream" (624). Taylor and Dumont, different missionaries in different historical times, bring out the perennity of a Western vision that can only see what it wants to see. Innumerable relations of voyages and hunting tales reveal to us the same type of Western perception of Africa. Boyce (1925) is but one example. Inquisitive and racist, he gives himself away with illustrations: the scarified arm and shoulder of a man from Tanganyika (388); a group of (Yoruba?) talking-drummers (307); two Gabonese women with scarified torsos; a Bushman rock-painting from the Drakensberg with a bubble issuing from the snout of a bovid and full of drawings (531). The illustrated Africa is scarified, plays the drum and makes rock-paintings. In three modes of communication, Boyce has seen nothing but proofs of primitivism. In my youth I had a dictionary depicting the Bambara as beardless and intelligent. It is to the point that a Black American politician once began his investiture speech by declaring ironically that he could neither dance nor sing. Another illustration, a photograph of a Black African and a chimpanzee, is captioned with a question and its answer: Which of the two evolves better and more quickly? The monkey, of course. Biesele (1978) echoes the familiar thesis that to study peoples who live in an environment where a white man would perish is an absolute necessity. This approach of his, born of an apocalyptic vision of the near future of mankind, at least puts him on the track of the means of communication of South African gatherer and hunter peoples. But he merely discusses the exchange of symbols for the satisfaction of ordinary needs and desires, for making decisions and for obtaining group approval.

The apostle of Panafricanism, Nkrumah (1963), echoes Senghor's line "*L'encre du scribe est sans mémoire*" in his own words: "What is crucial is not the paper, but the Thought" (59), reminding us of Amadou Hampaté Bâ's immortal phrasing: "every time an old African dies, a library burns". These westernized African intellectuals adopt the European ideological point of view. They even put out more flags, as one surrenders waving a tattered shirt. They use writing to blow up thought and orality, at the same time advertising paper and ink and libraries. As one was born in a people without writing, one glorifies the oral memory of those who do not write. Today's African joins those he can't beat, for after all he knows that Africa it was that created writing, through the earliest of all civilizations. Here it is necessary to read all Cheikh Anta Diop, Obenga (1973), and, in America, Van Sertima and

his friends. Africa's contribution to humanness must be recognized, as a contribution among others, neither superior nor inferior. There are peoples in Africa which have not known writing in the ordinary sense; but others, which wrote long before Europeans, did and more which may communicate differently through written texts and have written archives of their memory. So it is equally false to talk of a "writingless Continent" and of an all-inventing Africa. What is probably true is that the Greeks borrowed from Egypt a cultural base, their essential merit being that they later significantly developed it. Non-Mediterranean Europe had invented little, but it has finally produced, in recent times, sciences, technologies and an original and complex culture which owes much to borrowings from others.

Lévi-Strauss's "Leçon d'écriture" (Ch.28) in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) shocked many readers by its revelation of the ethnologist's rapport with his subject:

One may easily suspect that the Nambikwara cannot write; but they do not draw either, except for a few dots or zigzags on their calabashes. Nevertheless, as with the Caduveo, I distributed sheets of paper and pencils, with which they did nothing at first. Then one day I found them all drawing swaying horizontal lines. What did they mean? They were simply trying to put their pencils to the same use they had seen me do, the only use they could then conceive, for I had not yet thought of entertaining them with my drawings. For most of them, the exercise stopped there; but their chief saw beyond that. Alone, probably, he had understood the function of writing. So he asked for a pad, and we are now likewise equipped whenever we work together. Instead of answering my questions orally, he draws heavy lines on his paper and presents them to me as if I could read his answer. He himself half-believes in his make-believe: each time he has finished a line, he examines it anxiously, as if he expected meaning to jump out of it, and the same disappointment appears on his face. But he does not admit it, and it is tacitly agreed between us that his magic lines have a meaning, which I pretend to decipher. Almost forthwith follows the oral commentary, so that I do not have to ask for any explanations (349-50).

Without realizing it, I suddenly found myself alone in the forest, having lost my way. Methodically, I divest myself of my weapons and camera, which I lay down at the foot of a tree, marking its emplacement. I then run after my mule, which finally gives up trying to get away. I remount and we go recover my belongings. But we had spun around so much that I could not find them. So demoralized, I then undertake to rejoin my troupe. Neither the mule nor I knew where it had gone. Now I would try a direction the mule jibbed at, now I gave it free rein and it began to turn in circles...I was waiting for sunset to set the bush on fire...I had almost resolved to do so when I heard voices: Two Nambikwara had retraced

their steps as soon as I was missed and had been trailing me since noon. Locating my stuff was child's play for them. At sundown they took me to the encampment where the troupe were awaiting me (351-2).

Comparing both texts, we see two illiterates. One cannot read the Latin alphabet, and the other bush signs. But of the two, only one looks down on the other: because he does not know a system of communication privileged by the West. But whereas the native chief tries to grapple with the new system, Lévi-Strauss makes no effort to read into nature, however useful this may be for survival in that unknown environment, for had he not been helped he and his mule might have died of a sort of illiteracy. Not a iota of this chapter embodying Lévi-Strauss' reflection on writing should be missed, the juxtaposition of the two modes of reading being perhaps not accidental on the part of the author of the classic *Race et histoire* (1952) and of the *Anthropologie structurale* (1958). For he stipulates, in the latter, that the task of anthropology is to describe non-civilized, non-writing and yet non-industrialized societies. The anthropologist however, immediately adds that it is rather the so-called modern societies that should be described in negative terms, their human relations being the fruit of a systematic process of reconstruction through written documents (215).

Lévi-Strauss is part, with Barthes, Lacan, Foucault and Derrida, of a semiosis inspired by writings like those of Hume, Kant, Marx, and Hegel, and as such he perpetuates, with slight correction but no fundamental contradiction, their judgments on "peoples without writing", judgments that were all the more severe for being ill-informed on Africa. Thus Lévi-Strauss sees in writing the source of intellectual progress:

Having eliminated all the criteria proposed to distinguish barbarity from civilization, one would at least like to retain this one: peoples with or without writing, the former capable of cumulating past acquisitions and progressing faster and faster towards their goal, the latter powerless to retain the past beyond individual memory, captive to a fluctuating history, ever lacking an origin and lasting awareness of a goal (353).

The incapacity of a savant of Lévi-Strauss' stature and his followers', to conceive other coherent, necessary and satisfactory—for a given culture—systems of thought conservation is rather tragic. In his conversation with Charbonnier (1961) he reveals himself:

CLS. We cannot recognize ourselves in societies which by definition, are extremely different and remote from ours, this in fact is why they interest us: we cannot do as if, in spite of all these differences, they were simi-

lar...If we did find in these societies patterns of the same type as in our own...

GC. They would be relevant to the order of our societies.

CLS. Exactly (125-6).

Today one may smile at such remarks. Yesterday they provided food for thought. Thus ethnology creates difference and then goes on to study it. Who decides the "by definition?" Elsewhere Lévi-Strauss answers the question "what are the fundamental differences of functioning and structure that you observe between the societies which are the subjects of your inquiry and the society in which we live?" After a somewhat tightlipped preamble, Lévi-Strauss finally declares:

An essential acquisition of culture must be brought in, which is the very condition of that totalization of knowledge and use of experiences that we more or less intuitively feel to be the origin of our civilization. This cultural conquest is writing. It is certain that a people can profit from its acquisitions only inasmuch as they are fixed by writing. I am not unaware that some peoples we call primitive often possess quite astonishing memories...but such as they are these are obviously limited. Writing had to be invented for the knowledge, the attempts, the experiences—happy or unhappy—of each generation to accumulate, so that subsequent generations might, starting from this capital, not only repeat the same attempts, but use them to improve techniques and evolve new progress (28-9).

Lévi-Strauss goes on to place the appearance of writing in "the eastern Mediterranean" during the fourth millennium BC and thinks it was fate; for in this corner of the ancient world "l'humanité" resides, therefore "we", not African Egypt, not African Phoenicia (Carthage was also in Africa), not the Other. Touching on the Neolithic revolution, which (alas for him) also took place in Africa, Lévi-Strauss tempers his "intuitions" and declares:

So, if writing has just appeared to us as a condition for progress, we must beware that some essential advances, and perhaps the most essential ever accomplished by man, were made without writing (31).

Lévi-Strauss has often been criticized for asserting universals whilst, like Marx and Hegel, he was ignorant of Africa. When he speaks on the relations of art and language, his linguistic veneer (which comes from neither Saussure nor Jakobson, but mainly from Troubetzkoi's phonology, a fact too little known) betrays him: he confuses language and thought, does not know the notions of "referent" and "interpretant". Thus:

That art can be a language is a literal truth. We see it in those pictographic writings...that are halfway between writing, i.e. language [sic], and art, and above all in that wealth of symbols we discern in the works of many populations we call primitive, ... of some peoples of the Sudan, of the Congo or more to the south...where every object, even everyday tools, is a digest of symbols, clear to the maker as well as to all users (128).

So it appears that there are primitives close to and different from us, and primitives who produce and use coded symbolic forms to conserve and communicate texts, which are known to all but are definitely not writing. If some primitives are more primitive than others, the notion of degree of primitivism appears, an idea the human sciences were quick to grasp and apply.

I will confine myself to a very simple example. In some African groups, it is not usual for husband and wife to take their meals together and even less to engage in conversation on these occasions. Food is a very personal, intimate matter, rather like elimination in our societies. When a wife wishes to admonish her husband, she orders from a woodcarver a soup tureen cover decorated with symbols generally connected with a proverb — African societies have many proverbs. So the dish itself in which the man takes his food becomes a message which he deciphers, alone or with the help of a consultant (128-9).

On the subject of these “tureen covers” (sic), one must refer to Faik-Nzuji & Balila Balu (1989). For Lévi-Strauss, the accruing of goods and knowledge is linked with exploitation and violence against the Other, with the wish to define oneself against the Other. This is an essential characteristic of western societies and all those that adopted writing. Indirectly (and wrongly), Lévi-Strauss states that writing with its consequences causes the use of power. That was thirty years ago. Sixteen years later, in *Myth and Meaning* (1979), a text based on radio conversations, Lévi-Strauss shows how he has changed since he defined the primitive as the one without writing. This time he refers to thought rather than to language:

The way of thinking among people we call, usually and wrongly, “primitive”—let’s describe them rather as “without writing”, because I think this is really the discriminatory factor between them and us— has been interpreted in two different fashions, both of which in my opinion were equally wrong. The first way was to consider such thinking as of a somewhat coarser quality — determined by the basic needs of life...The other fashion is not so much that theirs is an inferior kind of thought, but a fundamentally different kind of thought...determined by emotion and mystic representations...and what I have tried to emphasize is that actu-

ally the thought of people without writing is, or can be in many instances, on the one hand, disinterested — and this is a difference in relation to Malinovsky — and, on the other hand, intellectual— a difference in relation to Lévy-Bruhl...

This is my basic hypothesis (15-7).

People who are without writing have a fantastically precise knowledge of their environment and of all their resources. All these things we have lost...This implies a training of mental capacities...You cannot develop all the mental capacities belonging to mankind all at once. You can only use a small sector, and this sector is not the same according to the culture. That is all...The human mind is everywhere one and the same and has the same capacities (19).

This was a gap, into which the phenomenologists, as relativists, were the first to jump. And now we can see post-structuralists, deconstructionists, post-modernists and semioticians wading in behind them. The researcher, taking care to being “politically correct”, will see differences but will henceforth refrain from comparing them from culture to culture, from grading them. He will simply look for cohesion and coherence, and describe how a culture functions to reveal all its meaning.

In a critical essay on an exhibition of contemporary African art, Hassan (1992) raises a number of important questions. He criticizes this “Apartheid” which has created a religious, cultural and historical “Sub-Saharan” Africa that nobody can see on a map. It can only be the work of a demeaning vision of Africa, imposed and affirmed by all those “semi-literates” in politics, the press, museums, libraries and among dealers in African art, whose intellectual comfort depends on debasing a part of the continent discreetly but semantically “located under bleakness, under a barren area, and impermeable to civilizing influences”. Hassan insists: Why “Sub-Saharan Africa”? And how do they [Stanislaus and Jegede] define the term? These are important questions, which must find their answers at a time when African or African-born intellectuals are struggling to correct the prejudices and misunderstandings carried by Eurocentrism. The divisive methods are many and serve the purposes of their inventors. Thus Bascom (1973) was one of those who strengthened certain stereotypes about African art (tri-dimensional, magical) which now seem to be on the way out. He sees Egypt, Ethiopia, North Africa and the Sahara culturally so different from Black Africa that they might be situated in another continent, perhaps Europe or Asia. And so, if Africa is to be admitted into the categories of some Westerners, she must be forced into new arbitrary frontiers, barriers and hierarchies. These four regions, arbitrarily taken away from Africa, had systems of writing in Antiquity. The very short chapter 2 of Hassan affirms that African history begins with Egypt and mentions

the existence of illuminated Ethiopian manuscripts and Arab calligraphies. The classic division between North and Sub-Saharan Africa has amply proved self-defeating and unnecessary. What makes Nigeria a more "African" country than say Morocco, Tunisia or Egypt? Can it really be accepted that the "Sub-Saharan category is unified, discrete and consistent"? (96). He uses "Eurocentrism" as in Saïd (1974) and Amin (1989) and recalls that this concept dominated all Western studies of non-Western societies during two centuries. It is this notion which led to impose an external model, to compel an "acculturation and deculturation of the Other" (note 3, 100).

Amin's book has on its cover an Arab planisphere⁹ which the publisher, probably in deference to the ideology questioned by Samir Amin, put upside-down, in the belief that he was replacing it right way up. Thus the Maghreb, meaning the West in Arabic, is the historic origin of the French orientalist movement. East becomes West, North South, and no wonders some find it difficult to adapt to post-modernity. Amin's thinking (he is a French-speaking Egyptian who has written much on Africa) belongs to the concert of thought that has followed on Foucault's work. Amin challenges the notion of a Eurocentric history of the world opening with Greece and Rome, progressing with Christian feudalism and triumphing in the European capitalist system. When he emphasizes the essential part played by the Arabs in world history, one begins to fear that he will encumber his demonstration with a shift home that would be as vain as the one he condemns. This does not prove to be the case. If Amin fastens on his own people, it is only to defend a real and too often occulted contribution, in the West as well as in Africa (Battestini: 1986). We can see the central and referential place reserved for the Latin alphabet in Eurocentrist ideology. The history of writing, which we challenge only for its teleological tendencies, is also ideologically homeomorphic with the Eurocentric history denounced by Amin.

In effect, the descriptive term "Sub-Saharan" connotes the vague idea of a "lifeless down-under", of forlorn geological times prior to the appearance of the human species. The term "black" is no less abusive,

⁹It may be recalled that Arab cartography long placed the South where we put the North. On Amin's book cover's map, which is the right way up for the Westerner, the upside-down Arab toponyms could have signaled the anomaly to the art-room staff. If we compare this error with Isichei's who also presents the text of a court decision in Nsibidi upside down, one can appreciate our difficulty in understanding the other, perceived as inverted. Such mistakes are by no means rare. Even Obenga gives a Nsibidi sign curiously adorned with a little digit in brackets, taken out of a table referenced by Talbot (1912). This small 6, isolated from the other numbered references of Talbot's table, looks pretty queer.

insidious, and loaded with deprecating history. So-called Black Africa has a population whose skin ranges from slightly tanned or bronzed white (frequent among Berbers, Ethiopians and Fulani) to a bluish black (e.g. in West African coastal lagoon fishermen) which may have inspired Matisse.¹⁰ The white skin of Europeans ranges from a mixture of all colors (that is to say no color at all, inducing doubt about the existence of blood circulation) through the rosy pink of British cheeks to the dark brown of Mediterraneans. Brown is often designated, if not perceived, by Africans as red, and blue as black. In the whole of Black Africa we have heard much about the first legendary inhabitants, the "little red men", perhaps Pygmies (Cissé: 1985). A place should be found in this geographic and anthropologic terminology for a Brown Africa, predominantly Muslim and partly literate, often since the 10th century, three centuries before the construction of the Oqba ben Nafi mosque in Kairouan (Al-Qarawan).

Vercoutter (1988) even accepts that until recently Egypt was considered by the West a corridor of high civilization, a "gift of the Nile", in economic and cultural contact with the Near East and isolated from the rest of Africa. He explains that this conception of Egypt is currently, thanks to new developments in climatology and stratigraphy, being replaced by the notion of an Egypt in contact with, to the West, Libya, to the South the Saharan middle Nile and, beyond, Black Africa. Exchanges took place, contributing to the birth of Egyptian civilization, cattle breeding, agriculture, and architecture, even writing, possibly under the influence of Sudanese cultures. The periods of these exchanges between the valley of the Nile and what is today desert were the Neolithic, and then the pre-dynastic Badarian and Amratian. From the Gerzean onward (3500 BC), the hitherto favorable climatic conditions deteriorated and disappeared completely towards 2300 BC. One of the four most ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs is a stick in a sand-filled oval, read /te-he-nu/ and resembling present-day Libya. It is established that the Egyptians maintained contacts, mainly warlike, with Libya as early as 3200 BC. The Egyptians' presence on the second cataract, south of Wadi Halfa, emphasizes their trade with the Nubians during the second half of the sixth millennium, but also their wish to control access to distant Africa to procure ivory, ebony and other precious woods, obsidian, gum arabic, leopard skins, mercenaries, servants and slaves. The perennial myth of the isolation of this Africa is part of the ideology which claims the priority of Semitic peoples in

¹⁰Let us note that, whether white, black or of whatever intermediate shade, the human skin, to be painted, requires a varying injection of blue. Matisse's obsession in his blue nudes series may be a case in point.

the creation of writing and of the earliest civilizations. The first written signs appeared approximately at the same time in the Near East and Egypt, around 3500 BC. So much for the myth of a Black Africa isolated or owing other worlds more cultural influences than she has given.

Missionaries, explorers, hunters are too easy to criticize; but how can we justify the work of westernized Africans like the authors of *Educafrica* (1980), the cover of which is illustrated by a page of writing described as "Old Bamum Writing"? In 1983, at Foumban, we were able to observe that this "old" system was still used by some old Bamum people and academics from Yaoundé and that a school was being mooted to teach it, in the framework of the renovation of Njoya's Palace. The interest aroused by this script was not so much due to its antiquity and decay as to its role in shaping Bamum identity. This reference on a cover to a prestigious past condemns it in effect in the name of development and modernity. The dominant ideology relegates to a folklorized past a cultural organism that might prove it wrong.

This is not the only example. An issue of *Etudes maliennes*, a duplicated bulletin, is illustrated with the Dogon graph *aduna kinu* (= man principle of the world), a vaguely anthropomorphic sign, outstretched arms separating the heavenly placenta (the head) from the earthly placenta. The *aduna kinu* is inscribed in a part of the oval macrocosm (*azuno gun*), which represents the world (Griaule: 1952). This bulletin of the University of Bamako occasionally features geomancy, rock painting, new orthographies, but never, it seems, the Sudanese symbolic systems studied by Griaule and Dieterlen. Thus a symbol of an ancient knowledge is simultaneously promoted on the cover and ignored inside.

Similarly, small sculpted seeds from Cameroon called *abbia*, used in a game forbidden in colonial times but apparently also used for passing messages, appear on the cover of the review *Abbia* (1963) without the slightest reference to them in the review. Many other African linguistics periodicals, which totally ignore local systems of signs, have sometimes illustrated their cover with signs from one of these systems. *Afrique et Langage* (1983, 20/21) advertises several African writing systems in this way but is completely silent about them. Cultural associations use isolated symbols taken from African writing systems, mentioning the proverbs they signify.

Nobody will deny, then, that various Africas have been invented in the past and that others will be invented in the future. Our project is part of this process of denial and renewal, but only incidentally, for our aim, thanks to the critical power of African sources, is to find a new theoretical perspective on writing. For us, Africa is a means to an ambition, which could not break through without her. Illiterate or not,

Africa shall survive Africanist discourse and will continue to exist and grow. The science of writing cannot ignore African sources. The truth for Africa as an object of knowledge calls for a reexamination of writing data in the semiotic sense, of texts and their relations.

Many writers such as Hull (1972) insist that the white man has disturbed the regular development of African culture. Like Senghor for Negritude, he takes stock of African values, but hardly touches on the writing systems of Africa. More modest Africans than Senghor have published confidential works in which they put forward the same opinions, but in immediate contact with a concrete local reality. Humble priests and teachers have reflected on their tasks, on means at their disposal, on the consequences of their actions. A short text by Tawo-Asu (1977) on the *bokyi* of Nigeria expresses in its introduction (c-j) the feelings and reflections of teachers in rural schools facing the invasion of the colonial language and its dramatic consequences for the economy, the families and their culture.

Lellouche (1992) presents a pessimistic vision of the North-South relationship. Overpopulated and hungry Africa asserts itself against a Malthusian North. The urgently needed reconstruction of our relation with Africa should begin with a deconstruction of our image of her: it will be for the real Africa, when the time comes, to decide what we should and may think of her, and how we should act towards her. It is for her to choose her destiny, alone or in concert with others.

It would be easy to list up similar objects, techniques, languages, products, narratives, geomantic and medical treatises, existing in parts or the whole of the African continent, so multiplying proofs of cultural diffusion. Aside from everyday objects like head rests, leather and copper crafts, musical rhythms, religions, political systems, medicinal recipes, the ayo game, etc., there are also techniques like the pressing of olive oil which vary little in the whole of Northern Africa, from the Siwa oasis to the boundaries of Egypt and Morocco, in all the oases inhabited by Berbers. The sameness of this technique, perhaps inherited from Rome, used by the same ethnic and linguistic family, together with Tifinagh and Libyco-Berber writings, is surprising in a cultural space larger than Europe.

Recognizing the fact that outside cultural influences have infiltrated many African peoples, we should stop denying all Africans any capacity for progress, creation and originality. The Vai do write. Some suggested that this fact was due to an indirect influence of the Cherokee script, reinvented or improved by Sequoya in the United States. Cherokee and Vai scripts are syllabic and some of their signs are alike. Until Holsoe's publication (1971), outside influence was agreed. That author shows and proves that at most a rationalization of

an existing Vai system through a missionary's knowledge of Cherokee script could have occurred. In three serious objective pages, Holsoe makes short shrift of the usual negative stereotype: alone the concept of writing in its restricted sense may have been borrowed, by a culture already capable of transmitting and recording texts.

Could ethnology, as it has done for art, establish a correlation between the object writing and society? This question raises two contradictions at the outset. Ethnology is opposed to sociology in that it has long been the science of peoples without writing, of simple and perennial societies without history, literature and therefore civilization. It was Derrida who formally rejected the stereotyped view that there could be peoples without writing. Lévi-Strauss, having said in *Mythologiques* "and then there was the Greek miracle", saw other distinctions between "them" and "us", and writing even as a means of exploitation by a power armed with symbols.

Ethnology remains blind to the writings of the peoples it studies. The *Bibliographie de l'Afrique Sud-Saharienne* (1932-1990) is a considerable source of information on Africa south of the Sahara. The Tervuren Museum is ethnological: it therefore ignores writing, but it exhibits in the same showcase, without explaining their function, a collection of objects which all serve communication and/or recording of collective memory: mythograms, carved symbols, a cushion decorated with Arabic calligraphy, a carved ivory tusk, a taampha. The curator of this museum, one of the best in Europe for Central African art, must have seen a common theme in them, but the caption merely names the objects and their origin, without a word about their function, communication. Tervuren is no exception. The Musée de l'Homme in Paris intends to remain a research institution rather than a public window on outside worlds. Two Korans, one Mauritanian with its highly wrought leather case, the other from the Maghreb (borrowed from the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle),¹¹ a Tuareg shield with Tifinagh writing, a photograph of a funeral stele covered with Kufic Arabic writing are displayed there. Before its renovation, one could see on the first floor landing of the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens an earth-dyed Bambara cloth resembling Mangbetu and Mbuti libers, without any other explanation than the name of its culture. On the second floor, in the Maghreb section, a permanent exhibit shows many illuminated Koranic tablets, 10th, 13th, 15th, 17th and 18th century embossed

¹¹"Natural History", a rather obsolescent term, still means biology and geology in their evolutionary aspects. These two sciences study nature, not culture of which writing and books are the most usual symbols in the West. These marvelously bound and illuminated, calligraphed and bound Korans are so relegated to the dawn of humanity and primeval nature.

leather bindings from Fez and Marrakech, embossed copper trays with Arabic calligraphy, shawls embroidered with Arabic writing from Tunisia and Morocco. In the Muslim world, writing is everywhere associated with art, but is never for pure decoration.

Folarin (1993) describes the association of art and architecture in traditional Yoruba houses, which are like Roman villas in layout. He explains that the house decoration is only part of the inscription of the material world in culture. Body adornment, hairstyles, facial scarifications, tattooing, adire cloths, complex woven mats, outside and inside murals, painting, sculpture, etc., all proclaim the beauty of natural forms. He could also have mentioned the connotations that explain the choice of symbols and style. Apropos the carved wood panels on the palace doors of chiefs and obas, guardians of culture and votive altars, Folarin remarks that

In a world where there was no written language and painting deteriorated easily, carving became particularly important for the inscription of human experience. Panels ... provided esthetically pleasing architecture and traditional fiction. Like architecture such carving was a kind of three-dimensional inscription for recording human experience (8).

The art historian thinks he can see proof of his own history in contemporary peoples, thus pointing to the intellectual and technical gap they would have to close to get nearer to us, whereas we are moving away from them at an even greater pace. Dichotomist thought, which excludes any third party, is incapable of seeing a parallel development in the primitive. The civilized — primitive binomial becomes an opposition, since one of the terms is partly defined by what the other is supposed not to be. There are exceptions, such as Zahan (1950) who published, outside France, a short "Pictographic Writing in the Western Sudan". For Zahan the Dogon pictographs are an authentic writing system, which can be compared favorably with that of the Bambara (136). Twenty-eight years later, a team in the Griaule-Dieterlen tradition published *Systèmes de Signes* (1978). All thirty-five ethnologists are some of the best-known authors in English and French language ethnology: Roger Bastide, Jean Rouch, Meyer-Fortes, Marguerite Dupire, Solange de Ganay, Dominique Zahan, Luc de Heusch, André Leroi-Gourhan, Christiane and Michel Cartry, John Middleton, Mont-serrat Palau-Marty, Albert de Surgy, Greimas, Courtès, Nicole Echard, Monique et Robert Gersain, Jean Capron ... The general impression left by these texts is of an adolescent science trying to justify itself *a posteriori* and, curiously, to transmogrify itself into an opportunistic ethno-semiotics. Apart from the title, nowhere does the expression "systems

of signs" refer to anything but paleo- or proto-writings. However, the semiotic vision that could make writings of them is discreetly taking shape. Cazeneuve (1967), a diplomat and academic, author of many sociological and ethnological works, may help us understand why ethnology cannot see regular writing in a people called primitive:

As happens so often in the human sciences, specialists disagree on the meaning of the name of their discipline. Etymology does not help much, as "ethnology", from Greek, simply means "study of peoples". But what peoples? Some would say all peoples without distinction. But ethnology generally restricts itself to the study of populations that are as different from us as possible and formerly called "savage" or "primitive", that did not know writing or modern techniques. We shall accept the most common definition to avoid confusion and say that ethnology deals with societies that have remained on the fringe of our culture, that is to say with primitive or archaic peoples, while admitting that those ill-chosen adjectives are used for want of adequate terms. It is simply by extension that ethnology today tends sometimes to apply to highly evolved and even industrialized societies the methods that have produced its explanations of primitive or archaic societies.

In the past, what we have just defined as ethnology was called anthropology. In Anglo-Saxon countries, indeed, what we, in France, call ethnology is still cultural or social anthropology...Towards the end of the 19th century, A. de Quatrefages, who was the first to teach anthropology, meant it as a branch of natural history concerned with man, just as other branches studied insects or mammals. He included not only the physical, anatomical aspects of human beings, but also their languages, civilizations, customs. Later...in Germany as in France, anthropology came to mean the study of physical man, and "ethnology" the cultural and social, which were included in the former anthropology (125).

We should not be surprised, then, if, looking at all records of Western violent past (slavery, bombing of innocent people, the Holocaust, colonial wars, religious intolerance), an African ethnologist saw in the European an inhuman creature less rational than himself, who hardly reads anymore, in effect. Another he would have every right to study with the methods of ethnology. In the same vein as Cazeneuve, Jaulin has spoken of "colonial ethnology" and Griaule of "police ethnography". For his part, Alexandre (1976) admits:

[Ethnology] was mainly invented by the Big White Chiefs after the conquest, as a tool for the pacification, subjection and later assimilation of natives...Let me sum up by memory (without, I hope, misrepresenting [one administrative circular]): "One really destroys —wrote this Governor— only what one will replace. You will therefore try [District Officers, etc.] to achieve intimate knowledge of indigenous societies, so as to recognize

weak points from inside and focus your civilizing action on them". this was applied anthropology indeed! But more pious wishes than a practical and enforceable directive (450).

Literary anthropology focuses on texts that used to be oral and were transcribed that are cut off from their supra-linguistic existence, from the circumstances of their performance, from the totality of cultural experience. Written language cannot render the reality it wants to describe, especially the vanished cultural and literary connotations (Poyatos: 1988).

Tyler (Clifford & Marcus: 1986) opens a new and profound debate on writing and ethnography, exploring the conditions in which ethnographic discourse takes place and is perpetuated. Certain texts discuss the question of cultural representation through writing, and therefore of the legitimacy of the relation between writing and the object it tries to represent. Tyler's "Post-Modern Ethnography" seems the best set of reflections on these problems:

The ethnographic text is not only not *an* object, it is not *the* object; it is instead a means, the meditative vehicle for a transcendence of time and place that is not just transcendental but a transcendental return to time and place. Because its meaning is not in it but in an understanding, of which it is only a consumed fragment, it is no longer cursed with the task of representation. The key word in understanding this difference is "evoke", for if a discourse can be said to "evoke, then it need not represent what it evokes..." (129). Ethnographic discourse is not part of a project whose aim is the creation of universal knowledge. It disowns the Mephistophelian urge to power through knowledge, for that, too, is a consequence of representation. To represent means to have a kind of magical power over appearances, to be able to bring into presence what is absent, and that is why writing, the most powerful means of representation, was called "*grammartye*", a magical act. The true historical significance of writing is that it has increased our capacity to create totalistic illusions with which to have power over things or over others as if they were things. The whole ideology of representational signification is an ideology of power. To break its spell we would have to attack writing, totalistic representational signification, and authorial authority, but all this has already been accomplished for us. Ong (1977) has made us aware of the effects of writing by reminding us of the world of oral expression that contrasts with it. Benjamin (1978) and Adorno (1977) have counterpoised the ideology of the "fragment" to that of the "whole", and Derrida (1974) has made the author the creature of writing rather than its creator. Post-Modern ethnography builds its program not so much from their principles as from the rubble of their deconstruction (131).

These statements are quite different from the position of Lévi-Strauss in his famous "Leçon d'écriture" in *Tristes Tropiques*. By writing on the Other, one fills his soul with a desire to be integrated into a world centered on Europe. To be observed by a Westerner, described, translated into his language and references with signs other than his own, is to be assimilated but as a fringe creature. A case in point is that of Frobenius (1983). Presenting reproductions of rock paintings (figs. 5, 7, 41, 42), organized as a mnemonic support for "fables" in the Barthesian sense, he says about one of them:

Both engravings are deep cut... The natives refer to them as *hardschra maktuba* [sic], i.e. "writing on the rock" (note 1, 26).

The English sounding <hard> and <-schra> suggesting the German word <schrift> for "writing", followed by <maktuba>, the African pronunciation for the fatalistic Arab <mektub> (it is written) which also refers to magic and science, would seem to be pure fantasy if it were not obvious that the informant had nothing to say, beyond a vaguely descriptive pidgin phrase, poorly translated by Frobenius. Maybe what is important here is that Frobenius does not exclude the possibility of discovering some writing in those signs.

It may seem unfair to blend all ethnologists. Many enjoyed or suffered under the proverbial "Good Conscience". There were many ethnologies, and each evolved with the times (Leclerc: 1972). Their differences were an invitation to write a history and sociology of ethnology. This Copans did (1971), pointing out that no history of ethnology could be satisfactory, for none could establish the foundation of a sociology of knowledge, the social explanation of mankind's intellectual productions. Some ethnologies would like to be a theory before the fact, others try to establish the homeomorphy of intellectual products and social structure.

The history of African studies brings out a very precise objective: the explanation of the institutional, ideological, theoretical and practical context of African studies today, and the problems this context poses all researchers (423) ...

The question of the epistemological assumptions implies an *explanation* of the function of science and its evolution, as well as of the nature of its internal functioning, i.e. of the constitution of the object it constructs (424) .

Ideology expresses the place and object of social groups. Where dominant classes partake of scientific research and when the producers of scientific knowledge are part of these classes (a sub-group), they inter-

nalize the dominant ideologies because they are dominated by them. Copans insists:

Science constructs its object, meaning that it grasps reality (outside thought) and establishes laws and principles, which it then subjects to the coherence of the object and of the relation established with it, a relation expressed *inter alia* by the definition of procedures and concepts which enable the reproduction of reality in the form of *thought* (426) ...

There is no absolute truth, only truths theoretically and practically, therefore historically, specified. Every scientific text, however trivial, results from some kind of "mise en scène" (direction, in the theatrical sense) of concepts and results, and from a knowledge-producing process (427).

The evolution of African studies can be "periodized". The importance of semiotics increases as a result of this evolution in cultural space and time. Copans quotes a definition by Kristeva:

Semiotics is a kind of thought in which one "lives" science and is consciously aware of the fact that it is a theory. At every moment in its production, semiotics thinks its object, its tool and their rapport, and therefore thinks itself and becomes, through this recoil on itself, the theory of the science it is. This means that semiotics is a constant reappraisal of its object and/or of its models, a critique of these models (and therefore of the sciences these models are borrowed from) and of itself (as a system of perennial truths) (429).

In Japan, Barthes (1970) sees writing on faces, in cries, in violence.¹² He tells us that:

The Bunkaru, then, practices three separate writings, which are presented in three different places in the show: the puppet, the handler, the voice; gesture by proxy, direct gesture, gesture by voice (69).

The text manifests itself simultaneously on several levels. This is often the case in Africa. Discourse mixes levels and acquires strength from their weaving. Only semiotics can try to reconstruct the numerous functions of these discourses. The Africanist discourse that ignores, erases or reduces writing must be seized from the inside, in its immanence (Barthes: 1985), in spite of its heterogeneity. The thematic unity of our search constructs its relevance. From the first contacts of the West with

¹²Mounin (1970) warns against borrowing from the linguistics of Barthes (189-197) and Lévi-Strauss (199-214). But semiotics incorporates the study of all signifying systems.

Africa to the present, Africanist discourse has displayed a substance that tended to homogenize its written corpus. We shall question it unceasingly in order to frustrate this tendency.

Discourse legitimization (Habermas: 1975) is based on a belief in a universal true-false dichotomy. In this perspective, legitimization of knowledge is a narrative history of intellection and of the complexification and refinement of culture. Lyotard (1979) has taken up Habermas, suggesting that there is no legitimization without consensus and authority. Here language becomes a social game of self-production and constant renewal. Language makes new social ties possible.

The source of all the material and ideological prejudices caused to the East and to Africa seem to be in writing. The category "African Art" includes many systems of signs that can be integrated in the concept of writing. Contemporary ethnologists defend this point of view. Mark (1992), for instance, on the "Iconography of the Horned Mask", regards the notions of form and meaning in art as denying the divergent perceptions of two disciplines. Mark explains that when the art historian engages in iconographic analysis, or in the contextual interpretation of symbolic form and of meaning, he is doing cultural anthropology. Elsewhere, the researcher disposes of written sources and visual images for the artistic interpretation of writings. Africanists must generally use non-written sources: oral tradition and rituals. But whether they study literate or illiterate populations, art historians must keep in mind the context of those societies. The need to refer to non-written information is therefore not confined to Africanists. Implicitly to accept a distinction between peoples with and without writing is to comfort the paradigm: art history is to civilized peoples what ethnology is to primitive peoples: a morally unacceptable proposition.

Semiotics, the science and theory of signs, self-critical and multi-disciplinary (Kristeva, Rey-Debove & Umiker: 1971, 7) intervenes at a time of questioning of the traditional definition of writing. Deconstructing itself, or rather, reconstructing itself constantly, semiotics relies often on other disciplines, to which it may propose models, instituting itself their critical conscience, becoming their best warranty against all risk of positivism on the one hand, and of philosophical vagueness on the other.

Semiotics appears to be particularly apt at exposing lies (Eco: 1976), omissions, tropes in discourse (Kristeva: 1969) or in any other text or system. No other continent has been lied about, ignored, falsified and slandered like Africa.

Semiotics has created two notions: the necessary arbitrary provisional artefact and necessary coherence and cohesion. In the quest of knowledge it privileges intellectual exertion and distrusts any fixation

on whatever conclusion (theory, dogma, ideology, and totalitarianism). Optional rationalization is one of its major objectives, even though this may be only a means. Believing itself perfective, the postmodern intellect uses not only analytic and synthetic, but also poetic-noetic and pre-Socratic modes of perception, imagination and reflection. As a result, the qualities of perception, imagination, and memory generally granted to primitives are supplemented by understanding, logical reasoning, the power of abstraction.

To assert that the semiotics of writing remains to be done amounts to a paradox or a tautology, since the quality of semiotics is constant self-regeneration and renewal of its discourse, creating the need for other coherences as soon as meanings tend to appear. The semiotician's sole aim is to produce an open series of verifiable snapshots, even if this constantly renewed experience may from time to time lead him to see models and focus on them. This type of discourse seems to us particularly apt to trail writing-in-being in Africa: maybe it is even the only possible approach to "African realities"? Is not the African continent, because of its very complexity and many-sidedness, because of our doubly partial information, the best accessible to semiotic analysis?

For the science of writing and text there can be graphic signs only in and through text. Only if signs constitute a text can semiotics find its object-system. The fact that semioticians are not agreed on the definition of sign is not surprising. To define is not a semiotic act. There are after all systems of signs without linguistic articulation and systems without first articulation (Prieto: 1966).

Many are the histories of writing. Curiously most of them were published in the years 1950-1960. Then came Schmitt (1980), Coulmas (1981), and Harris (1986) who desacralized the Latin alphabet, unmasked the ethnocentrism of previous approaches, and questioned their evolutionist determinism. This discreet revolution was a part of the current crisis in the Western conscience; due largely to the holocaust and other atrocities felt to be incompatible with Judeo-Christian and Marxist moral imperatives.¹³ At the same time, empires were crumbling while Derrida-Foucault were questioning the Western epistémé, shifting centers of reference over and old frames of thought into unusual

¹³Gottlieb's pictographs, printed between 1941 and 1953, sprang from several sources. Gottlieb chose to take his inspiration from Amerindian, African and European prehistoric pictograms. In literature, he followed Joyce and Eliot, and in painting Mondrian, Klee, Picasso and Miró. His work was revulsion from the barbarism of the "civilized" world during the Second World War. In a Manifest published in 1943 in the *New York Times* with Rothko and Newman, he declared he had chosen simple forms to express complex thoughts, and that alone this theme and this world are tragic and infinite. They had read Freud and Jung.

critical jurisdictions remote from philosophical circles. The historical perspective tends to confuse logic and chronology.

The absence of African writings in the histories, contrasting with their insistent presence in our African experience, excited our curiosity. Soon the possibility of deliberate omission occurred to us, and much later a feeling that here was a key to the understanding of the history of Eurafrikan relations. With this key, the prejudices inflicted on Africans, white, brown or black, including those of the Diaspora, could be explained.

In the midst of general blindness, there were European "discoveries" of African systems of writing. They remained confidential. Forbes & Norris (1849-1850) and Koelle (1849) signaled the existence of the Vai script. Van Gennep (1908) dramatically announced "a new negro writing" and boldly claimed "theoretical significance" for it. Delafosse (1922) coldly proclaimed a *new* writing: "Birth and evolution of a contemporaneous system of writing". Sumner (1932) described in four pages the Mende script. Yet they were all aware of the revolution in Africa-Europe relations these discoveries could cause. Thus Klingenberg (1933) saw a contradiction between primitive Vai society, its modest political and economic structures, its isolation in primeval forest that seemed to exclude any loan from a contact people, and the possession of that highest mark of civilization: writing. The first shock of these discoveries still resounds from time to time in the African press and in Africanist discourse (Stone: 1990). Njoya's mapping attempt still occasionally surprises (Struck: 1978).

The logic of reasoning, within the African discourse, contains a challenge to current Eurafrikan relations, founded on a faulty appreciation of the Other's capabilities. Among the first, Raum (1943), in an article that remained unnoticed, "The African Chapter in the History of Writing", protests against the silence and contempt of writing specialists for African systems, despite their qualitative interest for science and the new vistas they open up by their diversity. Lebeuf (1965), challenging the idea that writing does not exist in Black Africa, points out the presence of systematic metaphysical thinking among the Dogon, the Fali, etc. and shows that such systems also exist among certain North African Berbers. He thus clips the wings of the other contemporary prejudice which separates North Africa from Black Africa culturally, denies "vernacular" cultures a world vision and an African contribution to humanity, and ignores its writing systems: Could this be the beginning of a new type of relation? Five years after the Independences, Lebeuf's plea was an aborted message of hope, a faint echo of political tub-thumping. A dozen years later, Amaeshi (1977) takes up from Goody and from Watt the argument that the existence of a nonnegligi-

ble number of written documents in West Africa challenges the primacy of the prehistorian and the ethnologist and opens up history to these so-called "writingless" peoples. It is true that a Leroi-Gourhan (1965) had already proved, in his Chapter VI, "The Symbols of Language", which describes the birth of graphism, the expansion of symbols and the nature of linear writing; and in his chapter XIV "The Languages of Forms" by a fine analysis of the relation of figurative behavior and language the existence of meaning in form. Inventories of symbols (Helfman: 1967) and of signs (Jean: 1989) appear periodically, but independently of the notion of writing. Helfman describes graphic signs and symbols and their importance in communication, from rock pictograms to the present-day use of numbers, musical notation, religious signs, trademarks, scientific and industrial signs, track and road signs, geographical and administrative demarcations, etc.; but he only incidentally approaches the potentialities of an international system of writing. Jean, in *Mémoire des hommes*, endeavors to describe proto-writings, visual languages, and the uses of signs and signals. His analyses of many symbolic systems, however, give little place to Africa. One notes "An Indian story on a belt" (54), where he shows that an organized series of codified geometric signs may constitute an authentic narrative; but he does not mention myriads of African symbolic systems, like for instance the Yoruba àrokò and the short pearly Ndebele aprons or the famous Zulu love letters.

Baron (1981) demonstrates that problems of speech representation also exist in writing and gestural communication. Her chapter VI on written language seems to us a useful introduction to any reflection on writing. She refreshes perspectives on language and linguistics and opens up a new theory on writing.

Vai was known in Europe in the very early 19th century as a system of writing practiced by many people. Then, Vai literacy was statistically higher than literacy in Europe. Koelle (1854) described Vai as syllabic and phonetic, independent and original (235). Friedrich writes (1957) apropos the appearance of writing in Egypt:

The cultural situation on African soil is rather simple: in the ancient days, there was only one civilized race there, the Egyptians whose mighty edifices and the pictographic writings on them still fill the modern visitor with no less amazement than they inspired in the ancient Greeks (1).

Note the clean dismissal of the rest of the Continent, and yet the indirect recognition of Egypt as the forerunner of Greek civilization. One of the characteristics of Nazi and imperialist discourse was to confuse cul-

ture and race. This was all the more curious since the category of "race" is of little use for the study of ancient Egypt, where whites and blacks lived side by side, traded with one another, and even alternated in power for centuries.

Abalogu (1978) describes some aspects of "Nsibiri" (Nsibidi) and of the gestural language of the Ekpe secret society of Southeast Nigeria. He also features two illustrations of geometric and pictographic signs, but without giving their meanings. Nor does he mention, any more than Amaeshi, the Efik of Calabar or the Ekoi and other users except, as announced in the title, the Ibo towns of Aro-Chuku and Bende where Ekpe is known under the name of Okonko. One of the difficulties in the quest for information on African systems of writing lies in the wish of some authors to hide or displace the origin and even the existence of scripts created and used by other peoples than their own. Ways and means are many: choice of some peoples to the detriment of others, hijacking to the benefit of the author's people, omission of some user peoples, claim to initial creation, accusation of forgery. Some, for fear of being considered more primitive than others who had writing before colonization, simply hide or deride such writings. Some are truly ignorant of such scripts. Sometimes, judging that their readers, generally Western or westernized, would see little interests in facts that could modify their perception of Africa, feel or deduce that they would derive no prestige or other advantage from helping to overthrow stereotypes of a power in which they have a stake. One is tempted to speak of a conspiracy of silence.

Modern semiotics is the science of signs, grounded in three disciplines, logic, semeiotics or symptomatology, and linguistics. Since Saussure it questions the nature of signs and their sets. It transcends the study of language. Since Pierce (1979), semiotics studies all the communication systems invented by man, including non-intentional forms and animal and vegetable forms. The link between writing and language is part of it. The contemporary evolution of semiotics allows us to see in systems of writing, beyond a manifestation of a conscious and codified intention to communicate, a surplus of meaning, which we shall try to define later on and will provisionally now describe as global, phatic and exclusive.

It may be significant that some important works on the history of writing, some of them monumental, were published in that immediate postwar period (1945-1960), when Europe, in moral, political and cultural disarray, was questioning its values and looking for new ways of thinking, feeling and acting, while being itself radically questioned in the imperial worlds it had created by violence. Weakened, contested, it was vital for it to create new myths for itself. A generation of philol-

ogists and historians was attempting, against Saussure, an inventory of Europe's contributions to mankind, to save the foundations of the edifice. It is a fact that writing, equated with the Latin alphabet, is deeply embedded in the heart of the remotest room in the West's temple of Episteme. The naos, where the Egyptians put the heart, is associated with conscience, not with feeling. Their heart is the place of memory and imagination. It can establish a link between the past and the present. Thot is the master of eternity and the god of writing. The about-turn vigorously advocated by Harris (1986) recovers the semantic field of writing, defined 55 centuries ago by an African civilization. For semiotics, writing is then the entire set of signs and their systems born of man's universal desire to communicate and preserve his thought from the passing of time. Seen in this way, thought results from experience but transcends it. It reduces immediate perception, the anecdotal, imagination and memory by a constant synthesis according to rules Saussure compared with those of the game of chess, which enable the player to play all the games and to invent them. African thinking is conventionally considered as pre-Socratic, that is to say, interrogative, mythic and poetic, and African knowledge would be therefore poiesis and based on well-localized and pragmatic cosmogonic modes of apprehension. Quoting Métraux (1963), Harris suggests that, as in the case of a drawn Cheyenne message, its design alone does not suffice for communication. Connotations shared by encoder and decoder alike are needed. The entire message is not in the medium. This remark cancels out the distinction made by Gelb between two sub-types: "descriptive-representational" and "mnemonic-identificational". Such a distinction may be of some interest in creating two levels for analysis, but in practice these levels are inextricably mixed (65).

A priori, all systems of writing relate to a world of signified entities representing units of meaning, significant sequences and sets of material, sensuous, mental referents. By individual segmentation of the substance-situation, thinking beings and human groups produce these units, their articulatory modes and individuals' own sets, characteristic of a culture and/or universal.

At this point, we postulate that the function of writing, in the semiotic sense, is not to represent speech or language—as is generally assumed in the West—but thoughts. It seems to us evident that writing is produced by the need to conserve thought in time and to communicate it in space, materializing, harmonizing, unifying and finally codifying and socializing it. As soon as it asserts and propagates its powers, it tends to become self-preserving and to differentiate itself from speech, which continues to evolve. We will leave aside for the time being the notions of "inscription" and "trace". Unlike Derrida (1967), we still be-

lieve in the possibility of describing the motions of meaning in the "text", which do forms and usages in the cultural fabric attest.

We think it is improper and wrong to perpetuate the myth that phonetic writing is superior to other systems of signs, which also are meant to conserve and communicate texts. Fundamentally, writing and saying are two different ways of representing thought. Of course, one can speak or write without thinking, mechanically (surrealist writing), or in a second state, or again and more commonly, without telling the truth. In our time, many Christians recite or read the sacred texts without caring about their semantic intentions and the tensions that arise between their behavior and those proposed by the sacred texts. One can trace in various societies, and not only in religion, the same divorce between a vision of the written text, conservative and paralyzing, and a sudden desire to redirect one's conscience towards the inner life, the spirit, not the letter.

There are types of writing whose function is essentially ornamental. The Islamic calligraphies, the Asiatic (Shen Fu, ... : 1986), the ancient Egyptian, and not only on monuments, only referred to concepts in a secondary way. In Europe, gothic script had long become illegible and uneconomic when it fell into disuse. There are non-phonetic writings like Chinese and others, like English and French, which have become morphemic. The graphic evolution of Chinese and English has produced graphs that have nothing to do with the original pictograms, although both retain some of these, but in the case of the Latin alphabet, completely divorced from their original meanings, such as <A>, <M>, <F>, for cow, water and slug. Semiotic reality, according to Shaumyan (1987) is the whole of the "specific properties of sign systems and all necessary or possible consequences of these properties"(321).

Our world of signs proliferates while our history accelerates in a whirligig of images and symbols. To refuse to see that the world is expanding also means to refuse to contest our values as well as to renounce perfecting our perceptions and theories. There is no longer any question of imposing on the rest of the world the values of a culture, however perfect it may be deemed. Nor is it suggested that a culture is corrupted by contact with others, or that a culture is better than another, or that belonging to one must lead to contempt for another. Values from another culture may refine our sciences, our laws, and our institutions, without endangering our identity. It is indeed through constant revision, in the teeth of experience, that Western society progresses, as it has always done. It is well known that a shocking piece of news arouses and informs us all the more if it was unforeseen. Above all, we know that no science is now possible without finality, without an ethic actively aware of the responsibilities of knowledge.

Saint Augustine studied the notion of sign in works like *De Magistro*, *Principia dialectice*, *De Doctrina Christiana*. The founder of semiotics in ancient times was a North African, a Berber. For him the sign represents and suggests an object that is not immediately perceptible. To this Epicurean view he adds the presence of the interpreter's spirit and the Christian notion that objects are of divine creation. He distinguishes between natural and conventional signs and raises the question of the arbitrary in signs. Augustinian signs are not just words. For him, communication escorts and goes beyond and is independent of linguistic exchange. We shall have to come back to this; suffice it to note here that there is, in Augustinian semiotics, the suggestion of an expansion of the concept of sign system and hence of writing. Benoist (1975) studies the role of signs, symbols and myths in each culture. He sees in their codification (he even says their alphabet) the essential mark of each culture. For him writing is a ritual, "perhaps the most important". Writing is a second-degree symbol, since spoken language is itself symbolic of the world. The totality of writings, more than 30,000 years old, includes prehistoric pictograms, Egyptian and Chinese morphemograms, the syllabic and phonemic alphabets of the Phoenicians. Morphemograms are the absolute of writing, since they denote the logos and are independent of the reader's language. Long "practiced by priests, by the scribes of ancient sovereigns, writing was a sacred trust, protected as the echo of original speech, the letters being themselves hieratic in form, since it was destined to convey an idea whose original transcendence was that of the world" (102). Africa is no exception to this general pattern.

We have tried (Battestini: 1988-9) to show that the way to a theory of writing is through individual decolonization, as well as through the deconstruction of accumulated thinking on writing. Among some of the prospects opened up by Derrida, we adopt deconstruction as the best critical system of Western modes of knowledge since 1960. The ethnocentric European discourse on first causes and fundamental principles saw itself as universal. Its metaphysics had to be subjected to systematic deconstruction by exposing its own aporiae. Living a third-of-a-century in Africa, we were able to observe, in ourselves as well as others, the processes of self-decolonization, along with the historic deconstruction of the colonial world. Using some of Derrida's ideas to analyze the recent evolution of the situation in Africa, we proposed a new way of being in the contemporary world, based on the lesson he drew from the colonizer-colonized relationship. Recalling the parallel between Derrida's African childhood and the experience of a self-deconstructing world around and in him, we insisted on the inappropriateness of applying the concept of history to Africa, where many stages of our

vision of the evolution of mankind may be unfolding simultaneously or even in reverse order. All these intermediate "stages" —defined as so many successive victories of mankind in its march towards the universal model of civilization— exist simultaneously today. Reductionist continuum thinking relativises manifestations that are functionally coherent in the societies in which they occur, debases many others as outmoded stages in the history of human progress, unnecessarily causing segregations between and within societies as well as between and within scientific disciplines, preventing the integration of values and beings, of human logics and groups, whose values cannot but enrich us, if only through a transcending of the contradictions they bring to our ever too vernacular vision of the world.

*The real beginning of life is the art of writing.
(Greek student inscription on a wax tablet, Alexandria child,
4th or 5th century).*

As quoted by Pulgram

*Man has endowed himself slowly and painstakingly with a
conscience through indescribably long and slow stages to reach
the state of civilization (which is arbitrarily dated from the in-
vention of writing, about 4000 years ago).*

Carl Jung

*And these intellectual tenors do not know or pretend not to know
the times of our fathers and grandfathers... May you
prepare the genesis of our new world. For it is out of the
vices of a doomed world that this new world, so long
awaited and dreamt of, will be born.*

Sembène Ousmane

Chapter 3

History: About the Relationship of History with Writing Studies

The classification, distribution and connections of African languages (Greenberg: 1963), and the first attempts to study their history (Gregersen: 1977) reconciled Africanist research with a more traditional kind of linguistics, diachronic and philological, that had always made room for writing. Gregersen devotes a chapter to it: "African Writing Systems" (174-97). The little noticed novelty of its wholly continental approach should perhaps be attributed to the nature of its purpose, diametrically opposed to the traditional Western Africanist denial of Africa's territorial integrity, cutting away different mappings of the north of the Continent, or focusing on a village or a cluster of villages and extrapolating from there to a larger and vague entity called Africa (See Mudimbé: 1994).

The study of Africa's language arts includes oral tradition and genealogies, recited or chanted, with or without musical accompaniment. Beyond the fact that Africa was the home of Ibn Khaldun,¹ one of the

¹A Berber of Andalusian origin who sought refuge in Fès (Morocco), he wrote his *History of the Berbers* (4 volumes; French translation by Slane; Paris: Geuthner, 1925-1956) towards the end of the 14th century.

inventors of history, historical consciousness has existed in Africa at least since Manetho (3rd century BC). In West Africa, the cantors (griots) ranked as a caste and practiced their profession close to the powerful and wealthy. The scientific study of oral tradition was initiated by Vansina (1961) and achieved the status of a science with the publication of Person's *Samori* in three volumes and 2372 pages (1968-1975).

Some works deal superficially with writings in relation with African history (UNESCO: 1981c and Isichei: 1977 for West Africa since 1800). We shall see that some histories like Davidson's (1972) and Ki Zerbo's (1978) are illustrated with a few African writing systems. Isichei describes Nsibidi (112), briefly, and illustrates with a "text" in that script (113), an Ekpe court sentence in an adultery case granting a divorce in favor of the wife. Isichei mentions no other of the many West African writing systems than Vai (137), unlike numerous historians such as Davidson, Ki Zerbo, Cornevin, Coquery-Vidrovitch and Moniot, and she ignores Dalby. She observes that Nsibidi, at first reserved for members of a secret society (Aro-Chuku? Ekoi?), spread rapidly, after it was adopted by non-initiates in the inventor people, to the secret societies of neighbor peoples. Before colonization, this script was known to large segments of Efik, Egham, Efut, Ibo, Annang and Ibibio populations. Its widest extension has never been really estimated. Isichei writes:

In *Nsibidi*, as in Chinese, a symbol, or combination of symbols, represents not a letter, but a concept. This means that it could be used as a means of communication between speakers of different dialects, or even different languages. This is what happened. A small group living in the Cross River area apparently invented it. It spread to Ibibio land and to south-eastern Igboland. We have records of at least one school where it was taught. In many [African] societies, the knowledge of reading and writing is the carefully guarded privilege of an elite, and this was the case with *Nsibidi*. The knowledge was confined to members of a secret society. But there were indications that the knowledge was becoming more widely spread. Had colonial rule not intervened, it is likely that the knowledge of *Nsibidi* would have become more general, and that it would have acquired more and more symbols, as Chinese did, becoming a suitable record for recording any kind of literature, science or philosophy (112).

Recently, we have seen lavishly illustrated books on African history or civilization intended for young people, some of them written by authentic historians. Maucler & Moniot's (1987) duly mentions African writing systems. The iconography of the theme is even relatively abundant: a Meroë document (12), an Axumite coin (14), an Ethiopian monk and his

volumen (16), a Sudanese denar (20), a funeral stele said to come from Gao (24), Abomey bas-reliefs (45), an Akan weight (63), an extract from a feminist text by Othman dan Fodio (66), a Luba tablet (68), a carved ivory tusk, presented as "a real history textbook" (69). The sample covers the Continent from Antiquity and deals with many uses of writing. Another example of this type of work (Kaké: 1991) shows how it is possible, by means of these books for youth, to fill the gaps in official teaching, in the West as well as in Africa. The author, a well-known African historian, begins with protest:

It has been rather too hurriedly asserted that the history of Africa is impossible to reconstitute because the black continent has known no systems of writing. This is untrue. Precolonial Black Africa knew no less than seven writing systems: The arako [sic] writings (of the Yoruba in Southern Nigeria), the Giscandi (of the Kikuyu in Kenya), the Nsibidi (of the Efik in Nigeria), the Mende (of Sierra Leone) for example. For historical reasons, unfortunately, these writing systems were unable to develop as those of Asiatic and European peoples (9).

The author might have cited the Mum system (the Cameroon Grasslands) which *was* fully developed, from pictographs to syllabic print cast in Fumban; or Amharic (Ethiopia), or Arabic (which he discusses later and apart) and the 'ajami of Islamized Africa, which are derived from it. These last have even produced numerous manuscripts and literary works. Kaké's intentions are good, but his information is inadequate, contradictory and self-defeating. The decolonization of minds and sciences requires giving up this sort of counter-definition and a strong will to construct an irrefutable argument based on the best, updated and serious information. He offers three documents: a page from the Koran in Vai (a script he seems to confuse with Mende); a letter in Loma; a page showing one of the early versions (pictographic) of Mum. Probably a Muslim, this historian could of course not understate the importance of Islam in the alphabetization of Africa.

Each village possesses a school in which children learn to read the Koran. Later they further their studies at the University of Sankore or at Jenne (26).

To Sankore, the university of Timbuktu, is devoted a double page. One learns that it was created in 1433 and rebuilt in 1580. The Moroccan raid at the end of the century is not mentioned. He goes on:

[It was] one of the most important seats of Islamic thought, like Cordoba, Fès, Cairo, Damascus...Students receive a graduation diploma called *ad-*

jaga...Public readings of the Koran are given...The pupils of the primary schools use wooden tablets, and the more advanced, books [of theology, law, rhetoric, history]...Princes and paupers from the Sahara, the Maghreb or the Levant are united by studying together... Some of the poor have scholarships...Others are public scribes and copyists (24-5).

Kaké names three of the most celebrated Timbuktu scholars and, later, the literati of the Futa Jalon (42) and the Swahili ports (28). The young reader also learns that a Christian king of the Congo, Nziga Kuvu (Joao I) buttressed his power and the state by creating a class of literati. Between 1506 and 1516, forty young men went to study in Portugal. One of them became a bishop and Latin teacher: Don Henrique, who decided to stay in Portugal.

A man from Toulouse, Anselme d'Isalguier, studied Letters in Gao at the beginning of the 15th century. His wife, a Songhai princess of Gao, went to France with him and their children. She converted to Catholicism, and when her husband died she took holy orders. One of her servants, Ben Ali, was a physician renowned for curing high fevers. He helped the Dauphin of France, the future Charles VII, to recover from illness. The French court doctors must have taken umbrage of his success for he died soon after in mysterious circumstances. One can also see in the book (58) a picture of an Ethiopian priest reading a book in sacred script (Ge'ez), of which Kaké tells us that it is still in use, although long replaced in current usage by Amharic.

Melacca (1987) depicts the city of Jenne in 1860, devoting a double page to the Koranic School. Pupils enter at the age of 7. They learn the entire Koran by heart, without understanding it. This takes 4 years. Four further years long, they learn to recite it backwards and to comment on it. No mention of the art of psalmody, of the works of rhetoric, grammar, of the religious compendia in 'ajami, of the *volumen* of theology, law, geomancy and astronomy, of the pharmacopeia...One of the authors is an architect. They jointly supply a bibliography; but the tone is different from Kaké's. The details on architecture are of high quality. But again, no mention of the medersa (equivalent of our secondary schools) or of the university of the 14th-15th centuries, of which there are traces extant, for instance in secular private libraries or in the *isnads* of teachers and professors.

These works challenge stereotypes on the relation of Africa to writing. They vulgarize confidential works and constitute useful repositories of memory, offering the African child and adolescent a positive, decolonized view of their world. A pedagogical document on writing, intended for a non-specialist public, lays a solid foundation for informed reflection on the phenomenon of writing. It deals with its function and history and points to new perspectives: Catach (1992) offers a

rare and useful documentation and updates the theory of written language. The text questions a number of stereotypes and, incidentally, demystifies the Latin alphabet. Catach's work is a critical examination of the history of writing and the writing of history. The author questions the long period of prehistory during which Africa saw the progressive emergence of man and finally the dawn of civilization, at the very moment when, with writing and the earliest documents, prehistory ends. But this event was never and nowhere a sudden explosion.

Coulmas (1989) refers to Childe's view that writing appeared with the revolution brought about by urbanization in the history of mankind. The most ancient historic cities, according to this view, are those in which writing first appeared (16). From the archeology of certain ancient African cities, such as Dar Tichitt (3,800-2,300 BC), Jenne or Jeno (250 BC-16th century; climax 4th-9th century; decline with Islamization, 12th century), Niani (6th-18th century), Igbo-Ukwu (about 9th century), no written document emerges, except for the Savanna after Islamization, through Arabic and the subsequent 'ajami. But there are other cities, Thebes, Carthage or Alexandria, that know writing and rural or village cultures that produce the Mum, Vai, Nsibidi scripts. Indeed, African writing systems have sometimes appeared in small marginal societies, usually rural or slightly urbanized. The most urbanized area in West Africa, around Ibadan in southern Nigeria, has not produced any writing in the restricted sense. Kingdoms like the Ashanti or Mossi have used borrowed forms of writing, with often the cooperation of foreign clerks. Those rural or little urbanized cultures seem to have wanted writing as an instrument of resistance and power in their struggle against the mighty and often well-armed blocs. The case of revealed scriptures is another instance of the universal intentionality of writing as a foundation of power.

But for a better appreciation of the link between urban life and writing we must turn to Coquery-Vidrovitch (1991). Her subject being urbanization in "Black Africa", Coquery — Vidrovitch obviously had to define carefully the city, and its semantic field of jostling concepts like the state, writing, agriculture, religion, social stratification and heterogeneity. Following on many studies like Childe's (1950), she recalls that the list of criteria he puts forward to establish the existence of urbanization begins with the adoption of writing, the essential foundation of administration, and the use of arithmetic. "This amounted to saying that writing in Africa was excluded" (5), she writes, confirming Schmandt-Besserat, but without explaining the strange omission of Egypt, of Phoenician Carthage, of Meroë, of Mauretania, Libya and Roman Africa. Childe (1957) later took up this criterion again and noted that "it could have been arbitrary to have chosen writing as indi-

cator of the critical moment" (36-7) of the origin of urbanization. Coquery-Vidrovitch (1991) concludes her examination of the definitions of urbanization by pointing out the disadvantages of a Eurocentric viewpoint.

These examples demonstrate how difficult it is to speak of cities, or at least of a *true* city in the precolonial era, according to all these authors who have in mind the Western Mediterranean model. To give literate primacy such a deliberate importance sounds rather surprising today, even though it was a generally shared opinion at the time. It caused several scholars to overstate their assertions in spite of their knowledge and specialization in non-Western societies...If urbanization is a proof of civilization, only literate preindustrial societies can claim to be civilized. [Childe] suggests for them as a synonym, "pre-industrialized civilized societies", that is, societies which have advanced beyond a certain number of stages, among which writing is given as a *sine qua non* condition (1950: 10). Childe contends that in addition to size, heterogeneity, public works, and so on, writing is essential to the categorization of the city, implying as it does the existence of a highly specialized non-agricultural group that has the necessary leisure to develop such a complex skill. I agree (5-6)...Agriculture permitted on the one hand an exchangeable food surplus and, on the other, an increase of population density, though we are unable to determine which phenomenon was decisive. In short, it was not writing but agriculture that was the index of civilization and the determinant of urban revolution (13).

Incidentally, Coquery-Vidrovitch relates her striving for a definition of city with a problematic with which we are also confronted in attempting to define writing. She calls upon Rossi (1987) who conclude as she does:

The construction of a coherent urban model, at a universal level, must refer to the multiplicity of historical situations, and extract through this diversity what makes the irreducible unity, beyond the multiple variants in time and space (14).

A science of writing, or anything else, can only be founded on this principle. The inventory being infinite, the model, no matter how coherent, must continue to evolve with the progressive complexity and diversity of the facts. Some Semioticians believe the search for unity is scientifically obsolete and their approach to reality tries to avoid reducing it to what it obviously is not. Definition becomes (if it ever was anything else) a provisional proposition marking out the unfinished quest for knowledge, making it possible. Scientists will probably have to cease confining their vision to the modalities each culture has endowed itself

with, and take in the identities, similarities and analogies between systems in carrying out the various acts of research: describing, naming, classifying, explaining, understanding. The intended paradigm shall be culturally and historically defined, or it shall not be, but it will be nearer to us, better grounded in science and equity, and above all prospective and perfectible. The traduccements named comparatism, diffusionism, historicism, if they are to persist, will have to be handled with greater care than in the past. Coquery-Vidrovitch emphasizes that

a city, in Africa as elsewhere, reflects the global social and economic context. For each epoch, for each mode of production and exchange, for each type of power and ideology, there exist corresponding models of urban settlements and urbanism...Third World metropolises are not similar to Western capitalist cities (16).

Here as before, it is easy to transpose the reasoning of this historian of Africa to writing. No new theory of writing could ignore the diversity of the coded systems of signs that have served to record individual and collective memories, any more than the political, economic and cultural contexts in which they have functioned. These systems of writing, even if they bear little resemblance to the Latin alphabet, are nevertheless authentic scripts.

The myth of a perfect script of unique origin persists in the public mind and in the human sciences. It leads to rejection of some of our contemporaries into an iron-curtained prehistoric past, in the name of a definition that had left African realities out, yet which serves to explain present-day Africa when it does not lead to ignore her.

God knows what aberration begat the creed that the graphic notation of meaningless sounds is the foundation of the Western model of civilization, fatally engraved in the future of all mankind. Paradoxically, the disappearance of the thought originally contained in the sign is claimed to have enabled thought to progress as it was secured on the white page. Some, as McLuhan (1962), did not hesitate to proclaim that it was this very alphabet that detribalized man, and even to see in China and Japan persistent tribalistic attitudes, those nevertheless that against all odds have permitted Japan's economic success. Japan demonstrates a sustained efficiency based on a different economic enterprise that ignores the Latin alphabet. Yet the Western model, which nobody should now think of imposing on the rest of the world, is still advocated to the exclusion of all the others, and by westernized Africans.

Yet, if it is true that the alphabet said to be Latin really enabled Western man to give the world the only real civilization, can it be denied that the great seminal Greek philosophy was born in an urban, hierarchized, segregative, originally oral culture, linked with the same sources that the inventors of that alphabet possessed? On the question of the relation of thought to writing, what are we to make of Plato (1990)?² Does he not in his *Phaedrus* mention loans from “non-civilized” peoples, among them writing?

- *Socrates*: Now tell me; is there not another kind of speech, or word, which shows itself to be the legitimate brother of this bastard one, both in the manner of its begetting and in its better and more powerful nature?
- *Phaedrus*: What is this word and how is it begotten, as you say?
- *Socrates*: The word which is written with intelligence in the mind of the learner, which is able to defend itself and knows to whom it should speak, and before whom to be silent.
- *Phaedrus*: You mean the living and breathing word of him who knows, of which the written word may justly be called the image?
- *Socrates*: Exactly. (276A)

Yet there are “points of origin” in history that seem to be negotiable and others that are a matter of sensibility. Thus the history of the United States until quite recently —the Bicentennial, to be precise— tended to begin with the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers in the *Mayflower* in 1620.

A recent trend wants history books to mention the presence of earlier missionaries and colonists, Spanish, French, Dutch, Swedish (and possibly African); but also, and for the whole of the American continent, the period significantly called “precolumbian”, from 40,000 BC to 1513, during which peoples that possessed writing may have visited America: Chinese (2,640 BC), Hindus (9th and 5th c.), Vikings (6th, 14th c.). Until archeology comes to the rescue of insufficient texts, American history, in the strict sense of that discipline, begins indubitably in 200 BC with a writing system created on the Continent. The

² For Plato, there are three beds: 1. The idea of bed, which is of the order of the logos, in the divine sense. This might be the signified; 2. The real bed, an object on which one can for instance sleep, made by a carpenter. It might be the referent; 3. The image of the bed, created by a painter, possibly a second signified. The graphic word <bed> and the phonic word /bed/ are different signifiers of the same notion, of the object and the image. Plato clearly distinguishes speech, thought and writing. For him meaning links them and yet the meaning of the one does not necessarily depend on the meanings of the other two.

first Maya king who had his name written into the stone of temples ends American prehistory. Moreover, Maya writing was perceived as not phonetic. The priests who burned the Maya codices were the forerunners of those scholars who now deny certain peoples the possession of a means to conserve and communicate their thought, to perpetuate their culture,³ who deny them literature, history, civilization and categorize these contemporaries as primitive.

The Maya hieroglyphic system may date from 700 BC. During the classical period of Maya culture (250-900 AD), hieroglyphs were used on stone monuments and ceramics, in books and on numerous portable objects. Maya writing was first perceived as logographic, but since the 1950s, we know that it included consonant-vowel combinations and the principle of synharmony. Because most Maya signs have not yet been deciphered, it is not possible to establish clearly the relative proportion of syllabic to logographic signs. One aspect that complicates deciphering is that different signs evidently share the same value, and that the same sign may have many allographs. Maya cloths are still today covered with motives that represent the ways Mayans perceived and imagined the world. These cloths are appreciated for their decorative effects and adorn the walls of people who see nothing in them but exotic esthetic values devoid of meaning.

A discovered 17th century document, described by McCutchen (1993), *The Red Record (The Wallam Olum, The Oldest Native North American History)* was written with the help of symbols inscribed in red on wooden sticks by Amerindian nomads. One of the most ancient documents of the North American continent, it narrates, *inter alia*, an original myth, the migration through the Bering Straits, and ends with the arrival of European colonists. It attests not only the historical memory of a people said to be primitive, but the existence of a graphic system at a time when it was living in great fear of losing its cultural identity with the arrival of the Other and the sudden acceleration of history. With this type of writing, the possibility of a simple adoption of the Other's is excluded. The script aimed at recording collective memory, before disaster set in: somehow a bottle thrown into the sea, a document difficult to read, like the one designed by Thomas A. Sebeok, planted on the surface of the moon, to greet visitors from other planets, or from this one in a distant future. We are far from the elaborate constructions of the historians of writing, from the alleged agricultural almanacs and early bookkeeping signs escorting the emergence of capi-

³A culture may be defined as the autonomous set of constraints freely adopted by a given society. Semioticians prefer to regard it as a sum of acquired reflexes, evolving with circumstances, and tending to solidify in contact with other cultures.

tal, from the earlier writings supposed to have strengthened the rulers of a recently sedentarized people, from the birth of the state, the need to legitimize the dynasty, etc. If it were, as McCutchen says, the oldest document of native North American history, then we would be in the presence of a prehistorical historical text, an absurdity. The Aztecs' *Codex Mendoza* is thought to be another example, but this time of "glyphic writing".

Arabic writing may have penetrated the States in 1312, at the time of the exploration of the Mississippi by Muslim from the Empire of Mali. Later on, Muslim slaves were numerous and some refused to be Christianized. Bilali Muhammad wrote a manuscript of 13 chapters concerned with Maliki law, the prayers, the Prophet's Companions ... It was recorded in the States as a "slave diary". Its title is *First Fruits of Happiness* (Amir Nashid Ali Muhammad: 1998).

In order to define the scope and significance of the prejudice historically and currently inflicted by our notion of writing and consequent perception of Africa and Africans, it may be necessary to return to some key notions like history, ethnology, sociology, which rest on the criterion of the presence or absence of writing.

Prehistory deals with all human activities before writing or, more accurately, metallurgy appeared. Leroi-Gourhan, a leading prehistorian, places the appearance of writing 30,000 years ago.

Primitive peoples, according to sociology, are human groups, ancient or contemporary, who do not know the complex social structures and techniques of "evolved" societies.

If by habit ethnology has had as its object primitive peoples without writing, metallurgy or complex social forms, there is no compelling ethical reason that should force it to kowtow to sociology in its claimed territory, the complex "evolved" societies. Originally, ethnology was the science that classified human races, and then it studied fossil man and "primitive" societies. At first merely classificatory, it gave itself a methodology that did not distinguish between logic and chronology, presenting most contemporary peoples as belonging to the remotest past of mankind. A contemporary dictionary (Durozoi & Roussel: 1990) attempts to correct these errors rather unconvincingly. The entry "primitive" thus delivers corrections and hesitations:

The adjective is used in sociology and ethnology (sometimes in substantive form: "the primitive") as a synonym for archaic or simple. It is to be noted however that no primitive society in the strict sense of the term exists, insofar as every society possesses a complex culture and none represents the initial state of mankind, and insofar as it cannot be affirmed that so-called "primitive" societies represent a former state of western society...The term may however be retained to designate societies without

writing, whose cultures appear relatively "simpler" and indifferent to the notions of rational economy and political philosophy that are fundamental in industrialized societies. In esthetics, one likes to name "primitive arts" (at the beginning of the century "savage arts") the arts of archaic societies as defined above (267).

Stereotypes should be absent from Scientific discourse, but their practice is common. Many scientists perpetuate erroneous concepts despite the doomed ideology they derive from.

The relationship of the West to Africa, and generally of Whites to Blacks, suffers from this intellectual complacency. Historicism rules over the study of writing and perpetuates the delusion that general laws govern the evolution of the world and enable us to understand any present situation and predict the future on the basis of history. The slicing of mankind into peoples "without writing" and "civilized" peoples serves neither the interests of Africa nor those of the West. It draws an imaginary line that rejects the immense numbers of peoples who conserve and communicate their thought without phonetic writing beyond the pale of the sacrosanct archetypal Latin alphabet. There are no human groups without language, without codified means of perpetuating their collective memories, without means of exchanging texts at a distance. Users of the various sign systems tend to oppose the simplicity of their own system to the difficulty of any other that may be strange to them. Script-consciousness touches on the most sensitive chauvinistic feelings, whatever the objective efficiency of the system in use. Those who master and use it perceive every culturally integrated system as perfect. The undeniable qualities of the Latin alphabet do not however justify its fetishization, even less its imperialistic diffusion, or contempt or ignorance of other systems. The idealized Latin alphabet comforts the historic vision of the scientific and cultural superiority of the West over an illiterate Third World. Let this view be judged polemical by those who will not see on and in the temples of Western civilization the innumerable allegories that materialize the collective unconscious or the insolent discourse of colonialism.⁴

⁴ which in our time finds more and more numerous echoes. Catastrophic economic management in African countries, western press coverage of disastrous events there rekindle outdated perceptions of the African continent. Many, in the West, doubt its capacity to take off economically. Mumbblings crystallize in publications and a new African discourse regurgitates threadbare themes. A well-known example is Lugan (1989: *Afrique, l'histoire à l'endroit*, Paris, Perrin). There are also articles and skirmishes in the press, like the diatribe against Paulin Djité by Lines and Baker in May 1994 (private communication), or in the local press (*The Australian*). All this shows that it is no longer possible to perceive Africa as she had been since the end of the nineteenth century and until quite recently, whichever side one is on.

One needs only to look at government buildings in every western capital from city down to parish halls! The central place occupied by writing in Western societies is there to see in the décor that they have set up to comfort their superiority over those that have not. In the Library of Congress, entrance hall two allegorical statues representing children face each other. One symbolizes America; it is a feather-aureoled Indian boy, arm raised, and hand cupped over his eyes, looking with assurance towards the promises of an ever-broader future. The other is an African child, head inclined on its shoulder, crying and wailing. The former awakens sympathy and esteem, the latter desolation and pity, the desire to protect. The actual future of that Indian child was to be alcoholism, the highest suicide rate among the populations of the United States, relegation into reserves where he is watched, betrayed, forsaken. None of the treaties signed with Indian nations has been honored. The African child's future is no better, except that on his own continent he is independent and free, although for the time being he does not seem to know what to do with this freedom.

A painting in the hall of the same library, where many African and Black American students come to study, shows a sitting allegory of Civilization, a strong woman of Germanic type, blond and straight, who holds on her knees an open book in which she writes with a long pen. On the ceiling two winged figures hold up a cartouche in which an open book and a lighted torch symbolize knowledge.

In Brussels, in the spacious rotunda at the Tervuren Royal Museum of African Arts entrance, a young African child raises its grateful and imploring eyes to a Belgian warrior woman, powerful and protective. There are similar examples of this sort of thing in the whole World. Writing is decidedly linked with History in the western mind, and this is historically justified no doubt. Nevertheless, each type of writing fulfills, in its society, the full function that society demands of it. The error would be to try to impose Vai in London, as the Latin alphabet was imported to the African bush of Sierra Leone or Liberia. A script is more linked to its culture than commonly assumed.

The elimination of the particular in scientific discourse goes hand in hand with the construction of clearly delineated categories and precise definitions. Different classifications of the natural world clearly show how arbitrarily the same surrounding substance is culturally divided. Thus, two animals have become scientifically indefensible. Both are hairy and suckle their young, but one swims like a fish, the other flies in spite of Linnaeus' classification. Africa has her whale and her bat: Ethiopia and Mauritania. Arabic scholars recognize, in Mauritania's Arabic language and writing, a strange similarity with those of the Koran, hence a feeling of optimal purity: Nobody knows

how to place Mauritania culturally. The Moors who are Berbers, therefore white, tend to think of themselves as exceptional beings, hovering over "White" and "Black" Africa. Black slavery, officially abolished in the 1980s, is still practiced. Yet, the prejudice is not racially motivated, since many blacks, notably Sarakolé, are totally assimilated.

Mauretania, ruled by Juba II, one of the greatest scholar of its time, created a library which inspired the creation of the one of Alexandria in Egypt. Modern Mauritania has numerous private libraries containing Arab manuscripts that have not yet been completely inventoried. Mauritanians are educated in Arabic, like the Rgaybat, and, in the cities, a few in French, for a few decades of colonization did not eradicate centuries of Arab-Andalusian culture. The city of Chinguetti has many ancient libraries. An association named "Bibliothèques du désert", under the leadership of Elise Lucet, was created to save them from neglect, greed and dissemination.

If one accepts the division of the Library of Congress, Mauritanians, literate for centuries, are part of illiterate Black Africa, and therefore assimilated to peoples without writing or literature or culture before colonization.

It is even more arduous to place Ethiopia on the cultural map of the world. Heir to the ancient Kingdoms of Axum and Meroë, in the cultural tenure of Egypt, having acquired fifteen centuries ago a writing derived from Greek and, perhaps, from Devanagari, Christian and Hebraic since longer than many western nations, inhabited by dolichocephalous blacks, Ethiopia is impossible and hence very little studied by Western Africanists.

Silverman once confided in us his bewilderment touching Ethiopia's place in Africanist research and university programs. He wondered at Africanists' ignorance about the Ethiopian cultural space, and believed it was due to the havoc it made of their frames of reference and stereotypes. Not only is Ethiopia clearly in Africa, as confirmed by the choice of Addis Ababa as its seat by the OAU, but the most recent research, notably on Ain Fara and Christian Africa, makes it an ancient historic link between the Asian world and the Nile Valley, and between Africa south of the Sahara and the Mediterranean world in the Middle Ages.

History is a written discourse based on analysis and synthesis of documents, generally written.⁵ When in 1959, Davidson, flouting the

⁵For the problematics of the possibility or not of African history, with or without written documents, see Connah (1990) concerning history founded on archeology, and Nassar (1967) on Ibn Khaldun who, in the 14th century, found a way of using oral tradition, popular narratives, eye-witnesses' accounts and written documents to compose his four volumes of Berber history, just as Person has recently done for Samori.

mandarinate, launched his personal enterprise for the "moral rearmament" of colonized African peoples about to become independent, he did so as a well-informed journalist. In the West, with its legion television public, he enjoyed some success in destroying stereotypes, although naturally his publications were denigrated as journalistic sensation. The same kind of reception was also bestowed on Cornevin, who was branded as a colonial administrator turned redeemer of those he had helped to exploit. The universities in particular were as highly critical of him as of Davidson. There were also Brunschwig's extreme imperialists and Suret-Canale's extreme Marxists. Western Academia, after reeling a while, reacted and hit back by devising courses in African history, a politically inspired concession to the popular trend raised by Davidson. University institutions intercepted and channeled this current in the name of "serious and objective" research, teaching and publications, this kind of honesty being regarded as the best policy at the time. It is true Davidson's descriptions of the magnificence of some African civilizations and demonstrations of their priority over many European developments were not always free of shall we say hypothetical thinking. But he did rediscover many confidential writings and made full use of the research of the 1950s. What he showed clearly was that many African peoples had organized themselves in solidly structured states and economies integrated in wide international networks of exchange long before they had any direct contacts with Europe. Some of these Africans, said to be primitive, without writing, and therefore literature and civilization, had built cities, composed literary works, had evolved on their own and in contact with other peoples, and their "written" history, attested also by archeology, had extended in certain places over several millennia. The aversion of official historians for the Continent prompted another non-historian to compile two volumes that have become classics. Cornevin, after two attempts in 1956 and 1960, declared in 1962:

Considerable progress has been achieved in the last ten years in the knowledge of Africa's past. Prehistory, archeology, oral tradition, Arab chronicles, medieval manuscripts, European archives have newly revealed whole slices of the African past (7).

Yet these documents existed long before the "novel craze for local and national research" whipped up by the current "accession of many states to independence"(7).

The creation of African historical science was raising many objections. The popular trend seemed ill-adapted to the exalted climate that followed on the Independences and to augur ill of the seriousness

and objectivity that were required. It is true that the hasty syntheses (Cheikh Anta Diop), the Marxist (Suret-Canale) and the Imperialist (Brunschwig) excesses did Africa little good apart from provoking in restricted circles, by way of scandal, greater interest in her.

For a long time the only documentary sources of African history had been European. Hence the history of Africa began only with the study of the first western contacts with Africa. Later, towards the 1960s, it was noticed that Arab and Berber geographers had traveled in Black Africa. One began to examine documents other than French or English: Portuguese, German, Dutch, Danish and then Chinese. The rational analysis of oral tradition, archeology with its diverse scientific dating methods (Carbon 14, thermoluminescence, dust particle analysis, pollenology), recourse to "auxiliary" sciences of history (oral traditions, dendrochronology, numismatics, study of dejections, clinical examination of skeletons and DNA-based analysis, study of inscriptions on funeral steles, climatology, historical and comparative linguistics) made a network of information available, that allowed oral and written documents to be checked, completed or contradicted, and occasionally supplemented.

But a scientific history, founded on the analysis and synthesis of written documents, is also practiced in Africa. Lewicki (1962), for instance, has written the history of the North African state of Tahert and its relations with western Sudan (8th-9th centuries). He used Berber Ibadite manuscripts and texts of Arab geographers to describe and evaluate the essentially economic relations between North and West Africa. It could of course have been an exceptional case, the usual argument of those who refused the establishment of an African history. In the 1960s at the University of Dakar, teachers were sharply divided over the issue. According to those who held power, Africa had no history except what written sources of foreign origin might reveal, in any case a history of short duration running from the first contacts with Europeans to the present day. A small group of young *agrégés* believed in a much longer history for Africa, a new history, to be sourced in ancient, Arab, medieval and other unexplored, more recent documents (Chinese, Portuguese), but also on sciences then called "auxiliary" and this was the latest idea, after Vansina's impact on oral traditions. The strife was not only scientific. It evidenced two currents of thought, the first a product of the colonial era, the latter, blown over with the "wind of change", endeavoring to place a science conceived outside Africa at the service of a new future. For the former, Africa, that gigantic block of potential knowledge, must imperatively be brought in and integrated into the categories of European science. When Boulègue (1987) used Yoro Dydo's text translated from Wolof, he adds to it other, oral and writ-

ten, endogenous sources on the history of the Kajoor. That text had been oral, like many of our own epics and legends, which we consume written, without feeling the need to mention that they existed before being written. He had consulted oral traditions written down and published before 1864, documents written in Portuguese but also in Latin, Italian (9), French translations of Arab geographers (Al-Bakri, Al-Idrissi); but curiously, reading his Preface one has the impression that Boulègue has used only European documents.

At Dakar, in the 1960s, all non-orthodox work (not based on written documents) was forbidden for young teachers as well as students. The formers' approach, more phenomenological, less dogmatic, integrated those sciences then called "auxiliary" to history. For them, ethnohistory had a right to exist, side by side with history, neither excluded. It had to have the same driving power in historical research as the written document. These innovators believed until proven otherwise that all peoples have a history, that in the absence or paucity of written documents it was up to historians to change their methods. Recurrent and convergent results obtained outside textual analysis could just as rigorously be verified and offered the same guarantees (provided they were handled with the same care) as those yielded by written documents. Moreover, they were attentive to the recently begun census of African manuscripts and called for the classification, translation and analysis of those already on the shelves of libraries.

Reading *Public Documents from Sinnar* (Spaulding & Salim: 1989) and *After the Jihad* (Hanson & Robinson: 1991), as well as other works and inventories published since 1980, one can measure the progress achieved by Africanist historians, but also see what remains to be done. At one time, the advocates of ethnohistory seemed to be on the winning side; but for well-known economic and security reasons, Africa has not been able to pursue the complex and costly research projects she needed. At the same time, Africanist research was rediscovering in western libraries collections of archives seized in Africa, authentically African and in written form, like the "Archinard Fund", named after the colonial officer who took and looted Segu in 1891. To the histories based on native documents in African languages as well as foreign documents, like Kirk-Greene & Hogben (1993), one should add those exclusively founded on local documents. Spaulding & Salim's is such a one and destined for historians. It deals with the political and social history of Sinnar, a Sudanese kingdom centered on the north of the Nile valley. This region of Africa is

home to one of the world's oldest cultural traditions, characterized for more than three millennia by the presence of state forms of government

and by literacy. The leaders of successive regimes chose to write in diverse languages; sometimes these were indigenous (Meroitic, Nubian), but at other times preference was given to a language of current cultural eminence in the wider eastern Mediterranean world (Ancient Egyptian, Greek, Arabic). The present volume offers a collection of government documents from one segment of this long written history, records produced in the period AD 1720-1821 and couched in the Arabic language (1).

There follows a rapid survey of the period immediately preceding the times they have chosen, going back to the 14th century. In the 16th century,

the leaders of the Funj government were quite familiar with the practice of writing...[Around 1500] King 'Amara might pay handsomely in gold for an Arabic book imported from Makka...[Between 1629 and 1632] Zaga Christ could communicate with Rubat and family by means of written letters...Funj kings chose to make use of written documents in the conduct of their administration...A pre-Arabic system of calculation survived...Badi II is also said to have produced written documents of his own...[B]y the middle of the seventeenth century most holy men of Sinnar were born and trained within the Funj kingdom (2-3).

Spaulding & Salim ignored many texts because they were outside the framework of their research. These were works of astrology, medicine, pharmacy, grammar, fiqh, religious exegesis. They may serve later for a general history of Sinnar.

Medeiros (1986) has the merit of stating the problems African historiography posed in reducing oral traditional documents to writing. He shows that transcription introduces semantic distortions in the target text. He contrasts the richness of orality with the dryness of writing, but also the precariousness of the oral with the durability and sometimes unjustified prestige of the printed text. As to Obenga (1986) in an essay on "Methodology in African History", he reviews the historians' methods in Africa but limits himself to the "auxiliary sciences of history" and, curiously, nowhere mentions the existence of written sources, nor evidently their treatment, which may differ in certain cases from the treatment of those Western historians are used to. Yet we know that he is aware of African systems of writing and written documents.

The author who devoted his entire life to the writing and rewriting of the cultural history of the black world before colonization is Cheikh Anta Diop. His underlying aim was to prove the linguistic, cultural and institutional unity of Africa. Undeniably a scholar, but also an ideologist of Pan-Africanism, he aspired to endow Africa with the overarching ideology he thought she needed. He pulled all the registers of

knowledge to fight colonialist prejudices. On Egyptian influence over ancient Greece, Diop (1959) points out the close relations of the Phoenicians⁶ of Thebes in Boeotia, who originally came from Sidon, with Egypt. It was from Thebes in Egypt, a sacred city, that the Phoenicians had brought over the two black women who founded the oracles of Dodone (*Dido, Dodanim*) in Greece and of Amon in Libya. "Cadmus personifies the Sidon period and the Phoenician contribution to Greece: the Greeks say that it was he who introduced writing, as we would say that Marianne [the French Republic] introduced railways in French West Africa" (76). This is tantamount to suggesting that the Greeks borrowed the concept of "phonetic writing" from the Phoenicians, those who had come from Tyre and under Queen Dido had founded Carthage on African soil and there received writing from Egypt. As for the Egyptians, they had "invented" their system by inner developments, borrowings, and subsequent improvements, from many others. The expression "the Greeks" in Anta Diop means almost exclusively "Herodotus".

In 1960 and 1967, he published two comparatist and diffusionist texts. In the first, he compares two pairs of languages: Mande-Egyptian and Bamum-Egyptian. In both cases he finds some similarities, but does not really convince. He does the same (1967) with Egyptian-Coptic-Wolof and announces the presence of hieroglyphs in Senegal (on millenarian baobab trunks).⁷

Cornevin and Davidson revealed unknown, or known but unused, written African sources. But it may be with Coquery-Vidrovitch & Moniot (1984) that official history really begins to make room for African sources of African history after 1800. Their entire Part I ("Working Tools", "Original Sources and Documents", above all "Written African Sources") and the Basic Bibliography contain a great deal of information on written documents, historical or not. There exist also numerous source inventories, the archetype of which is Joucla's (1927 [1912]), rather outdated now, and covering only West Africa. For Niger alone, Gado (1982) briefly reviews the historiography from 1900 to 1982. He recalls that the written sources of African history are Arabic, European, African, and archeological. In Niger, the gathering of Arabic and 'ajami manuscripts, fostered by Boubou Hama, furnishes tools for new historical research, with the support of archeology and the gathering of oral sources. Gado pleads that however legitimate research on

⁶Etiemble recalls that Abbé Barthélemy had sought to establish a relation between Egyptian writing and the Phoenician alphabet.

⁷As a History student at the University of Dakar (later, in psycho-socio-linguistics), we tried to trace these hieroglyphs on Diop's indications, without success.

manuscripts is, it should not drive out research founded on oral tradition.

Historical information sometimes arises out of strange quarters: Iroko (1980) sought to demonstrate the historical significance of two types of facial scarifications in West Africa. He convincingly argues for informed "reading" of scarifications in the study of the history of the African peoples who practice them:

These symbols...often yield information on migratory flows, population mixes, affinities between peoples, assistance or loyalty oaths, alliances, insecurity in a region, contacts, interferences, loans (119-20).

They may serve to verify oral traditions or even written sources. Michelet, the great advocate of written sources for history, could never have dreamt of that kind of writing.

If explorers have seldom mentioned the presence of writing, it is because they were so conscious of the exoticism of their ventures that they could not imagine finding any similarity with their own cultures. Or perhaps they were just bored by anything that was not strange or exceptional. Arab and Berber geographers, from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, do report the presence of writing and books insofar as they are found in their own cultural and religious world. The early missionaries described and transcribed African languages and writings to bring the Bible to the people. Their subsequent emphasis on and teaching of European languages slowly eroded their early ambitions when lay colonial schools were instituted. The literature on African writing systems, relatively abundant until the Second World War, becomes rare thereafter. Some historians take up these ancient or confidential testimonials of the presence of writing before colonization. Al-Hassan Ibn Muhammad Al Wazzan (The Weigher), alias Leo Africanus (1956), a Berber geographer who visited Timbuktu in 1510, bears witness to the intense intellectual life that existed there:

There are numerous judges, doctors, and priests in Timbuktu all appointed by the king, who truly honors the learned. Many books are sold which come from Barbary [Maghrib]. One profits more from the sale of these books than from the sale of any other merchandise (468-9).

Let us remember that this testimony antedates by 80 years the Moroccan conquest of the Sudan (just about present-day Mali). It indicates the existence of many literati, their different functions, but also the interest Timbuktu had in writing. Leo Africanus' book (he was an Andalusian born in Granada in 1492, raised in Fès, who died in Tunis in 1552), *History and Description of Africa*, was started in 1518, finished in 1523, but

published only in 1550 in Rome and in 1600 in English. We have tried to show elsewhere (Battestini: 1986) that the capture of Timbuktu by the Moroccans had profound effects on West Africa. When Timbuktu, an intellectual center equivalent to a University, was destroyed, many of its scholars and teachers were killed, their libraries were scattered and their correspondence with the Muslim world was obliterated.

Some of the masters and their books wandered into West Africa. Now more isolated from one another, these *karamokos* taught an *ad hoc* Islam, less orthodox, with elements of Hellenic-Arabic medicine, of Malikite law, geomancy and astronomy, and propagated the idea of writing, if not the Arabic script itself. For the first time the African Islamic tendency to concentrate political power and knowledge of writing in one place for the benefit of an elitist group was put into question, and one may regard Othman dan Fodio's Jihad as an attempt to re-equilibrate the values of Islam in a unique center or model.

A mathematician colleague at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria once explained to us that Euclid's postulate, the basis of all orthodox geometry, (only one parallel to a straight line can be drawn through a point outside that line), poses an insoluble dilemma to the Muslim mind: on the one hand, all Muslims are morally bound to seek knowledge and enlightenment, and on the other there is Allah who cannot accept a fact that challenges his absolute power. In other words, God's will is opposed to Reason, which is unthinkable. The Greek polytheists were luckier than the Faithful!

Davidson (1964) also cites Clapperton (1829), who in his *Journal of Second Expedition into the Interior of Africa from the Bight of Benin to Soccatoo [Sokoto]* (London, 1829) declares:

Saw the Sultan this morning, who was sitting in the inner apartment of his house, with the Arabic copy of Euclid's *Geometry* before him, which I had given to him as a present. He said that his family had a copy of Euclid brought by one of their relations, who had procured it in Mecca; that it was destroyed when part of his house was burnt down last year; and he observed, that he could not but feel very much obliged to the King of England for sending him such a valuable present...(67-8).

The Sultan's behavior is far removed from the European's expectations, when he, the ambassador of the highest culture in the world, meets a Negro king in the course of his wanderings in unknown parts and exchanges trinkets with him. There is something faintly incongruous in the way European explorers and their admiring public used to conceive the exploration of Africa. The Fulani Sultan Muhammad Bello, who was fully informed of Britain's conquests in the Muslim world, would have been shocked at the idea that his kingdom, which was vastly bigger than "Great"-Britain, was being "discovered" by modest Lieu-

tenant Hugh Clapperton, who had to confess his ignorance of many subjects the Sultan wanted to discuss with him. Mountfield says in his *A History of African Exploration* (1976):

The question that Clapperton was asked most often in Sokoto was: Why had he come? He would reply that he came to see the country, "its rivers, mountains, and inhabitants, its flowers, fruits, minerals, and animals...[for] the people of England could all read and write [early 19th century?], and were acquainted with most regions of the earth; but of this country alone they hitherto knew scarcely any thing, and erroneously regarded the inhabitants as naked savages, devoid of religion, and not far removed from the conditions of wild beasts: whereas I found them, from my personal observation, to be civilized, learned, humane, and pious" (76).

During the times of the "triangular" trade, interloper shipmasters must have noticed the existence of scripts used by Africans during the trading, and the Africans themselves their white partners' surprise, like Lévi-Strauss' famous Amazonian. We are indebted to one of these mariners, an initiated user of it, for knowing that Nsibidi existed at the end of the 18th century.

Conneau (1976) refers to the use of certain writing materials, such as fine white sand, carried in a small leather bag attached to the belt. The sand is spread over flat clean soil or a piece of cloth, and the writer draws with his finger or a thin stick the signs or symbols required by the situation. Conneau also mentions the making of sand models of trails, or of rivers or mountains to be crossed, marking reference points, etc., with the aid of small objects, a practice current among Jula, Hausa, Fulani and some Malinke (111). Boilat (1984: 303) and Brenner (1984: 198) report the same practice. The writing aids are many: wooden tablets, wooden or bone tallies, the liber, papyrus, raphia, walls and rock faces.

The histories of writing are conceived as histories of the Latin alphabet. They aim at showing how mankind passed from the concrete perceived drawn image to maximum abstraction allowed by phonography. Writing advances teleologically from mythography to logography, and then from morphemography to phonography. The principle ruling the reduction of early types to a small number of letters is assumed to be a permanent concern for efficiency, the economy of which is never explained, although such an analysis would be an essential part of the grammatology that remains to be done. The historians of writing have generally treated African writings as prehistoric since primitive, forgetting that in Africa, all writing systems have often spread over

time, that they now exist simultaneously and that Africa has written longer than any other part of the world.

The relation to writing is often original in Africa. Some writings have experienced in a few decades the whole continuum of development extended over four millennia by historians. Systems distributed by them all along this chronological axis coexist in the same culture and in neighboring peoples in constant cultural interaction.

We shall confine ourselves to the examination of a few of these histories of writing, e.g. Cohen, Higounet, Jackson and Gaur. This should suffice to evaluate through this theme the treatment of Africa by Western history.

Cohen's classic work (1958) is undoubtedly important so far as classification, exposition of the characteristics of writing in its diverse manifestations and presentation of modes of approach to writing are concerned. He accurately describes European and Arabic writing, analyzes the evolution of spellings and supplies a commented bibliography of the subject. Cohen, moreover, knows a certain Africa well. He has published works on Ethiopia, Algeria, southern Arabia, the Hamitic-Semitic languages, and has always shown a linguist's interest in writing. Under the rubric proto-writing (pictography), he is content to mention only Nsibidi (in Africa), without saying that it is probably the only African writing system that does not seem to owe anything to outside influence. Under the rubric "New non-alphabetic (or alphabetic) writings in the world of alphabet", West and East Africa are represented. For the first, Vai, Mende, Guerze, Toma, Bassa (a South Nigerian system) and Bamum are cataloged. About Mum, he remarks that it

presents a very special interest because one can follow very closely its history, which shows rapid evolution through the will of the inventor himself (218).

For East Africa, Nuba, Galla, the Osmani writing of Somaliland are mentioned and commented upon. Chapter 5, on Egypt, has a place for the demotic characters of Coptic⁸ and for Meroitic writings.

He also describes Egyptian Aramaic, Arabic writing, the Hebraic writings, Greek and Latin writings, the influence of Christian missions outside Europe. Middle-Eastern Canaan (or Phoenician) writing is distinguished from that of Carthage, called "Libyc" or neo-Punic (122). Chapter 11 evokes, together with semitic writings, Libyan-Berber, Phoenician, ancient Aramaic, square Hebrew, Syriac, Ethiopian, but omits secret writings, cryptography, magic writings. Chapter 12 on nu-

⁸According to Etiemble, Kircher had an inkling that Coptic and Egyptian hieroglyphic writing were related.

meric notations gives Africa pride of place. The work is a comprehensive, indispensable repertoire — whose individual rubrics leave the reader unsatisfied. However, this was the right beginning: taking stock, naming and classifying all the information then available. It must also be recalled that the work was begun in 1936 and published in 1958, other texts on writing having appeared in the intervening period, creating perhaps an unwholesome competition, with Diringer, Gelb, Jensen and Février, for instance. Recently a rebirth of interest in writing has been observed, due in part to the emergence and rapid spread of semiotics, and to critical works on writing and written discourse, like those of Derrida (1967), Baron (1981), Sampson (1985) and Harris (1993).

Higounet (1964) retraces the evolution of writing right down to the triumph of the Latin alphabet, considering western attitudes until Derrida; but he also explores other rival or complementary systems that have disappeared. He tries to put the present into perspective, but is pessimistic about the future of writing. Although Eurocentrist, Higounet mentions Ethiopian, Egyptian, Phoenician, Tifinagh and Libyc. His chapters 1, 2 and 6 are useful syntheses on the for Africa important relation of writing and orality, on non-alphabetic writings and on present-day problematics.

Gaur's contribution (1985) stands out sharply against traditional attitudes. It asks real questions, compares and groups writings in an original way, and often innovates on the subject of alphabetization and the sociology of writing. It hobnobs with futurology in its last chapter on the computerization of printing, the new technologies and industrialization linked to writing. The opening sentence is apparently trivial: "All writing is information storage"(14), but the last fills in the meaning: "but it has now become increasingly obvious that information can once again be stored quite effectively without writing" (210).

So the historiography of writing, at one time petrified in the delusion that the Latin alphabet was perfect, yesterday demystified by McLuhan, now enters the phase of obsolescence of its subject, soon to be replaced by a plethora of electronic communication systems. For the history of mankind, writing will have permitted the rise of text to the status of object, detached from its inventor, transmissible like any other and decodable by anyone who has the key. Here Gaur joins with Plato, apropos the opposition of writing as a mnemonic, an obstacle to critical thought, to writing that enables the complexification of thought. The first is linked to poetry (secular and religious), to traditional oral history (epic, legend, genealogy), to secret knowledge, confined to a powerful group. Gaur's originality lies in the implications for his discourse of the following declarations:

If all writing is information storage, then all writing is of equal value. Each society stores the information essential to its survival, the information which enables it to function effectively. There is in fact no essential difference between prehistoric rock paintings, memory aids (mnemonic devices), wintercounts, tallies, knotted cords, pictographic, syllabic and consonantal scripts, or the alphabet. There are no primitive scripts, no forerunners of writing, no transitional scripts as such (terms frequently used in books dealing with the history of writing), but only societies at a particular level of economic and social development using certain forms of information storage. If a form of information storage fulfills its purpose as far as a particular society is concerned then it is (for this particular society) "proper" writing.

Basically, all forms of writing belong to either one or the other of two distinct groups — thought writing and sound writing (14).

Then the author denounces the usual categories and shows that no writing fits the consecrated categories, e. g. showing that the series <2, &, #, \$> is morphemographic⁹ and follows the same rules as Chinese characters. French spelling today is mainly morphemographic but obeys the rule of mixed representation in all types of script or sign systems.

A good number of scholars have been, and still are, of the opinion that phonetic writing in the full sense is the result of a definite, unique invention which took place only once; others, with a somewhat less fundamentalist turn of mind, see in phonetic writing the result of several sporadic and often (semi-) historical documented inventions made by a number of definite persons...The latter opinion has been revived by recent observations of how a number of still basically tribal communities in Africa, North America and Alaska...made often temporarily successful attempts at inventing indigenous forms of writing (14-5).

It is worth pointing out that this work grants women a modest role in the creation and use of writing systems. A domain to be explored. Their part has been mentioned in the transmission of Tifinagh and knowledge of literature among the Tuareg. Many are poetesses in North Africa, who use Arabic, 'ajami, Berber or, now, Latin scripts. Writing on bound and dyed cloth may have been feminine among some peoples on the Benin coast. As for African systems of writing, Gaur mentions the Vai,

⁹Are ideographic our punctuation signs, our mathematical symbols, and the capitals of proper nouns. These signs represent ideas. But, of course, it is more delicate to accept quipus, knotted strings, or mnemonic objects (tokens) that serve to record chronologies, inventories and accounts.

Mende, Bamum scripts (131), and in other places, briefly a Lukasa mnemonic system, the writings of North and East Africa from Antiquity to the present, and Nsibidi, the latter with the usual prejudice: he takes over from Diringer the myth of the specialization of Nsibidi in the transmission of sexual and especially extra-marital messages, a derogatory myth created by missionaries for obvious reasons. According to Campbell (1983), an inventory of Nsibidi signs shows the following distribution of centers of interest:

Material culture	25,8%
Interpersonal relations	14,4%
Other	49,6%
Non-identified	10,2%

Campbell illustrates with three signs, one of which complex, the embryo of a text, a "fable" in the Barthesian sense: "Two men go to town to procure two girls. One of them is lucky, the other not. The first goes back home with the girl. The two chaps separate". This sign denotes not an idea but a narrative, introducing the situation and following up its transformations until, as Greimas might say, the "breaking of the initial contract". Further, Campbell defines his categorization of Nsibidi (186-192) and deals with the scripts created by clerics and politicians on all continents, which he says are all alike in their development (130-4). In its *General History of Africa* (1981c), UNESCO could have corrected the stereotype of an Africa without writing. Mum writing is mentioned (138), and the history of some writings: Vai, Bamum, Nsibidi, with illustrations of Mum (138) and Vai (163) texts, which however look like exceptions.

There could be, in the historicizing kind of Africanist discourse, difficulties arising from the linkage between history and writing, which one must try to understand. The historian of writing posits a mode of conservation and communication of the thoughts of mankind. Its temporal perspective implies the need, not only of a continuum founded on causality, but of a universal diffusion of writing according to rhythms and ramifications he often has to imagine.

However, one of the problems of history is not imputable to him, but to what we make of history. Two medieval historians of Africa used methodologies in ways that have not aged. Mas'udi (10th century) "had tried to move from the plane of events belonging to a given generation to the plane of the general conditions on which particular facts depend", and Ibn Khaldun (14th century) "wished to discover the general explanation of the conditions of sociopolitical evolution" (Nassar: 1967, 41).

History has successively had as its objects and products biography, legend and family, generation and genealogy, the past evolution of peoples, the quest for universal causes, finally the severance of the short from the long term and acceptance as a fatality of the need of constant rewriting. Ancient modes persist, the demand for exclusively written sources dates from the end of the 19th century in Europe, the century of imperialism. The trouble is that we do not interpret history for its own sake, but to understand our present. We lend it and draw from it references, standards, hierarchies, dispositions that all concentrate on a single axis or center, on a single scale of values, reductive, inconceivable seriously in a world that has become unpredictable.

The histories of writing do not constitute a homogeneous category. Their different origins and certain ancient influences make them dependent on mythological texts of Eurocentric or Africanocentric inspiration. The historian of writing, having as his object a field of human activity it is not for him to define, is usually wary of recent discoveries which could put in question his categories, his definitions, his particular way of structuring his chosen material. He is more defined as a historian than as a specialist of writing. Only with Schmidt (1907) and Harris (1986, 1993) does the emergence of new data and recent perceptions lead to some contesting of old schemes hitherto common to all histories of writing. The ongoing inventorying and describing of African writing systems are radicalizing this tendency. The semiotics of writing offers an opportunity of critical reflection on ancient modes of approach and description. It proposes the integration of all data on writing and a synchronic approach. Using all the data available, including facts that have once been omitted, ignored or set aside, semiotics will generate future frameworks and definitions. The Latin alphabet is still a graphic system among others, but no more the universal reference or imperturbable finality.

Thus a writing system emerged at the end of the 19th century and underwent a rapid series of changes over less than three decades without ceasing to be a graphic system, a writing. The Mum script had at first many picto- and morphemographic signs, but they gave way gradually to more and more economic systems, remaining available in the economy of the system. It was the brutal force of a colonial administration that reduced this script to a curiosity, to an aborted exception, comforting the stereotype "no writing in Africa". By successfully implementing in a third of a century all the transformations which the history of writing had decreed having needed over five or six thousand years to emerge, it denies the historic contention that time was of the essence, and the final brutal and total imposition of the Latin alphabet makes nonsense of the idea that Mum was possibly a derivation of it.

The illiterate Bamum of today have been forced into illiteracy. The exiling of king Njoya, the imprisonment or interdiction of teachers, the destruction of schools, free distribution of works in the Latin alphabet in the imported schools and missions succeeded in almost totally eradicating the local script, apparently for ever.

Champollion (1989) did not see the origin of writing in Mesopotamia. He was of course unaware of the discoveries to come in Nubia but he wished that the scientific community in Europe would accord some respect to Egypt, its debt to which was recognized by Greco-Roman antiquity:

I shall dare to say more: it would be possible to find in this ancient Egyptian phonetic writing, however imperfect it may be in itself, if not the origin at least the model on which the alphabets of the peoples of western Asia may have been drawn up, and especially those of the neighbors of Egypt. Indeed, sir, if you notice,

1. that every letter of the alphabets we call Hebrew, Chaldean and Syriac bears a significant name, very ancient since nearly all were transmitted by the Phoenicians to the Greeks when these received the alphabet;
2. that the first consonant or vowel of these names is also, in these alphabets, the vowel or consonant represented in reading, you will recognize with me, in the creation of these alphabets, a perfect analogy with the creation of the Egyptian phonetic alphabet; and if alphabets of this kind are formed primitively, as is well proven, with signs representing ideas or objects, it is evident that we must recognize the people who invented this graphic method in the people who especially made use of an ideographic writing: this is to say that Europe, that received from old Egypt the elements of the sciences and the arts, seems to owe her also the inestimable benefit of alphabetic writing (42-3).

One may add however that the appearance of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing has been lately dated back to the end of the second Neolithic civilization, to the kingdom of Negada II. The pottery evidence is rare and the designs are rudimentary, so that it is still generally accepted that writing developed only under the first Dynasty. Kristeva (1989) recalls that, under the Middle Empire and the 8th Dynasty (2,160-1,314 BC), 730 signs can be counted and 220 were often used, only 80 for the purposes of everyday communication (64).

Jackson (1981) does not modify this perspective, which runs counter to that of writing historians, when he remarks that the first phonograms, really or partially alphabetic, are to be attributed to Egypt. On the other hand, the link he sees between sedentarism and the origin of writing is contradicted by African data. Many African nomad peoples

use writing for many vital purposes: recording trading deals, religious writing, signposting wells, buried water supplies and the seasonal conditions along tracks, the state and location of pastures, private or public messages, the reckoning of distances in man or horsedays, occasionally amorous trysts. The letter of credit was born of long-distance trading. As a camel rider in the 1950s on the Libyan-Tunisian border, we can vouch that rock messages in Arabic or Tifinagh were often precious. Looking back, we can't help feeling that they compared favorably with the signposting we have in the West. Monod (1938) described rock inscriptions that could only have been made by nomads. Lewis (1968) reports a case of Islamic literacy in a nomad Somali people, in which he sees confirmation of Goody's thesis of limited possession (by an élite) of writing and texts, an essentially Eurocentric conception of minority specialization in the interests of all. Colonial rule had created nomadic schools in Mauritania, in Algeria and in most of the enclaved African countries. The view that nomadism breeds illiteracy is that of ill-informed sedentary people. How can we forget that the spread of the Arabic script was due to caravans at the time of wide Islamization? In West Africa, the spread of Arabic writing was largely the work of Jula wandering traders and Fulani shepherds in the wake of their flocks or on the off chance of infiltrating or converting other cultures by jihad.

Writing, in Africa, has often and long been regarded as a craft, whose practitioners should be subject to the jurisdiction of a guild like any other: hunters, carvers, potters, fishermen, blacksmiths, carpenters, jewelers, etc., implying optimum production in each for the general good of society. The intellectual gap between a French farm worker and a member of the French Academy is probably wider than that which separates a Tokoror shoemaker from a scholar. The latter's book knowledge is constantly broadcast in a society that consumes it orally.

In their work, historians often stand on their heads. They begin by premising that they will conclude with the Latin alphabet, then they make half a somersault around this misconception, which brings them back on their feet, hopefully. Take a few works typical of this *salto mortale*. Gelb (1952), the archetype, goes without saying. Moorhouse (1953) gives the show away in his title: *The Triumph of the Alphabet: a History of Writing*. He poses writing as a means of visual communication, sees its origin in image, describes pictograms, morphemograms and the emergence of phonograms in Egypt. Then he gets off the beaten track a bit, to describe the Semitic, Coptic and Hindu systems, even touching on Nsibidi (47) in an eight-line paragraph ending with the verdict: morphemographic. In the back room of this type of disquisition, we find Taylor (1899) with his overriding interest, usual at the

time, in the Semitic alphabet and its resemblance with the Egyptian (99). Rather than on image, as in Moorhouse, his analysis is centered on the design of the letters. In a comparative spurt, he does present the Phoenician, Punic, Hebrew and Syrian alphabets, but in table form, and with Latin alphabet equivalents. He does not ignore the Ethiopian and Amharic alphabets (349-58). His information is concise and of surprisingly high quality for the time.

The absolute priority of one script over all the others reduces all these to the rank of also-rans. The most representative author of this dwindling fraternity is Diringier (1948, 1977) who posits a direct link between the Latin alphabet and being human, meaning that those who don't have it are not. But his descriptions of the scripts of the world are models of clarity and precision: cuneiform, hieroglyphic and cryptic; then the alphabetic: Semitic, Aramaic, Indian, Greek, Etruscan, Latin. One of the first to do so, he gives examples of attempts to adapt the Latin alphabet to African languages such as Nyanja, Twi, Yoruba, Efik. In his *History of the Alphabet*, he presents and describes the main systems diachronically, by branch: Aramaic, Indian, Greek, Etruscan and Latin. He constructs or reconstructs the history of each letter of the Latin alphabet and observes that each is the present trace of an ancient pictograph.

A number of African writings are historical. Apart from Egyptian, Coptic, Ge'ez, Amharic, Latin, Greek, Aramaic, Sabeian, Libyan, Nubian, Meroitic, Kushitic, Punic, which have extant inscriptions and texts, Arabic has been used since the 7th century and European languages with the Latin alphabet since the 15th. Devanagari served at one time for Somali.

History is written in many languages and scripts in Africa, notably in the 'ajami of Islamized East Africa. The example of Sinnâr has been seen. Di- or polygraphy is quite frequent. Each script has a well-defined function. An exhibition on *La Naissance de l'écriture: cunéiformes et hiéroglyphes* at the Grand Palais in Paris (1982) granted primacy in the creation of alphabetic writing to Egypt around 3,150 BC. Mesopotamia was said to have developed its own script from book-keeping pictograms from 3,300 BC onwards and a real writing no earlier than circa 3,000 BC. These dates may be challenged, for the reality of history in Africa profusely shows that, while a system may be substituted for another, more often different institutions long coexist without harming one another. Such parallels, metamorphoses and substitutions may be appreciated, for instance, in inscriptions on Punic steles. Picard (1956) delivers many documents on Carthage. A *ciffe* dedicated to Baal (plate 16) with text in Punic writing (before 5th century), a stele of Horus (plate 22) with text in Egyptian hieroglyphs bear witness to cul-

tural and religious coexistence. The celebrated stele shaped as Tanit's sign covered with Punic writing (plate 31) is seen next to others written in Punic (plate 32) and Hellenistic (plate 60). Steles in Latin alphabet in the Sanctuary of Bou Kornine testify to the romanization of the Cult of Ba'al Hammon. These steles may have been nearly contemporaneous.

Their study is useful in judging of the possibility of rapid change and even of substitution of one system for another, a frequent case in Africa. Yet, nothing would justify, despite this example and many others, generalizing this quality of transformation and tolerance to the whole of Africa. The influence of the Carthaginian Empire over its neighbors in Mediterranean Africa is better known than that which it exercised over Saharan and Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet this people of scholars and traders opened up the inside of Africa to long-distance international trade as early as 500 BC (Herodotus). The network of Saharan "chariot" routes is well known. They were highways of culture as well as goods. Salt deposits were exploited. The gemstone garnet called "carbuncle" from which Roman purple was extracted, ivory, slaves, etc., were exchanged for glass and terra cotta objects, wine, cloths and olive oil. Then, the Garamantes (Berbers), whose descendants use Tifinagh, probably knew Punic writing. They did not copy it, but its need was felt in Mauretania and Numidia, as also south of Tripolitania and in the Hoggar, even possibly in Bambuk (between Senegal and Mali) where it may have succeeded more ancient scripts. For Kristeva (1989), the substitution of the Greek alphabet for the Egyptian systems would have been a consequence of the reorientation of activities: the political and theocratic ruling class and its writing (not its speech) gives way to a new class of enterprising wealthy businessmen and their clerks. The old Egyptian form of writing, whose bias had for so long been the articulation of a perennial social order, now yields pride of place to the agora, the voice of the people and of strong individuals pouring into the crowds of *comices agricoles à la Flaubert*. Then Egypt replaces globalizing thought, in which sound, concept and representation, unsyllabled and unvoiced, were one and the same thing, by a more analytical system, founded on close attention to the intricate concatenations of spoken words. It would however be worth comparing the Egyptian and Greek numeration systems, which probably competed for a time, to appreciate the need for the Greek option in a society opening up to Mediterranean trends, precisely dominated by the Greeks. Plato financed his journey to Egypt through the sale of his olive harvest. Therefore, the main contribution of Africa to writing is to have invented, by successive reductions, the one-to-one relation of sound and sign.

It is unthinkable that intelligent individuals in Egypt should not have realized the more efficient use to which their alphabet could have been put, once liberated from the rest of the writing system. Such reform would have been heretical however, and so it was left to Egypt's neighbors to profit fully from the potential of her alphabet — to the Semites, the Greeks and other eastern and northern peoples from the 18th century BC, and to her Meroitic and Libyan neighbors, to the south and west, from at least the 2nd century BC. But to Egypt falls the honor of the invention of the *letter*, the use of one symbol to represent one sound (Dalby: 1986, preface).

Another of her merits is to have conceived the notion of library and built the first temple devoted to knowledge by book. Canfora (1990), in an original and finely erudite work, “reconstructs”, with the aid of an impressive collection of written documents, the Alexandria library, famously burnt down, but still an integral part of our cultural heritage. Ptolemy II Philadelphus had raised an immense building which Demetrius Phalereus patiently filled with important books. The Ptolemies, of Greek origin but Egyptians, dreamt of assembling in Alexandria in one building all the manuscript books of their time. The political power then recognized the importance of intellectual diversity and dialogue. The “virtuous” savant holder of perennial truth found himself contested by diverging forms of reasoning. Mysticism must now accept the companionship of logic. They looked forward to enjoying the visits of intellectuals from every country in the world. But let us not forget that History owes Ptolemy III Eurgetes’ project to collect all Aristotle’s works in Alexandria to his ambition to outclass a king of Libya, Juba II, husband of Cleopatra VII, another African, himself an ardent collector of the works of Pythagoras. This African rulers’ intellectual rivalry was at the origin of librarianship in the whole world (author collections and other forms of cataloging, shelving and special rooms), but also of the sheer love of books and their conservation, of forgery and plagiarism, of the professions of translator, copyist and librarian. The destruction by fire of the Library still horrifies every intellectual, ever a fetishist as far as books are concerned, whom he tends to think of as an organic extension of himself. Canfora reminds us that we know little about what it really was and tries to blend history with fiction, imagination with true and rich documentation in his recreation of the context in which this world premiere of Humanity was enacted. That it was an African event there can be no shadow of a doubt, and yet, everything inclines us to deny its geographical and cultural localization. It was, however, upstream of Thebes on the Nile that Humanity was born and downstream that this sort of temple dedicated to the cult of writing was consecrated. The word *liber*, father of the French

"livre", designates the material on which Pygmies paint their symbols, just as the word *papyrus* gave "paper". This exclusive concentration of the creation of writing, of its tools and production up and downstream on the Nile should be recognized. From the Ishango bone through phonetic writing to the Alexandria Library, Egypt and her southern neighbors offered mankind the prospect of a better world, which the Greeks, grateful admirers of Egypt, took over and used to launch it on the road to progress. Such recognition would cast no shadow on the kindred efforts of other cultures. It would suffice to obliterate the threefold myth of a single noble origin of all writing, of the hierarchy of cultures and of fatal one-directional progress, and to replace it with the notion of internal cultural order, necessary and sufficient to ensure the best possible service of our needs for real happiness.

Piette (1896) saw in the painted pebbles of Mas-d'Azil (Pyrenean Epipaleolithic) the origins of writing. However, two other origins have been generally suggested since, excluding the three Sumerian tablets of Romanian Tartaria (2,700 BC). One is the Semitic (Schmandt-Besserat: 1979), the other the Egyptian.¹⁰ Such quarrels may amuse or annoy according to mood. Thus, speaking of the Akkad empire, whose language was first written in Sumerian script, and believing he is hitting the nail right on the head, Dufour (*Le Monde*, Sep.8, 1993) fiercely confirms a diehard Western myth:

This empire [Akkad] was the first to appear in the region between the Tigris and the Euphrates, astride Syria and Iraq, the birthplace of agriculture, the cradle of civilization (circa 7,000 BC) and of writing (3,500 BC) (11).

This belief is common to all kinds of literature. Mesopotamia and Egypt, between 4,000 and 3,200 BC, and including Nubia, invented nothing more than marks of property, etc., on earthenware vessels, make-up pallets, royal and identity seals, terra cotta tablets which, it is agreed now, were graphics announcing the birth of pictograms, if they were not such already. Before the many logographic African systems are integrated in the world corpus, only Sumerian, Egyptian and Chinese—all three logographic—could pretend to the status of writing.

Another thesis works out a continuum starting with the Ishango bone (Upper Nile, 25,000 BC), Nilotic writing (8,000 BC), ox domestication and creation of the Apis cult (Upper Nile valley, 7,000 BC), the first cereals (barley, around Thebes, 7,500 BC), the creation of Thebes

¹⁰For others, like S.N. Kramer, "History begins at Sumer" (1948, *American Journal of Archeology*, iii, 164), which was neither Semitic nor Egyptian, and whose writing was logographic. The monogenetic theory, of Hebraic origin, persists for many against all evidence. Certain African ideologies match it worthily.

(first political and economic capital city of an organized state). This first nation-state created also the first topographical map and population census, to enforce legally equality among sexes, and to respect animal as well as human life. State religion was benevolent towards different believes and rites. Discoveries in mathematics and medicine were soon adopted by other nations. Internal medicine, surgery (notably of the eye) and pharmacopoeia if not born in Egypt were developed there. Agronomy with irrigation and manuring, veterinary science, the calendar of 365 days of 24 hours, were also launched in Egypt. Pottery and ceramic, glassware and sophisticated jewelry reached a level of quality and luxury unrivaled at the time. Writing noted thought as well as phonic values and numbers. Writing support and material (papyrus and ink, inkstand and stylus...) saw their first developments in Egypt. Egyptian architecture was and is still copied by many nations of the world. To these incomplete impressive collection of innovations one may add the invention of taxes, a national of weights and measures system, a state system of education, a professional army, an ambitious universal library ... It is difficult to admit that such an immense step in the history of Humanity may be credited to a single people if one ignores that Egyptian civilization inherited from many cultures, mostly from Africa. The "miracle of the Nile" (not a gift) is nothing but the harmonious synthesis of a great number of different cultural values.

So, Mesopotamia or Egypt? It would matter little if these were not two origins of a civilization which many would have us believe were each the origin of "Civilization". Since 1992, the debate is over. Writing on the Bagam script, for long believed to be lost, Tuchscherer (1999), mentions Günther Dreyer's archeological discovery at Abydos of 150 labels written in hieroglyphs and carved into bone and ivory, dated 3400 BC. They are, at present, "the earliest examples of phonetic writing". Tuchscherer closes the debate in these terms:

New evidence uncovered by archeologists in Egypt ... has revealed that Africans employed their advanced hieroglyphic system, which was capable of expressing complex ideas and abstracts concepts (and notably place names), at least 150 years earlier than the Sumerians in Mesopotamia around 3250BC. The less developed system of notation, employed in Mesopotamia for purposes of accounting, consisted of pictographs for commodities and numerals. (55)

Schmandt-Besserat (1979) seems to be fighting a rearguard action when she sites the origins of writing admittedly in Mesopotamia but of a

writing consisting only of tokens,¹¹ which expressed numbers and served only for accounts. Being now the leading exponent of this view, her book is of a twofold interest. She widens the database of definition, recenters the invention of writing in Mesopotamia, reviving the notion of a Semitic origin and of a religious justification attached to the Bible and the Jewish people. The other interest lies in her questioning of certain traits developed by historians of writing. According to her, cuneiform writing was not derived from pictograms but from small terra cotta objects marked with various signs, abstract or figurative, but already stylized. These objects enabled Sumerians to develop a system of counting and numbering. Literacy and numeracy are therefore the result of this type of calculus evolved by the Semites of Mesopotamia. Before Schmandt-Besserat, the period advanced for the birth of Egyptian and Mesopotamian writings was about 3,500-3,100 BC. On a hollow ball of clay, a set of small symbols was printed before drying. The Sumerians discovered that there was no need to duplicate inside the information printed on the outside of the ball. Henceforth a graphic symbol replaced that of an object previously used as sealing stamp. An important detail: the duplication of the object becomes unnecessary when the set of number signs is invented. Thus, to express "10 jars of oil", two signs are enough. The sign 10 is abstract, that for *oil jar* is pictographic, codified and stylized, on the way to abstraction, as historians of writing might say. Schmandt-Besserat, it would seem, had discovered rather than the origin of written, that of arithmetic notation or quantified inventory. However, the geometric forms of the tokens also signal a geometrical rationalization of perceptions, and an analytical capability, which are ignored by Schmandt-Besserat. She curiously fails to mention the many known incised bones, dating back 25,000 BC, that represent lunar calendars, like the Ishango bone from Zaire. Notches on bone and stone appear outside Africa as early as the end of the Mousterian era, around 35,000 BC. Analysis of these early graphs suggests that the scribe was rather more concerned with inscribing the rhythm of his message than its image or vocalization. Hence, our tendency to perceive them as calendars, or notations of polyphonic chants, narrative scansions, human or animal counts, genealogies. True, Mesopotamia itself has not thrown up any yet and Ishango is at the foot of those fabulous Mountains of the Moon where the Greeks sited the sources of the Nile and of Civilization. Schmandt-Besserat's theory has to be seen in the light of the "Ishango" find and of other recent discoveries in Upper Egypt and Nubia, for possible African anteriority (Heinzelin: 1962). By

¹¹Several diverse objects with some common characteristics are tokens. This set of characters constitutes their type.

the way, Heinzelin's article had appeared shortly before Schmandt-Besserat's in the same *Scientific American*, but she fails to mention it. Her tokens are about 10,000 years old, whereas the Ishango lunar calendar dates back 20 or 25,000 years.

These discoveries are often paraded as definitive, whereas like any other they are simply waiting for the next one to put them back into the melting-pot. In Africa, as elsewhere, it is likely that many systems of writing aborted. Some could not withstand the imposition of a new system by some political power, as is well attested over the whole Continent. Since Antiquity, we know only of systems that tradition remembers or which remain extant through the hardwearing qualities of the materials they used. Muslim proselytism, riding on the wave of the Koran and its adjuncts, reduced to writing languages that were previously oral, but also proscribed older than Arabic scripts linked with the now forbidden figurative forms and unacceptable worldviews. The 'ajami appeared because of this confrontation, and appear to have been conceded. It is unthinkable that African Savanna empires, some of which, like Ghana, covered an area nearly equal to Europe, could have been administered without archives or means of long-distance communication. Muslim clerks may have tardily imposed the Arabic script on them. Monteil, Dalby and Hau have independently suggested the existence of a form of writing peculiar to the Empire of Ghana, which could have been instrumental to the blossoming in this cultural region of the scripts we know: Vai, Mende, Kpelle, Beti, Bambara. But Lévi-Strauss, Goody, Ong, etc., will all have us believe that the emergence of writing coincided with that of the complex society, capitalism, the state and... Civilization.

Ancient testimonies suggest the existence of writings now forgotten. Cheikh Anta Diop was satisfied he had seen some on millenary baobabs on the road to Thiès in Senegal. Much earlier, Cavazzi de Montecuculo (1687) reported that a hieroglyphic writing was in use in the Congo and Angola. He describes such an inscription found on the rocks of Tete (Mozambique), near the Zambese. Delafosse ascribed to the Hausa and Zenaga a cryptic writing and Dalby did likewise for the region of Hodh. These testimonies are not concerted and widespread in time.¹²

¹²Hodh is a region of present Mauritania rich in secret alphabets, called cryptic, for the writing of Hassanyia Arabic. Apparently the Sacred character of the Koran and other religious texts made it unfit for ordinary and commercial uses. It is interesting to note that the Arabic spoken (and written, in Maghribi or Andalusian script) by Mauritaniens is, compared to the Koran itself, of great purity. One can see how the use of the Arabic script and language could cause a fear of corruption of both. This fear led to the creation of other and cryptic scripts. What caravanners on the Saharan trade between southern Morocco and West Africa knew (trails, watering holes, the transactions themselves) had

Forgetting the existence of ancient writings does not mean forgetting the function of writing. The case of the Oluorogbo script would tend to confirm the disappearance of several writings. The main cause of oblivion would seem to have been the "offer" of another system of writing, enforced by the presence of a military or ideological power. Thus an article (anonymous: 1957) in the local press in Calabar, in South-East Nigeria, tells us of the gift to the British Antiquities Commission of a document concerning Nsibidi, a secret writing within Efik society. This document was based on the work of missionaries and said nothing new about its cipher. The donation was a symbol of allegiance, of renunciation of power, since this "secret" writing had been a tool of the occult power of the Ekpe Society within Efik society, about two centuries old. The gift symbolized acceptance by the Efik of British Law and surrender of their own. Yet it must be noted that the Ekpe secret society was not weakened by the donation and continued to exercise real if discreet power. Aye (1967), the historian of Calabar, mentions a historic case, dated May 1785, of Nsibidi use, but suggests much older dates for its tentative creation. The dates he gives, with the creators' names, correspond to sudden accelerations in the historical process, combined with the presence of an original individual. These moments, engrained in collective memory, are perhaps not absolute points of origin. To the substratal dynamics of local symbolism should be added osmotic exchanges with neighboring or imposed systems, the establishment of a centralizing political power, the (re)awakening of nationalism.

Genetics confirms the constructions of historical linguistics showing migrations and the spreading of techniques during prehistory.¹³ Cav-

to remain secret. Each of their signs corresponds to an Arabic letter and corresponding sound, but also has a numerical value, 1 to 1000, 1 to 9, the tens and hundreds up to 1000 (Dalby: 1986).

¹³Three theories are presently in the field about the origin of man and his evolution on the African continent and elsewhere.

Some say that *Australopithecus afarensis* and *A. africanus*, who both appeared in Africa, could be a million years older than commonly admitted. *Homo habilis* lasted more than 500,000 years. He fed on plants and remains of lions' and tigers' etc. meals, competing therein with hyenas, jackals and vultures. Then came *Homo erectus* and *Anthropopithecus erectus* (Java), who give birth to *Homo Sapiens*.

Others, taking into account the recent discovery of a 200,000 year old *Homo Sapiens* in China, set up a new theory: *Homo Sapiens* appeared not only in Africa but simultaneously in several areas of the globe.

Finally a third group of archeologists, in agreement with the second, adds that *Homo Sapiens* could have returned to Africa to colonize the habitat of his remote ancestors.

Proofs are tenuous on all sides and theories evolve with technology and rare new finds. Nothing either confirms or contradicts the assertion that prehistoric man learnt how to draw before he could talk, yet they all agree about the African genesis of Man (See M.

alli-Sforza (1991) shows that genetic study confirms the genealogies of language established by Greenberg and others. Language is generally dated about 100,000 years and present-day complex language 40,000 in Africa and the Middle East, 10 or 15,000 years before the Ishango incised bone. Hominization took place in Africa (most scientists would still believe). The combined weight of archeology, paleontology, linguistics, genetics and prehistory confirms the appearance of *Homo erectus* and the passage of man from the natural state to culture in Africa. Scientists are now agreeing that the paths of diffusion of man and his tools coincides approximately with those of breeding, agriculture and the beginning of metallurgy (Cavalli-Sforza: 1991). In 1978, before genetics came in and the Ishango excavations were completed, Ki Zerbo published:

thus at Ishango, north of Lake Edward, Neolithic remains have been found...polished millstones and grinders, bone harpoons. The Elmenteita pottery (Kenya), probably 5 millennia old, is yet another element allowing the inference that ceramics and bone tools or weapons reached the Sahara and Egypt from the highlands of East Africa (53).

In Africa about 5 million years ago, the Sahara moved forward and the forest back roughly to their present limits, and the gap between small and big apes increased. Some small monkeys continued to live in their trees. Others, of various sizes, adapted to their new wooded or grassy abodes. The smallest are the ancestors of the baboon, the largest of our own Australanthropian forerunners. The first hominids were African. They date back 3,700,000 years and their traces have been found on the banks of the Omo in Ethiopia.

1,500,000 years ago, the Sahara may have formed a formidable barrier, except for now fossile waterways and the Nile valley. No traces of Australanthropians have been found north of the Sahara.

Half a million years elapsed —the prepaleolithic (1,000,000 BC)— before human stock, originating in Africa, is attested in North Africa, Europe, or Asia. *Homo erectus* came from the Great Lakes Region of Africa. He measured 120cm, lived in small groups of a dozen individuals in low-walled shelters. He had fire and flint monoface tools. He could probably speak. He hunted elephants, hippopotami and also fed on stranded whales and scraps of other animals' food. The Straits of Gibraltar did not exist yet and the fauna of Southern Europe was tropical. This *Homo erectus* is still attested 350,000 years later. He could then work metal and build huts.

Towards 280,000 BC other Africans, the Atlanthropes of North Africa, peopled present-day Spain, France and Great Britain. Their height varied from 150 to 165cm. They were Troglodytes. They made biface axes. They had bone bodkins and were able to make cloths. They were probably cross-bred, but their bifaces with handles were an African technique. *Homo Sapiens* appears about 250,000 BC and *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* towards 40,000 BC. The Grimaldi caveman (Nice, France) is Negroid.

Between 40,000 and 8,000 BC the only population of Central Africa is Pygmy (135cm) and of Southern Africa Bushmen (155cm).

All the peoples of the European ice age, coeval with the Ishango culture, possess notation systems. They are all of African or Asian origin, possibly cross-bred. This is the period when rock art reaches its perfection, evincing a new stage in the evolution of the human brain. The generalized use of symbols also suggests that the intelligence of *Homo erectus* is no longer that of an ape, even if a deified monkey is credited with the invention of writing. At the foot of the Ruwenzori there were already monkeys and gorillas, humans of great height and smaller ones. The immediate forebear of *Homo erectus* is a "skilled vigorous, sharp-minded creature" called *Homo habilis*. He is capable of thinking and acting in terms of space and time. His intellect is superior to that of all his contemporaries and enables him to survive in different environments and difficult circumstances. Mastery of the notions of time and space was a necessary condition for the creation of writing, i.e. the conservation and communication of thought through space and time. To venture into the conceptions of time and space of a culture other than one's own is a singularly disconcerting experience (Marshack: 1991).

The exploration of a foreign notion of space requires serious testing of our culturally determined spatiotemporal categories. Those African prehistoric men were intellectually no different from their European contemporaries. Adapted to different environments, their physiques evolved but remained comparable. According to Marshack, Ishangians lived in

a complex, mixed ecology that includes lakeside, savanna and forest, with prolific fishing some seasons and a use of other seasonal resources such as crabs, snails, tortoises, ostrich eggs, small and large mammals, and a probable gathering of season seeds, fruits and roots...The Ishango notation may have helped structure social life and group interchange (32).

And attempting to understand aspects of evolved human cognition, Marshack suggests that:

skills and knowledge were taught by word of mouth, by use of story and symbol, by ceremony and rite, and by showing and doing. Because of these factors, as I have suggested, there was a limit not so much on the amount or complexity of knowledge and lore as to the number of comparisons that were possible (371).

Given the prehistoric dispersion from Africa of peoples and techniques throughout the world except America and Oceania, even if Africa had not invented writing, her contribution to the history of mankind should be recognized. Moret (1941) grants the Neolithic Negroids who were the first inhabitants of the Eastern Valleys, and their more or less cross-bred descendants, the invention of the first writings of the world: Egyptian, Sumerian and Indo-Dravidian. He predicted the recent archeological discoveries in pre-dynastic Upper Egypt.

In Zaire, in the cultural area occupied by Pygmies for at least 25,000 years, the Ishango incised bone (Heinzelin: 1962), the Tschokwe figures (Falgayrettes: 1988), the proverb pot lids (Faik-Nzuji: 1989), the Mbuti Pygmies' writing (Thomson & Bahuchet: 1991) and many others bear witness to an ensemble of graphic structures which are among the most ancient.

Since western science confused prehistoric societies with contemporary primitive societies, the current revision of our knowledge of prehistory should entail a new perception of the primitive. Having dared to take a psychologist's look at prehistoric black culture, Bernolles (1967) respectfully concludes that it was highly inventive and that the descendants of such men would have deserved better treatment from their colonial masters:

It would have been better to let the Blacks, if need be, evolve on the very seat of their own highest and more valuable tradition than to impose on them foreign principles, heterogeneous to their psyche, ridiculous *Summae* that were merely destructive and did not spare [them] the internal dramas of all other human beings, and, moreover, had only one aim: to destroy the *Prima* and the men who were faithful to them by temperament (89).

Long was Egyptian Antiquity perceived as a sort of sudden explosion, a mushroom surge of civilization in a waste. A "Gift of the Nile", Egypt had no roots in the past, no prehistory, and was denied historic continuum. But Hoffmann (1979) undertook to revise the history of Egypt and mankind. A set of circumstances, due to the construction of the Aswan dam, had just led to an accumulation of documents about Nubia and Upper Egypt. International cooperation was summoned to a campaign of excavations unparalleled in history. The analysis and dating of all these documents are not yet complete, but it is already confirmed that it

was upstream on the Nile that Egypt sought and found the main elements of her civilization. Greek authors had already said this, but it had always been good form to ignore them or to refer to other Greek authors who had contradicted them. Hoffmann wrote us on 4 August 1986:

Apropos your question on proof of the existence of writing in Egypt before 3,500 BC there is no simple answer. My epigraphist colleagues insist that, strictly speaking, true writing does not appear before the beginning of the First Dynasty (around 3,100 BC) and remains confined to short inscriptions in the four or five following centuries. More and more however, archeological evidence suggests that the roots of writing date back to the predynastic period. Nobody at this moment in research can give a date before 3,500. According to what I have seen of the use of complex graffiti on pottery, some hieroglyphic signs date back to the predynastic period. This does not prove that we are in the presence of a real system of writing. I open the debate on this problem in my book *Egypt before the Pharaohs* (Knof, 1979) and in a monograph, *The Predynastic of Hierakonpolis* (Eisenbrauns, 1986).

Hoffmann, who led the excavations at Hierakonpolis, also gave us the references of the other "debatable" works which had come out in favor of the existence of hieroglyphs in the predynastic periods in Upper Egypt. It was long impossible to accept that this model could have inspired Egyptian civilization. Yet, the Greek "innovation" (one letter, one sound) is partly Egyptian and totally Meroitic. At a lecture on Nubia, at the University of Philadelphia, one speaker was prepared to say that Nubian objects suggesting "predynastic pharaohs" [sic] and "hieroglyphs" predating 3,100 BC are of Egyptian origin and merely attest the existence of trade between Nubia and Egypt.

Mveng's thesis (1972) and the works of Cheikh Anta Diop (1954-1981) raised protests among French-speaking academics, ex cathedra and in the media, comparable to those Bernal's theses have provoked in the United States since 1987, and to a lesser extent Van Sertima's (1983). Both defend, each in a particular mode, Greek and Latin texts in hand, the thesis that Africa inspired Greek and therefore European and Western Civilization. Although Mveng remained discreet in this debate, he was accused of having cited only documents that supported his preconceived views. Cheikh Anta Diop published enormously and in many fields. Often thought to be soaked in anti-Senghor ideology, he was accused of trying to deck Africa in the qualities confiscated by Europe. The truth is that Bernal has of late tried to refurbish arguments put forward long ago by Mveng and Anta Diop while differing on others. Bernal aims above all at "cutting down on the cultural arrogance of Europe". In his first volume he shows how western university tradition

created, around 1840-1850, the myth of the Greek cultural miracle. He proves with several documents that the Greeks themselves said they owed Egypt the essential features of their theogony and culture. This fairly recent myth, he says, founded the overriding duty to spread European civilization, the direct heir to ancient Greece.

Its expansionism since the 15th century and its industrial development have put Europe in contact with many different peoples. Saint Augustine the Berber had compared the growth of a child and the history of mankind. This Other one, despite the growth of man over the centuries, has remained a contemporary childlike primitive, and his world shall be contrasted with the world we know, complex, literate, developed and adult: Civilization. The pairs past and present, primitive and contemporary, have combined to confer on the white man a civilizing mission because he is superior. Reacting against classicism, romanticism developed a passion for history, ethnicity and nationalism. In spite of that, the Greek model, cracked up as the sum of universal values, continues to reign in architecture, in the universities, in politics, in literature...Bernal promises two new volumes on "Greece of the Middle East or Europe" and "The Sphinx's reply and other Greco-Egyptian mythological studies".

The predynastic etymological, linguistic, literary, musical, socio-historical, mythological, historiographical, archeological Upper Nile sources seem to place the most ancient scripts, hieroglyphic or cursive, in Nubia. Bernal's thesis, on the other hand, reinstates the classic western model in the Fertile Crescent and "Afro-Tunisian Phoenicia", thereby revealing the usurper role held by Greece, in spite of herself, for a century and a half to date. The fact of the "creation" of writing becomes the center of a network of reciprocal influences in which Egypt still seems to have held the greatest and earliest initiative.

A simple comparison of Bernal's title, *Black Athena, the Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, with Mveng's, *Les sources grecques de l'histoire négro-africaine*, reveals the different but complementary intentions of the two authors. The one writes African history, using documents in the Greek language, and emphasizes the importance the Greeks attached to their borrowings from Africa. The other, using various but also predominantly Greek sources, demonstrates that classical culture inherited, at least in its earliest innovations, many features borrowed from Asiatic and African civilizations.

An issue of *Archeology* (1992, 45:5) offers an example of the diatribe (49-55, 82, 86, Coleman's critique and Bernal's reply) that raged that year in the United States, a third of a century after the passionate debate at the University of Dakar between Cheikh Anta Diop and a number of French academics. First, this issue of *Archeology* highlights

the confusion raised in the Black American public and university circles by the arbitrarily created division between a non-African "white" Africa and a "really" African black Africa. Snowden (1983) had shown the absence in Egypt of any racial prejudice founded on skin color, the reality of range from black to light brown (but avoiding red, pink and white). But Egypt, ruled for seven centuries by Nubians, is nevertheless allocated culturally to the Asian sphere. What Bernal did was simply to prove the influence, among others, of Egypt on the intellectual awakening of Ancient Greece. The overreactions showed how deeply shaken the authorities were, on their thrones of complacency, by this modest outrage to the purity of the Greek Indo-Aryan model. And in the opposite corner, who had we? Those who wanted Egypt to have been peopled exclusively by Blacks, a no less ideological and moral rearmament loaded contention. But whoever was right, the debate pinpointed the importance of writing and its ownership for both sides. There were two brief articles that at least had the merit of showing that absolute truth was on the side of neither. Coleman, a conservative, criticized Bernal in these terms:

[Bernal's] work is receiving wide media attention for its message that "Afro-Asiatic roots" were basic in the formation of Classical Greek culture and that these roots have been ignored because of a prevailing racist vision of an Ancient Greece unblemished by African and Semitic cultural debts (49).

We cannot reexamine all the reflective arguments, which turned around the occupation of Greece and Egypt by the Hyksos, the contradiction between Diodorus Siculus and Herodotus, the influence of the Egyptians and Phoenicians over the Greeks. We shall have to await the appearance of Bernal's last two volumes to evaluate the full impact of his point of view. Until then, caution is advisable.

The change in Western perception of other worlds has been gradual and goes on. An important stage was Champollion's *Lettre à M. Dacier* (1822). The decoding of an ancient writing had led to the discovery of coherent and different past schemes of thought, feeling and action. Ethnology could, at every new stage, provoke our mental schemes as learning Greek and Latin used to do, and learning Chinese or an African language still does. The deciphering of the writing of an extinct civilization forced us to look into the word-to-word structure of the other language. The omnipresence of writing in Egyptian remains could only lead to questioning the self-admiration of European civilization, with its stronghold the phonetic alphabet, so-called Latin. A curiosity towards the other came to light, esteem and respect began to vie with

contempt (racism) or indifference (Barbarian is the Other) or fear (past "Yellow Peril"; today, unemployment linked to presence of immigrant workers), and pervaded mentalities and behaviors. The alterity of the West was now challenged and reinforced by this contact with the Other through writing. Friedrich (1957) analyzes the principles underlying Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. For Africa, he describes Meroitic writing, used from the first century BC to the third or fourth AD (an alphabet of 23 letters), and the Punic and Berber writings. In his introduction, he recalls that the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were not unaware of the painted or incised writings on Egyptian and other monuments, but that they saw in hieroglyphs and cuneiforms just decorations which defied understanding and interpretation: if there was meaning here, it was *abracadabra*, and that was it. Mankind began, and still does for many, with Homer and the Old Testament. The recognized and studied ancient, dead, languages were Greek, Latin and Hebrew, all three enshrined in the historic and cultural heritage of the West. The concept of modern languages (*langues vivantes*) dates from the 20th century and still suffers in its teaching from the pedagogy of ancient tongues. Before the 18th century, the Other, set apart from the arbitrary phylum and never even suspected of being capable of expressing himself in another just as coherent logic, was banned from the ranks of those whose inheritance was claimed. Such outcasts, geographically and culturally remote from the Judeo-Christian world, could only be barbarians and primitives. The thing to do was to convert them, integrate them in the circuit of economic exchange; give or impose on them the best possible model, the West: in a word, civilize them. The author shows that the discovery, thanks mainly to the deciphering of their writings, of civilized worlds older than the history of mankind saw its origin retreat from 2,500 to beyond 5,000 years. A part of Africa, China, Central America revealed cultures worthy of the most sympathetic interest. Soon the Great Discoveries, the expansion of the known world, then colonization, multiplied contact with other, ever more other cultures. It became irrefutable that unthinkable religions, modes of knowledge, systems of thought had existed and existed side by side with the Western world. Perhaps less spectacular than the development of science and technology in the 19th and 20th centuries, the impact of these discoveries changed our perception of the world.

One may refuse, or integrate, or adapt the values of the Other, but one is never indifferent to them. The encounter with the Other, from which alterity slowly emerged in the West, started in the 18th century, but its impact has hardly yet begun. Africanist discourse, a late comer to phenomenology, has just begun to question itself. All do not take part, many are still under the spell of the underlying ideology. At

this end of the 20th century the relation to Africa, save an occasional wink, is still characterized by general ignorance or indifference. Influence or exploitation being on the wane, a void is filling their place, free from passion or self-interest, unavoidably and progressively shedding the old prejudices, opening up the probability of an integration of African values, without risk of hurting interests, privileges or sensibilities. Africanist discourse must use the opportunity to decolonize itself. The values and systems of the (African) Other will gradually integrate our referential schemes. The cultural impact of Africa on the West has already begun. It is now going to become scientific, as science begins to question itself and other forms of scientific thought. Monni Adams (1989) explains:

The differences in scope and method between the studies of sub-Saharan art and European art that became apparent in the '50s and '60s led art historians to believe that the study of sub-Saharan art within their discipline was marginal, if not wholly misplaced. If there were a place for it in the history of art, it was located with the artefacts of a distant primitive period...A different strategy for skirting around the problem of lack of disciplinary fit was the characterization of sub-Saharan art as a qualitatively different, distinctively "other" art by freely contrasting it to European art. The art could then be valued and enjoyed for precisely these qualities of otherness. Otherness was indicated by the term "primitive art", a term applied in the '50s and '60s to all arts produced outside literate cultures. For many art historians, this special category of art had a low status (59).

For a better appreciation of the function of writing in an African society we have chosen to describe a culture, the Efik of Calabar in South-East Nigeria. Here the Ekpe Secret Society¹⁴ has a visible emblem, a dyed cloth like a batik, named *ukara* and bearing signs of the Nsibidi script.

The Efik to create a barrier, figured and real, between initiates and the people, to enhance the Efik collective identity and to ritualize authority have used the *ukara* cloth.

Now that scholars and politicians are beginning to admit into their development models the cultural and psychosociological dimensions of African societies, it may be worth trying to understand:

¹⁴A much longer text, the outcome of our research in Calabar, was distributed, orally summed up and discussed in Sydney (Australia) during the 15th Congress of the International Association for the History of Religion (August 1985). The ethno-historical part of this paper has been published (Battestini: 1991a). The unpublished second part, more sociological, has inspired the following pages of this chapter.

- 1 — How a powerful secret society, having acquired before the 18th century an original system of writing, has been able to hold its own and evolve, and how it functions in modern Nigeria;
- 2 — How an African people, situated at a crossroads of several cultures, has been affected by various events and numerous changes since 1960.

The presence over two centuries of the ukara cloth and over eleven centuries of Nsibidi writing in the Efik cultural landscape is a long-standing and far-reaching social fact. It should allow us to appreciate how an African culture, endowed with writing, experienced the impact of Western colonization and survived after independence.

The evolution of the cultural ensemble "Efik society-Ekpe society-Nsibidi writing" offers the unique prospect of a social history of an ancient African writing that has survived the westernization of the Efik people. Many West African cultures (Fon, Ewe, Yoruba, Hausa, Ibo, Efik, Bamum, Jukun...) produce and/or use a sort of batik, generally contrasting indigo blue (perceived as black) and undyed white strips. This type of loincloth, wall hanging or *peplum* is archeologically attested since the 12th century in the caves of the Bandiagara cliff (Mali) and was historically documented in the 16th century by Leo Africanus. In spite of the wide cultural extension of its use, this dyed cloth has rarely been studied. Ukara is used as a ritual object by a secret society of so-called leopard-men, known under the name Ekpe in a few Cross River communities, among them the Efik.

Ukara today, made of a poor cotton, often imported from England, is dyed according to a "secret recipe". It is covered with various figures geometrically distributed, pictographs, symbols, Nsibidi script, strips of a hand's width, locally woven or brought probably from northern Nigeria by Jukun or Ibo traders, sewn together to loincloth size and dyed with a local, not European dye. Before 1850 it could have been made of liber, a fine fiber matting attested in West Africa since the 9th century, and more recently of woven raffia. It is known the Efik stole raffia ritual vestments and royal costumes from the Uruan Ibibio, well before 1750, the approximate date of their arrival and settlement in Creek Town and Old Calabar.

The most frequent ukara seems to be a loincloth or hanging approximately 210 by 180cm, a rectangle of two pieces sewn lengthwise together. Each piece measures about 100cm by 220cm, including two non-dyed strips about 18cm wide. The worked part of about 200 by 180cm consists of 72 rectangles. Ukara may have more or fewer rectangles-carouches, but their overall organization testifies to a functional and esthetic desire to express a comprehensive message, as for the composi-

tion of a poster or a newspaper front page, made of images, symbols, and writing.

There exist two other less usual types of ukara with slight variants. One is made of regular blue and white triangles inscribed with pictograms and Nsibidi writing. The distribution of the motives is similar to the first ukara just described, although this one seems less elaborate: a variant rather than a different pattern.

The third ukara is a banner more than 5 meters long and nearly 100cm wide or high. It is used as a fence signaling that the secret society is in session, whereas the other sorts are mainly backcloths or throne decorations for chiefs and kings. In this last function, a rope or a chain may replace it.

All the pictograms, Nsibidi and geometrical signs of this type are on all the variants but their distribution is comparable to that of the other models. The area of this type of ukara, although it is made of a single long piece, does not differ from that of the others. This model is twice longer than the one described above, and its width or height is half the other's.

The production technique, despite the secrecy of some details, is comparatively well known (Barbour & Simmonds: 1971; Polakoff: 1971). Raffia thread is used, with splendid results despite the limitations of the method. The part of the cloth that is strongly stitched remains relatively white, while the surrounding parts are dyed deep blue. Each drawing in white may consist of a limited number of forms, such as lines, circles, points, triangles, animals or objects, which often recur on all types, allowing the artist and his team freedom of expression and creativity.

The Ibo of Cross River, not the Efik, produces Ukara. The models used by the Ekpe, notably those featuring Nsibidi and geometrical forms, are considered mysterious and prestigious. According to Cole & Aniakor (1984), the designs are made by

the men of Okafia, Abiriba and Arochuku (and perhaps their neighbors), but the cloths are dyed and sewn by the Nkalagu, a little to the North (59).

Reports on the manufacture of the cloth are rather unreliable. Some say that ukara making is a dangerous activity, conducted on the quiet by post-menopausal women. Others claim it was public and practiced by young men. There is no confusion in these statements if they are considered historically, and comparatively with the Yoruba *adire*. The latter dyed cloth was prepared exclusively by old women before 1945. Men

progressively joined in the industry after the Second World War and have become experts in cheap mass (stencil and rapid dye) production.

Formerly a ukara was not signed or marked, but one can now see in a corner of the cloth the owner's or maker's mark. There were however lodge identifications. A ukara is very expensive, especially if it is made to order. These fabrics are still produced for the richer members of the Ekpe society.

What is most striking in ukara is its sheer heterogeneity: it is used by Efik belonging to the Ekpe society, is made by Ibo of Cross River and covered with motives designed by Ekoi (Ejagham). It resorts to a myth purchased from the Efut by the Efik and is probably to some extent a reminiscence of an older Efik cult. Ukara is a cult object of a complex society open to external influences. One characteristic of the Efik is that they exchange consumer goods (originally fish) for valuable and durable ritual objects, myths, and even types of behavior, when they did not steal them.

The ownership of a ukara is of course essential for a *mboko* (leopard-man). In the middle of the 19th century, the missionary Waddel noted that 100 pounds sterling had to be paid to acquire the highest grade and obtain the right to wear the corresponding ukara. Each quality is associated with a certain level of knowledge and expressed by certain symbols and Nsibidi signs. The *nyampke* grade (conferred on Captain Burrell of Liverpool on 15 December 1878) is associated with a hat and a rattle. Every usual object has its symbol in Nsibidi. The *nkanda* grade is represented by a peacock feather, a forked stem, a basket, antelope horns and a spear (Simmons: 1959, 254).

On close examination, a ukara reveals a rigorous arrangement of motives:

The total depth of Ekpe symbolism on these cloths, although rich, cannot be entirely clarified on account of the discretion surrounding Ekpe rites and Nsibidi. (Cole & Aniakor: 1984, 61).

Nevertheless, one can readily see that the motives function collectively like a poem in which most of the signifiers are repeated and reinforce the *raison d'être* of the text and the object. They signal the presence of the Ekpe society, its power and legitimacy, the protection it affords. Certain motives appeal directly to grades and their hierarchy, others to the original myth, yet others refer to means of action, to rites, punishments and privileges.

Some are iconic and logographic, simply saying what they mean, either a proverb (the tortoise) or a text (the fish), which may be explained to the novice. Others are synecdochic, showing part of the

whole: a bench for deliberation and collegiate decision; a strophantus pistil, source of a deadly poison used to punish culprits, as a sign of the executionary power of justice; the double gong for the long-distance communication of decisions over Cross or Calabar River, showing the territorial extension of the society's power, a warning against any effort to escape from its jurisdiction; two strokes symbolizing executioners' sticks and the threat of punishment; copper and iron bars for money and wealth, the price of a higher grade, fines, debts, etc, ... and the security of free intercourse, the assurance of mutual assistance and honest trading. Other motives combine several symbols, creating a text, but of course only for literate initiates.

The levels of initiation are hierarchically organized. Every probationer can choose his first level, subject to approval. He may decide to transfer to a higher level, even to clear two at a time. Complex, detailed and contradictory reports are at hand on the subject of initiation. Rites may vary from lodge to lodge, within a lodge and from individual to individual.

Each grade may be divided into:

three stages — *Ekpe ufok* (extended family Ekpe), *Ekpe essien* (lineage ekpe) and *Ekpe obio* (Town ekpe) which correspond to the structure of the social organization. At each stage initiation dues are paid in the form of money, food, drinks and goats. At the ceremony performed at the beginning of each initiatory stage, camwood dust is sprinkled on the hair of the initiate... On the day of the initiation the successful candidate steps into the Ekpe ring, a large circle drawn in the middle of the chief's compound. His friends and member relatives support him. A costumed officer makes seven attempts to push him out of the ring. If the officer fails, the initiate then receives the Ekpe insignia and is pronounced a full member of the society. Ekpe designs are painted on his body with chalk, camwood, *oniong* powder and *iduo eto* (*Bixa orellana*) which are local plants. (Ekpo: 1978, 75)

No Nsibidi sign then is purely ornamental or morphemographic. However, the composition of any ukara is of a very high quality, showing a solid sense of esthetic values. Each symbol has to be learned but the lexicon is grouped in progressive series for gradual apprenticeship. In our time, the duration of initiation has been shortened as interest in using the script dwindled. Most new initiates, fixed on the prestige of their new title, immediately forget the precious lore just imparted to them, but a restricted group does master the whole tradition (some of it recorded in Nsibidi) and the set of rules that govern deliberation and decision-making. They know how to order their own specially designed ukara. They understand the language of gestures and dance and the

painted *uli* signs and the codex of the pharmacopeia: medicinal plants, poisons, antidotes. All this knowledge comes to them as they climb the ladder of grades, gradually filling the enormous chasm that separates the neophyte from the *Eyamba*, the sovereign master of the society, a godlike creature in the people's estimation.

The geometric figures on ukara are of three types: the first consists of concentric rectangles with variations; at the heart of the smallest figure one or two lines, a dotted one, or nothing. A rare variant: the widest rectangle may end up in a Greek key line (a broken line of right-angled segments) representing the labyrinthine access to knowledge and to the temple, the secret path towards the kernel.

Another type has a groundwork of lozenges (the leopard's spots), of triangles (the leopard's prints, a figure of the awe-inspiring power of Ekpe), of fan-shaped designs (imitating the horns of the duyker and other objects supposed to figure the leopard's cry). This last type is a meaningful calligraphic geometry of natural objects and Nsibidi writing —pictograms and morphemograms— or a mixture of both.

Knowledge has consisted, and for many still does, in inventorying a substance-situation and establishing an order of corresponding parts (or series of parts) so as to obtain a unified, homogeneous perception of one's environment. This operation necessarily puts distance between the human and natural worlds. A new order has been created, that exists only in the imagination.

The geometric shapes of ukara organize space and at the same time select and reshape objects for their identification and configuration, a stylization that facilitates perception, cognition and memorization. These processes imply a certain capacity to analyze milieu and language, characteristic of those which presided over the invention of writing *stricto sensu*. Before teaching children or adults to write, it is necessary to show them that writing is done in a two- or three-dimensional space and how to use its tools and materials.

One geometric shape is made up of two superimposed crosses (signifying two waterbowls), symmetrically opposed to two sets of four imbricated chevrons signifying a mirror.¹⁵ The *ekba* is a copper receptacle often decorated with Nsibidi signs. Lacan and others have insisted on the importance of the mirror in the development of the idea of self. The mirror has penetrated the African substance — situation and was used for magic practices. The ukara shows its (geometric) forms, its (mythic symbolic) content, but principally the objects of the two differ-

¹⁵A mirror of varying size pivoting on a horizontal axis. As a piece of furniture, it could be seen on every European dressing-table, associated with a large bowl, in the 19th century. Such a facility is to this day a must for the quality in Efik society.

ent types, feared by the ignorant and the initiated alike. Ukara signals remembrance of distant times when humans became conscious of similarities between their and neighboring cultures. The Efik then became capable of transcending their internal differences and constructing their collective identity (*anana ukpohode*).

Beyond the geometric designs and abstract symbols, the ukara includes a limited range of stylized and figurative motives such as fish, scorpion, lizard, crab, tortoise, crocodile, snake, leopard, duyker, or others familiar in the past or present Efik habitat. Of the ten naturally drawn animals, some are suggested in a few lines, while others are charged with other signs. The tortoise is represented with lozenges on its shell, fish and crocodile have parallel rows of marks, snake and leopard are covered with spots.

Tortoise¹⁶ and wisdom go together, according to the Chinese. The design of its shell is of supernatural origin. Named "wen", the veins observed in materials like wood or marble, in constellations, in insects' wings or the footprints of birds and other animals, the natural marks on crocodiles, snakes and seashells are at the origin of the concept of "literature", as shown by the fact that "wen" also means writing and courtesy. Without assimilating Efik culture to ancient China, useful comparisons are possible. Nature everywhere is pedagogic of its order.

Nsibidi script is morphemographic and enables the notation of different languages, expressing ideas that can be rendered in each of them, like Chinese writing. Many languages of southern Nigeria are tone languages, tone being ignored by their present provisional spellings. The fine motives of the royal python, of the snake *Bitis gabonica nasicornis* (the figured snake), of the tortoise carapace (as in the overall composition of ukara and with concentric rectangles), of shells and crabs (one may carry the symbol of the two executioners in ukara), the footprints of birds and quadrupeds (the lizard's, wildcat's and duyker's exist in Nsibidi), all try to show that nature is a source of knowledge and the origin of the organization of perception. From this point of view man imitates nature, appropriates her secrets, may even buy them like the Efik. Any appearance of chaos in this prime organization of the sub-

¹⁶Linguistically, the Efik are Bantu. Their language is even thought to be very similar to Ur-Bantu, the original Bantu tongue, laboratory-reconstructed by comparison of all the known variants of Bantu. A Bantu city, Musumba, capital of the Lunda Empire, is thought to have been planned on the basis of an anthropomorphic conception of the tortoise's shell (Margarido: 1970, "La Capitale de l'empire Lunda: un urbanisme politique," in *Annales* 4. 857-61, cited by Coquery-Vidrovitch: 1991). There is perhaps more than a coincidence between the checkered pattern of the Efik ukara and that of certain ancient African cities, typically made up of concentric circles or of checkered rectangles, reminiscent of tortoise shell.

stance-situation is perceived as abnormal. In the ensemble of established concordances and correspondences reigns conformity. Contradiction can only be a norm. So arises the cultural illusion of a coherent "natural order" in the environment and the universe. The development of a system does not necessarily mean rejecting traditional elements. This goes for Egyptian hieroglyphs and Mum, for instance. Ukara comprises stylized designs, geometric forms and abstract signs. It can be regarded as embodying the remembrance of stages in the representation of speech from the emergence of the consciousness of order in original chaos onwards.

The commonest ukara resembles the tortoise's shell in its global rectangular division, many of the squares reproducing the spots and traces of the leopard and other culturally significant natural objects.

Members of the Ekpe society learn and use the secret writing called Nsibidi. No other people than the Efik have made such an extensive usage of this type of writing, created by the Ekoi (Ejagham) and said also to be used by neighbor peoples. Each Ekpe lodge in Calabar, each Ekpe society, develops a repertoire of symbols that combine with or replace older ones. The series is therefore open, symbols being forgotten while others, entirely new or modifying the old, are created according to changing needs. There is no unifying center. The only permanence is the script itself, its function, its modes of creation, its manifestations. Comparison of the systems, however, enables an estimate of 600 signs common to all the initiation centers.

Among all the Nsibidi symbols, a few are often represented on ukara cloth: the love star, benches, the skin of a fish on a calabash, ancestors' eyes, mirrors, waterbowls, the *efe nsibidi* or round house where young men meet to learn Nsibidi, the *nkanda* meetings, or the symbols known as "you, you have all the secrets" (Thompson: 1983, 247), the favors of young women, the folded copper, iron or silver bars, "standing man reflecting on the next action or decision", the Ekpe stick, the two executioners, the duyker horn, the Ekpe feather, the masked and costumed Ekpe, poison, the warm heart. Some of these symbols remain secret, but most of those deciphered refer to the Ekpe society, its origins, its power and functions. Some Nsibidi symbols suggest, through the traits they have in common with other African symbolic systems, the existence of a limited series of symbols common to several cultures across West and Central Africa. In this respect, it would seem that Nsibidi writing is the most elaborate system of morphemographic writing created by Africans since the beginning of the 18th century, and that, although continuous and unified, it has always been subject to local modifications.

The functions of ukara may be reduced to three:

- 1 —Worn exclusively by Ekpe members, it serves (with other external marks) to identify them in ceremonies;
- 2 — It (mainly the banner) discourages non-initiates from entering the meeting place or the temple.
- 3 —Covered with secret symbols (Nsibidi graphs, mythical animals, geometric forms) in checkered formation, ukara touches on the meanings of a yet secret field of knowledge.

The new initiate dressed in ukara is vested with a higher social position and role. Ukara is the outward symbol of his rights and privileges. Non-initiates owe him obedience and respect. In return, they expect order and prosperity, resolution of conflicts, payment of debts, dramatic, ritual entertainment, protection against enemies and evil, bad weather and hard times, the administration of justice.

Within this general framework of accepted social regulation and control of difficult individuals, some abuses may be tolerated. There have been exactions by members of the Ekpe society. In one case, there was a revolt of slaves against inhuman treatment by their betters (Aye: 1967, 96-101). It may happen that non-initiates feel called upon to control the behavior of the society or discipline one of its members. It has happened that the wellbeing of the majority has justified ill-treatment of marginals or outcasts: slaves, childless women, unwanted children. Such, however, may receive gifts, of food and drink, money or valuables.

In Iboland, at Abiriba (Cole & Aniakor: 1984, 52), ukara is used as canvas for tents in which copper basins called *ugbo ekpe* are exhibited. It is there also worn in various fashions.

Ukara ever marks the social cleavage between the powerful, the knowers of secrets, and the ignorant irresponsible *polloi*. As such it has been regarded as an isotopic connection between two complementary groupings in Efik society: a society potentially composed exclusively of men (not slaves) and the other of women and children, non-initiated men, slaves and outsiders. In truth, the demarcation is not clear cut: there are always potential members who refuse to seek initiation, out of indifference or negligence, long stays abroad or political or religious convictions. Nowadays fathers acquire the first grades for their young sons, and small circles of well-to-do women succeed in acquiring certain rights. Former slaves or rich upstarts have always been and are still admitted today.

The initiate fraternity, sitting in Ekpe lodge, is vested with the collegial and social power of decision. The individual Ekpe, as family head, village headman or house chief, wields power conferred on him

by other members and by tacit agreement of the society or community. This power increases with elevation in the society. All initiates do not take part in all the meetings, nor do they all know to read ukara and Nsibidi.

The strangest aspect of ukara, for an outsider, is the custom of public placarding of some secret but apparently easily denoted symbols. In such cases, what remain unknown are the connotations. They just signal knowledge, and the power and prestige that go with it. The surface manifestation of secrecy affirms its all-powerful existence without revealing what it is.

From behind ukara cloths inside and outside the Ekpe lodge or temple (*efe ekpe*), noises are made: *uyo enang* (a buzz produced by a duyker or antelope horn), *uyo ikwot* (the cry of the bullfrog), and principally *mboko* (the leopard's voice). None of the instruments are used in public. The noises consequently acquire a mysterious dimension, all the more awe-inspiring as their origin is unknown. These noises lend a voice (an identifying noise) to the snake, engineered through the shaking of leaves of the *Afungbe newbouldia laevis*. Other noises are superimposed, the duyker's, toad's or leopard's cries, creating a concert behind the ukara curtain. When masks and initiates come out of the temple in their festive or funeral costumes or for the crowning of a king, the need to lift the veil a little is satisfied. Gesticulation and dance, headdress and costume, insignia and drums materialize the power of the Ekpe society. Then the indigo blue of ukara permeates a colorful moving world, and everywhere Nsibidi signs write up and justify the power of initiate office.

The social recognition of this limited but ever recurring series of images, of these forms and noises, creates a sense of community. Certain interdictive symbols add to the feeling of cohesion. They are recognized by most adults, initiate or no: parrot, white cock or peacock feathers. The last, worn on a hat, means: "silence, a serious matter is being discussed here".

In the relation between Ekpe and crowd, a reassuring sense of mutual assistance is pervasive. No power can durably exist without the complicity of the crowd. For the majority, the desire for alterity is incongruous. To be noble, or free, usually leads to initiation into the society. Each individual fills his place in the community. Some social mobility is possible, but with well-established parameters and with the agreement, requested or granted, of the group. Natural forces thus channeled, social order and cultural identity assured, ukara becomes the emblem of Efikness.

The Ekpe society has preserved most of its traditions and rites, but has had to accept a degree of westernization. What was a club, with its

rules and codes, has become a political and social association of contemporary men. The old knowledge, now unknown to most, remains the source of power, but supplemented by new sorts of knowledge. Ukara and Nsibidi are more secret than in the past, precisely because many members of the circle have acquired new sources of power in the white man's schools and abroad, not available to the people. Individual and social problems are still debated and resolved in the temple, notably the problem of indebtedness, attested since the 18th century, of which Aye (1967) tells us that in 1785

Sam Ambo carried Ekpe drum with *nsibidi* inscribed on it to one Dick Ephraim, a debtor to Captain Morgan, an English ship's captain trading with Old Calabar. Apparently Captain Morgan must have presented his case to a member of the fraternity who immediately had to summon the debtor to appear before the Ekpe court for the said debt and to pay it at once. The carrying of *nsibidi* inscribed on the drum indicated the urgency of the case which must be attended to without delay (72).

Evidence of sentences passed, written in Nsibidi, is adduced by Talbot (1912), who reports that for a long time texts have been dispatched in Nsibidi writing, incised or painted on stems of palm leaves longitudinally cut (39). The possession of a writing system, the ability to send coded messages and record collective memory have jointly given the secret society its real power.

Nowhere else in Africa but in Calabar have so many Africans of so diverse origins been governed by a single secret society in possession of one system of writing. Until the West, chiefly in its mercantile, religious and military aspects, came in to do it for them, the Efik people still had much in its environment to classify and organize. To give an object a name deprives it of its mystery; classing the object in a comprehensive system confers on it a familiar aspect; establishing correspondences based on identity, difference, similarity and analogy is to explain par excellence. Naming, classifying and organizing were the intercessors between humans and nature: priests, chiefs, diviners, secret societies. But all have to be educated.

The Ekpe society has accumulated experience in sundry areas: curing disease, the pharmacopeia, toxicology, psychology, history, law, trade, literature (the oral tradition), fishing and hunting, rhetoric, popular weather forecasting, Nsibidi writing. All members spoke Efik and English. The society was also the guardian of cult objects and ancient instruments. All this knowledge was divided in domains and series of levels. There was a correspondence between birth, age, education, experience, social position, the quantity and quality of knowledge to be acquired at each level. Initiates were, depending on the knowl-

edge of their respective grades, intercessors. Some were experts in family, domestic, genealogical or city affairs. Others were rainmakers or stoppers.

There is no point in idealizing their society or in comparing their established system of education with a western-type system. Enough to say that a small group of men took over responsibility for a passably stable society. Their authority depended on their experience and knowledge, which have long been jealously kept secret, or shared only by a few selected "accomplices" and/or "disciples". The high-ranking members, as well as the rank and file, have discovered their identity in terms of their shared interests and powers. They wear an insignia of their rank in public, less to signal their superiority than to assert the collective identity, under their governance, of Efik society. The people know that benefices, advantages, protections, assurances can be obtained from initiates, and they therefore recognize their power and show respect for them. It seems to them normal to be governed by those who possess the greatest sum of knowledge in the group and whose behavior is deliberative.

The Ukara cloth hanging at the gate of the Ekpe lodge or worn by its members, in its own social and religious landscape the symbol of the complementarity of two groups, serves as a concrete sign of the division between them. Like a coat of arms, ukara brings them together in showing the symbols of the secret society and making secrecy a guarantee of the social regulatory function of Ekpe.

African writings, with rare exceptions (mainly those based on Latin and Arabic scripts), probably have no future. They are historic. The idea that a society without a symbolic system that could be seen as a written one cannot exist is by no means universal. Indeed, the use of a writing system is no longer essential for the recognition of a culture or even of its complexity.

Contemporary historicist discourse in France shows the paramount importance, for the emergence, consolidation and dynamism of a culture, of a social conscience inhabited by "sites of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*): literary monuments, rites and architectural landscapes, heroes and personages, music and songs, natural and architectural landscapes, myths. Malraux declared, at the festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, that France had become a great nation because she believed she was the direct heir to Rome. Whether these sites of memory are authentic, true or false matters little. The essential point is that they bring individuals together and channel energies, creating a collective identity while erasing a few differences. Historical science, like every other contemporary science, must be conscious of its responsibility. At the moment, it is soaked in the present. Between anthropology, which aims at univer-

salinity but leans on dated, periodized or parallel "culturalisms", and the sociology of knowledge, which recognizes, beyond the flowering of autonomous explicatory schemes, the need to find a logic of man in society, history offers the easy way to the construction of coherent ensembles. Long did structuralism and its avatars powerfully insist on the need to substitute the explicatory logic of the relational for the reductive chronological thread that describes and classifies more than it understands. The principle of reflectiveness, which now tonifies every researcher, and makes him question his object as much as himself in his rapport with the object and with his discourse, changes history into an art, and challenges the human sciences to more modesty.

African writings do not need to be invented. It is enough to stop denying them and to recognize them for what they are: sites of memory needed for the development of Africa. They are also a corpus of concrete facts that deny the Africanist's "Continent of peoples without writing" leitmotiv. What must be done is to strengthen and accelerate the current stocktaking of African signs of civilization, as Cheikh Anta Diop had wished, but a bit differently perhaps. What Africa will make of it is her own business.

The Eurocentric vision of the paramount importance of writing in the domestication of the mind, the birth of technology, the complexification of society and the emergence of capital and the market economy and the State, and their diffusion throughout the world with the imperialisms is now being superseded by an interrogation of the ways writing works, by a new theorizing of written language at last capable of integrating the generality of systems of signs.

In this way Africa is going to give itself a history of the present, of the contemporary symbolic significance of the traces of her past. The cultural foundation of the economic development of Africa lies in good part in an inventory of her writings. These systems of signs are essential for the identity, the memory and the heritage of postcolonial Africa.

The Ukara of the Efik, with its long timespan, its images, symbols and graphs, functions as evidence of the existence of all the memorials of that culture. Its example suggests similar types of relations in other African cultures, between social conscience and symbolic systems. But the concept of "site" (*lieu*) involves a deliberate semantic ambivalence. The first degree of meaning denotes something material. The second grows on the investment of qualities and inventions or perceptions of relations. Sign systems, therefore, first exist concretely, but the abstract panel of the memorial shall be what the Africans decide to make it. Nobody has the right to do it for them.

Sketching the social function of a local writing all along the history of an African culture demands proofs, variables and contradictions

of our reflections on writing, in the chronological perspective of this chapter. We have shown elsewhere (Battestini: 1991) the evolution of the concept of identity and alterity of that same people.

A linguist, Harris (1986), has made himself the critic of the history of writing. He sets up clearly the epistemological problem at the origin of writing, without more than incidentally and implicitly touching on the problems of its scope and value. Harris opens the way, but still as a historian, to a new theory of writing. He announces the coming of an "other" history of writing, when his entire project seemed to be tending towards a general science of it.

It says a great deal about Western culture that the question of the origin of writing could be posed clearly for the first time after the traditional dogmas about the relationship between speech and writing had been subjected both to the brash counterpropaganda of a McLuhan and to the inquisitorial skepticism of a Derrida. But it says even more that the question could not be posed clearly until writing itself had dwindled to microchip dimensions. Only with this latest of the communications revolutions did it become obvious that the origin of writing must be linked to the future of writing in ways which bypass speech altogether.

As intellectual labor, it would be toil in vain to re-plough McLuhan's field, or Derrida's either. They are ready for sowing, and the harvest will surely include in the fulness of time a history of writing *as writing*. When that history comes to be written — as distinct from the premature sketch we might now attempt — speech will be seen as the historical crutch on which writing was obliged to lean in the earliest phases, a prop to be thrown aside when no longer needed.

That history will also show us how Saussure was wrong to relegate writing to the status of an ancillary system merely designed to represent speech, but right to insist that speech was just one of many possible manifestations of a higher human faculty — that semiological faculty governing the creation of signs, which is *la faculté linguistique par excellence* (Epilogue).

Harris (1993) prepared the way to our argument with his *Sémiotique de l'écriture*, introducing the notion of "integrational study of writing", understood as the study of signs within social life. For him, a pure message does not exist, unless as a product of an intellectual operation, in which all that is constitutive of the act of human communication has been removed (370).

To lay the foundations of a science-to-be of writing, historical but not exclusively so, integrating its object in the text where it finds its *raison d'être*, would seem to be indispensable. Africa and the semiotics of writing and text will soon appear to have been pretexts, useful and

necessary in their time, the one on account of Africanist discourse's capacity to inform and criticize, the other for the methodological frameworks it provides. The future theorist of writing and text shall be neither a linguist, nor a semiotician, nor a philosopher, nor a historian, but he shall not be at all if his work is not both informed and critical of the methodologies and finalities of these sciences. Reflection on writing and the writing of text should be made to profit by these sciences, whose data bases were constituted outside it and only incidentally include it. It should build on its object, which can be discerned as being in the productive rapport of the one and the other. Thus the theory of writing and text shall incidentally contribute to opening up an interrogation of the productivity of sociological or historical texts.

Every race has a soul, and the soul of the race finds expression in its institutions, and to kill these institutions is to kill the soul. No people can profit by and be helped under institutions that are not the outcome of their own character.

Edward Blyden

Write the Divine name of Allah on a wall, in front of thy bed, so that when thou wakest up it is the first thing thou seest. When thou risest, utter it fervently, from the bottom of thy soul, that it be the first word from thy lips and to thy ears. When thou liest down, fasten thine eye on it, that it be the last image thou seest before the temporary death of sleep engulfs thee. If thou persistest, at length the secret light contained in its four letters will overflow thee and a spark of the Divine Essence will radiate through thy soul and inflame it.

Cerno Bokar¹

Chapter 4

Society: Of the life of signs within African societies

African history and anthropology confirm the irrelevance of western distinctions between social, political and religious notions and institutions.² Anyone still in doubt about the importance of writing and text in the playout of politics, economics and religion in society should read Austen & Headrick (1980). These two account for the resistance of Africa to writing with two practical considerations. Alphabetization does not necessarily confer greater power in difficult times. Yet, during the 18th and 19th centuries, West Africa acquired several systems of writing which enabled her, together with Arabic (there since the 8th century), to find a place in international economic and political systems. These acquisitions were associated with imported revealed reli-

¹Advice his mother gave Cierno Bokar Saliff Tall, named the Wise Man of Bandiagara, a Sufi mystic whose life has been told by his disciple A. Hampaté Bâ. In Arabic, the name Allâh consists of four written letters: /alif/, /lam/, /lam/ and /hâ/, which underpin the esoteric teaching of Sufism.

²The review *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* (1982, XXII 3/4, nos 87-88) revisits the theme of the classic *African Political Systems* (1940), under the title "Systèmes étatiques africains." Alexandre remarks: "interdisciplinary barriers no longer have much sense (231)," particularly for history and anthropology.

gions, and were accompanied by economic, political and cultural mutation. Alphabetization may give direct access to new technologies.³ An examination of the relation of writing to this field enables us to observe the function of writing, "a system of signs within social life", in Africa and the rest of the world. That was precisely the objective Saussure assigned to semiotics. One knows the counseling role of marabouts (cleric or teacher) and diviners in West Africa, the power wielded by pressure groups, e.g. constituted religions, churches like Kimbanguism in Zaire or Muslim brotherhoods like the Murids, a state within the state in Senegal, etc. The part played by religious movements in elections, political decision-making, economic planning is public. Clerical power in politics is real, discreet and unverifiable. This is no monopoly of Africa. Reading of signs in political matters requires scientific rigor and creative power. These, together, delineate the texture of our existence, the articulation of our political, economic, religious and cultural references. When King Njoya created a secret language and writing system, his aim was to convey to his civil and military chiefs confidential instructions that were to be hidden from German administrators and missionaries (Dugast: 1950). The Kimbanguists' secret code, named Kidouma (Ash: 1983), was a discreet communication tool during the conflicts with missionaries and persecutions by Belgian administrators. Other cases of ad hoc writing systems are innumerable. The runaway slaves in Brazil used an 'ajami to write instructions on bits of paper for fellow members of their resistance movement. The masters thought they were children's graffiti. *Oberi okaime* served similar purposes against the British in southeastern Nigeria towards 1930.

Larger African political entities than the Bamum kingdom created or borrowed or imitated writing systems to meet the needs of contact with the outside world. However, the birth of writing does not always accompany and sanction the emergence of state structures, of capital formation or even sedentarization. Halliday (1990) conjures up certain age-old ways of thinking when he reexamines the connection between sedentarization and the emergence of writing, with all the authority of a linguist of renown:

³Ali Hamadachi & Daniel Martin, in *Théorie et pratique de l'alphabétisation*, analyze the various methods of alphabetization. One of these at least could pay off. One reads, in Annex 34 (199), under a picture of a yoked plough with ploughman, this text in Bambara: "Fifth lesson, eighth sequence of the Malian manual in Bamana, eclectic method (decomposition et recomposition)". The starting point is global, the key phrase "Bakari be bulukuli la" (Bakari is ploughing) being supplied by the same lesson. From the key words of that phrase one can extract the syllables then the letters to compose other syllables giving other words. DNAFLA, Bamako, Mali.

With settlement, the shift from hunting and gathering to pastoral and agricultural practices, there developed a new semiotic mode, namely writing; but the importance of writing lies in the grammar that develops along with it. This is a grammar in which *things* are construed as commodities; they take on value, and can be itemized and drawn up in lists. This work is done by the nominal group: nouns are measured into quantities, they have assigned qualities along various scales, and organized into taxonomies of classes and sub-classes. It is also a grammar in which social relations are transformed into institutions. But the main source of *abstract* meaning seems to shift from the interpersonal towards the ideational — from, for example, the rights and duties of kinship to generalizations about the phenomena of experience, and within the ideational, from processes towards things. This shift into settlement semantics is of course masterminded by the grammar; but it is also constituted iconically by the shift into the written medium, whereby discourse itself becomes a thing and the abstractions — the written symbols and their arrangements — are transformations of processes into things. It is important to stress, however, that writing is not a cause; we are not talking about causal relationships but about realizational ones, whereby in the impacting between the material processes and the processes of human consciousness. The grammar construes the reality of a settled agricultural existence, in which activities lead to products, and the space-time flux of experience is overlaid by constructions of objects having fixed location in space. Overlaid, but not obliterated: the pre-settlement grammar is still there in the language — but it is no longer the predominant mode of meaning (8-9).

For Derrida, writing emerged from the need to write proper names. In his own psychosociological and culturalist way, Goody prophesies that the complexification of man's intellect and of the socio-economic process followed on the adoption and generalization of writing. Africa reveals political structures with and without writing, and small village communities with writing, regulated by councils, secret societies, or even democratically. Failing possible verification, the matter remains open, but African facts will have to be taken into account.⁴ There probably have been pre-Islamic systems of writing used in the Savanna empires. Explorers have noticed types of relations to speech, power, and music that had surprised them. Drums and various instruments preceded a royal retinue, as Camara Laye recalls in *Le Regard du Roi*. The enormous size of royal drums, as in Fouta Djallon, is enough to demonstrate

⁴For an appreciation of his theory, Goody's best work in French seems to us to be his *La Logique de l'écriture, aux origines des sociétés humaines* (1986. Paris: Armand Colin). It is noteworthy that he cites no author's name (Dalby for instance) and that his bibliography does not contain a single African name. With our different assumptions and definitions of writing, we could only diverge from him in our conclusions.

their importance. These instruments of command and prestige also served to summon, to communicate decisions and news. Forest and Savanna differ in the way they propagate sound. Sometimes gong was preferred to drum. Distance mattered, but tempered by terrain and the lie of villages. Thus sound travels easily over water and reverberates on tree-lined banks all along the meandering courses of rivers. Echo is used in mountains. In forest, polyphonic chanting in the clearings welds the group together and overtree canopy communication allows inter-group intercourse. African examples of peoples with writing do not support the common view that it is associated with agriculture, and even less with a state or capitalist structure.

Researchers in Anglophone countries are not well-informed about work in Francophone countries, and vice-versa. The rationalizations of the ones rarely benefit the others. Bamgbose (1991) proves that he knows the Anglophone situation best and avoids the words "script" and "writing". He is not aware of Scribner & Cole's work (1981) on literacy in Vai country, so that he totally ignores the question of "modern" alphabetization in that African language. Ethnological and linguistic discourse on African writing systems has privileged individual rather than collective and sudden rather than progressive creation. One may see two reasons in this, to do with the researchers' Eurocentrism rather than with historical reality or simply probability. The "inventor" or "discoverer" are concepts ideologically and historically more familiar and widespread in Europe than in Africa. Most of the inventors mentioned by Dalby (1986) for West and East Africa yet recognize a debt to pre-existing symbolic systems, and to some external influence. All inscribe their personal contribution, real or fictitious, enhancing it to a greater or lesser degree in a movement that they have at best contributed to channel, transform, and spread. The Western insistence on a sudden emergence of hieroglyphic writing is now countered by recent archeological discoveries in Nubia. Sudden, individually inspired inventions—incidentally contradicting the psychocultural pattern usually attributed to Africans, said to be "social beings"—would be more in the main a feature of the European rather than the African semiosis. An Africa "without writing", in which the emergence *ex nihilo*, through an individual brain wave, of a major cultural fact is seen as a one-off deviation, leaves unscathed the western observer's references, his usual denial of the possibility of development and progress in Africa. Let us remember too that the "inventor" of a recent system, often a more or less westernized African intellectual, may simply have wanted to curry favor with his foreign counterparts. One might think it would have been straightforward to "insert" the "discovery" or "invention" of any system of writing in a long span of history and influences,

proven or yet to be tested. Even "revealed" scripts are inscribed in a local or contact continuum. The Mum script claimed to be revealed while it may have been inspired by the neighboring Arabic script of northern Fulfulde, or even (for its latest versions) by the Latin (not Gothic) alphabet of German missionaries, must surely have been the heir to a local symbolic tradition, since it rejects the consonantism of the first influence and, partially, the phonocentrism of the second, to constitute itself in full accordance with local graphicacy, pictographic at first and later syllabic. Moreover, granted that an individual's influence may at the outset have been decisive, the work of creating, simplifying, codifying, diffusing, writing and copying manuscripts can only have been collective, if closely supervised by individuals chosen by the monarch, some of whose names are recorded in history.

It seems to be abusive to attribute to King Njoya the exclusive merit of the innovation, in contempt of an undeniable major collegiate contribution. Pinnacled an individual of genius on a backcloth featuring a handful of prestigious individuals is indeed more germane to a Eurocentric than to an African vision of history.

The Dakar Center for Applied Linguistics (CLAD) was once about to publicize the results of a statistical inquiry according to which the Senegal of Senghor, apostle of Négritude and Francophony, was not a Francophone country. Rumor had it that budget cuts, repatriations and Africanization ensued, ushering in for a time a return to more orthodox views and methods. Indeed the academic issue was political. Our own inquiry in Dakar, Paris and Strasbourg in 1985 brought to light that the westernized African élite may have seen CLAD's "discovery" as a threat to its representativeness, legitimacy and power founded on its mastery of French. With the point and substance of the argument beyond the people's ken (political consequences remaining vague and indirect), there was much talk of the prestige of and need for the French language, whereas what was possibly meant was the preservation of the privileges of the westernized minority. The Whites claimed to be speaking in the name of the Blacks' interests, while the Blacks (westernized) explained, if need be in Wolof, that these Whites could not really understand the natives' interests. The political opposition (e.g. Cheikh Anta Diop and Sembène Ousmane) raised voices in protest and in favor of the Senegalese languages and indirectly of CLAD. Thus the real sociolinguistic analysis led to the strange bedfellowship of the Senegalese opposition and the younger "coopérants" linguists of CLAD, which was dismantled. All African intellectuals did not see in this crisis a political debate. Some, like Agbe-Cakpo (1980), thinking in sociolinguistic rather than in polemical ideological terms, came out against the present role played by world languages in Africa, characterized as

instruments of imperialistic capitalism, and in favor of giving back to the people its right to speak in its own language. At the same time, none seemed to have thought of the possibility of regional, national or international promotions for their own scripts or for Arabic. As for CLAD, its ultimate objective was not the teaching of African languages and the rejection of French. Simply, it would be a good thing to know something about its learners' linguistic background, to improve the teaching, through the creation of specific methods for French as a second language.

When Dalby compares Mum and ancient Egyptian scripts and suggests an explanation for their appearance, he relies on Mesopotamian anteriority (debatable), spontaneous generation of Egyptian hieroglyphs (recently rejected) and advances a parallel that is scientifically unsustainable. Yet he has an intuition of a more probable but even more risky truth when he asserts in 1986 in his preface:

In Njoya's case, testimony has been preserved of the stages and evolution of his system; but in the case of Egyptian, the different stages of development seem to have been incorporated in the original writing...There is no proof of a long evolution between these stages, and one may suppose that this is a script that arrested its cumulative evolution on the threshold of a purely alphabetic system.

So far as Mum is concerned, in its most recent phase it has preserved the possibility of reusing all the signs of its earlier phases. Simplifying, an optional evolution is a better way to enrichment than a reduction to a phoneticism that stops at the syllable. Ajayi (1970) explains how Yoruba received a system of writing, a variant of Boehmer's system, better known as the Romanists' system [sic] of phonetic notation. He insists on the historical conditions rather than on the linguistic and graphic choices of the Yoruba neo-alphabet. Whoever knows Yoruba, a tone language most difficult to acquire by speakers of a Romance language, is at a loss to understand this half-hearted attempt to represent Yoruba with this European alphabet. Reading a Yoruba newspaper is always an occasion for errors and pleasantries. Yet it must be recognized that there is enough literature and journalism in Yoruba to justify a Yoruba alphabet no less or no more efficient than the Latin one is for our "modern" languages.

African academics contend that imported colonial languages like English or French continue to serve the interests of linguistic imperialism, perpetuating colonialism, capitalism and underdevelopment and neglecting the people, the principal agent of development, to the advantage of a minority of officials and adventurers. The people must have the power to express itself, to play its part in the nationalist

movement and structures. Not until it has, will Africa achieve linguistic independence and begin to confront economic reality from its own perspectives and through its own means and solutions. The evolution of African languages is proceeding normally, but since the beginning of colonialization with the additional burden of having to integrate and express imported ways of thinking, feeling and acting and the techniques that go with them (Agbe-Cakpo : 1980). The uses, maintenance and repair of bicycles, sewing machines, oil-presses, electricity generators, automobiles, aircraft and a thousand other contraptions can easily be explained in African languages or pidgins. The modalities of loan, metaphor, derivation and composition are known and can be exploited in a logic that is their own.

The policy of teaching African languages, at present little favored by governments and masses alike, was very early advocated as one means of helping Africa develop. Cust (1883) noted increasing awareness of African languages in his time and tried to classify them: Semitic, Hamitic, Nubian-Fulfulde, Negro (sic), Bantu, Hottentot, Bushman (56). He devotes a whole chapter to writing in Africa. His point of view is a trifle antiquated, but his discourse is representative of a tendency that was fairly widespread at the beginning of colonization but disappeared with effective occupation. It is notable that the expression "Modern Languages" did not exist then in the sense that it has today, but was opposed to the concept of "dead languages", which was highly favored. In some parts the modern language teacher is still his eminent colleague the classics man's poor relation. However that may be, universities in Africa have lately been transferring the teaching of African languages from Linguistics departments to Modern Languages departments, leaving the former to get on with their research. The exclusive research function thus assigned to "Linguistics" carries with it the onus of scientific description, with the requisite objectivity and distance, while conversely the actual teaching of African languages in a "modern" framework inevitably brings to the fore a type of learner actor who will prepare, even advocate, their return to the active sociopolitical fold, to the probably not very far ahead detriment of the imported colonial languages.

Werner (1925) had spoken little of writings, although many were already known. She gives a Fulfulde text in International Phonetic Alphabet (113-5). In his Introductory Note, Daniel Jones,⁵ one of the inventors of the IPA, clears up the prevailing language policy with re-

⁵D. Jones, P. Passy, D. Westermann & I.C. Ward may have jointly worked on the production of a memorandum titled *Practical Orthography of African Languages*, International Institute of African Languages and Cultures, 1930.

gard to the respective functions of phonetics and orthography. He cites the 1912 official circular n°797, the *Memorandum on the Teaching of Modern Languages*, and he quotes Werner:

The explanation of the principles of sound-production and the comparison of the sounds used in different languages are greatly facilitated by the adoption of a scheme of special symbols each of which represents one and only one sound. Many teachers go further than this, and use whole texts and books written in a phonetic script. It might seem superfluous to point out that the proper use of a phonetic script is to give training in audition and systematic practice in the reproduction of the new sounds and their combinations, while postponing for a while the further difficulty of a new and inconsistent orthography. (vi)

Then Jones adds:

Up-to-date methods have unfortunately not yet been introduced to any large extent into the teaching of African languages. There are various reasons for this. First, most of the present teachers of African languages have had little or no opportunity of studying modern methods of teaching, and they have no phonetic training. In the second place, the pronunciation of most African languages has never been accurately analyzed, because it is in most cases impossible to give the students directions how to form the speech-sounds. Thirdly, the current orthographies of such African languages as have been written are in most cases atrocious misrepresentations of the correct pronunciation; they effectually succeed in perpetuating our mispronunciations by concealing the difficulties (vii).

Yet the majority of linguists who propose new orthographies tend to see in phonetic and phonological transcription a type of writing. Let us mention in passing that it was Werner who put forward the idea that *Æsop*, the Greek fabulist, was of African origin. She argued, inter alia, that *Æsop* and *Æthiop* sounded alike and that his known portrait shows a small dark-skinned man (an *Æthiops*). In 1966, Verberke, in the *Revue internationale de Pédagogie*, stated the problem of vehicular languages in Black Africa and advocated their teaching at primary level to enable children to learn to read in them and so master other processes. He did not quite know when best to introduce foreign languages, but recommended they be studied early and jointly with the mother tongue. He exposes the reasons the mother tongue should continue to play a didactic role in the primary cycle. Along the same line, he takes up the theme of functional literacy, but without referring to the UNESCO Tehran meeting that had defined it the year before. A critical survey of the Zaire example yields a quantity of reflections useful for those who have to take informed decisions on the productiv-

ity of various options, on language teaching in Africa and on national language policies. Kokora (1989) recalls that any language policy must address three factors: corpus, status, and economy. The first requires a terminology adapted to actual needs, a script and an orthography. The second takes account of the relations between languages and cultures: it is essentially political. The third evaluates the costs of applying the recommendations of the other two. Kokora also mentions Pike's well-known determination (he was a missionary and a linguist) to ensure to every African of whatever tongue access to the Old and New Testaments. Citing Weinstein, he claims that the 1953 UNESCO report was nothing more than a lay version of the Protestant ideal in language policy. The westernized Africans of UNESCO and the Protestant missionaries in Africa must have met somewhere for a service of Thanksgiving in honor of the alphabet called Latin.

Language policy and choice of a writing are truly matters of great complexity in Africa, which may explain the confusion, in the face of which it may be worth questioning other areas with similar experiences. Morison (1972) strives to show, over six centuries for Greece, how tugging between authority and liberty influenced the development of the Greco-Latin script. He describes rustic writing and alludes to North Africa (65-7). We will readily grant that the experiment took a long time, whereas Africa hasn't much to spare.

In 1977, Houis & Bole Richard are still pleading for the integration of African languages in all educational policies, a matter omitted by UNESCO, whose 1962 Report, for instance, had appeared to be supremely ignorant of any pre-or postcolonial system of education. This Report had implicitly recommended westernization (as against the modernization of African values), through channeling of energies and resources into more functional, welfare-and-development-oriented education, while lip-stressing the imperious need for its rooting in local history and culture as well, words that were followed by the minutest possible effects. Three years later (1965), the UNESCO Report seemed to be more realistic, at least in its intentions. Out of this reunion came the definition of functional literacy. There was talk of an educational and professional improvement program that would allow rapid increase in individual and community productivity. It was one of the most important and exhaustive meetings ever on the subject of literacy. The Report recommended that educational material be geared to national and regional conditions and to the immediate concrete needs of different social groups of learners. From 1965 to 1971, there was no significant change in African language policies.

In 1971, 1973 and 1976, UNESCO devoted three international consultations to literacy policies in developing countries, which ended

with recommendations to governments: in 1971, long after a *motion de principe* (1953), it recommended the use of African languages in education and as vehicles for general knowledge. It worked out a detailed ten-year stocktaking and methods investigation plan. As for writing, the Report was founded entirely on the colonial legacy. One text was the exception: Galaal on the unique and exemplary Somali experiment. Herbstein (1991) was to retrace its history, which he compares to a war. In 1960 the independent Somali Republic was established, with three official languages, Arabic, Italian, English, and two scripts — some say three, the Latin alphabet differing considerably in the last two: reading English does not help to read Italian in the same script and vice versa. A solution had long been sought and a Somali had given his name to a new script (Osmaniya). Some Somali who were unaware of any problems had for centuries communicated in Arabic or the local 'ajami script; but they did not belong to the social class in power. A dictator, Siad Barre, cut the knot and imposed over the whole territory the alphabet Andrzejewski and Galaal had produced with the help of the London School of Oriental and African Studies and Professor Firth. Sole exception to their recommendations: their <ch> became <x>. The Somali had three months to adopt a new script in all their transactions. Severe sanctions were applied, some people lost their job and one man spent five years in jail. An army of 30,000 teachers declared war on illiteracy and those literates who were refusing the new script. Andrzejewski became a national hero when he wrote 150 poems that had been recited for over a century without ever being written. The written poetry, read in the streets, on the radio, in competitions, contributed to popularizing the script. Mathematics and physics were taught in Somali language and script. The dictionary had 40,000 entries. New words were incessantly created. The elaboration of this script was the business of many Somali, but without Andrzejewski, "Goosh" as the Somali called him, and the unopposable power of the head of state, multilingualism and multiscriptism, rife in most African countries, would continue to paralyze Somalia. Adam's study (1968) describes the process. After taking stock of the proposed scripts: Arabic, "national" scripts, Latin and others, two commissions (1961 and 1965) with a handful of local inventors (whose reasons are described) led to political decisions (referenda, decrees, parliamentary resolutions) of possibly exemplary interest. Mezei's text (1989) is worth reading for comparison and even contrast. Once it had been removed, a sudden form of liberalism that baffled the people replaced Siad Barre's iron fist and led to the anarchy the world has since been able to observe.

In 1973, UNESCO produced a small text of pragmatic inspiration that aimed at informing writers of textbooks meant for adult literacy

campaigns in developing countries. Its model character probably precluded it from venturing advice at the local level. Finally, in 1976, UNESCO assembled in Lagos the Education ministers of all member states. Sixteen years after the Independences, it had become clear that *L'Afrique Noire est mal partie* (Dumont: 1962) and that the educational system bequeathed to Africa by colonization had created for her more problems than it could hope to solve. A new look at education, at the problems created by the post-colonial situation and a redefinition of priorities could no longer be shelved. The final text duly recommended decolonization and nationalization of the educational systems with the view to better adapting them to the needs of peoples. This was what Attouman (1987) had to report apropos the work of experts on the standardization and provision of a new orthography for Hausa. In January 1980, indeed, international experts had met at CELHTO, in Niamey, for the harmonization of the orthographies of Hausa, and the final report had been promoted to the status of Official Decree (n° 01 of March 15, 1981), co-signed by six ministers. This new orthography was to have replaced the one known under the name "UNESCO Bamako Orthography 1966". Hausa is spoken and written in Niger and Nigeria. The authors underlined the progress caused by this orthography compared with the preceding one, dubbed "standard", which, however, had come back, a regrettable regression. Attouman pointed out that in Hausa teaching in Nigeria the grammars, deviating from "Standard", had introduced diacritic signs for vowel stress and tones, while the dictionaries had been left alone. So-called standard Hausa is based on a Hausa idiom, *kananci*, but its model is the style of the newspaper *Gaskya ta fi kwabo*, a Nigerian sheet, therefore influenced by English, whereas if it had been *Nigérien*, it would have been infiltrated by French, phonologically and graphically. Attouman goes on to state the problems posed by the standardization of *Nigérien* languages as necessary preliminaries to harmonization. According to him, the meeting of January 1980 did not even question the inconsistencies of the Nigerian and *Nigérien* orthographies but went slap-bang into their unification. His text is typical of westernized linguistic minds when they look into the political and economic problems of harmonizing the orthographies of a country, region or group of languages, whether related or not. Often the linguist, ontologically a phonocentrist, ignores two realities of writing and reading which are beyond the pale of his descriptive and analytical frameworks: the grammaticality of a sentence, context being excluded. He fails to understand the contribution to communication of the contextual situation. He refuses to see the radical difference that exists in all languages between written and oral communication. In its formal aspect writing may be very different from the phonetic tran-

scription of speech, to which linguists remain attached. An efficient script has little to learn from the phonology of the language. Its quality depends first on its economy then on its autonomy from the phonological system. How sterile that polemic over the variants of the Latin alphabet apropos a language, Hausa, which had acquired centuries ago a script derived from Arabic, a script nowhere mentioned by all those westernized African experts who have their own ways of resurrecting the methods of the colonial assimilation policy. They are all for economic development taking the path of westernization, not of modernization of African cultural values and in particular of African writings (Taylor: 1928; Zima: 1974; Bamgbose: 1983).

Nobody contests the need to unify graphic systems, but nobody will agree on choices and methods of application. Ansre (1969) analyses the role of Ghanaian languages in the educational system. Criticizing the weakness of their teaching, he insists on the need for a coherent language policy and suggests a linguistic and educational policy better adapted to Ghanaian realities. In 1969, to propose a national policy for the teaching of African languages (including teaching *in* local languages) was to show singular courage. Ansre ignores, willfully or no, the problematic of choice of script or scripts. Twenty years later, another example (Ali: 1989) of language policy, that of Ethiopia, shows the complexity of decision-making in Africa. Ali evokes the history of the various official, unofficial and teaching languages, always at the mercy of foreign occupations and local dominations. He dwells on the role of Amharic and of the script he names "Ethiopian" instead of "Amharic". He explains that newspapers and textbooks are printed with the help of the Amharic syllabary for all languages spoken in Ethiopia (Amharic, Oromo, Wolayta, Tigre, Tigrinya and Somali). He briefly demonstrates the inability of the Amharic script to transcribe the sounds of the other languages and makes this the cause of relapse into illiteracy after schooling of speakers of non-Kushitic languages. The consequences of the use of Amharic script are innumerable in all sectors of Ethiopian society: economic, political, military, cultural, all dominated by those the system favors, the Amhara. Hence real democracy and harmonious development of all regions are impossible.

Ethiopia offers a good example of reactions to a centralist policy (Amhara) that imposes a single graphic system on a whole country using different languages, some of which are not related. Such reactions would seem to be all the more violent wherever the imposed script belongs to a political, religious or economic majority or dominant group. A new, totally foreign script may in these circumstances be better received, even if it is linked with colonization or religious proselytism. Resting on phonetics, a little culturalized technique, pointing towards

the world of experienced technology using similar systems, a new script would seem to be irresistible, except that it may not be sufficiently proof against political and ethnic connotations and the revival of old antagonisms. Can one imagine Nigeria adopting the northern Fulani-Hausa 'ajami and giving up the Latinate alphabets that have served to write most of its 200 languages? This would mean a major cultural revolution that nobody would accept. Meanwhile the Fulani-Hausa use three scripts: Arabic, 'ajami and Latin, which does not seem to worry them. Everywhere the homogenization of scripts, whichever is chosen, would probably be felt as a diktat of the central power and an outrage to cultural tradition and the right to be different. Adamolekun (1991), a Nigerian administrator and political scientist, writes:

Three other words that can cause confusion are ethnicity, language, and religion. There is no agreement on the number of ethnic groups in the country; although 250 is the most widely used figure. A few people argue that there are as many as 500 groups. In practice, people usually distinguish among the three major ethnic groups (Hausa-Fulani, Igbos, and Yorubas) and "minority" ethnic groups of unspecified number. Flowing from this is a distinction between the languages of the three major ethnic groups (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba) and the languages or dialects of the minority ethnic groups. Although English has been maintained as the country's official language, the constitutions of 1979 and 1989 provide for the development and diffusion of three major indigenous languages. Some minority leaders have been critical of this constitutional provision, but language has not emerged as a major problem in managing Nigeria's federal system. It would appear that the co-existence of the three dominant languages has benefitted from the existence of a "foreign" official language. The recent decision of the federal government to approve twenty-seven languages for "mother-tongue" education, that is, the use of these languages for instruction during the first three years of primary education, further underscores the emphasis on accommodation and coexistence in matters relating to language. This contrasts markedly with inter-ethnic relations, which are most often conflictual and tend to occupy center stage during periods of stress and strain in the management of the federal system (7, 9)...The approval of twenty-seven local languages is largely theoretical because at present only nine are fully orthographed (7).

The disparity pointed out between interlinguistic and interethnic relations may be explained by differences in their nature. The former are usually individual and socio-economic on a daily basis, the latter more political and power-related. One of the Nigerian's remarkable qualities is his faculty to switch midway from one language to another. Two ready languages are normal, but ability to communicate in six or seven is

not rare. With an area a little more than twice that of California, Nigeria has a population nearly four times greater. Soldiers, civil servants and traders normally live and work a good deal of time outside their places of origin, so that most children may come to communicate in different languages with their parents, their grandparents, their minders, their play- and schoolmates. Monolingualism also exists, African in villages, English in residential districts such as Ikoyi in Lagos, but it is rare. Another pleasant and sometimes baffling quality of Nigerian speech is, often in one conversation, sudden switching from one register to another (for instance, from King's English to pidgin).

The 1989 constitution stipulates in Section 19 (4): "The government must promote the teaching of indigenous languages in all the primary and secondary school institutions of Nigeria". On August 27, 1991, President Babangida announced the creation of 9 new states and 47 other "local governments", but in fact 89 were created, making a total of 589, with 30 federal states. Such a political decision would seem to have been directed towards local aspirations rather than national unity, but in fact it reinforces the power of the center (divide and rule). Thus Nigeria appears to have chosen a strongly federal overarching political system, a compromise between Jacobin and Girondin, French and British type options, an evolution on Maastricht lines, i.e. promoting cooperation between non-hierarchized states and regions, while respecting their diversity and values. Such a project should appear dangerous only to those who fear a future different from the past. In the same spirit, the cohabitation of many historic or recent systems of writing may be looked forward to. English could remain the national language, with the Latin alphabet, and each state would choose, besides English, the language or languages in use within its administrative limits, with regionally homogenized writings. The computer should be able to provide the necessary conversions.

It may seem that the considerable number of scripts in which African languages have been written contributes an obstacle in the way to an efficient and economically viable literacy. Apropos literacies, it cannot be denied that they often take on the style of crusades against primitivism and absence of culture. Freire (1984) points out the danger of antagonizing target populations and producing rejection symptoms among them. He warns those who confuse illiteracy with lack of culture. In the same review, Guerra pleads for respect of cultural identity and integration into the educational process of the values of local cultures. This would imply, wherever a local writing preceded the Latin alphabet, its conservation, even at the price of its modernization (always better than a brutal substitution), as in the case of Mum in

Cameroon. Guerra invokes pedagogical, psychological, economic and political reasons.

Instead of perpetuating histories of that mythical continuum of "writing", it might be useful to study the development of local writings and try to arrive at a synthesis. History is made daily and in the field. Vast laboratory syntheses, put together on the basis of doubly partial information, may be useful and necessary, but they would gain in accuracy if, like certain anthropology, they took on board as much ethnology as possible. Then at least the political and psychological problematics of decision-making could be informed and enlightened (Mahmoud: 1979; Arrivé: 1994), be the subject the reform or the creation of writings. Fabian (1986) has defined the relation of languages to colonial power. He begins by questioning the conditions in which the colonial authority took possession of the Belgian Congo. Right from the beginning appears the urgent need to establish communication with the people, i.e. unilateral discourse, the use and control of means of communication being indispensable for the plantation, functioning and maintenance of economic, military and ideological-religious power. Fabian studies the diffusion of Swahili from the East Coast towards Central Africa and shows the accompanying transformations of the colonial regime, including those of colonial policy towards Swahili. Using various sources and viewpoints like literacy theory and socio-linguistics, he analyzes different types of discourse, in which he finds deeply embedded stereotypes affecting our attitudes towards language and communication (the jacket of the book). A Belgian officer, Becker, who published *La Vie en Afrique* in 1887, supplies him with much of the information contained in his introduction. Becker combines names on the colonial map with lists of local words and concepts to show that what matters is not so much the exploration and study as the *in-scription* of the environment and culture of the colonized in the colonizer's world. The power to name, describe and classify tends to scientifically justify the colonial undertaking. Constituting vocabularies, as was widespread in Africa, has little scientific value but opens up a practice of control relations. Putting these lists into writing reduced the oral languages to a stilted verifiable text. Towards 1880, there had been two forms of Swahili literacy: in Arabic, the more ancient, and in the Latin alphabet. This situation of digraphia⁶ was to be exploited by the colonizers (25). In this

⁶The classic work on Swahili remains W.H. Whiteley's *Swahili: The Rise of a National Language* (re-edited in 1993, Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co.). The phenomenon of digraphia (sometimes even multigraphia) has generally been ignored or very little studied. Gelb (1973) says: "Cases where a language is at the same time expressed with the help of different writings are rare and have little interest (227)" and chooses not to take an interest in them. S. Grivelet (private communication, 1993) is presently studying di-

sense, colonial linguistic planning began before colonization. Becker chooses to write Swahili in Latin characters, claiming them simpler than the Arabic used by English missionaries in their work of evangelization. For Becker, teaching Africans to write Swahili is a necessary stage in their future Europeanization. Thus the orthography of Swahili is to be decided in terms of its use by speakers of European languages. The primary aim was to appropriate Swahili rather than scientifically standardize and rationalize the relations between the oral and the written. Becker points out that he is modifying such and such orthography, notably that created by the English. A hierarchy is established, starting at the bottom with spoken Swahili, then the Arabic and Latin scripts and at the top Swahili blended with a French orthography.

The orthography of ethnic names in the Belgian Congo was unified by government decision in Brussels. A nomenclature of the main tribes and languages of the Belgian Congo follow the lexicon. One of the rare advantages of a strong political power is that it is able to impose such decisions without wasting time on arguments for different interests. Much later, a policy of "authenticity" replaced colonization and the Zairese gave themselves Zairese names. The world had to get used to naming Lumumbashi and Kinshasa cities of the former Belgian Congo. Bokamba (1976) points out the contradiction between the choice of French as the official language and the philosophy of authenticity advocated by Zaire. On the other hand, he praises the original soundness of this philosophy, its *raison d'être* and the choice of national languages (Swahili and Lingala) side by side with the official language. Shortly after, Bokamba & Tlou (1977) consider the consequences of the language policies of African states in education. Taking the examples of Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda and Zaire, they conclude that the present policies constitute the major obstacle to the development of education in Africa. In presenting, with great lucidity, the advantages and disadvantages of colonial languages and analyzing the problems of choice of national languages, the two authors neverthe-

graphia in Mongolia. He distinguishes between diachronic or sequential digraphia (where a system seeks to supplant another) and synchronic or concurrent digraphia, where coexisting writings (as we have reported for Fulfulde and Hausa) may fulfill perfectly watertight functions (Arabic: religion; imported script: administration and modernity; adapted Arabic script or 'ajami: everyday use for correspondence, bills, I.O.U.s). Each is recognized as useful and prestige-bearing in its own area but unfit for any other use. Exclusively linguistic reflection on writing is incapable of taking account of these details of use, regarded as being outside its field. Semiotics, and textual semiotics, should integrate them in its research and reflective sphere. The error is to regard the linguist's deliberate ignorance or limited perspective as proof of the non-existence of the phenomenon.

less look like timid reformers in the face of the options proposed by Bot-Ba-Njock (1974), who saw in African languages a powerful factor of development, deploring their abandonment and the systematic teaching of Indo-European languages, in which he saw one of the causes of the observed retarded development of children and low productivity of schools in Cameroon. Logically pursuing his argument, he proposed a new method of transcribing African languages. These questions are debated on a background of rising nationalism and declining cultural identity rivalries, sometimes fanned by colonization. Fishman (1972) had stated the problem of the relation between language and nationalism, but strictly from his point of view as a sociolinguist. Godart (1990) has taken up the more general approach, which consists of posing the problem not only in terms of linguistic unification, but also from the wider point of view of the power of the written word in the dominant language. In a historical perspective, Gregersen (1977), beyond a study of the systems of writing (174-97), offers a survey of all the key questions (200-9) facing linguistic and political authorities in Africa in the matter of their languages.

Sometimes, politics may step aside or encourage private initiative. Bhola (1989) reports on a private local literacy program in Zimbabwe, aiming at eliminating the significant gap existing between Blacks and Whites in former Rhodesia. If one had any doubts about the impact of literacy programs on numerous aspects of society, here was convincing evidence of its widespread dimensions. Indeed, the program had already modified behaviors hardly suspected of having anything to do with literacy: family budgets to fulfill the need of surpluses, rational realistic management of small and medium businesses, distance correspondence and consequent emergence of horizontal and vertical social mobility, promotion of women's and children's rights, tightening of family links, acceptance of administrators, hitherto felt to be distant and oppressive, enlightened exercise of citizenship. Smith (1978) corroborates Bhola's study.

Government may also substitute politicized institutions for private lay or missionary establishments, or for those bequeathed by colonization. Hanry (1970), who was in Guinea (Konakry) after independence and taught there in conditions prefiguring those which were to prevail in many African countries a few years later, runs through the process, mentioning among the reasons why adolescents were disastrously uninformed in sexual matters the illiteracy of parents and their lack of interest in the intellectual and moral education of their children. Until independence, this education was carried out by koranic, missionary and lay schools, as well as by special initiatory associations for the advancement of moral values. After 1960, it was taken over mainly by

the Parti Démocratique de Guinée and the youth movement Jeunesse du Rassemblement Démocratique Africain, and by the lay schools, where political instruction was prominent at every level. For Muslims, the kuranic schools were still there discretely in the bush, defying the laicization and politicization of all schools in cities and important villages.

Their conservative values, including their two scripts, constituted the backbones of their resistance. In the debate on complex forms of rationality and culture, claimed to be bound with and conditioned by the emergence and intensive use of writing, Hountondji is there to show the limits of this kind of thinking. At the same time he points out the African authorities' distrust and repressive attitude towards writing, a potential instrument of liberation. Thus typewriters, duplicators, photocopiers, computers and printers have until recently been subjected to police supervision, like in former Eastern Europe. It can be very enlightening, for a reader concerned with the general preconceptions underlying political decision-making on literacy and the teaching of African and imported languages, to gain insight, through his own discourse, into an African intellectual's perception of the relation to writing. Hountondji (1990) involuntarily lifts the veil over some of the articulations and structures of that African "text" which conditions politics, economics, culture and religion, in the heart of which we see the relation to writing. He gives us a bird's-eye view of the whole discursive area of the African philosophical essay. Starting with his own definition: "I call African philosophy an ensemble of texts, precisely the texts written by Africans and described by the authors themselves as philosophical", Hountondji explains

that in its confining itself to written works, the ongoing inventory seems an arbitrary and, in some aspects, an unacceptable reduction. It seems to exclude that form of research which, far from being secondary or inessential, is on the contrary the most ancient (original) form: the living dialogue, discussion, what in Africa is called palaver, and in Plato's Greece, dialectics.

On this point either, I would not like to wring from the *Bilan*⁷ more than it says. It may be that writing is no more than the starveling trace of an infinitely richer and more complex search, whose original element would be orality. One may even accept that, in a sense, this is always the case, and that writing, very often, is only the partial, very limited transmission of oral discourse, the pale vestige of a living word expressing, there and then, the élan of the spirit. In this sense but in this

⁷...de la Recherche philosophique africaine, 1ère partie: 1900-1985, vol. I, A-M. Cotonou: Conseil Interafricain de Philosophie, 1987.

sense only, one must recognize that the explicit spills over indefinitely, that the passage from the one to the other is fraught with narrows and consequently that the body of philosophical writings cannot be regarded as the whole of real philosophical thought, even and especially if it is agreed at the onset to limit consideration to explicit, effectively articulated thought...[In any case] research on oral tradition still takes place in the medium of writing. Conducted by literates, by intellectuals armed with varying degrees of book knowledge, equipped with a pen and notebook..., this research aims at fixing, engraving, inscribing words and works in matter, for the sake of better conservation and transmission to future generations of words and works...Every kind of research today inevitably overflows into writing, even research on orality...

In the debate on African philosophy, much has been said about Socrates: again and again that he had never written anything, and that in spite of that he was today regarded by all as the father of philosophy. I answered once: without the writings of Plato and a few others, Socrates would not exist for us...in spite of his preference for phonocentrism...for the live word. However radical a critique may be, it cannot get round the fact that it has to use the paths of writing to make an appearance on the scene of critical theory, as an argument involving other arguments or denouncing existing practices, and aspiring to exert a lasting influence on minds far beyond the single instant of its verbal production (37).

Without writing, Socrates' ideas and logic, it is true, would not have borne his name, but they would have survived him, at least those potent ideas that make solid sense. They would survive transformed by all those who would have transmitted them from a generation to another, adapting them to their culture and enriching them.⁸ Hountondji seems to want to avoid the prime fact of the information he himself brings us: The fact that proves the possibility of philosophic discourse independently of the presence (or absence) of writing. Socrates precedes Plato in time, and we could say that the latter would have had little interesting to write without the former. A large part of contemporary writing is useless and cumbersome (newspapers, advertising, throw-away books). The mnemonic tool is useful only insofar as it enables widespread diffusion of thoughts, accumulation, criticism and extrapolation beyond the pale and into the remotest future. The essence of thought is not that of writing: they should not be confused. Hountondji goes on:

⁸How can we evaluate in an adult what he has kept of the words of all the teachers he has had? On the other hand, his daily actions are surely informed with all those distant ideas and logical articulations, but constantly restructured throughout his experience of living.

To say this has nothing to do with any contempt for orality, let alone any "fetishism of the alphabet". To say this is simply to recognize what is, and at the same time, with feet firmly planted in the present and eyes fixed on the future, over and above the interminable conflict of detractors and apologists of the African past, to point with prospective intent to one of the essential tasks of our generation, which is to promote, by all available means, the collective appropriation by our own societies of the international scientific heritage (38).

Nkrumah can therefore very well write, as he does in *Consciencism*: "What matters is not the paper but the thought". Hountondji returns to Goody's thesis on the influence of the writing process on the domestication and complexification of thought when he recalls "the intimate, dialectic (and not only external) relation between the act of writing and a certain type of rationality".

The powers that be in Africa are generally fearful of writing...It is the duty of African intellectuals to make their leaders understand that a non-police approach to writing is not only possible but necessary and urgent; that freedom of expression, in the widest sense, is a necessary condition of what they themselves say they are striving for: development; and that, if we are not to move backward into the 20th century, if the future is to be other than a simple repetition of the vices of the present, it is high time to begin the agonizing reappraisal, to stop once and for all valuing pretense, accrediting bogus solutions, and set about tackling the real problems (38).

Perceptions and definitions of these problems differ as much as the notions of urgency and priority. It may be argued that a westernized African intellectual is no better equipped than a Western one to discern, reason about, let alone solve these problems. Whoever pretends to do so must sink his vision, his sense of priorities, his mental categories, his reasoning in the grassroots, material and mental, of African culture, presently modified and acculturated by contacts with the West. Against the hackneyed thesis of necessary and logical modernization of what exists is pitted the pragmatist thesis of adaptation to local socio-economic realities, to technologies that are homeless or, which is the same thing, do not need to be traced back to their origins, but observed and accounted for in the ways they function, in a pragmatic perspective. We would wish that African philosophy constitute itself on the basis of textual relations, of the movements of thought manifested in texture, oral, drawn, written or other. In a text, as in the social fabric, the forms of thought-in-becoming are concrete. Masolo (1994) returns to the ongoing debate between several African philosophers on the importance of writing in their discipline: Bodurin draws attention to the backward-

ness caused by lack of writing on the Continent; Oruka sees in orality the characteristic of African cultures, and conceives the possibility of a real African oral philosophy, but nevertheless advocates its reduction to writing, while Wiredu thinks orality alone will do; Mudimbé dominates this debate when asserting that "it is not too late to identify, apply and problematize the epistemological frameworks and principles" that are proper to the Continent. Against Goody, he suggests that the growth of knowledge, conceived as the result of the intellectual pursuit of explanation and understanding, will never be sufficiently dependent on natural methods of conservation and communication, such as oral traditions (241-3), to which we would add writing in the semiotic sense, text in the anthropological sense, and the dynamic of their relations. In the end, Mudimbé (1988) reconfirms Sumner's studies ((1976-1982) on Ethiopian philosophy, and the cover of his book is illustrated with Kuba cloth which could be writing. One could not better delineate our own project: posing as a preliminary to the existence, in the Greek sense, of an African philosophy of knowledge the need for a theory of the relationships of signs and texts within social life.

However, it may seem highly hazardous to perpetuate an Africanist discourse of a kind that failed to open up forthwith paradigms useful for an understanding and explanation of the rest of mankind. Although one might say it would be a fair return for the West's "universalist" discourse which was nothing if not Eurocentric. When Vansina (1961) promotes orality to the status of a scientific object, he reinvents Africa, but his impact is not limited to the Continent. Likewise, the theory of writing and of text will emerge out of information derived from Africa; but having appropriated it, she will have to transcend it.

The teaching of writing may have positive and negative effects on the economy of African societies. Africa is experiencing an economic catastrophe that is drawing away from her westernized intellectuals, while at the same time people are fleeing the countryside and one type of economy for another that is creating a new lumpenproletariat and a manpower exodus towards more developed nations. Conversely, the inclusion of the African corpus in reflection on writing should lead to a revision, in the cultural order, of the changes in thinking the Japanese industrial and business management model brought about in the convergence hypothesis, according to which management had no cultural finality.

We shall confine ourselves to the areas of economics where literacy is included in reflections and models of action and influences the African economy. With a brief examination of the doctrines of List, Lenin and Keynes who still guide experts in the struggle for develop-

ment, we shall try to understand and hopefully to explain failures and successes, and finally the policies of governments and international organizations, within the defined framework of this essay.

Nobody should linger much longer over List's Darwinian doctrine, which read into the history of mankind an evolution in five stages: the savage, the pastoral, the more complex agricultural and agricultural-manufacturing, and finally the triumphant agricultural-industrial-commercial, the ideal reached by Great Britain in his time. In this perspective, writing would have happened with agriculture and its surpluses and capitalization which gave birth to state superstructures.⁹

Capital, yesterday condemned by Marx, was perceived as an unjust form of concentration of power, of illicit accumulation of property. Writing, in that perspective, was at the moment of analysis a tool of that power and a class privilege, therefore a tool for the exploitation and oppression of the people. It is generally agreed today that writing does not enable the emergence of that state, but that it allows its perennity and greater efficiency. Economic surplus and its management by a central political power necessarily preceded the emergence of a state structure, until the combination of these two factors led to a monopoly of violence in the name of an order judged necessary for economic advancement and the continued appropriation of the ever insufficient surplus. Writing thus facilitates the administration of the surplus. It is useful and indispensable for the state, but it does not produce it. Indeed, it often contests it.

There was once an African socialism founded on an African "primitive communism", a form of collectivist mutual assistance which did exist among some Savanna peoples, materialized in village communal barns and egalitarian modes of distribution of the common production. When generalized to the whole of Africa, it becomes a myth which reinforced that other myth, the concomitant emergence—raised to the status of a cause and effect relation—of writing, capital, and state structure in the Fertile Crescent (Egypt and Mesopotamia). Individualism is attested materially by the habitat and socio-economically by the production of food in private parcels in many areas, i.e. Dogon or Yoruba. The concept of property is attested in Africa, in politically little structured societies as well as in the more complex, by the practice of marks of appartenance and ownership among Bushmen and

⁹To do justice to List, it must be recalled that he was the inventor of the notion of economic progress bound with the creation of an ensemble of political entities freed from internal customs barriers (i.e. Zollverein, EEC, and NAFTA) but protected by external tariffs. Germany built itself on these two principles which Europe has adopted in its present phase and ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) would also like to follow.

Pygmies. On the other hand, with Islam came the Arabic script, often introduced by ambulant traders, although Islam condemned and forbade profit and usury. The westernized Nigerian literate may thus see in "corruption" an ancestral mode of redistributing wealth. The "commonalty" of African children who throw their possessions together to redistribute them equitably precedes that of adults who join in undeclared but extremely effective groups of mutual assistance, without other records than the memory of all. African realities question many principles underlying the economic logic that governs aid to development, or our conceptions of writing. Fottorino (1991), essentially following on Mamadou Dia's analyses, proposes the introduction of certain cultural values in development policies: incentives to accumulation (with recognition of local chiefs), individual remuneration (shareholding), application of useful local customs to regulate workplace relations, resort to formalism and ritual to reinforce contractual ties, encouraging existing group dynamics. Mahieu (1990) and his African team-workers use computerized models and software packages taking into account the largest possible number of measurable data from the given society.

Kabou (1991) "discovers" that Africa in the last thirty years has rejected all proposed paths of development, and advocates modernization of the existing culture. All these proposals for anchoring the future in the concrete present are invitations to take seriously into account, among other values, systems of signs, texts and their modes of production. The market economy is nowadays regarded, even by communists, as favoring progress, provided it is controlled and founded on developing means of production, within evolving socio-political structures, and rationally exploiting the environment, even if the individual who has not assimilated the new rules and can no longer achieve his personal objectives is rejected in the process. In this new context, electronic writing appears as the privilege of a minority group, contemptuous of the majority and its new form of illiteracy. Formerly, in times of overproduction or underconsumption, capital would look for new markets, hence imperialism. These exchange zones play the same part as the regulatory basins of large rivers. Manufactured products are sold: books, writing materials, reprographic machines, but more often used or out-of-fashion goods.

Keynes introduced the notion of economic forecasting and with it better control of currency and planning of the economy. Means of controlling the production of consumer goods and machine tools are created, so that volume of production can be anticipated. This, among other things, requires serious market and consumer research in the long term, in a development context, effective means to ensure rising standards of living

and acceptance of evolving technologies. Underdevelopment is regarded as a total phenomenon. Indeed the underdeveloping state cannot simultaneously modify geographical (climatic, hydrographic, agronomic), demographic and religious, social and political, psychological (consumer habits, cultural stereotypes) and medical (endemic, epidemic) structures. Contemporary African society may be perceived as dual, with two distinct, very different sectors: a traditional, rural, slowly evolving sector, devoted to two types of agriculture, subsistence and export-oriented. A variegated world: nomadic cattle-breeders in high grasslands, craftsmen to turn out the tools (axes, hoes, "hilaïres", machetes), the clothes and sandals, the pots and pans, the basketwork, part-time rainmakers and stoppers; imams, witch-doctors, "modern" postmen, gamekeepers, tourist trackers; village councilmen and shopkeepers. This sector corresponds to none of List's five stages, but rather overarches them in complete contempt of his theory of evolution. Let us add that some of its members are literate in Arabic or as members of a regulatory society protecting its own system of signs. Moreover, this sector is sensitive to several aspects of the second sector, so called *évolué* and westernized. This second sector uses universal techniques, is market-oriented, knows money, but is mainly composed of the administrative, military, policing and customs services. It includes some industries, mainly handicrafts, wholesale and semi-wholesale import and export trading companies (SCOA, CFAO, Niger Company). Members of this sector are city dwellers who maintain family and financial links with their villages and retire there as soon as they can, to build houses and buy land. The city African is often a peasant, and it has been said that there are no cities in Africa, the urban areas being conglomerations of villages inhabited by people of the same origin. The classic division in two watertight sectors impairs the general articulation of the economy and the mobility of productive factors. Those who know the roads of Africa often wonder how many trucks got through for every one they see lying in the ditch.

This economic dualism, which we are told is characteristic of developing countries, is not thought to be an all too decisive factor of underdevelopment. On the other hand, cultural and religious dualism has long existed between the coastal areas, estimated "useful", and the high hinterlands, between the Latin alphabet or its derivatives on the coast and the original Arabic Koranic script or its derived 'ajami inland in West or East Africa. To the western intellectualism of the capital seaport is theoretically opposed the millenarian highland tradition, Arab-Berber in West Africa and Arab-Nilotic in East Africa.

The western-type education implanted by colonization was essentially intended to form clerks in the colonial administration, the driv-

ing-belt of foreign power, and its go-between with the subject populations. As such, these staff had to be bilingual and bicultural. Senghor used to talk about *métissage culturel* (cultural cross-breeding), whereas what these people really did was to play up and profit by both parts, while at the same time trying to avoid as long as they could the snags of this ambiguous position. Chic suits and spectacles have cost some westernized Africans their life.

The marks of this interpenetration of two economic zones are branded on the urban landscape, and novelists like Ferdinand Oyono, Camara Laye, Aké Loba, Ousmane Socé, Abdoulaye Sadj, Amos Tutuola, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Valentin Mudimbé, Albert Memmi, Tahar ben Jelloun and so many others have shown the difficulty of being at the same time in the center and on the periphery of each of the two cultures. The traditional sector is real, but it is not cut-off from the modern as economists would have it. Thus it consumes imported products (rice, flour, tuna and sardines, tomato juice and condensed milk, enamelware, etc.). It is far from thrifty (social events, such as funerals attended by hundreds of people, financial requests by the extended family still in the village, inauguration of new houses). This traditional sector sometimes produces more for the international market than the modern one: timber, coffee, cocoa, groundnuts, bananas, palm oil. It hoards up considerable amounts of cash, e.g. from the meat market, and often smuggles goods across borders, for instance when it transforms Benin, which does not produce it, into one of the first exporters of cocoa. Its political and economic role may be measured against the cyclic political crises that long afflicted Ghana, usually following the collapse of the price of cocoa on the world market. The recently created cartel of coffee-producing countries has just succeeded in raising its price by reducing production by 20%. The activities of the traditional sector have justified much of the expenditure on infrastructures: ports, bridges, roads, cooperative plants. It has proved, on the occasion of rural extension experiments, that it could rapidly assimilate, transform and adapt new breeding or agricultural techniques, and considerably increase productivity and profit, without literacy programs or destruction of family or social ties or yielding of tradition. Technical progress in agriculture, when confined to moderate exploitation of soils and human capabilities, does not seem to be fatally bound up with the advent of agricultural engineers, and even less if they have been taught their job in foreign languages. It doesn't take all that brainwork to satisfy vital minimum needs and modern expectations.

This "fixed conservative substitute economy" (say the economists) labors under a plethora of service personnel who encumber the so-called modern sector, regularly recommended to governments for severe cutting

down by international institutions; or under the carpetbaggers who come and drain their surpluses. This sector is also the first to bear the brunt when the terms of trade go bad. Then the health delivery care people in town see about controlling births and far less about getting the mortality rate down and the expectation of life up, thus further reducing the productive agricultural sector already decimated by the flight from the countryside. It may be said that while the GNP of most African countries has regularly increased since independence, the price of imported manufactured goods has increased even more. In spite of its economic growth, Africa is an underdeveloping continent, representing less than 1% of international trade in 1995. Studying the relationship of Language and development in Africa, Djité (1989) observes:

Although Africa is one of the best endowed regions of the world (30% of the world mineral resources), it is still the least developed. Approximately 15% of the arable land of our planet, five hundred million hectares of land, can be agriculturally developed in Africa. The share of World recoverable oil and gas reserves is estimated at 28 billion tons and 1,900 billion cubic meters respectively. Its reserves of diamond (96% of the non-communist world), gold (60%), white coal (40%), natural aluminium (28%), iron (more than 20%), chrome (97.1%), manganese (53.7%), cobalt (45.2%), bauxite and aluminium ore (43.7%), vanadium (34%), tantalum (67%), platinum (60%), to cite just a few examples, are considerable. Its productions of cash-crops are just as high: 60% of the world production of cocoa, 40% of palm oil, 28% of peanuts. And yet its industrial production accounts for just 9.65% of the world production. Latest estimates show that 30 of the hungriest nations of the world are in Africa...This is what Mazrui (1980: 70) calls "The pathology of technical backwardness"...

The real issue remains a question of how to attack and solve the causes of underdevelopment rather than just react to their consequences. It is a question of adequate transfer of know-how. And one fundamental aspect of this is the medium of communication used to bring the population to understand these new techniques and their uses, [which brings into focus] "the pathology of linguistic backwardness"(2-4) [as a key factor to lay the foundations of development].

The experience of Zimbabwe (Bhola: 1989) proves that improved literacy stimulates and consolidates development, sometimes in most unexpected ways. It may however be an isolated case, although C. Michailof (1993) helps us resist this view when she describes "an example of successful literacization: Sodefitex, a society for the development of cotton cultivation in the area of Tambacounda (Senegal), created in 1979 a literacy program in Fulfulde and Mandinka, consisting of 399 literacy centers, i.e. in one third of the villages of the area:

The content of the course takes close account of economic realities in the area...[It revealed] an increasing and pressing demand for literacy on the part of not yet literate villages, which led to the creation of self-managed literacy centers where Sodefitec now merely provides technical aid (312).

This, then, is functional literacy, the only obviously valid sort in rural areas of developing countries, since it costs three times less than primary teaching for an immediately useful and economic result, arrests rural emigration and the inordinate growth of suburban lumpenproletariats, does not touch family and social cohesion and traditions, reinforces cultural identity, makes for responsible citizens, injects awareness of economic viability and gradually sets up an industrial culture capable of indigenous self-management. It seems to be imperative in poor countries, if the minimal affordable economic structures that are necessary for taking off are to be timely put into place. Self-financed and managed, this particular literacy campaign has functioned well since 1979. Its success is partly due to the fact that it is conducted in African languages, but above all it is bound up with a local development program and it evidently requires no expatriation of local manpower or linguistic and cultural mutations. Meister (1973) explains that access to literacy opens up to another cultural world of employment and information, new tools and machines, transistors and movies, a world in movement in which individuals acquire new skills and productivity (UNESCO. 1962. Ed/217, 37). As against this, the vast campaigns undertaken after the second world war were costly failures for the international community, as Meister shows in his critical study of UNESCO's literacy program and evaluation of its chances of success. One reproach he addresses the westernized teachers involved is that they are incapable of or unwilling to gear their teaching behavior (andragogy?) to learning machinery and production processes. He too preaches for the rooting of education in local culture, and even if he sees no chance of local writing or symbolic systems being integrated, one may grant him a pragmatic sense that too many linguists, economists and politicians lack.

The population of Africa could rise beyond 830 million¹⁰ by the end of this century. It may be said that Africans are all religious. Around 1970, the vast array of African religions could be divided in three convenient domains: Islam (200 million), Christianity (150 million), endogenous or traditional religions (a vast ill-defined area, 50 million). This simplified vision does not do justice to Africa and the extraordi-

¹⁰1950: 222 million; 1975: 467 million; 2,000: 830 million. Source: Chaliand & Rageau. 1983. *Atlas stratégique: Géopolitique des rapports de force dans le monde*. Paris: Fayard.

nary rich and plural range of religious behavior and mobility in that immense continent.¹¹ One of the main characteristics of this huge religious landscape is the constant presence of systems of signs, symbols, and writings.

There are, leaving aside dialects, between 150 and 1000 languages in Africa. 150 may seem few compared and scaled with the numbers of mutually unintelligible languages in Asia or Europe, where the profusion of languages is a much more important obstacle to unity than in Africa. We have seen that there have been very many attempts to create local, regional or continental orthographics, mainly by missionary organizations (Kouadio & Battestini: 1988-1989). The creation of standard grammars for restricted linguistic areas reinforced the myth of a multiplicity of languages, when the differences were just dialectal variants without a reference language controlled by a central political power. Such descriptions have often led to artificial distinctions between close and linguistically related idioms. If we take totally different languages in an area with low or no migration, their centers will probably be very distant from each other, and experience will show between them a continuous chain of mutually two by two intelligible neighbor languages. The more one moves from one periphery, the more there are differences gradually creating the language of the opposed periphery. These chains have sometimes been broken or weakened by linguistic analysis and the production of grammars and texts in different scripts. The creation of writings, given over to individuals or groups with diverging interests, tends to divide.

A few African languages are international within the Continent and even outside it. Swahili, of course, but also Fulfulde, Hausa, Jula, Arabic cover vast African spaces, Yoruba is spoken in Brazil, Edo in Cuba. Swahili, the vehicular language of East and Central Africa, shares some similarities with Southern Africa Zulu and the Bantu languages of Central Africa. Fulfulde covers sporadically the whole Sahel and Savanna. Arabic is the official language of the Machreb and Maghreb. Millions of Africans have some knowledge of it. Their scripts, the 'ajami, are inspired by Arabic and their vocabularies and conceptions of the world are largely influenced by Islam. Some languages, spoken by a few hundred peasants in handfuls of small villages deserted by young people, are fast disappearing. Stimulated by greater and faster movement of people and ideas, vehicular languages like Hausa and Jula in West Africa are of late spreading rapidly and widely, while the less spoken languages tend to disappear. Wolof has become the unofficial national language of Senegal, where French re-

¹¹About 4 1/2 times the area of the USA

mains the official language through the influence of a political, economic, and administrative minority. More than 90% of Senegalese use Wolof for everyday communication, trade and even political arguments as soon as they heat up. However, the African continent may appear relatively to be more unified religiously than linguistically, and religions are powerful institutions for the spreading of writing and literacy.

Any generalization about Africa immediately calls for its opposite. Pluralism, in religion as in language or communication or conservation of texts, is the continental norm, with relatively unified areas and others of great diversity. The absolute acceptance of strangers was a very widespread principle in Africa until colonization, within the family, society, and religion. There were of course exceptions, as elsewhere. Knowledge of several languages by an individual goes with the use of several scripts and systems of symbols in the same society. The term Christian covers a wide range of denominations, including Catholic and Protestant (of many rites and beliefs), plus 7,000 or so African churches and religious movements.

In these African churches, the relation to writing seems to be linked with the kind of perception individuals have of it. A well-documented case, the Bouiti or Bwiti religion, will serve as an example. According to Swiderski (1984; 1989), nothing is known about the origin of Bwiti writing and its earliest uses in Bwiti temples. It is surmised that Michel Nzé Mba was its inventor. Inscriptions in the temples are of several kinds: some name a community or a temple (fig. 9), some proclaim a motto, as in the temple of the village named *Bambous de Chine* (fig. f) or the André Mvoma temple in Oyem (fig. a), others are memorial inscriptions. In most Bwiti temples inscriptions emphasize the peculiarities of the Bwiti religion. In Michel Nzé Mba's chapel, they are personal or centered on Christ, and reveal the painter's emotional idiosyncrasies in the face of Christianity and the destiny of the black race, a decisive feature of his painting commemorating his vision. Some inscriptions refer to the community's social and political commitment. Judging by the few inscriptions available, the writer(s) had little inclination for calligraphy. They are hardly works of art compared with Kufik writing or the penwork of the Benedictines of Beuron. Yet they increase the prestige of the temples, by identifying them with Catholic churches. Their main objective is to teach, not to "decorate", and they are to be judged on their content and the way they complement the images and other symbolic signs (156-7). One illustration (pl. 12) does however show a piece of decorative writing: a key, the symbol of passage and power (fig. a & b), a bell, symbol of God's voice (fig. c), the cross, sign of the "House of God" (fig. d), the text of a manifesto ad-

dressed to the Bwiti faithful (fig. e) and lists of initiates accompanied by another writing, this one esoteric, by the prophet Ekang Nguu (fig. f). The manifesto is in excellent French, while the juxtaposed cryptic text, which is also linear, could well have been put there to single out each individual by his function or some other personal characteristic. The inscriptions are in French and in African languages (in Latin alphabet) with drawings. It seems, then, that the author contradicts himself: he did not want to decorate, but he did.

Some accounts of the creation of new religious movements integrate notions linked to writing, the signs themselves, but also the supports, the materials, the functions and the types of individuals who used them. Sometimes, the link between missionaries and the Holy Scriptures, seen as a special gift accompanying the White Man's power, embodied in the paper, not the writing, is evoked. The Bwiti may have known a graphic or other system, but what they hail as a divine gift to the White Man is a better support for writing. Probst (1989) is original in stressing the importance of writing and its consequences for members of that religious movement. As against Goody's thesis, he believes that the introduction of writing may actually have reinforced the prophets' function. The recitation of certain symbolic words, the writing of biblical verses to devise charms, the use of the power of the lettered word confirm that the Aladura churches and Yoruba society can combine traditional forms and values with exogenous and new modes of life and association without jeopardizing their existence or development. Smalley, Vang & Yang (1990), a study of an Asian messianic movement based on a revealed writing from Laos, could well be taken up as a methodological model by Africanists. Two hundred and twenty one pages are devoted to the origins of the script, its diffusion, the effectiveness of its representation of the phonetic system, the script itself, its socio-historical function and its evolution. The study computerizes the handwritten script and its use. Aside from Scribner & Cole (1981) on Vai and of many on Egyptian writings, we have nothing similar about the several dozen scripts used in Africa since Antiquity, or about the many "revealed writings" of new African religious movements.

Christianity, then, is identified as the religion of paper, writing and book. The Christians' power rests in part on this technology, which must therefore be appropriated. Power, as defined by Hackett (1987) in her study of new religious movements, is the capacity to transcend the normal course of events, to acquire universal knowledge, to accomplish miracles, to exercise spiritual gifts which may be beneficial to an individual or the community, to ward off evil forces and opponents, to justify the ordinary avocations of everyday life, founding a family, being self-sufficient and in good health. When the missionary had the

"idols" burned, when the mooni programs a new adept, the same act is performed as when a foreign language and culture are imposed. Foreign divisions of the substance-situation and an unthinkable syntax or logic of these divisions literally induce an imbalance that is as harmful to the individual psyche as to the sociocultural fabric.

African Christians are Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Evangelist, Adventist and so on. Being book religions, Islam and Christianity, with their Koran and Gospels, teach writing.

African Christianity was first established in Northern Africa in the first century AD. Ethiopians and Sudanese were massively converted shortly after the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451. A Christian Nubian empire lasted seven centuries. Sub-Saharan Africa was early acquainted with the monasteries, e.g. at Ain-Farah and on the Kongo coast where Portuguese missionaries landed in the 16th century. During the 18th century, Protestants were in the foreground, and exploration and colonization since the end of the 19th century have prompted the diffusion of Christianity almost everywhere. Nowadays it has become the business of Africans, even in the imported churches. All the churches now use, in varying degrees, African languages and texts in Latinate orthographics. Some religious movements have their own script and even a language they have invented. Votive tablets, liturgical and didactic texts, anthologies of chants and hymns, prayer books, captioned decorations, and even more significantly, printing, communal or private literacy, critical comment, and recitation of texts: all these are widespread.

Similarly, Muslims may be Murid, Sunnite, Chiite, Tijani, Ahmadyia, Khadriya, Moabite, Kharijite. Most Africans consider Islam authentically African, and as perfectly suited for Africa as Christianity is for Europe (Trimingham: 1974; 1978).

The term 'traditional' has little meaning as a category. It aims at cataloging everything religious in Africa that was not imported by Whites, Arab-Berbers or Europeans, and which would be better defined as endogenous. All the local religions that were important before the arrival of Islam (7th century) and of Christianity in the Maghreb, Machreb and East Africa, and more recently in the rest of Africa, are lumped together under the label "traditional religions". Those that appeared after colonization are called "new religious movements".

These movements are very different from one another, but some specialists see one common feature in them all, "animism" (Latin *anima*, soul). Some Africans attribute a soul to animals, plants and natural events.

Islam was first introduced in the north and west of West Africa, later on in East Africa, and Christianity from the second century in

Northern Africa, and from the fifth century in Ethiopia and the Sudan. It was curiously with colonization that Islam and Christianity exponentially increased their followerships towards the end of the 19th century. Animism is normally opposed to imported religion, like orality to writing. And yet we know that every society has always had a system of conservation and transmission of myths, genealogies, moral tales or legends. Africans without writing in the restricted sense had various mnemonic systems, but no books. Certain persons memorized collections of texts, which they could retrieve on demand. These people watched over social order, which depended on respect for and observance of tradition in the face of external influences and internal subversion.

In all African religions, the spoken or written word assumes a central part in the learning, practice and preservation of rites and values. In the form of verbal exegesis with simultaneous translation (the Evangelists), verbal exegesis, sermon and recitation of the Koran, individual and collective prayer, glossolalia, secret languages, sacred texts, hymns and chants, intercessory formulae, divination and prophecy, the word, the symbol and even writing accompany the works of religion. In the whole world, another institution has immemorially endowed speech with paramount importance: the judiciary. Writing is even more important a factor of linguistic unification. The link between ritual and writing in Africa is strongly demonstrated by Hodge (1983), with special reference to ancient Egypt.

Historical accidents placed the greater part of the Muslim population of Africa within the French orbit. Then geography restricted attempts to assimilate and Christianize mainly to those usually sedentary and agricultural populations which lived on the coast or nearby, along rivers and in clearings. The cliff running between the coastal plain and the hinterland plateau marks a limit between two cultures, two religions, two ways of life, two climates, and, incidentally, two writings. The inland peoples who live on the grasslands the Fulani call the *bowal* (plural: *bowé*) were less affected than the plain dwellers by the double conversion to a new culture and a new religion through a new language. Some of them were still nomadic at the time of European penetration, cattle breeders who had lived for centuries under Muslim influence or even as Muslims. These were not in any way predisposed to accept the activities of Western missionaries.¹² If their presence could not be avoided for political reasons, they saw to it that only the sons of

¹²Pastor Watkins, who resided for thirty years at Labé, in the Futa Jalon, in Jallobe (Fulani) country, an area of former French Guinea, Islamicized since the 18th century, succeeded in converting a few people, probably of lower "castes". Yet he had many friends and with and through them certainly had an influence on the cultural environment.

slaves or low castes were exposed to Western schooling and conversion. As a result, neither Muslims nor Christians massively adopted the languages in which these religions were imported.

The teaching of African languages began much earlier in the British than in the French colonies. This can be attributed to greater missionary activity. The rivalry of many different denominations seems to have stimulated interest in local cultures, on the one hand, and western-type teaching in missionary schools on the other. The sacred character of the King James Bible could not hold out for very long against the realities of teaching the gospel in Africa. The by now untouchable Authorized Version was well matched by the Koran's immemorial immutability. Nowhere did massive or profound conversion take place. Everywhere traditional religions continued to flourish under imported behaviors. Teaching was first done in local language (largely, presumably, through interpreters). At the same time, the liturgical Arabic and Latin were equally esoteric and prestigious. Later, the missionaries taught in English, but only future minority elites. Recently, American missionary institutions decided that every African had the right to own a Bible in his own language. This had the effect of decisively promoting the teaching in the African languages of African languages and cultures, as they embarked on the vast enterprise of translating the Bible into as many African languages as possible. It is still proceeding. The semantic impact had not been remotely suspected. The ideas of God, of intercessors, etc., were totally refurbished and turned inside out. The African divisions of the substance-situation and their logical articulations, a moment in disarray, were thoroughly overhauled and renovated. All this linguistic, lexicographical, translating activity led to the revolutionary concept of "dynamic" translation. In a pragmatic and phenomenological perspective, and in order to make the missionary enterprise more efficient and economic, a culture to culture translation became acceptable. The idea was to concentrate on the bottom message, i.e. the essential values of the Gospels, leaving aside the old fetishized word for word restitutions. In a given cultural context, Jesus could have had brothers and sisters, have been polygamous and a distinguished begetter. As one might almost say, the message was the message. Conversion meant progressively inculcating a set of essential values in everyday behavior, while other values and behaviors incompatible with the message were condemned with the greatest forbearance and without violence.

In the French colonies, the Jacobin-cum-Roman cult of the single model and the central state dominated the scene. Catholicism reigned without any serious rival, except of course Islam. The teaching of the French language long excluded that of African languages. Even the

timid teaching of these is nowadays not appreciated by parents, who regard it as an obstacle to social promotion, and anyway belonging to family rather than to formal education, private or public. If we simplify a little, it was a monolithic system: one language, one religion, assimilation and conversion to the one French Catholic culture. At present, the French-speaking population is on the wane, with its percentage varying, according to estimations, between 5% and 25%, mostly Christians at the time of independence.

The Muslim "clergy" sometimes had a pragmatic attitude towards the sacred texts. In order to ensure rapid large-scale conversion and a far-reaching integration of Islam in local culture, marabouts soon introduced short summaries of the Koran in African languages rather than wait for people to learn Arabic. As a result, only a minority learned it, while a few Koranic masters built up libraries of religious works, and also of Ancient Sciences from Egypt, Greece and the Middle East. The Koran is learned by heart in Arabic without explanation or commentary, with rigorous concern for pronunciation and eloquence and even observance of prosody (rhythm, psalmody, caesuras). This painstaking formal mnemonic learning prepares for the next stage, during which the contents are explained and discussed, mostly in the local language.

Muslim reactions to the Arabic, Catholic to the French language, and Protestant to African languages strongly contributed to stratifying and distributing the African linguistic problem. The government, Koranic and Mission schools all radically modified, through language and religion, the whole African cultural landscape (Battestini: 1990). It remains to be seen whether the substrata on which these actions were exerted —often on anarchical, always on limited, parallel or conflictual lines— have benefitted or suffered. The overall reaction may be surmised from the propensity towards geomancy, divination, faith healing and exorcism pointed out by Goody (1971b):

The area in which the influence of Islam on non-Islamic, non-literate cultures is most immediately apparent is that of magico-religious activity (458)...And from "pagan" Ashanti, ninety percent of the early nineteenth-century collection of Arabic manuscripts that found its way to the Royal Library of Copenhagen was concerned with "magic"...[Islam] being a written and an excluding religion...its practitioners were required to reject other approaches (459). [But Goody adds] even the non-literate groups are influenced by the existence of literates in their midst (464).

Goody has chosen to emphasize magical religious practices rather than medicine, which we shall later deal with together with the sciences. His use of the composite term magico-religious (magical: primitive and ethnological, religious: more historical and sociological) defines his

position which, unlike ours, is ethnology —rather than sociology— oriented. Brenner (1984) studies West African Sufism as illustrated by Cerno Bokar Saalif Taal. Without mentioning either Arabic or the 'ajami used by Cerno Bokar, he reports that the Wise Man of Bandiagara had a library (95) and cites a set of symbols that he used in his visual teaching of abstractions to illiterate children and adults.

The imported religions have nearly nowhere in Africa erased what is commonly regarded as a magical substratum, although on the one hand, these "ritual" practices are, for those who resort to them, authentic religious practices, and on the other, some were imported. We know indeed that Africa is not the only continent addicted to "magic". It is said that there are two million healers in France, not counting chiromancers and other "occult" practitioners. The recent spread of "soft" medicines has blurred the frontiers with the official kind. Akhmisse (1985) gives a set of Tifinagh and Arabic signs used symbolically in Morocco to draft the formulae enclosed in amulets (43-4), of other symbols characterizing djinn, of talismanic formulae directed against evil spirits (57), madness (59), spells (74), or for the protection of newborns (96), these last four in Arabic script. Tifinagh would then seem to be in use in Morocco, whereas Berber specialists believe it is nowadays present only in the Sahara among the Tuareg. Back in 1934, Delobson had revealed certain "secrets of black sorcerers"; notably native forms of sand divination, i.e. with more than 60 pictographs and morphemographs among the Mossi of Burkina-Faso (30-8). One of Dieterlen's first texts (1951a) describes the Bambara religion as a magical practice. She supplies 22 elements issued from the explosion of the spirit; the symbols of the twelve future waters (31; 32); a stone altar with symbols, wall drawings with their meanings (129); a drawing made on the ground by the chief of the Komo to indicate the placing of attendants during ceremonies (158). These symbols and other graphics have various functions bound with religion, its teaching, the rites, and its reference texts. Ganay (1949, 1950, and 1951) refers to the heroes of Bambara myths, said to have traveled through the earth, the sky, cosmic space. The traditional narratives of these voyages are extremely precise and detailed, with diagrams and indications of time and space. Other numerous diagrams represent mountains on the sun, the moon and the planets. The narratives feature Koni (the Creator), Faro (who put the world in order) and Mosi Koroni Koundyé (Koni's wife) who, pursued by her husband, fled to the four corners of the world. Koni, during his travels, created water, air, fire, and earth. His movements are sometimes represented by four connected spirals, or by a cross that also represents the movements of the sun (the annual cycle). Faro and Mosi Koroni are seen as complementary or antagonistic, and a horizontal zigzag line, the

same that represents the movements of the planet Venus symbolizes their voyages. Mosi Koroni is said to have invented circumcision, and indeed among the Bambara this practice takes place when Venus, the morning star, shines most brilliantly. Ganay points out that the mentality of the Bambara, as revealed by their myths, is so complex and different from European thinking that long and detailed research into their language is yet necessary. In a word, we can describe the signs through which the Bambara conserve their narratives, but the complexity of these texts, both in form and content, still makes them incomprehensible for us. Let us note that Ganay asserts a relation between symbols and texts without having recourse to "mysterious" Africa, supernatural power or other such shibboleths. He recognizes the difficulty in interpreting, but without falling back on the usual stereotypes.

The theses attempted by Joleaud (1931, 1933) went without echo. What he suggested was to accord more importance to the "signs" used in the popular traditions of North Africa, in which he saw more than symbols, almost a writing. Before Dieterlen and Hamadou Hampaté Bâ, he wanted to interpret the rock engravings in terms of ancient but evergreen traditions. Thus, for Joleaud, those of North Africa are bound with its rites of water. The basic idea is that the drying up of the Sahara provoked disasters and migrations, but also religious reactions, reflected in the form and context of the engravings. In these Joleaud sees magical supports for rites of protection against drought and for reversal of the process. It is regrettable that the models of analysis inaugurated in 1964 by Leroi-Gourhan (1990) for the caverworks of prehistory should have failed to inspire Africanists.¹³ Distance in time and the absence of witnesses could have been treated like distance in space or cultural differences and scientifically verified with the help of contemporaries. About the graphic documents of the Paleolithic, we note that the most ancient go back to 35,000 years BC. Like Joleaud however, Leroi-Gourhan sees in them nothing but ritual objects. That these objects may have been, during the ritual, accompanied by a discourse or have formed a text *per se* is not really suggested. In that period before the Second World War, it may be of interest to cite two texts typical of the curiosity and respect of authors of that time. Leyder (1935) took an interest in the relation of the graphic work of some Belgian Congo tribes to magic, seeing expressive form in it. Maupoil (1939) went beyond the

¹³ According to Mounin (1970), Leroi-Gourhan (1964) recaptures the syntax of these wordless legends, whose distribution he recovers, but without being able to reconstruct their signifying function, since the figured linguistic and cultural landscape has disappeared. And yet, it may be argued that the represented does not belong to language but to the thought, divisions and articulations of a culture which archaeology could partly help us to reconstruct (215-7).

description of form, when he analyzed geomancy and divination on the Slave Coast and in Madagascar. From the symbolism of Fon or Fa geomancy he defines a system of 16 major signs and 240 secondary ones, conceived after the usual rules of geomancy. Each symbol expresses a "fate" and is the center of a set of myths bound together. Maupoil, nor Barber (1991), saw in these not a system of writing, although some of these signs could be communicated afar and therefore be used as messages. Together they constitute an infinity of potential narratives, rather like a pack of tarot cards or Queneau's famous indefinitely recomposable poem. Maupoil again (1943) studies the Islamic contribution at the origin of geomancy in southern Dahomey. The Muslims of Dahomey (now the People's Republic of Benin) used to practice, in contradiction with the precepts of orthodoxy, a mode of divination comparable to the Ifa of the non-Islamized inhabitants and probably related to it. It owed to its use of Arabic writing (compared with Ifa) greater rigor and a stricter codification. Venturing out of vernacular comfort, this now classic work introduced the idea, relatively new at the time, of studying interculturality, and recognized the positive contribution of a writing that was not the Latin alphabet, but only on the magical-religious level. Sylverman (1986) takes up Maupoil from a new angle, the influence of the Arabic script in the area of occultism, and explains its (and like scripts') different uses in the confection of charms, in magical-medical spells, divination, decoration of powerful leaders' clothes and other functions. He also describes tools and techniques and the materials used for this writing.

More recently, research in France, Great Britain and the United States has heralded our own views on the integration of symbolic systems into the conception of writing and text. So Ganay & Zahan (1978) explain in this perspective the Komo's teaching. In 1981 Lewis-Williams put into relation the notions of seeing and believing, i.e. of symbolic signification, in the southern San rock paintings. His attempts at interpretation are all the more convincing since the dating of these paintings is relatively easy and descriptions by travelers almost coeval with their authors are extant. Lamp (1985; 1988) describes in passing some symbols in use among the neighboring Temné, many of whom possess a system of writing, as also the Poro Secret Society (42).

Between 1930-40 and the 1980s there are few studies on African symbolism. The general trend is ethnological and esthetic. This is due as much to the general "iconoclastic" disposition (Durand: 1964), bound with positivism, or to the temporary triumph of formalisms and structuralisms, as to the history of our relations with Africa, and to history in general. Etiemble (1961) produces only one African document, a page from a 17th century Malagasy magic manuscript (17).

Divination seems to have an assured future in times of stress. The profusion of new religious movements throws up many "prophets". The marabout's skills have become extremely lucrative in West Africa and even in France. Some fly from one capital to another to counsel ministers and heads of states. The pagan elements in Christianity are exacerbated and some practices, tolerated by Islam, such as geomancy and wearing of amulets, do proliferate. The press in Nigeria and elsewhere is full of stories of evil spells, impotence or loss of genital organs, fertility or extraordinary pregnancies, multiplication of banknotes, human sacrifices. The printed word broadcasts to an ever wider public magical beliefs and practices. Catalogs of miracle products are eagerly sought. All this points to the presence of noetic-poetic forms of thought. It is difficult to distinguish the old magical practices, still flourishing, from those that are imported. What is constant in all this seems to be the persistence, on all continents, of an immemorial mode of apprehension of reality, in spite of the new philosophies and logics of action and interaction.

Glossolalia, a feature of shamanism, exists in Africa as much in certain Christian churches as in the traditional religions. It has even been observed in Christian Europe. In Africa, it appears in trance or possession, with inarticulate speech, vocal and instrumental imitations of natural sounds purporting to be supernatural. During ceremonies resonators like hollow stems, sea and tortoise shells distort voices and other sounds to make sure that they, are impossible to identify, and through masks, mats, pearl curtains, fences, adding the mystery of their production to their secret meanings. Still, the totally incomprehensible (for a foreigner) cacophony, associated with an event known to all, exhumes mystery and power, invites participants to remember, adapt or create texts for each particular set of circumstances. Many secret societies possess rigorously coded systems of signs, such as mimics, gestures, dances, clothing, hairstyles, scarifications, graphic body painting. Sound and visual signs suggest rather than reflect language and thought. In association with the whole mode of representation, their effect is to drive out previous anecdotal meanings, which enables them to generate actual or future meanings, potentially manifold but limited by the context in which they are inserted. All these graphics, sounds, movements, smells, crowd responses conjure up connotations, metaphors, illustrations, biographemes, allusions, sayings, proverbs, riddles, all textual elements which together dynamically create a text in which the social fabric is represented, reaffirmed and reinforced. The African ceremony, as we have tried to show, is often the celebration of a text, whose mimetic development can be felt by all as each recites his/her own diegesis. Thus spectators may have untimely reac-

tions to the sequence being represented, something that the western on-looker cannot understand. Most African societies have created or borrowed mnemonic means of recording their memories and transmitting their experience, their religious, magical, or other knowledge. Their "library" consists of myths representing and explaining their origins and environment, of religious or agricultural calendars, of formulations of ceremonial orders of precedence, of secret and sacred formulae. These artefacts may be perceived and understood as purely religious or esthetic or sociological, and even cosmogonic: many rest, partly or totally, on morphemographic and/or logographic systems. Some use local scripts or an 'ajami, but all aim at constructing two- or three-dimensional texts, which themselves generate new, living texts (Battestini: 1990).

The West African Linguistics Society was founded in 1965 and the justly renowned *East African Survey* took place in 1966. Missionaries and African linguists took little or no part in the debate that accompanied Greenberg's vast enterprise, the classification of African languages. American missionaries launched the Bible Society under the leadership of Eugene Nida, the promoter of "dynamic translation". Not only has this society undertaken the culture to culture translation of the Bible or the production of bi- or trilingual dictionaries like Noss's on the Gbaya of Cameroon and the Central African Republic; but it has recaptured the early missionaries' sense of practical service, and now with a real scientific curiosity at last detached from any collusion with the powers that be and even sometimes in conflict with them.

The wide diffusion and circulation of texts among different peoples has the advantage of promoting the linguistic and graphic homogenization of evangelized or politicized groupings. The language (with its writing) of the Biblical text becomes the norm, and the neighboring languages variants or dialects of it. Phonetic, phonostylistic, lexical, logical, cultural, syntactic variants not noted in the chosen scripts gradually disappear, which is judged positive by some but may have its negative aspect. The Ibibio people of the Cross River in Nigeria have its language, classified by Greenberg in the Benue-Congo sub-family of the Niger-Kordofan family. Ibibio language and culture are related to the Efiks', but differ from them in many ways. For practical reasons, the Presbyterian missionaries settled in Efik territory, in Duke Town, which became the center of Calabar. This mission produced a Bible in Efik. This Bible was used for the Ibibio also, imposing on them the Efik language norms (which they accepted until quite recently). The Ibibio had to correct their "accent", syntax and vocabulary (new words for things and ideas that were their own), that is to say speak like the Efik, on pain of being dismissed as barbarous and wild bushmen (Ward:

1933). Christianized Ibibio took some time to realize that they were no longer speaking the same language as their “pagan” compatriots were. Nowadays, the revival of Ibibio language and culture takes the form of rejection of an invented language called Efik-Ibibio and the creation, within the Nigerian Federation, of an Ibibio state that had to be cut out of Efik-dominated Cross River State and Christianized by the Presbyterian missionaries, who were mainly Scots or Jamaican.

For a long time Swahili Catholics used the same fund of words as their Protestant counterparts in East and Central Africa, but differed in the pronunciation and derivation-composition. Here are some examples from Gregersen (1977), bearing in mind however that missionaries have been working to unify the pronunciation and writing of these names and concepts:

<i>Catholic terms</i>	<i>Protestant terms</i>	<i>Translation</i>
Kristu	Kristo	Christ
Enjili	Enjili	Gospel
Karama Takatifu	Ushirika Mtakatifu	Holy Communion
Dominika	Jumapili	Sunday
Paska	Pasaka	Easter
Bikira Maria	Mwanamamwali Mari	Virgin Mary
Yosef	Yusuf	Joseph (206)

It may be noted that the Protestant terms, being closer to Swahili, seem to be more respectful of original pronunciations. For instance: *jumapili* (Arabic root for Friday, the day of worship).

All book religions have imposed another language or taken over local languages, spoken or written, and instilled new perceptions of the world into them. A missionary, Donovan (1978), portrays a catechist who learned to read “alone”. He was used to reading aloud the Old Testament in Kiswahili. He had a certain level of literacy in Swahili as well as in his language: Masai. He could translate, in writing, the Scriptures. He went as far as creating some Masai liturgies (123).

What with his fixing the referential texts, harmonizing pronunciations, spreading new ethical modes, new schemes of thought and a new vision of the world, using the prestige of the written word and respect for those who can read, explain, comment on and translate the Book, knowing both cultures: the missionary’s impact was linguistically and culturally of the greatest importance.

A spreading book religion obviously advances literacy. Well known also is its influence on the homogenization of related dialects. Hackett (1993) demonstrates that the rapid spread of the Bible among the women of Southern Nigeria that accompanied the considerable progress

of Evangelical and Pentecostal movements has induced not only theological transformations, but also an improvement in the literacy rate and socio-professional status of Nigerian women.

The great number of Fiqh texts and other manuscripts in 'ajami may well irritate the Muslim purist. A Fulani (Mombéyâ: 1971) from the Futa Jalon explains:

Many Fulani do not penetrate what is taught them in Arabic
And remain in uncertainty (V.6).
To rest on the uncertain, in the words of Duty
Is not enough in words, not enough in actions (V. 7).
He who seeks light without uncertainty,
Let him read in Fulfulde these verse of the little man (V. 9).
Be it in Arabic letters, in Fulani tongue or any other, all is valid
That [...] makes easy the exact knowledge
So that all be known of the sense of the Law (V. 113-4). (30).

The reasons for such a heresy are many, and first practical ones. A comparison between Fulfulde and Arabic phonologies and between Arabic and Fulfulde scripts could well reveal the most important. Arabic has twice fewer vowels and consonants than Fulfulde (Ladefoged: 1968). In the Koran, the number of consonant signs is 28 and there are 28 consonantal phonemes in Fulfulde. Unfortunately, only 14 of the Arabic letters can be used to note similar sounds in Fulfulde. Arabic script has little time for vowel notation, but it can of course use diacritical signs. Moreover, two sets of phonemes disappear in the transcription from Fulfulde to Arabic: the prenasals and the implosives. A few of the unused 14 signs have been given the task of noting Fulfulde phonemes which they do not represent in Arabic. Even more heretical may appear to be the use of Arabic writing or 'ajami for charms or spells, geomancy and divination. The use of a pseudo 'ajami-Arabic script is frequent in amulets. Religious expressions like *bisimilaye*, *shahada* or certain verses are written on many-waggons, trucks, shops, houses, in mosques, and are used to bless, protect oneself, accomplish a sacrifice, even to curse or punish somebody.

In the exhibition "The Valleys of the Niger" held at the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens in Paris in 1993-4, an inscription in red could be seen on four fragments of a stele from the ruined site of the Kumbi Saleh mosque: "La ilaha Allah al amru Kulluhu Lillah *la quwwata illa billah al wah*", among a unique set of inscriptions, some of which covered with geometrical designs. What is interesting in the quoted inscription is the mixture of Sunni and Shiah it implies. The Fatimids, the Umayyads, the Almoravids, the Almohads, the Merinids have adopted a mixture of principles. The asterisked phrase: "There is no

power but by the grace of God, the One and Unique" to be found in a foundation text engraved in Cordoba in the 4th century of the Hegira (10th century AD). The fragment also appears on Almohad dirhams and Merinid dinars. The phrase "God the One and Only" is not found on any inscription of Maghreb origin. It was used in the Machreb by Egyptian Tulunids in 306 H (918 AD) in an inscription written in small characters on red silk. In another furniture Egyptian inscription (386 H-996 AD) and in a mosque dedication (638 H-1240 AD), "God is One" is the basic principle of imamite Shiah affirmed in Egypt. The reappearance in Kumbi Saleh cannot be accidental, but it remains unexplained, save that it must imply contacts. Monteil (1964) pointed out, in *L'Islam Noir*, that one of the written sources for Gao history could be epigraphy, for

In 1939, ten steles, dated 12th and 13th centuries were discovered in Sané (6 km from Gao). They were royal epitaphs in Arabic, in Andalusian writing from the Almoravid period concerning "freshly Islamized malik" (local chiefs)" (68).

Monteil mentions other written sources, i.e. the *Tarikh El-Fettach* (composed from 1520 to 1599, revised in 1600) and the *Tarikh Es-Sudan*, completed in 1655. The authors of these two chronicles were a Soninke scholar and others of Fulani and Moorish origin.

Let us recall that the Arabic language and script are sacred, having been dictated by God. The pupils of koranic schools and medersas copied the Koran on light wooden tablets, before they learnt to recite it. Some would not hesitate to travel long distances to join renowned masters and schools. Captain Washington (1838) reports that "a boy of eight years traveled in 1776 from Niani Maru to a well-known koranic school at Darsalami in northern Wuli, returning home again to be circumcised when he was sixteen". (449).

The Koranic tablet was washed and reused by each pupil, the water being considered preventive or curative of many diseases (Battestini: 1994c). Marabouts are wont, while reciting Koranic verses, to spit in their palms and stroke your face as a blessing. The written text, recited loud or mumbled, the organs of speech and saliva on the hands, are fused together into a single belief in the power of the divine text. Mauritaniens distinguish themselves from other African Muslims by an absolute respect for the text of the Koran and for the Arabic language. This singular feature ensures for them the respect of Arabs and Arabic scholars the world over. Their language, Hassanyia, and their script, Maghribi, claim to be the Prophet's. In West Africa many libraries have lately begun, at last, to be inventoried with the help of UNESCO. Some of the books are copies of venerable manuscripts, like

Ibn Rushd's (Averroës) copy of Aristotle's *Commentaries* (Battestini: 1986).

The multiplicity of religions in a same place, same family, constant exchanges of faithful, frequent conversions, are surprising to the outsider. These characteristics are a sign of extreme tolerance, historically attested until recently. One may also see in this a refusal of barriers between religions, a recognition of the perennity of the supernatural powers above human agitation. The interpretation of religions stimulates exchanges and combinations of heterogeneous symbols. With even greater certainty, this diversity, like every division without end, materializes a conscious sense of unity in man to man, man to God, and man to nature ¹⁴ relations. These cross-fertilizations and this standardization sometimes condense in concrete signs, like a piece of adiré in our possession. On a Yoruba adiré (Battestini: 1984), one of the rectangles contains three symbols: one refers to traditional religion, one to Islam and one to Christianity. The first represents Eshu's staff: Eshu the mischievous, the Orisha of language, of truth and falsehood, of contradiction, and the distant cousin of Thot,¹⁵ Hermes and Mercury. Thot "was regarded as the Divine Word through whom all creation came into existence. He is the patron of scribes, the Master of the words of the gods, the lord of writing, and the creator of all languages" (Gregersen: 1977, 15). The "Masters of Speech" in Mandinka country perpetuate the age-old tradition, but it is often forgotten that many who possess this gift can also read, write, compose and versify. One major modern African poet, L. S. Senghor, said of them: "From the Masters of Jong, I learned the art of weaving pleasant words" (1973. *Nocturnes*. Paris: Seuil. 180).

The second symbol is the simplified facade of the Anglican Church on the campus of the University of Ibadan, topped with a cross. It not only represents the Anglican religion, but the power that came with it, of which the University is another manifestation. That power the students could acquire thanks to mastery of the English language and writing: the arms of the University are a book and the motto says it is the source of all true knowledge.

The third symbol is the star and crescent of Islam. It is repeated twice, but that may be for the sake of symmetry.

¹⁴One may notice, in contrast, that Africa being perceived, in the Western World, as more of the order of nature than of culture, tends to be, as in Heidegger's view, a "standing reserve", a stock or resource whose only justification for being, is for its usefulness to the technological world, as tacitly suggested by T. Casey, *Philosophy of Technology in the Jesuit University*. *Conversations*, Spring 1996, 16.

¹⁵Bleeker (1973) depicts Hathor and Thot, two key components in the Egyptian pantheon, who do remind us very closely of Eshu.

Together the three signs form a single reference, to "religion" and to the power that goes with it or is granted by it. Their associated differences signal "tokens", while together they express "type". Whatever our relationships with God may be, they are human, social, anecdotal, and would be of little significance if their combinations did not advertise the unique fact of being religious, the essential nature of what binds man together, with nature and with God, rather than mutual exclusions.

Language and religion form a couple closely associated in the world. Missionaries and administrators now work together with linguists (as in Cameroon) to solve the many problems created by the multiplicity and diversity of tongues and writings. But nobody studies with pedagogical intent the systems of signs that existed before him or her. The religions contributed to the emergence and spread of writing and a form of literacy by diffusing new systems of writing and helping in the description and analysis of African languages. Sophocles' *Antigone* opposed unwritten laws to the Written Law, a thematic that underlay the religious schism out of which Christianity emerged. Jesus Christ opposes the regulation of civil society by the priests. He proclaims introjected in-time religion, invites each individual to take in and over the divine message in his everyday life, proving the transcendence of the Holy Spirit and the redundancy of intercessors. The moral and political direction of the people by a minority invested with religious power entails a risk for religion itself and for humans. The imposition of a church ethic, even derived from Scripture, would seem to him heretical. The sacred text is just only insofar as, forgotten, it is daily recreated in the feelings, thoughts and actions of each and all of us. The text is made culture, tends to become the texture of our individual and cultural identities. Scripture commentary, anecdote, ritual gestures, architectures, ceremonies, offerings, if all these may remain necessary for some, can only, in the new perspective, serve as behoven initiatic stages and later as more or less useful reminders, depending on individuals and historical moments. These sort of relations to the text are not unknown to Africans who, by writing thought rather than speech, were however preserved from any fetishism of the written word. The unwritten law here invoked is a law effectively known and accepted by all. It is preferred to a written law that is hermetic and can only be capitalized or invoked through the intercession of a fraction of society that draws privileges from it, which is essentially contrary to the spirit of the law. If nobody is supposed not to know the law, nobody carries the penal code in his pocket when walking his dog in the woods. The moral, social and religious laws aspired to by Jesus, and Antigone, demand

that all inscribe the book in themselves and conform to it, not relegate it to the shelves of their libraries.

A few new religious movements have revealed or inspired scripts, like the Yoruba script or the Oshitelu church, in Western Nigeria, or the *oberi okaime* of southeastern Nigeria, Njoya's secret scripts in Cameroon or the Kimbanguists' in Zaire. A dream during which a hand (God's) guides the inventor-elect is a common myth to explain the origin of local scripts. The Vai script in Liberia is used to transcribe the Koran as well as the Bible. Congolese cosmograms combined with Nsibidi signs and sand drawings are known in the African Diaspora on the American continent and in the West Indies and are associated with Voodoo (Bramly: 1975). Thompson (1983) surveys African and Black American symbols to demonstrate the survival of African values in America. The values he considers being cultural and esthetic rather than political and economic, we shall touch on them when we come to the relation of writing to art. Wahlman (1986) also depicts certain symbols in use in the art of Afro-Americans. Briefly now, as an example: the most frequent motives used by Afro-Americans in pin cushions, quilts, magic protective clothes retain woven forms out of West Africa or the Congo (*nkisi*: amulets). The American Diaspora has forgotten the meanings and functions of these geometric signs and motives but seems to express, through this stolid perpetuation of them, the need to remember cultural roots, to preserve a discreet but nodal identity and perhaps also the power that still, in its mind, emanates from these forms. Sahlstrom (1990) points to the same perspective in his study of Marxist billposting in Ethiopia. A pity nobody has, in this connection, made use of the analytic methodology of the graphic arts invented by Bertin (1967).

The significance of *akan* weights varies enormously, but is always based on figuration of the weight or of its geometric abstraction. Interpretation has every right to be imaginative, but within limits! There may be many meanings, but they are not infinite, as in a *dja* (or *fotoo* or *sanaa*), a bag containing weights: the theme or themes it evokes are repeated from one to another, and associating them cannot be open-ended.

The content of these bags may serve to make up a story. Nana Boaffa Nta, king of a Ghanaian community, explains: these weights, "they are the Book of the Akan of yore. Formerly before colonization, all children were taught to read it and its contents were explained to them". A compendium of edifying stories, they may be compared to the Old Testament (Niangoran-Bouah: 1984, 76), serving as they did for the moral and religious education, the integration of the young in society.

The bags contained two types of weights: those representing God's creation and those representing human creation. This implies a distinction between the sacred and the profane. The weights showing humans accomplishing everyday tasks evoke the various gifts received from the power above and therefore the productive function they fulfill in the social and divine order. There are also figurines of genies and other supernatural beings. Each of these weights serves to warn and protect against the dangers of the bush and forest, or to draw attention to private and social interdicts. Careful repertoires of minerals, vegetables and animals glorify God's creative power and inculcate knowledge in varying depths of zoology, botany, pharmacopeia, medicine, astronomy, and, naturally, numbers. Weapons, clothes, furniture, musical instruments, allow all sorts of narrative combinations, touching on philosophy, law, literature, religion, in the spirit of Akan social harmony conditioned by their conception of God.

Pemberton (1977) does not mention writing. Since the Yoruba, as we all know, had none before their evangelisation in the last century. Yet, they used mythograms, the *àrokò*, to transmit messages afar. The art of the variable membrane drum seizes on the tone and intonative schemes of short sentences, repeated to communicate at a distance or to utter without saying them certain secret and/or public discourses. A script was revealed to one of their latter-day prophets, Oshitelu.¹⁶ Yet the Yoruba world is politically structured. A vision of a world moral order is common to all Yoruba groups, who speak the same language, with some variants. Yoruba kingdoms existed for centuries, the political and religious capital of which, they regarded Ile-Ife, as the center of the world. Twelve years in Ibadan have taught us to appreciate the Yoruba smile, their extraordinary vivacity of mind, their art of *double entendre*, their sense of diplomacy perhaps inspired by Eshu but above all by their pride of being Yoruba. Pemberton's article corrects Goody's ethnocentrism. Would it persuade all those who will have it that the birth of writing is logically linked with the emergence of complex societies that they are wrong (Goody: 1968; 1977; 1987a; 1987b). The Yoruba

¹⁶ Oshitelu and other inventors of alphabets may quite possibly have been influenced by the *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, known as *The Book of Moses*. Probst reports having seen copies of it in West Africa in 1920. Oshitelu's "sacred" script is said to have been created by him in 1926-1928, according to a dream of 4 April 1926, during which he claimed to have seen an open book, written in a strange Arabic — like language. Oshitelu was born in 1902. He could write Yoruba and English, he taught within the Anglican Church of which he was a catechist before he founded the Church of the Lord in 1930. He died in 1966. His script, which survives him, served not to transcribe the dialects of Yoruba, but a revealed language, that of his church, like the *Oberi Okaimé* of Eastern Nigeria. It is written from right to left like Arabic.

semiosis has an unparalleled texture, which has enabled its culture to evolve durable institutions and an art that is universally appreciated. Pemberton perfectly demonstrates the pertinence of sacred Yoruba symbols and their permanence down to and including the literary discourse and social comportment of a Wole Soyinka, who belongs to the same social and moral order (28).

Turner (1967) describes the revealed script of the Aladura Church (Church of the Lord), Oshitelu's sacred script (42), and mentions the revealed *oberi okaime* language and writing in connection with the Pentecostal movements in Nigeria (1972). He narrates objectively the events that surrounded the foundation of these churches, languages and scripts and their long-term consequences. Udofia once entrusted to us a four-page brochure (undated) in *oberi okaime* script. Udofia, one of the first prophets of the movement, was arrested by the British in the 1930s, tried and sentenced as a troublemaker, one of the "troubles" being that he had invented a system of writing. His church and school were destroyed. They have been rebuilt since but in makeshift materials and far from roads. Udofia was freed after three years in jail.¹⁷ Let us recall that about the same time, on the French side of the Nigerian-Cameroon border, king Njoya suffered the same persecution, for the same reasons, and died. Udofia gave us another document (1953), printed and published by the author, written in the *language of the free worshippers*, which is *oberi okaime*. Such wrath on the part of both colonial powers could only have been due to awareness of the dangers these inventors of writings and religions represented for the legitimization of their causes and enterprises.

Missionaries offered brochures of this kind. Towards 1955 Pastor Watkins gave us two, titled *Ngurndan poomayankedyan* (Anon: 1955). Each has four pages, one is written in Latin characters, the other in 'ajami, but both are in the Fulfulde of French Guinea. The Latin print, side by side with the Arabic, had a remarkable impact on Fulani people, proving to them that their language could be written in the same alphabet as French, the prestigious language that gave access to the civil service, the army, the police, the trade unions, shopkeeping, etc., which most of them could only dream about. These brochures are typical of the efforts of missionaries, notably Protestant, but also of pri-

¹⁷Dalby (1969) sketches the history of the Christian Oberi Okaime church. He recounts the persecutions exerted against many members of the Church by the colonial administration, the police, Ibibio chiefs and notables, the missions and other instituted churches. A dozen members were hanged. Abasiattai (1989) adds that some were jailed or exiled and houses destroyed. As usual, martyrdom reinforced the faith and the movement is still very active today. The special courts set up for the occasion often flaunted the law and had to be dissolved, their sentences reduced and innocents freed.

mary school teachers, traditional chiefs and religious leaders to combine conversion with literacy.

When he provides himself with a new religious institution, a new language, a new writing on the lines of imported models, the African does not perhaps suspect that he is converting to another logical structure, precisely the one he is rejecting in some other of its aspects. He adopts the Other's "text", converts to a book religion, less turned towards doing than being, more formal than experienced, ritual rather than reflexive and assumed. In so doing, he establishes the power of his new prophets and creates a social hierarchy where there was only a division of functions.

In Africa like everywhere in the world, many natural or cultural events that are not logically explained or explicable are attributed to divine or supernatural intervention. The discourse generated by the event may vary with time and place but the event is universally experienced as an abrupt emergence or a mutation of an earlier event, or as a sudden revelation of the relevance and importance of the event. Many African religions and writings claim to be "revealed". The first thing to notice here is that the explanation, transferred from one culture to another, may induce a derivation of meaning, as though the European statement "X has conceived the idea..." could only be rendered, by an informant in an African language, by "A supernatural power has revealed to him." There exist in Africa cultural testaments that appear to have arisen from nowhere, that are claimed by no contemporary culture, in which no continuity with any present-day Africa can be detected. These carved, engraved, molded, cast, architectonic monuments, such as the Kissi stones, the Akwanshi megaliths, the Nok potteries, the Rao pectoral, the Christian woman's tomb or the ruins of Zimbabwe, etc., were conceived and produced and then fell into oblivion, until an accident brought them back to light. All bear borrowed names and it is irrelevant to our argument whether some of them have lately been claimed or ascribed. One may risk the hypothesis that these works of art were "revealed", thus explaining their sudden emergence followed by indifference. It may be that they lasted as long as the semiosis that had generated them. Defined by the rapport they maintained with a world of signs, their significant forms remained, but void of meaning, the founding gestalt having been exhausted, destroyed, displaced, then acculturated. This would imply an impulsive and inconsequential, therefore non-historical mode of cultural dynamism playing on spontaneous or inherited creation and voluntary or acciden-

tal disappearance.¹⁸ Without the support of memory such phenomena, until quite recently, could not be explained. They will possibly, at least in part, when highly sophisticated technical advances, like those achieved in the study of Maya ceramics, allow them to be "ready". This new archeological technology may be compared to Galileo's telescope in the realm of the infinitely large and the microscope for the infinitely small. The text we do not perceive exists nevertheless. Semiotics has deserved to be defined as the archeology of the living. All those witnesses of an African past are provisionally reduced to silence by the inadequacy of our techniques, the insecurity of their localities, the financial restraints limiting commitment: but the "text" which constituted them is still organizing them.

A new ethnological film, "Seni's children", suggests an explanation for this type of "spontaneous" emergence. Seni makes objects that are without any precedent in her or surrounding cultures: in a word, original objects. She claims to have invented a technique that will die with her, insisting that it was revealed to her. She sees proof of her election in the fact that two young women she has recruited to help her are incapable of imitating her creative activities. In other times, her art would have been buried with her until it had made some passing archeologist famous. That the cinema should now consecrate Seni's art instead of by religion or some other institution does not make the example less significant.

Writing, and even more text, permeate African society in its political, economic, and religious aspects. Not only do they weld individuals together, their energies, their needs and aspirations, but they enshrine these tendencies in potential interplay with themselves. They dominate the articulation of ideas and emotions, the syntaxes of persons and their actions, like a grammar of their culture, which we shall now examine.

¹⁸An example of spontaneous creation is perhaps supplied by the text procured by John Elder (*Vai script ... 1979*), possibly a legend, similar to the innumerable half-true, half-invented "traditions" put forward to wrench certain rights from the colonial administration. Another example, of a disappearance this time, could be furnished by the most striking African occurrence of the phenomenon, in medieval Nubia. Found to be "primitive" in the 19th century, when an Islamized people penetrated it and appear the first colonial intrusions, the Nubian people had known, for nearly a millennium during the Middle Ages, one of the most remarkable civilizations ever. All of it, the arts, writing, literature, political, social and economic organization, had disappeared when the ethnologists arrived (W. Adam: 1992, *Medieval Nubia: Another Golden Age*: Private Communication.)

If the tasks of semiology are constantly growing, it is because we are more and more discovering the importance and extensignification in the world; signification is becoming the way of thinking of the modern world, in the same manner perhaps as "fact" was previously the unit of thought of positive science.

Roland Barthes

Knowledge as co-naissance, defined as thought for ever indirect, as the figured presence of the transcendental, as epiphanic comprehension, seems to be worlds apart from the pedagogy of knowledge instituted in the West ten centuries ago.

Gilbert Durand

Chapter 5

Art: Art as Text and Art Context

The text of this chapter¹ will probably appear to be patchy and the diversity of the cases presented to invalidate any attempt at synthesis. This is what we wanted. Africa is multiple and diverse, and the major fault, in our view, of Africanist discourse is its tendency to extrapolate and wildly generalize about her. The essential was to test the movements of this discourse without eschewing occasional limited comparisons and syntheses. The demonstration bears on the avatars of the perception of the relation of writing, texts and artefacts in this discourse. It goes without further saying that we have no wish to impose our voice on the concert of others or to conclude otherwise than provisionally.

This Africanist discourse on artefacts signals the variously concomitant occurrence of signs and texts, and their inscription in African societies. The concept of text is here given the same wider meaning as that of writing in semiotics.

The Efik original myth (Calabar, Nigeria) tends to explain the birth of Efik writing through imitation of the checkered and marbled aspect of tortoise shells. The Ekoi, and other Savanna peoples, like the Egyptians, attribute the original idea of putting thought into writing to

¹A first version of this text (12 pages) was read at the Institute for Advanced Study and Research in the African Humanities, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill., November 5-6; 1993. See Barber. A second version (9 pages) has been published (Battestini: 1994b). Both were in French.

the baboon. These worthy descendants of Thot, tradition goes, had acquired the habit of attending the meetings of village elders. They sat in silence while palaver went on. Some groped for worms in the ground and in doing so their fingers made traces in the dust, which they left behind. These signs are thought to have initiated the Nsibidi script, which is common to the Efik and Ekoi of Cross River. To the palaver of humans corresponds the written sign of nature. The emerging awareness of a natural text is at the origin of the cultural text. This myth explains the loan from nature of certain forms of culture.

Natural geometric forms, animal, vegetable or mineral, have probably inspired the idea of a trace of an immanent order in the chaos of appearances. To survive in nature demands recognition of recurrent events, familiarity with the logic of their articulations. Non-interrogative thought, which favors a noetic-poetic perception of the world, coexists everywhere with discursive rational thinking.² A long experience of traditional Africa fully justifies belief in the omnipresence there of synthetic reasoning, based on generally original perceptions expressed in metaphor. An effort to understand these forms of memory and imagination conjures up new adventures of the mind. The exercise of collective verbal diatribe, the palaver, raises the mind above the particular, liberates a consensus, a synthesis of visions, opinions, perceptions that generates a local and circumstantial logic (Geertz: 1983).

In the West, African art has the appearance of a paradigm of objects without contexts and induces a discourse that is either esthetic and formalistic, or noetic-poetic, i.e. in both cases largely irrelevant to the African texture that has generated it. Seen from outside, African art is inversely proportional in quantity and quality to African writings. It is constituted in a set of values integrated with those of the West, ideological, economic or cultural. The western conception of writing excludes nearly all African forms of writing. African art is the object of an economic-cultural cult, with its temples (numerous museums and art galleries), its ceremonies (films, lectures, courses), its priests (closed circles of art historians and estheticians), its dogmas and sacred texts (a con-

²Africanist discourse favors certain dichotomies like primitive/civilized, simple/complex, and illiterate/literate (Battestini: 1988-1989). One of these demarcations concerns thought, and therefore intelligence. Two forms of thought are commonly distinguished. In the strictest sense, thought is the ability to understand the subject-matter of knowledge : that is reason. It is distinct from another mode of apprehension of the world, which may be termed imagination, immediate and global perception, and memory. Applying this distinction to cultural groups is tantamount to relating African thought systems (ref. Senghor's Negritude or Goody's theories) to the pre-Socratic, since they are both non-interrogative and privilege noetic-poetic against rational discourse (Durozoi & Roussel: 1990). But in a sense, the notion of thought should include all modes of apprehension and comprehension of the subject-matter of knowledge.

siderable bibliography), and western recognition that it has influenced its own recent art. Writings are ignored, occulted. When they are perceived, they are shrugged off as primitive games. An article by Tuchscherer (1999) makes this point ones for all, showing the attitude of the editor of *The Journal of African Society* in 1920 towards the eventuality of Africans having created any kind of script.

The recognized existence of their systems of signs or writings may very well change perceptions of Africa-West relations, a change of critical perspectives that could eventually bring with it even changes in some Western scientific and esthetic modes of thinking. The series of cases that follow proves that Africanist discourse on art is marked by the restricted definition of writing, reduced to the Latin or other phonocentric alphabets. We shall see that this discourse occasionally finds its own framework a bit cramped.

Most of the extant African woodcarvings are no more than a hundred or so years old,³ but the History of Art has been able to find a place for African art only between prehistory and Egyptian Antiquity, or else between mad art and prehistory, seeing that it has grouped recent African and Oceanian artefacts in the category first called savage arts and then primitive arts.

Africanist discourse on art, generally contemptuous as we know of writing or text, may occasionally risk reading the symbols it describes, classifies and catalogs. When it questions the social or esthetic function of that art, it comes pretty close to granting these symbols a finite coded set for each culture. Thus Brain (1980) inventories samples of rock art, incised calabashes, Ashanti gold weights, Loango carved ivory tusks, wall paintings in an initiation cabin, and Bambara dyed cloths (fig. 13 and 15) covered with motives strongly suggestive of a writing, which in fact is taken from a Mande syllabary. He tends to explain art by his perception of it rather than try to understand how this art expresses this society. For long the Africanist discourse on art fastens on form or a certain function. It tends to concede mere pragmatic value to an art conceived as essentially abstract, thus expelling the possibility of a spiri-

³It seems that the oldest known one is that presented (no. 34) by the Dapper Museum in its 'Dogon' Exhibition (October 26, 1994-April 10, 1995). It is attributed to a pre-Dogon culture and accurately dated 10th century. The remnant Dogon people occupies a refuge site that has received many visitors and of which the Dogon are the heirs, notably the Tellem, the Soninke and other peoples of Mandinka origin. The perennial fixed body language of these sculptures shows that successive invaders borrowed and perpetuated some of the cultural traits of preceding occupants. It seems that the awe felt by researchers towards the more ancient fixtures of the encountered culture predisposed them to regard the new occupiers and their myths as inadequate in the face of whatever uncontrolled events had forced them into exile. Or perhaps it was the other way round.

tual presence, comforting the notion of a primitive Africa and warding off any threat of a refoundation of the psychological and historical relationship with Africa through writing.

Other Africanists, equally silent on writing, amplify the importance of orality, in which they see a proof of the superiority of their own cultures, or of those they describe, over cultures that possess a written literature. For these, orality is more complex and offers a wide range of means equal if not superior to those of writing. Verger (1972), the leading specialist of the Yoruba world, warns those who think they can relegate every orality culture to a primitive, simple cultural period of mankind. Under the title "Objets-témoins et idéogrammes-rébus" (41-3), he confers the appliquéd Abomey cloths with the àrokò, the palace bas-reliefs and carved poles, the drawings and even with the current use in marriage ceremonies of the Dubonnet label raised to the status of a proverb extolling the future housewife's virtues. Two older texts (Gollmer: 1885; Bloxam: 1887) are omitted from the bibliography, although the authors had attempted the same approach to the mythogrammatic value of the àrokò, along lines that seemed essential to Verger's argument.

It may however be conceded that the concept of African art has been rapidly evolving of late, with the emergence inter alia of the phenomenological approach to art and of the concept of Afrocentrism. Between the destruction of fetishes during the earliest contacts and phenomenology and the recent quest for contemporary lexicons of local esthetics, there are five or six centuries of discourses all characterized by the absence of non-westernized and African voices. The favorite perspectives are history of art and esthetics, with a decided fixation on three-dimensional works. In any case, African wall paintings, jewelry, architecture, tourist art, domestic objects have only recently begun to interest Africanists.

The socio-historical survey of the West's rapport to African art is happily a task that no longer must be done. The *African Studies Review* (1990, 32:2)), with articles by Paula Ben-Amos, "African Visual Arts From A Social Perspective", and Monni Adams, "African Visual Arts From An Art Historical Perspective", have done it. African art is infinitely multiple, evolving in the bosom of multiple cultures in a cultural space nearly five times as large as the United States. The French African Empire was seventy seven times as large as France was. This alone explains certain colonialist reductions of Africa to a handful of stereotypes. The Continent was too extensive, diverse and complex compared to the French homeland.

Historical science has familiarized us with arbitrary instituted continuities and ensembles raising to the status of a logic isolated, dis-

parate sets disposed on an ideal teleological time axis. A fine example of this is the history of writing, which glorifies Latin alphabet as the heir to China and Egypt its joint forebears, the one of the pictographic lineage, the other of the morphemographic.

Africanist discourse on art may see in writing a curiosity or a decorative appendix. Yet, in nearly all its manifestations, writing in the full sense, when it is not itself art, calligraphic or literary, accompanies the work of art. Thus Flam (1983) studies the symbolic value of metal sculptures. Describing certain aspects of Dogon philosophy concerning the material world, the Word and the sign, he recognizes the primacy of thought over the material universe and the preexistence of Word and Sign over object. This is a far cry from purely functional or intercessory art.

Sometimes the Africanist describes a codified object destined for reading and support to narrative, but is unable to see in it either writing or a text in the ordinary sense: Jefferson (1973). Since he innovates in placing symbols in their configurations and contexts, he must surely recognize the presence of writing. Indeed, he is one of the first to have shown the importance of Arabic calligraphy in Muslim architecture in Africa. He presents carved ivories as a form of narrative, explains that the motives on earthenware vessels and textiles may have narrative meaning beyond their decorative function. He goes even further when he describes lovers' messages printed on cloths (177). And yet he does not seem to notice that these primitives *write*, since he titles his work *The Decorative Art of Africa*. This is because his preconception of writing prevents him from perceiving writing of a different kind, just as one is deaf to the phonological system of an unknown language: at best, one transfers into one's own system the sounds believed to have been heard. When the authors of Havelock & Hershbell (1978) gather specialists of Communication Arts in Ancient Greece, they jointly adopt the themes of Art in Communication, the Poetic Source of the Alphabet, the Learning of Writing.

Africa knows writing as an esthetic object. Calligraphy is a scriptural and architectural art. The precious luxurious illuminated Korans of northern Africa are there to prove it. Some of these, dating from the dawn of our waning millennium, figure in the collections of the Paris Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle. Some of the earlier specimens were highlighted in the wave of interest thrown up by the fifth centenary of the invasion of Andalusian Spain by Nordic and comparatively barbaric peoples (Lewis: 1993). This fine civilization also embraced the African Maghreb (Dodds: 1992, ill. 74-86), which was happily spared. One of the most admirable calligraphed Arabic scripts is called Maghribi. It results from an amalgamation of Kufik writing and a com-

mon cursive. It has variants, two of which at least are stylized: the ornamental and the "decorated". They all combine beauty, simplicity and ease of learning. To the ornate manuscripts must be added millions of Koranic or geomancy tablets, some true masterpieces, originating from Islamic Africa or close to it down to Central Africa (Staunus: 1910). Their graphic text harmonizes the quests for geometric and calligraphic design. Sometimes also a heretic animal or human figuration appears, generally in profane (medicine, astronomy, agriculture, pharmacopeia, botany) rather than in religious texts. The most thorough works on this topic are Bravmann's (1974, 1983). Figure 44 and the back cover of his *African Islam* illustrate these tablets and many other writings linked to Muslim art. Writing tablets of this sort exist from the west to the east coasts and to the south as far as the islands and Madagascar. They are more and more being replaced by imported copybooks and slates.

A few Ethiopian rolls and manuscripts were exhibited at the Cabinet des Médailles et Antiques of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris during the summer of 1988. Mercier & Marchal (1992) showed parchments, medical rolls, various religious and geomancy books, bibles, strip cartoons with written commentary like in the Bayeux Tapestry, objects of daily use covered with writing, pharmacopoeias and a book of medicine, all highly illuminated. Here the text, its support, the accompanying images, the calligraphy combine into a whole endowed with great powers of fascination and even witchery, dominated by a vision which may have something to do with *wajda* in a culture that is the linguistic heir to ancient Egypt, but whose design evokes that of Byzantine paintings or of late Egyptian sarcophagi. This textual form may be compared with the Mum manuscripts of Fomaban (Cameroon) and the innumerable texts of Fulani, Hausa and Moorish manuscript literature. We note the simultaneously objectified undifferentiated textual ensemble and the scientific or religious potency of the viewed, scanned and read text. This dichotomous relation to the text is pretty common in Africa. On the one hand: the text, an ensemble conjuring up mysterious, mystic activities, often secret or known to a few, inspires awe, all the greater for being known through the commentaries of personages who are themselves charismatic. On the other: the profit the initiate draws from his experience of this and other texts. His text-inspired eloquence, his quotations out of memory, his medical or geomantic practice derived from the text make a man of book out of him (*al kitabi* in Islamized Sahel and Savanna). An initiated reader of text, he spreads awareness of it throughout society. He becomes a living text read aloud to others who in turn will spread orally a knowledge, a

mode of reflection, moral values of book origin: but the ethnograph will confuse this mode of existence of the written text with orality.

Some Mum manuscripts of Foumban (Cameroon) offer a highly effective calligraphy and many illuminated pages (Foumban Palace Museum and personal collection). Literature as a specific art, especially in Fulani and Hausa manuscripts, will be examined later, as also medical and pharmacopeia works.

A census of the manuscripts of Sahel and Savanna Mullahs was begun only a few years ago but already the numbers surveyed, and sometimes their quality, have provoked astonishment: e.g. in Ghana a copy of a work by Averroës; in Nigeria, a book of Euclidean geometry.

Ancient and medieval tomb engraved inscriptions are numerous in Mali (in Arabic or 'ajami), and in northern Africa (Libyan Berber, Punic, Vandal, Latin, Arabic, Egyptian, Greek). In Black Africa today they are abundant and vying for originality, like those of the Ibo of Nigeria or of those of southern Côte d'Ivoire. Their census has not yet been completed. Many steles are to be found within the perimeters of the current Tuareg rebellion (Moraes Farias, private communication). This author published in 1990 a provisional report on some steles in the areas of Essuk, Saney and Egef-n-Tawaqqast. For many years he has studied funereal steles and their inscriptions in the southern Sahara and West Africa. His article considers only seven inscriptions out of three areas in Mali, but they are the oldest known in all West Africa. They are dated early 11th century to late 12th. Apart from their antiquity, they are remarkable in that the scripts they attest are still in use in contemporary manuscripts. Some of these inscriptions have been long known but, as usual for attested writings in Black Africa, their importance has been minimized in two ways: they are clumsy imitations of steles imported from Al-Andalus and anyway an analysis of their contents, not really attempted, would be a waste of time as far as the history of the region is concerned. Moraes Farias vigorously opposes both views, and has no difficulty in demonstrating that the use of Arabic steles engraved by local and other sculptors preceded that of steles imported from Almeria. In addition, he recalls that Punic, Nubian, Libyan-Berber, Tifinagh scripts are attested before the Arabic in the whole of Africa north of the Sahara, and that the Arabic-inscribed steles from the East Coast are posterior to those he deals with. Using a plural comparative approach to the documents, from rhetorical, stylistic, calligraphic, lexicological approaches, he reconstructs the historical religious background of the trans-Saharan trade; then he analyzes the contents of the seven inscriptions for the intrinsic information they offer over a span of several centuries, revealing periods of calm alternating with violent sociopolitical convulsions. One of the most signifi-

cant merits of these thorough studies is the demonstration that the text of these steles bears witness to the existence of a local Tuareg cultural identity universalized by Islam.

These inscriptions are numerous, some say 2 or 3 thousand, and many are yet to be discovered. One scholar alone, Gironcourt, quoted by Moraes Farias, has traces of 172 inscriptions. Calligraphy varies from graffiti-like cursive, partly illegible abbreviations to the most monumental and artistic Kufik. Contemporary Tuareg property-markings on dromedaries remind of Kufik writing rather than of Maghribi. A bibliography of more than 100 titles already opens up a new almost virgin field, which we may leave aside for the moment.

Ancient and medieval monuments also contain the best-known writings: Egyptian, Meroitic, Nubian, Kushitic, Coptic, and Amharic Ethiopian. Contemporary monuments, tombs, temples, initiation cabins, rock faces, clothes, sacred and profane cloths are likewise used as supports for writing. Wall painting is inscribed since Antiquity nearly everywhere in the African landscape.

To propose seeing a homeomorphic relation between the structures of artefacts and sociocultural structures is an undertaking that should long have ceased to raise eyebrows provided it strikes a balance. The scholar must be equally at home in art and in society. Such an approach is practiced by structuralist semioticians and phenomenologists. Some Africans are very good at it, like Ekpo Eyo and Rowland Abiodun. A few Westerners too, like H.J. Drewal, J.Pemberton III and S.Preston-Blier (*African Art Studies*: 1987). The producer of art objects becomes a privileged interlocutor for the interpretant who, ideally, is content with translating him as little as possible. The homeomorphism arises at the confluence of the artist's vision of his work and his conception of his society. For some scholars, it possesses necessary and sufficient explanatory value. Literary criticism adopts a similar aim, but non-phenomenological, with e.g. Lucien Goldmann's *Sociology of the Novel*. Often these objects are made up of symbols articulated according to a local logic. They appear in a cultural landscape and reflect it. Isolated from its context, often amputated of a part of itself, offered corpsified in western showcases, the African object is cut off from the constitution of its meaning. Its internal and external logic must be restored to it and their homeomorphism geared up to the incipient authentic meaning (Preston: 1985).

Objects may be invested with arbitrary meaning. In the Angolan exclave of Cabinda, woyo pot covers may, apart from their primary function, serve for communication between spouses (Vergani: 1988). A figurative group of objects and characters suggests a message, a proverb, and an anecdote known only to both spouses. It forms a paradigm whose con-

stituents we can name, but whose narrative or explicative structure can only be a matter of connotation. Dispatched to an absent spouse, a figurative cover has meaning for him or her, as it was a three-dimensional hieroglyph. These wooden or clay pot covers usually symbolize proverbs. They may also be silently exchanged in public. Outside the spouses' closed family circles they are difficult to decipher. In museums, out of context and time, they are obviously stripped of any meaning. In Cabinda itself, they are falling into disuse and collective memory is uncertain about them. Vergani's statistical approach to 272 covers aimed at bringing out recurrences of themes, forms, modes of spatialization of figures, and types of occurrences in family events. Some of these covers are male, others female.

In 1989, Faïk-Nzuji & Balila Balu dedicated to Calame-Griaule their reading of one *taampha*, one of the Cabinda covers. As instruments of marital intercourse, these visual symbols transmit thought and are collectively an original social regulatory system, capable of protecting spouses against verbal communication during a crisis. They are concrete aids to solidarity, honesty and reconciliation (Sumbo: 1988).

An exhibition in the National Museum of African Art (1993), Washington, brings together a type of traditional sculpture and a contemporary artistic production, under the titles *The Eyes of Understanding: Congo Minkisi* (MacGaffey) and *The Art of Renée Stout* (Harris). The two sides of this exhibition differently inform the theme of writing in Africa. A *Nkisi*, a booklet of the exhibition tells us, had no meaning without the "medicaments" which it contained or wore (they are not always sculptures). *Nkisi* attribute-objects were chosen in terms of their linguistic or figurative values, because of their names, or of a part of their names, like for a rebus. An early 20th century evangelist, Nsemi Isaki, has provided a list of the more common, e.g. these two:

Luyala (a fruit), that the *Nkisi* might "subdue" (*yaala*) hostile sorcerers.
Kalazina (charcoal), the one who can "lay low" (*zima*) (all those who are diabolically disposed to wreak evil).

We can therefore see in the attribute-objects of a *Nkisi* a mytho-grammatical inscription. The editors (MacGaffey and Harris) do not state whether this communication system functions between deities, ancestors, ghosts and *Nkisi* makers, or between these last, or yet again within the whole or a fraction of a particular Kongo society. Nevertheless, the text of the prayer is definitely a text. Within a restricted community there is a tendency to make similar *Nkisi*. Linguistically, *Nkisi* may be regarded as a sort of form of the signifier, intentional and limiting the possibilities of interpretation, which so vary, within

these limits, from one interpretant to another, the differences being of quantity of objects and quality of the finished artefact. They are sets of selected codified signs, which may be verbalized by initiates and serve in their distant communications or in their supernatural intercessions in favor of their clientele.

The other side of the exhibition is devoted to a black American artist, Renée Stout, whose work is clearly influenced by Nkisi and some comparable works produced by Black Americans in the last century. In several of her own works one can detect the special potency of Nkisi, to which she adds writing. Illustrations 73 (a, d and e), 90 and 96 show objects that include texts and brief inscriptions. Questioned by us on their meaning, the artist spoke seriously of automatic writing, of inexplicable impulses. Apart from significant dates in her own biography and fragments in English, one can recognize a set of signs taken from African writing systems. An attempt at decipherment shows odd, unmatched but linearly disposed loans from the Vai, Nubian, Coptic, Tifinagh, Bassa, Mum, Ethiopian, Libyan, Egyptian hieroglyphic, Kiduma of the Kimbanguists (Zaire), all writing systems, plus other objects. The general impression given by these "texts" is decidedly African. The juxtaposition of this cryptic writing with English reminds us of the many bilingual North African inscriptions, which enabled the decipherment of the Punic, Numidian, Meroitic and the three Egyptian writing systems. Illustration 90 of the object titled "She Kept Her Conjuring Table Very Neat" presents a low table standing on a carpet. The carpet looks rather patched up, but on closer examination we can see that one of the bits has the shape of one of the most common Mangbetu appliquéd cloths from the Congo region. The commentary ignores a small book kept open by a glass pendulum. The artist crafted this book. In the middle of each page, a manuscript text like the lines mentioned above occupies a small non-delineated square. Let us note in passing that the comments attracted by the exhibition generally tend to ignore the inscription of writing in the works of Renée Stout. That an art critic, for instance, should have failed to recognize the Egyptian *wajda* eye in one of the inscriptions is, to say the least, surprising. It may be recalled that this eye often accompanies the Egyptian god of writing Thot. It symbolizes knowledge, intelligence and features six multiple fractions of 2. Its phonetic value is /z/. This wink from the artist could be meaningful only for an accomplice, someone possessing the same knowledge. It recalls the commonest way of signifying in African systems of writing. Initiates alone share the secret of the system, but the symbols are public, proclaiming a power all the greater for being secret,⁴ tacit or con-

⁴For secrecy in Mum script alone, see Dugast (1950) and Tardits (1989; 1991).

spiratorial. African writing tends to immediately represent the essence of the power it accompanies. That it might be read in the same way as western writing does not depend on its existence for the people. The distance between the action of writing and the interpretation of the quintessence of the writer's intention is, in Africa, considerably narrower than in the West. This gap has the advantage or otherwise of allowing a greater, albeit limited, multiplicity of meanings than in alphabetical writing. But the productivity effect concerns not so much meaning as (pedagogically) semantisation per se. This handicap may be perceived in Africa as the overriding right of creation, interpretation, as the impossible negation of the history of the "readers", of the reading situation. The African "text" does seem to be more on the reader's than on the writer's side, more cerebral than linguistic, more global than analytical, more social than individual, more perennial than topical. Read by a wider public in the way a snapshot is perceived as a whole, this type of text provokes a prime meaning, precise and imperious, that transcends and at the same time annihilates all attempts at glossing, and belongs more to the realm of comprehension than explanation. It can nevertheless also be writing in the restricted sense, but then mostly for a small group of elect.

Segy developed the idea of African art as a substitute for writing and speech. As early as 1951, he published two texts, on Bakuba drinking cups and Warega ivories. Already he saw in these art forms surrogates for an emotion-based writing.

The subtitles in Segy's 1953 publication include terms such as signification, speech, writing, name, sign, symbol, and meaning. He attempts to demonstrate that Black Africa did not feel the need for writing because it had sculpture as a substitute for it. He recalls in passing other African substitutes for writing, such as the talking drum, wall and body painting, Ashanti weights, scarifications and the whole gamut of symbols. He opposes *Homo divinans* to *Homo faber* as more African, implying a more immediate and global seizure of meaning and little interest in phonetic and therefore analytical writing. He mentions a few systems of writing, but as examples of recent developments, except Nsibidi. This article espouses the official western definition of writing, seeing in African systems rudimentary although adequate means of communication given the state of development of African societies. He concludes:

We can feel the force of the African sculpture at once; but we might have to write 254 pages in an attempt to verbalize what a single carving can express to the African in a split second (Reprint, *Journal of Human Relations*, Winter Issue, 21).

Segy (1975) returns to and amplifies this argument in *African Sculpture Speaks*, without approaching the notions of text and even of texture. Works of art are supposed to also mean. Nobody before Barber (1994) had wondered how far this meaning is textual, i.e. seen how works of art are constituted from generic conventions that ensure their internal cohesion. In addition, Barber signals that few have studied how an object can generate a text and conversely.

Of late, African art has been seen from new perspectives and new artefacts have been added to it. Airport art is no longer scorned, is even analyzed (Jules-Rosette: 1984). The art historian and the esthetician are turning into phenomenologists and concerning themselves with African intentions and perceptions, and their reception. They are questioning the African way of expressing esthetics, creativity, and function in the object. In an international "Symposium on African Arts" (1992), numerous papers analyze the interaction of forms and meanings in the African context. Dominated as usual by art historians, this high-level reunion revealed certain recent contradictions in Africanism, in particular the study of an art said to be "primitive" by a discipline originally defined and methodologized, and still heavily marked, by the study of the Renaissance in Europe. Many participants did however show that they were no slaves to the referential frameworks of art history, and some others, semioticians, ethnologists, prehistorians, contributed the sort of perspectives one might expect from this kind of conference. The workshop "Memory, Language, and Art: African Mnemonic Systems", organized by Polly Nooter, was particularly informative. From the word go she announced that numerous esthetic forms are, in one way or another, containers for the preservation of knowledge. For instance: song, dance, sculpture, proverb, morphemogram, hallucination, and medical practices. She then went on to say that the papers of her session would take up and strongly affirm the recent idea that transmission itself is a mode of manifestation of memory, that memory is a dynamic process informed by cognitive experiences by which images are formed. This was a mutation apart from Plato and Aristotle's discourse on memory. These, in their own ways, had said that memory is a discrete function of intellection in which visual material is stored like in a data bank and retrieved on request. Memory, as it was perceived by participants in that session, is engendered in the course of an esthetic manifestation, in which expression and signification are fused in the connection of word and image. As such, memory —like signification— is not encased in the form of a single expression, and is not made transparent by the most elegant analysis of form; it can only be interpreted when it is located in a social organization and a practice of communication. P. Nooter mentions a decorated Luba board which helps members of a se-

cret society to remember their ideological and genealogical information; carved scepters that serve as historical references for chiefs and nobles in deciding on the legitimacy of power; wall inscriptions that help initiation masters in their ritual and mythical recitations; diviners who use a calabash full of objects together figuring moral lessons and precepts; and finally dances remindful of the exploits of former kings. In all these case studies, convergence of meaningful social practices is emphasized, but only up to the next ritual cycle. Meanwhile, loss of memory, new social dynamics and secret restrictions ensure that collective memory "will rewrite itself anew" and that "cultural" knowledge will go through perpetual transformations and creative mutations. In the same session, Nancy Nooter points to the different views of scholars in the study of San rock art. Some think it could be shamanistic representation involving visions and hallucinations. For others, resting on the logic of representational strategies, it brings proof that inspiration is always ordered and coherent. However, yet other studies of African graphic systems tend to show that these can only be translated into the language of the culture of the artefacts. MacGaffey, for instance, about Nkisi sculptures, points out that "every nail, in theory, reminds the Nkisi of the particular problem in the name of which it has been planted, and was consequently the recording of successive interventions". Quarcoopome, taking his cue from Kabu Ometsetse's royal attributes, explains how the manipulations of art, history and performance, especially musical, serve the double purpose of conserving knowledge and constructing new ideological and social perspectives.

The expression "will rewrite itself anew" calls for a few observations. In dealing with mnemonic esthetic systems, P. Nooter uses language very close to glossematics and semiotics. It may be significant that she uses, if only figuratively, the term rewrite (which we understand as referring to a particular type of writing) to describe African mnemonic systems. The word anew, by its ambiguity, opens onto two semantic fields. In the first place, it means "again, every time", seeming then to define a series of states, of synchronies distributed over an infinite calendar. But anew also means "modified, transformed, renewed". Expression will be "differently recreated", she says, suggesting a palimpsest process, one of the key notions of postmodernism. These traditional societies are not, it would seem, as static as has been claimed by the first ethnographers. Perhaps they do *not* simply reproduce themselves; perhaps each new ritual might draw new perspectives out of old forms? Plato's concept of memory (defined, as we have seen, chapter 2) may yet be more relevant than P. Nooter seems to believe. Derrida (1972) has insisted on the difference, in Plato, between *mnèmè* and *hypomnèmè*, the one opposing the other as corpse to creativity,

cliché to neology, as well as novel to new novel, philosophy to new philosophy, grammar to linguistics. An Africa would appear to have understood that mnemonic devices could endanger both the perennity of institutions and the necessity of historic evolution. This, in effect, is what Thamus, the legendary king of Thebes, rejoined Thot, the inventor of writing. The written word matters only insofar as one believes to have forgotten it and in this very rejection takes on a new mode of being, open to other writings, other experiences which one will traverse and forget, at the cost of perpetual mutations. With the artefact, equivalent to letter and creative thought, Africa offers herself the advantage of bypassing writing, thanks to her unfetishistic attitude towards it. The significant object is directly connected with its interpretant, but the one and the other bow out before the primacy of text, of the transcendence they have created one might say on the way. We shall examine elsewhere the extent to which writing, perceived in its non-significant textual totality (before it is read) can be an object of fascination in Africa. It is then its essence, its power to signify, not what it signifies, that is seized upon by collective admiration: hence the wall writings in initiation cabins, in the Bandiagara cliff, in Egyptian and Meroitic temples, and again on hangings that forbid access to places in which the secret is kept.

African writing may well offer itself as a show. The act of writing then becomes the show itself, no matter what each sign may signify. What is here celebrated is the power of writing, not so much a narrative as an articulation of ideas confronted with and tested by everyday life. Okediji (1988) describes the painting of an altar dedicated to the Yoruba deity Oluorogbo. He explains the rigorous sequentiality of the dramaturgy. Before him, it was generally felt that these ritual painting sessions were rather a matter of unbridled instinct than a careful, deliberate, rigorously articulated selection of signs recounting and recording a perennial story. The painters are women who act, dance and sing a traditional act. But over and above the reference to history, the actresses mime their present aspirations and solutions, sacred or profane. The original ancient text is *mis en abyme*, i.e. encased in other more contemporary narratives which it enhances, thus proving its essential role. A simulated sacred diegesis founds the mimesis, which in turn magnifies and justifies the first. Here again, one hesitates to see a writing; and yet, we have a codified, ritualized graphic and the memory of a text. Interpretation takes on its full meaning, integrating diegesis and mimesis and making them totally necessary to each other. This form of dramaturgy is not new, but Okediji sees in it a tradition exclusive to Ile-Ife, once the mythological and historic capital of the Yoruba world. Wall paintings of temples and altars are in fact attested in all

Africa and the association of pictographic (or other) writing with place and local rite is common. It would seem to exist, in Yorubaland itself, in places like Savé, a Nago (Yoruba) city in the Republic of Bénin (Olabiya Yai, private communication, June 3, 1993). It may be regretted that Okediji does not describe these paintings. He however adds this:

Ife traditions describe how Oluorogbo invented an ancient writing system; how he was acclaimed a sage; how he used to write his scripts on the walls of his compound, and how his scripts eventually became so popular. Nobody knew what he wrote, but it was gratifying enough that he wrote.

When he died his wife tried to imitate his writing systems, but discovered that she did not quite understand what he was doing. In order to perpetuate Oluorogbo's work, in spite of her inperspicuity of the scripts, his wife organized annual festivals, during which she attempted to imitate his writing system. Her friends and relatives always joined her. However, due to her lack of understanding, she could only draw out what her husband wrote, without making any profound meaning out of the figures she copied or painted. To her it was enough that she imitated him. Even though what she painted was exceedingly different from what he wrote. After the death of the wife, her offsprings have continued to perpetuate the work of their ancestral father, Oluorogbo.

Every year, the female members of the Oluorogbo descendants gather and try to imitate Oluorogbo's writing. They end up drawing pictures of various objects, drawn from everyday life and antiquity, since they have lost memory of Oluorogbo's writing symbols. However they believe that they imitate him, as they paint the shrine walls, during the annual Oluorogbo's festival (187).

The entire process of executing the Oluorogbo shrine mural is a mimetic process with definite dramatic significances. The process of painting the mural seems a ritual plot, by the end of which a mythographic design is completed, if the plot is followed faithfully. The process followed by the Oluorogbo shrine painters, nowadays, is an elegant dramatic enactment of the processes followed by Oluorogbo himself, while he was writing his script originally. The depiction of the script writing process, as painting form becomes a dramatic performance, embellished with songs, chants and dances. (188)

What is most noteworthy is the fact that at the beginning of the drama, the set was black. In the course of the drama, as the performers went to work with paints and brushes, the set began to come alive with various images. Towards the end of the entire drama, the painters had completed the set design.

At this point the painters ceased painting and singing, in order to pray their ancestral deity, Oluorogbo. This prayer sequence was a bridge between illusion and reality, between the deities and man, between drama

and life. It was mimetic to the extent that it followed a certain order, long established and ritualized. It tried to be a faithful copy of an archetypal prayer, containing certain efficacious symbols, phrases and words. (189)

This text calls for further inquiries and surely reflections. Let us for now note the prestige vested and perpetuated in the act of writing within a society deemed without writing. The will to maintain a set of articulated meanings seems in fact to produce a recreation. Oluorogbo's exceptional wisdom is associated with the invention and practice of writing. The simultaneous performance of writing as it is created, of Oluorogbo's actions and of accompanying scenarios forms an indissoluble whole in which every element founds and is founded on all the others. This is a fascinating shortcut, from the very act of inventing writing to the most complex processes of interpretation. The pertinence of myth (Eliade: 1963) in everyday life is founded on respect for the old manuscripts that illumine our own. How can one explain graphic signifiers if not through the gestures which created them in a context that gave them a meaning, while they in turn help us understand our present? The memory of oral tradition, on the one hand, and written signs devoid of meaning, on the other, tear apart these two in the West inseparable entities. Better still, the sense and relevance of the ancient text remain in the painters' active memory. What is affirmed, in short, is the autonomy of the text's meaning in relation to its material manifestation. The latter satisfies the need for forms to be ritualized, but it is the actualized meaning of the text that is vested with the full value of its necessity during the ceremony. The fascination, on the anecdotal level, of the sacred written text (all too often an obstacle to the realization of authentic religious meaning) being occulted, it becomes possible to establish the only useful meaning, that which is reactivated every year but, although founded on ancestral or mythological authority, tries to circumvent its origin by cutting its link with it while in the very act of celebrating it. Let us bear in mind, for the sake of our immediate argument, that the written word can be forgotten if we have integrated its meaning, if we go on re-actualizing it, and that it helps us even more if we have forgotten it. We seem to be talking like Blanchot, who says something like this: "forgetting creates a rapport with what is forgotten, a rapport which in secreting what has created it, holds the power and meaning of the secret" or like Herriot, reputed to have said that culture is what remains after everything has been forgotten. In this perspective we wrote long ago that "the secret is the code of the multiple network of signifying relations, registered as a formal set of logical potentialities, available for other semiotic games, begetter of its own critique, and of its own perfectibility comforted by an endless desire to play".

Some will not be able to recognize the importance of the foregoing. Quite evidently a certain conception of writing and the Latin alphabet fills an essential place in the heart of the Western episteme. Writing, originally a medium, has become the keystone of a mythology. There is such an inflation of writing in the western world that to be read becomes a privilege, to be quoted and/or understood or, better still, criticized and applied a rare instance, a source of vanity and of social and professional preferment. That Oluorogbo writing is not unique. There have been and are in the world, including Africa, inventors of scripts, of sign systems who did it only for themselves, for some use they felt the need of. Is Leonardo da Vinci a primitive when he writes his codex backwards twice, simultaneously from right to left and virtualized in a mirror? The draft of the Gettysburg Address, written in an ad hoc script invented by Lincoln, is illegible to us: it was for a moment the key to the history of the United States. Of Leonardo da Vinci and Lincoln mankind wants to remember the stature, their genius, their contribution and, as for Oluorogbo, their "wisdom". The best note-taking is not stenography of the coming speech, but the jotting down of a few main ideas or intentions and their articulations. We shall have to return to the West's fetishism of writing and the obstacle it creates on the path to critical thinking. A colleague from Berkeley, where numerous texts of the New Criticism were taught, wrote to us once that many of his students didn't read novels or poetry anymore, didn't think for themselves anymore but instead swallowed and regurgitated, whole, large chunks of metalanguage that were given to them to dissect. Robbe-Grillet, invited to conduct writing workshops at Columbia, cut it short and later wrote us that the students could write in his manner better than he, the height of absurdity for anyone who knows this author and his vision of the function of literature (Battestini: 1980).

For his description of a Bondo opera of Sierra Leone, Lamb (Drewal: 1988) gives (fig. 16) a drawing of a letter from the Vai syllabary, the letter pronounced /ti/. He points out that it looks like the path of a procession of Bondo Temné women (83). The initiation ceremony is called *ang-wol* (coming out of), because the young girls are coming out of long seclusion. The opera consists of a series of dramatic events, singing, instrumental music, costume changing, and natural lighting effects, make-up and dance. But, insists the author, the point is that a change is taking place. If one perceives this change as a connected series of scenes on the inward stage, generating one another, one can understand the self-critical perspective of semiotics. Initiation is a metamorphosis into adulthood, like a chrysalis into a butterfly. This letter /ti/ of the Vai syllabary also means to be or rather to become. Before the ceremony, these Temne women had no existence: their's begins with the rep-

resentation, when they become aware of the responsibilities of citizenship, of persons responsible before the group. The letter founds the work that produces a metamorphosis of the self.

What we are looking for with these examples are recurrences and tendencies covering the whole cultural Continent, in the hope that others will take them up and test them in the field. Just one more perhaps: in the same *TDR* issue (Drewal: 1988), another case of graphic association, this time the ritual initiation of an Olokun priestess (186-207). The history of *L'écriture de la danse* (1993) in Europe tells us that noting dance steps is very ancient. Some attempts to codify the movements of human bodies, such as "enter two women, Rigadoon", by Louis Pécour, and others by Feuillet, recall Congolese cosmograms or complex Nsibidi graphics. We know that some African dances delineate graphic signs on the ground, like the Dogon dance symbolizing the cycle of Sirius. Writing, then, can preserve the memory of danced forms and dance can reproduce graphic signs. Gesture and dance may sometimes mimic writing, as we have just seen. For a Berber like Saint Augustine, a semiotician before the letter (Simone: 1972), dance and song are language modes of expression:

The movements of their bodies [are] a sort of universal language, expressed by the face, direction of eyes, movements of limbs and voice inflections, which indicate the state of feelings in the mind as it appeals, enjoys, rejects or avoids various objects (*Confessions*: I, viii, 13).

Numerous authors have observed homeomorphism between choreographies and ground signs (symbols) writing. Hands may also trace in the air signs that complete, comment on, or even contradict the mimed narrative. Often a single dancer emerges from the group and draws with his feet ad hoc signs as for a choreographic notation. This is attested among young Efik and Ibibio girl dancers and Bambara and Dogon men. In Bou Saada, an Ouled Nail girl dancer would literally write in the air, from breasts to pelvis, a message reinforced by her eyes. Feet, legs, shoulders, arms and torso may tell a parallel, complementary story. Savanna puppets use various gestures, which may supplement their sign language with deliberate graphic forms. Young Tuareg men publicly but discreetly write Tifinagh signs on their girlfriends' turned down hidden palms: a palimpsest caress. In Efik country, it is fun to write with the index finger words in Nsibidi on a friend's back, which he or she must guess. Thompson (1974) describes, under the title "Ejagham Leopard Mimes and the Sign of Greatness", several aspects of ritual communication among the Cross River State Ejagham, a culture comparable to but not identical with many neighbor cultures (Efik, Ibo,

Ibibio, Efut). He also explains how the Nsibidi script is associated with Ngbe and Ekpe ceremonies:

The traditional writing system of the Ejagham, at least as old as the basalt monoliths of the Nnam and neighboring Ejagham groups — i.e., predating Western penetration of the area by several centuries, essentially functions on two communicative levels, sacred and profane. The latter focused on love and reconciliation, leading to birth and rebirth. Sacred signs were documents of death and initiation, matters of most important transition. Much of the former and a little of the latter can be rapidly illustrated by a sampling of recurrent motifs, which once were chalked on walls, embroidered or appliquéd on cloth, painted and resist-dyed on cloth, incised on calabashes, hammered (at Duke Town) on brass containers, cut in divinatory leaves, painted on toy swords, and tattooed on human skin (177 and 180).

The Ejagham Ngbe secret society (similar to the Ekpe of the Efik) uses a gestural language (*Egbe*) which is duplication on another mode of Nsibidi. Thompson describes the battles of signs indulged in by members of the society. Two council members face each other and, in a “prolonged intellectual and artistic combat” (180), debate the cases submitted to their competence. The sign of love, two inverted and intersected curved lines, is copied from the written sign by bending and crossing both index fingers. Roman numerals were once hand gestures too.

Thompson estimates that these gestural signs are a grammar. They are used sequentially and nearly always as responses between two partners. He describes one of these silent bouts, a veritable trial by combat between stalwart initiates, the winner being the quicker and more knowledgeable performer. In the same work he shows the interaction of Congolese cosmograms with the Voodoo cults in the Americas. The 1983 text contains many drawings of cosmograms and attempts a classification of Nsibidi signs.

In the total context of communal life, art is never really a single, separate category, although it will of course come out in time and place, sometimes discreetly, as when color is used to add to the meaning of the ceremonial ensemble or to reinforce it. The codified use of color ranges from the simplest, e.g. one color one sentiment, to a combination of colors forming a discourse, as in circumstantial explicit declarations of love. In Tornay (1978), several articles deal with color symbolism in Africa (Mina of Bénin, Tenda of Senegal, Mursi of Ethiopia, Kanguet-el-Hajjaj of Tunisia, and the Nkisi cult among the Bakongo). Tornay’s text “Perception des couleurs et pensée symbolique” (609-37), and the methodological reflections in annex, throw light on the question of cultural divergences over the color spectrum and open up new perspectives

on "the language of colors". Again one can observe the immediate link between thought and symbol, bypassing the letter, and its freeing of imagination and interpretation. But the use of colored pearls in southern Africa is not dealt with, for a simple reason. Works in the French language show that Africanist research is not always abreast of research in Francophone countries other than France (Africa, Switzerland, Belgium, and Canada), let alone other languages. This reminds us of that colloquium in Salisbury (Fortes & Dieterlen: 1965) during which specialists in African thought discovered, to their dismay, that Anglophone Africans tended to think like the English, and that the thought of Francophone Africans showed strange resemblances with various manifestations of typically French ways of thinking.

Not one of the authors in Tornay mentions the famous Zulu love-messages or the Ndebele pearly aprons. One article begins with an interview of the soothsayer Nyangatom Lojuko, of Nantua in southern Ethiopia, the point of which is the metaphor extended by this African between paper, writing and ... his divining instruments and symbolics. It seems it was a dynamic, culture to culture translation, performed for the interviewer, which would imply that he knew both and would put the Africanist in a position of inferiority vis-à-vis his primitive study-object.

The general and varied practice of scarification seems to have been essentially African, while skin painting or tattooing is worldwide. The art of hairstyling reaches its summits in Black Africa but has not really been studied scientifically. Decorating white skins seems easier, most pigments being generally darker than the skin of Westerners. Graphic effects obtained on a paler background by the use of vegetal blue or black inks are widespread. Northern Africa practices palm, footsole and gum painting, apparently for esthetic reasons only. Some Maghreb tattooings are tribal marks. Others, notably on hands, are very beautiful. They are generally geometric, some however stylized from flowers, or, according to certain observers, from the sex organs. Tattooing is rarer in Black Africa, perhaps owing to contrasting inks being difficult to procure. There are dozens of explanations or justifications for scarification. None is comprehensive.

Brain (1979) offers examples of signifying body decoration drawn from the world over, and especially from Africa: Dogon, Nuba, Masai, Tiv, Shilluk, Bangwa, Fulani, Bambara, Ashanti, Bamileke, Bateke, Bushmen, Coniagui, Dinka, Hottentot, Ibo...(Chapter VI: The Symbolic Body). Decoration may be an aid to meaning, but rarely the meaning itself. This symbolic body calls for an attempt to clarify the notion of symbol. As we know, one of the leading theorists of semiotics, Umberto Eco (1976) rejects this concept as being non-operational, too loaded with

diverse meanings to retain any for a science of the universal. Whenever, on the basis of controlled evidence, a tattoo or a scarification, a singular graphic sign, has a referent and one only in a given culture, that symbol becomes a codified sign, a decor and letter-sign, so that "Every attempt to establish what the referent of a sign is forces us to define the referent in terms of an abstract entity, which moreover is only a cultural convention" (66). The meaning of a symbol can only be that of a local cultural unit, and in this respect semiotics is less embarrassed than other sciences, since it regards meaning as necessarily peculiar, arbitrary and provisional and consequently chooses to question the ongoing constitution of those meanings rather than claim to establish perennial truths. On this theme, contemporary literature goes along with Eco and critics agree with him that symbols are a bit too much of a good thing, each being found with a unique set of circumstances (Todorov: 1977, 1978) and unlikely to recur elsewhere with the same referent. Nevertheless, it seems possible that a similar or analogous set in a neighbor or distant culture will give birth to similar or analogous symbols, a notion very much favored by diffusionists. Some symbologists also assert that chance has its laws and that the same set may produce the same symbol, or symbols with common features. Finally, there are symbols that are morphemographic, like the circle for an assembly of people, or the arrow for direction. Graphomotricity reveals the physiological limits of the hand in reducing to two dimensions a visual object. Other constraints are brought about by the techniques, materials, tools and supports used. And the fact remains that the use of symbols is universally attested.

Studies of two kinds, typological (Torday: 1913) and semiotic (Coquet & Régis: 1984; Régis: 1985), on scarification and tattooing in Africa allow some stocktaking of the theme.

Coquet & Régis deal with scarification within one of the Bwaba cultures. Both their methodology and conclusions bring new breath into ethnological research. Coquet shows that scarified motives refer to Bwaba mythology, the graphics of the former and the "texts" of the latter implying each other. Having described two types of writing among the Bwaba, who are related to the Bobo of Burkina-Faso, Coquet shows that *won* writing is figurative, whereas *wiini* is geometric and "hollow". About *wiini* signs used in scarification, we are told that "grouping by composition and succession of strokes forms discrete figures that each refer to an autonomous micro-narrative within a wider statement, thus making the set of drawings inscribed on the body a signifying set" (73). Initiate blacksmiths alone can read these texts integrally, but there are levels of reading, and the easiest are the common-

est, most superficial, and also least private and confidential⁵ (Coquet in Coquet & Régis: 1984, 73-92).

Régis's Greimasian text must be read in conjunction with the work that he published a year later. Founded on the same research, these two masterly works posit that the dynamics of sign-production analysis assumes that of the state actualized by the observer, as well as that of the plastic statement constituted by the object of study. Refusing any kind of exclusivism, Régis combines ethnology and art history and confronts them with (Parisian) semiotics. He concludes that these scarified writings imply different levels of knowledge and power on the part of the Bwaba people, the dignitaries, and the initiate. A topological survey of scarifications shows careful functional distribution. The eye is the generic center; the rest of the body is peripheral and specific. The totality of the composition presupposes mutually related the central and the peripheral as the generic "knowing-power" (*savoir-pouvoir*) is to the specific "knowing-power". Thus the scarified-tattooed one is under contract with the object he has become. The writings are irreversible, like the individual's fate in the social mesh. They credit him with a definite know-how and can-do that define his rights and duties in relation to his forebears and his natural and social milieus (Régis in Coquet & Régis: 1984, 93-101).

Régis (1985) goes further when, describing the scarifications with tattooings practiced by his Burkina-Faso Bwaba, he ventures beyond the observation of African practice. One of the aims of semiotics, of its essence for some, is to construct models. Thus he concludes:

A discursive analysis of this type may take in charge not only the innumerable optical parameters which intervene in works where a "visual cacophony" makes selection of approaches undecidable, but works that do not (or practically not) propose an on sight approach, as is the case (to go back to the two arts we have rested our argument upon) with the primitive object of decorative intent when it presents a uniform distribution of identical motives, or with modern monochrome paintings like Yves Klein's, Robert Ryman's and so on (34).

Essentially, this dense and original study proposes a discussion program comprising the individuation of content and "technical-topological" reading on the level of expression. Such a method seems capable of proposing coherent analyses of innumerable apparently chaotic "images" delivered by the African continent, e.g. Kuba cloths, the

⁵With their numerous illustrations, sketches and photographs, and a high-quality text showing thorough research, this work and Régis' are models, in our opinion, of Africanist research.

Pygmies' painted *libers*, parietal arts of Southern Africa, Kabyle serial symbols, Masai shields, Ndebele aprons, certain wall paintings, etc. Founded on the working-out of the presupposed relations of different levels of content and expression, this discursive practice would seem a model for uncovering the grammar of a work or of a plastic style, as Thürlemann points out in his preface. Even decorative and having no intention to communicate, a work reflects a vision of the world through the cultural finality of its mode of production and the perception of the finished object which may be had when subjecting it to the scrutiny of a formed and diversely informed mind. Such a work convinces one of the pertinence of the semiotic approach to visual objects in Africa (and elsewhere). Regis states:

The construction of the content off the ethnographic object compels us to replace it in the complex network of relations woven between itself and the many mythic-ritual situations in which it is involved (7).

Africa also knows tattooing. Torday's (1913) typology is still valid. He had recognized two common types: relief and hollow (we are not far from scarification). He mentions a third type, attested among the Bena Lulua, a Baluba people, which is produced by light grazing of the skin and leaves curvilinear marks of varying complexity that look like those covering the Mbuti Pygmies' *libers* or the Ibos' and other Cross River peoples' *uli* in Nigeria. But Torday's work is essentially concerned with recognition and clarification of the commonest forms.

Photographs of African ceremonies variously show men, women and children with painted faces and torsos, usually with white kaolin powder, red camwood and brown laterite. When we were there, members of the Ekpe secret society in Calabar painted their limbs with signs of their Nsibidi script. Willis (1987) has established the lexicon of an apparently important set of *uli* Ibo motives (southeastern Nigeria) (91-121).

Aniakor (1974), apropos the Ikenga (an Ibo people), seems to have put forward a satisfactory approach to the language-art relation. Such a rapprochement is frequent in Africanist literature, but Aniakor seems to offer a different approach to the sculptor's relation with his object, a perspective conditioned by his expressive intent. The choice of wood is determined by certain qualities, such as density and the connotations of some species. In working his material, the sculptor is usually less concerned with representing people and objects than with applying non-verbalized concepts he has about them. Sculpture, in this context, is fully sculptural in its language. Symbolization of form, reflected in the static pose of an Ikenga statue, respects the artist's will to express in a

work of art the essential concept ideomorphically reduced (5-6). Anikor also points out that uli drawings are painted on the statues, thus combining their significations with those of the plastic forms.

Piette (1986) attempts one of the first syntheses of functional interpretation of scarifications in African societies. Synthesizing existing works sometimes leads to adoption of current authoritative views. He lists the functions of scarifications as marks of belonging, rites of passage, esthetic or erotic values, prophylactic, therapeutic or magic-religious practices. In a second part he attempts a series of interpretations of their graphics, their relations with myths, their value as masks, as body beautifiers, as violence. In conclusion, he opposes scarification to writing, in the spirit of the old Traditional/Western dichotomy. Scarification he sees as a graphic support for myths and magic acts, as corporeal inscription, and lastly as the willful infliction of pain, characteristics that explain its absence in our societies which find it questionable. He hasn't thought of tattooing in the West and Asia, of the contemporary cult of the body with its resculpturing of face and breasts and belly and practically every other organ. Actually, the practice of facial marking is on the wane among the Yoruba; some clans are even said never to have had it. The elders of the city of Ondo still like to recognize their own through a single vertical horizontal bar on each cheek and some vertical temporal ones, and those of Ogbomosho through one oblique scar on each cheek reaching the middle of the nose. Children usually wore the same scars as their fathers.

The two- or three-dimensional esthetic object is not a linguistic object. It is wrong to see in intentional codified and interpreted forms nothing but clumsy substitutes for writing or forerunners of the Latin alphabet, as Tardy (1958) endeavored to demonstrate. Presenting image as a writing, he proceeded to describe a fatalistic evolution from pictography to alphabet, taking his examples from the symbols of Crete, Egypt and Babylon.

In the Africanist museums of Europe and America, everyone is able to see specimens of these "longhand" plastic art objects called *lukasa* by the Luba, sometimes without mention of the name or explanation, as we observed at Tervuren and Iowa City in 1992. The catalog of the Iowa Museum exhibition mentioned neither the Cabinda caves nor the Luba tablet (Roy: 1992).

These boards or tablets are mnemonic instruments in use in the Bam-budye secret society in Shaba (Zaire). One is a wooden board on which cowries, pearls and seeds are nailed or stuck (Reefe: 1977). The colors, names of seeds and disposition of cowries and other elements constitute for the Luba initiates an authentic text. The choice of a limited number of elements and their arrangement help and condition interpretation.

Nobody will see in them a form of writing, and yet nobody can deny that these lukasa function like texts of a particular kind. Between the "signifying" whole of the object lukasa and the immediately related whole of the memorized texts plus the more distant sets of connotations, there is a compelling relationship. These in-memory textual sets function as power-enabling knowledge. They share more with the semantic field of thought, memory, and intellect than they belong to the order of language or rhetoric. We therefore have here the material basis and arrangement of a sort of text as well as a collective thought, and between them the possibility of a verbalization of the former to explain, narrate, comment on, analyze, criticize the latter. What is yet lacking to ensure that the western definition of writing ceases to compel contemporary lukasa to be perceived as a prehistoric and/or primitive object is a phonetic reading of the text, which anyway is not the essential point. For the Luba, lukasa functions like the best of our own texts, since forgetting them is the *sine qua non* condition of the change they work on the reader. The extreme schematization of collective memory in lukasa protects the user against any risk of fetishising the text, which would run counter to its primordial function. Art becomes writing in lukasa and many other mnemonic objects, but a writing with direct access to memory and immediately available to the intellect. Among the Mandinka, it is an object

confected with the help of the most diverse materials...the *boli*...among other things, it always contains a *kise* seed...for each boli, like any Malinke-Bambara cult objects, is, after its confection, consecrated by drawing a line which is supposed to preside over its destiny (Cissé: 1985, 14).

African painting sometimes contains writing, as shown in Dalby & Souililou's exhibition, *L'Afrique et la lettre* (Dalby: 1986) which offers 3 pages of illustrations. Ethiopian paintings bear commentaries written in Amharic. The African poster would deserve a special study. Many African newspapers display cartoons of social or political importance, with captions. Sahara wall paintings often bear superimposed Arabic, 'ajami or Tifinagh inscriptions.

A Tuareg, Rissa Ixa (1991), has published a more ambitious album of drawings. This bilingual work is composed of 25 texts in the Tamasheq language written in Tifinagh, and in French. Brief texts on Tamasheq and Tifinagh are accompanied by tables of sounds and signs of this Berber script. The originality of this work is that it proposes a cursive for Tifinagh, a geometric script, and introduces the scription of vowels, as well as an alphabet whose signs are taken from various regional versions of Tifinagh. Uniformity of signs, vocalization and cur-

siveness: here are three innovations that, if agreed by all users, would represent a considerable advance. Actually, this script is one of several conceived in projects aiming at simplifying and adapting scripts to current reprography techniques in France and Algeria. Let us not forget that these efforts are expended on a backcloth of Berber, Kabyle and Tuareg popular revolt against their official rulers. But in view of the immense territories over which Berber populations are distributed, it seems unlikely that unity will ever be achieved. Like jegede in Nigeria, Rissa Ixa is an artist.

Dalby (1986) explains the evolution that took place in the Mum writing systems through Njoya's growing awareness of the need to simplify and to take up the graphic and phonological options. He omits the origin of the system. After a 'dream', sultan Njoya requested all his notables to make an inventory of the symbols used in the kingdom and to imagine drawings that could suggest objects and ideas. The first resulting script was morphemo- and pictographic and included many symbols already in use. Legend (and Dalby) will have it that the script was "revealed" by a charismatic character, but history tells us that Njoya simply wanted, with this pseudo-dream, to inscribe his innovation in tradition. There are many similar cases in West Africa. This was no ex nihilo creation and we know that Njoya, one of the most remarkable sovereigns ever in Black Africa, was politic enough to compose with his people, all the better to impose his will.

Sahlström (1990) studies visual imagery in revolutionary contexts. He tries to see how the visual space taken up by revolutionary posters in Ethiopia and Mozambique was constructed. To begin with, he shows that the originality of their graphic structuration results from the interplay of geometric proportions as it is attested by Ethiopian archeology and ancient history (especially Axumite) in decoration (wall painting, hangings) and architecture. In the heart of the system, the cross (with its variations) and its radiance combine with other themes to display and instill a sense of beauty and of the formal ancestral religious ideals of Ethiopia. The theme finds its barest form in the crucifixes of the Ethiopian church. In short, perennial forms are retained because they have been imprinted in minds for centuries and have proved their capacity to persuade. Alain Peyrefitte has seen the same homeomorphism between the hierarchical power structures of the Catholic Church and the French Communist Party. Ethiopian posters generally use the Amharic script, even in the Oromo language. One poster (fig.121) is multilingual and multiscript: Amharic, Arabic in their respective scripts, English in of course the Latin. One may note the addition to the Amharic text of some Latin punctuation signs like the exclamation mark and the dash. An ideological or cultural metamorphosis

can be founded only on a formal scheme that has been speaking to the unconscious for a very long time. It is probably a mistake to impose an exogenous writing on a culture that already has one. Even if it is known and used only by a few, the local writing is an integral part of a common identity. Any attempt to modernize must start from there and try to modify, from the inside, this nodal feeling by confirming or resuming the use of ancient signifiers of traditional values. The "adapters-inventors" of African systems of writing have not created anything *ex nihilo*. Most of them have innovated on the basis of a local substratum *and* on their perception of an exogenous model. As for Egypt there were inventions and loans, but always rooted in local culture for more effective cultural integration.

The two- or three-dimensional combination of text and image in Egyptian, Meroitic, Axumite, Arab-Berber, Libyan-Berber, Punic objects and architecture, and more recently in truck and bus decoration, on graves and memorials, shop fronts, mosques and churches in Black Africa, is well known.

The Egyptians, pastmasters in figurative representation, felt the need to add to their images names, texts, other images. They invented the captioning of images, superimposed writing, the bubble for strip cartoons. Their works of art include writing.

Masks, clothes, cloths, jewels, amulets, phylacteries, articles of baked clay, ostrich eggs used as flasks, calabashes, house façades, walls of temples and initiation cabins, draperies and blankets, household items, all these may bear writing. Objects made of pearls or decorated with seeds are special cases, as well as certain ivory objects. The *raison d'être* of writing on all these objects varies from one to the other and generalization is impossible. On the whole the impression emerges that nowhere are symbols and writing purely decorative or intended to be read as immutable texts isolated from a signifying context.

The rock paintings of the Sahara are sometimes covered with more recent inscriptions in Tifinagh, cryptic scripts, even in Arabic. The function of these inscriptions is to point to a track, a water hole or reserve, an event that took place there like a holy man's visit, a date, a signature, unless they are simply graffiti like on our walls in the West (Lhote: 1959).

Fischer (1986), in four lessons at the Collège de France on Egyptian paleography and epigraphy, demonstrated the close relation of art and writing in Ancient Egypt. Symmetry, inversion, retrogradation are some of the devices that show the integration of hieroglyphs in architecture, joinery, statuary, to the point of identifying art objects and writing. He says: "...it can be affirmed that Egyptian art is in its entirety "hieroglyphic" (25).

Arabic-type writing can be found on too many objects for anyone to attempt an exhaustive inventory. Its calligraphy and holy character combine to make it the permanent constitutive element (if we also take into account its transpositions, geometric and calligraphic, and the outlawing of figuration) of Muslim art and craftsmanship. Tibbou Tip's sandals, a bag of Samory's, a Hausa fan, etc. (Renne: 1986), copper trays, home façades in Kano or Boutilimit, Tuareg phylacteries, are but a few examples. A long tradition and the prestige surrounding this script add to the object and ensure its owner an excess of religious standing, dedication or purity, and perhaps also of power (Swiderski: 1989).

The African mask, usually the most obvious mark, for the ethnologist, of a primitive culture, often bears concealed or (if shown) secret writing.

In Roy's catalog (1992) figures (225, n°22) a Tshokwe mask from Angola, with the *chingelyengelye* cross on the forehead (Kubik: 1987a) and *masoji* or traces of tears on the cheeks. Another mask (194, n°97) resembles the first but has two concentric circles on its cheeks. Numerous sculptures bear scarifications, like the Makonde masks of Mozambique and Tanzania. These diverse graphs include straight lines, parallel chevrons and symmetrical <z>'s on the cheeks, and a sort of horizontal accolade running from one cheek to another and balancing on the nose. The Ekoi crest masks covered with animal skins often bear signs in Nsi-bidi script (Nicklin: 1974; 1979).

Most Africanists working on masks analyze the relation of their meaning and social function, their decorative elements and color symbolism with other elements accompanying the mask. One of the points of Mark's work (1992) on that wild bull's mask of the Jola of Casamance is that he shows that the art object receives meaning from a context from which it takes its constituent elements, by organizing these in accordance with an original perception of this substance-situation, so as to communicate with it. In short, the "text" of a mask pre-exists in its milieu, has its roots in it. It compels a transcendence through its logical power to reorganize the given and the perceived. This capacity to transform its public is accomplished by the mask during a ceremony. The essential is then achieved: each individual has heightened his own perception and imagination, his power to reconcile opposites, his memory and the change lives on after the performance. The experience of mimesis or (written or oral) diegesis finds its justification in the cathartic intention: purgation of the passions but also heightened soul and reason. Writing, in its ultimate function, is integral to the ceremony in which the African mask intervenes.

Contradicting herself, Wittmer (1991) begins by asserting:

Without written languages, it is masks, sculpture, accessories, and apparel which function as a visual form of communication (4).

But she adds, in the caption to mask n°7 in the catalog of the exhibition:

The more flatly stylized form of this male helmet crest and the linear scarification patterns on the cheeks definitely support a very different origin for this mask. The scarification is, in fact, reminiscent of the Nsibidi writing of powerful secret societies from the forests to the south of the Grassfields (11).

If certain artefacts serve as media for communication, along lines similar to writing, such a proposition should only be advanced when and where its pertinence can be demonstrated.

It is true that art historians are used to interpreting symbols and symbolic systems, but it is abusive or figurative to speak of reading in connection with their mode of communicating with the esthetic object. How can one justify the presence of these objects if not through the charge of meaning deposited in them by the society that has produced them? The only acceptable objection to what has just been suggested, namely the fact that the codification processes have not yet been explained, is that it precisely emphasizes the urgent need of identifying the various signifying modalities pointing to a usage similar to that of writing. The significations which these objects can convey are exclusively of the order of *hypomnèmè* (Plato, Derrida), of mnemonics, and they require of the reader a solid knowledge of the culture and the natural milieu, so that he can connote or recover from the multiple drawers of his *pharmakon* the stored-up memories the sign has suggested to him. Wittmer is aware of the existence of one of the few scripts of the region, Nsibidi, but speaks of "mysterious" and "powerful" secret societies in the forest. The Efik of Calabar do not inhabit the forest, they do use Nsibidi, and to us they were far more likeable and friendly than mysterious (Battestini: 1991). Wittmer's peoples "without written languages" might nevertheless not be ignorant of the process of conserving and communicating thought, and they might use for this purpose two- or three-dimensional artefacts, including masks, carvings, scarifications and, to cap it all, cock a snook at their primitive aura by actually using a local form of writing. But of course, this writing oozing out of the damp forest south of the Grassfields has nothing to compare it with the Latin alphabet: we are still in that darkest Africa invented by the West according to Mudimbé (1988), who shows us why and how.

Finally, it must be wondered at how Wittmer could have lived and conducted her research in the Grassfields without apparently being in-

formed of the writing of the Bamum, or of the real extension of Nsibidi, or of the Ejagham writing, and yet again of the 'ajami of the Fulani and other Muslims of the region. Nsibidi is known in the whole area south-west of the Grassfields, bound by history, linguistics, anthropology and art to the area of the Cross River. Ibo, Efut, Efik, Ekoi, Annang, Ibibio people use it to varying purposes. It serves regulatory associations to transmit messages, record court cases, write pharmacopoeia, and individuals to communicate by letter and conduct their private and public affairs. These associations exercise their power in cities and villages, not in the depths of murky forests. Ekpe and Egbo temples are clearly to be seen in the urban landscape, the ukara cloths with their Nsibidi inscriptions in all ceremonies. A scrutiny of the lists of signs of the Mum, Nsibidi and Ejagham writings elicits no resemblance with the scarifications of mask n°7 in Wittmer's catalog. Some of the signs of these writings are complex, a composition of several simpler signs, "narrative" and stylized. The complex sign, like these scarifications, results from processes of reduction, simplification, combination and stylization, and also from the sculptor's idiosyncrasies if not from his customer's fancies. So it is not easy to recognize the constituent elements and well nigh impossible to understand the general meaning without the help of the inventor or of initiates. These possess the rules of representation and are not baffled by the stylization or the sense of cultural connotations. The art historian's ignorance of an important fact may lead him to see awe and mystery where there is simply a gap in research, blessed ignorance.

Africa sometimes associates writing and textile. The use of vegetal and animal fibers produces geometric designs inherent in the techniques. Knots on a cord are one of the most ancient calculating and mnemonic devices. Writing may be heraldic as in Fulani hangings and blankets, alphabetic as in Ndebele aprons. Between these two extremes runs a whole gamut of associations, like in Kasai velvet, Mangbetu cloths, Bambara dyed cloths (bogolanfini and karamoro-kyoyolingo), Efik (ukara), Yoruba (adire), Ashanti (kente and adinkra), Fong (Abomey appliquéds), Kuba (tshak), pygmy (painted liber), Dogon (dugoy), Ewe (woven strips).

Even in the cases of the Ndebele pearly aprons, which occasionally feature words in Latin alphabet, or of ukara with its Nsibidi and other signs, one cannot speak of writing in the sense of text. Painted, dyed-in, woven or embroidered signs evoke words, notions, titles, slogans, but never a discourse. Two cases may be seen as exceptions: the industrial fabrics until quite recently photoprinted in Manchester and Amsterdam ("george" in the Anglophone world) (Battestini: 1984) and the cotton fabrics used for the habits of some West African chiefs and Koranic

masters and covered in Arabic and Cabalistic inscriptions (Bravmann: 1983, fig.15; 90-1). These inscribed figures may be of some interest to historians. A popular portrait of Amadu Bamba, the founder of the Senegalese brotherhood of the Murids, takes the overall form of an ancient photograph. It is filled up with sacred writings out of which the face of the saint emerges.

Indeed, the partial integration of Muslim clerics in the Ashanti government and in long-distance and international trade led to a partial fusion of Islam with the cult of the monarch. The *nsumankwahene* was a sort of cult minister whose function was to oversee Ashanti soothsayers, priests and priestesses, as well as Muslim doctors, geomancers and clergy. In his concern for divine protection, the monarch liked to harness not only the spoken but also the written word of God. Dual religious and esthetic sensibility required repetition and redundancy in addressing the protective powers.

Bravmann offers very many examples of the uses of Arabic writing on all sorts of objects and materials in West Africa, which must have been far more diverse than authorized by Islamic orthodoxy, bearing in mind that the love of decoration went hand in hand with the invocation and glorification of Allah.

In Northern Africa, cloths, cushions, hangings use the Kufik and especially the Maghribi calligraphies. The writing often concerns the Shahada, the name of Allah, some surats, traditional precepts and sometimes protection against spells. Perani (1989; with Wolff: 1992) examines diverse ornate and wrought Fulani-Hausa leather objects from northern Nigeria. She thinks that leatherwork is bound with war—notably Othman dan Fodio's early 19th century Jihad—and with the need to protect the body. She successively studies the relation between the decoration of leather and of cloths and clothes, the role of Koranic calligraphy as a source of inspiration for decorative patterns, using the important extant repertory of forms and its relation to a practice common in the Islamized Savanna and Sahel, notably in the Hausa and Nupe cultures, which consists in binding Arabic or 'ajami manuscripts in wrought leather. She considers an important number of objects, ranging from the smallest, amulets, to the largest, ceremonial attire for men and horses. Perani places their origin in the 19th or 20th centuries, but history shows that even before the 16th century Kano leathers were used by Moroccan craftsmen to make and decorate many objects that were sold in the leather souks of all Muslim townships. Such treatment and use are common to the whole of Islamized Africa. Thus, in the north of the Republic of Guinea, Mandinka and Fulani know the use of a tree bark, the *teli*, in a maceration for softening leather and protecting it against insects, especially termites. Curiously, the paper and text of

the bound manuscript are at the same time protected by poison in the bark, which impregnates the binding indefinitely. What destroys manuscripts is mostly humidity and poor quality paper's acidity. Leather bindings, though commonly used, are nevertheless an art form, whether they are luxurious or modest. All are carefully looked after and periodically treated with beeswax. Aside from books, many objects of daily use, and now also tourist objects, are dressed with braided, embroidered, embossed, molded, vividly dyed leather. In their geometrical decorations are often displayed or hidden invocations of the name of Allah or other religious citations.

Cotton strips sewn for clothing are woven in all West Africa and especially in Savanna country. Ibn Battutah (1957) describes the technique in the 14th century. Some of these strips show complex color patterns. None can be regarded as a writing, but a conference at the National Museum of African Art in Washington did in 1988 try to ascertain the names of the strips and of their patterns, their codification and significations, their social function and generally their importance in the history of the peoples concerned. Posnansky describes the Ewe (Togo) cloths and shows that the form and color variations are significant. He names every pattern. A name may refer to the village of origin, to the quality of the cloth, to the fashion in which it is worn, to the social status of the wearer, to the occasion when it was given, to natural elements (plants and animals) or to cultural objects (variously shaped containers, locally made or imported). The recurrence of certain named and codified objects, their durability (sometimes two or three centuries), their combinations, the evocation of proverbs or historical events, all these may not attest the existence of a system of writing, but they do demonstrate the workings of a means of recording and communicating the thought and history of Ewe culture.

A good inventory of African textiles, with some illustrations of symbol — and even script-bearing cloths can be seen in Picton & Mack's work (1979). Illustration is lavish. We will note figures 165 for the Bambara, 167 for the Fulani, 175 for eastern Sudan, 179 for the Bakuba, 183 for Egypt. The general impression is that, when a cloth offers different symbols, with some recurrent in the same type of cloth and apparently organized in sequences, one may reckon with a forgotten or secret form of writing. That these potential texts may no longer be readable does not annul the possibility of signification.

In any case, all authors are not in agreement. A special issue of *African Arts* (1992) devoted to West Africa publishes the findings of six researchers. All fit textiles within their cultural context and see their meanings in their functions. Aronson and Domowitz, in some dyed or embroidered motives, even show the function of message conservation and

communication. The former, in "The Language of West African Textiles", points out

the way cloth functions as a language or as facilitator of the spoken or written word. On the one hand, the cloth is an inherently flat surface, like a page in a book, upon which abstract symbols or words can be written. Cloth is also pliable and therefore able to be wrapped around the body. In that capacity, the messages one wears are likely to say something about one's identity, beliefs or set of values (38)...Some of the writing on cloths is directly related to speech...Sometimes it is simply the visual form on the cloth that elicits the spoken proverb...[Saussure] identifies what he calls the quality of "mutability", by which he means that the linguistic sign, being dependent on a rational principle, is arbitrary and can be organized at will...This would suggest that linguistic signs change their meaning over space and time...One can shape the garment itself to replicate written script...The portable and transportable nature of textiles allows them to carry messages, or at least motifs, over considerable distances...(40).

Domowitz's text shows how the *anyi* names of the anyi printed cloths act as mnemonic aids for the proverbs of that society, thus providing possibilities of telling the story of daily or unusual events. These symbols may be combined, e.g. a woman may order a loincloth bearing an original personalized message. Glover's (1971) and Ofori-Ansah's (1978) didactic tables on *adinkra*, Ofori-Ansah's (1993) on *kente* offer fine examples of associations of verbal elements, sentiments, medical, social, esthetic and ethical events in a quantity of texts or potential texts, linked with colors, geometrical figures and numbers.

The Yoruba of Nigeria produce an indigo-dyed cloth with diverse motives, some of which are written, but illegibly, with letters borrowed from the Latin alphabet. Apart from illegible or truncated words and isolated letters, they sometimes feature the names of important people or the buyer's, or of late the dye-artist's mark. History, social function, types, manufacturing techniques have been described (Barbour & Simmonds: 1971; Battestini: 1984). Their manner of signifying seems global rather than analytical. Some of the graphs are taken from scarifications, pottery and basketwork motives. Yet, the number of elements chosen is limited and some cultural (or other) elements seem to be censored out, whereas they can be seen in the daily life of all Yoruba compounds. Adire is mythologically linked with Yemoja, one of Shango's wives. Always selective in its motives, it is more and more geometrical. Divided into rectangles or squares, a cloth made of two pieces sewn lengthwise is used for a loincloth long made by women only. Mothers are sometimes seen teaching their daughters the social import of cer-

tain motives, but this is not a universal custom. The idea of adding writing on adire may have originated through King George V's jubilee in 1935, when for the first time Union Jacks bearing a medallion photograph of the royal couple were marketed in Nigeria: one type of adire seen was clearly a copy of this first "george", or "jubilee". As a follow-up perhaps, adire often displays a caption with the names of a chief and his wife's. But there again, the copyist betrays the original, omits words, and ruins spelling. The form of the writing, not its meaning, aims at adding a certain prestige value.

In 1992, the Tervuren Museum exhibited many examples of cloths made in Zaire, showing letters, slogans, and symbols. A recurring theme was the hand, seen in rock art everywhere from Australia to Spain. No explanation was given on the cloths themselves, which were probably seen as decorative. In the entrance to the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens in Paris, before its renovation, there was a painting described as being "on bark", in fact a liber from Chad, whose abstract drawings evoked pictographs and morphemographs. The Cross River peoples used an indigo-dyed cloth featuring various animal motives (antelope, snake, tortoise, panther) thematic in their mythology, Nsibidi signs and geometric designs believed to signify membership of the Ekpe secret society as well as the weaver's grade. There is another type (see chapter 4), signaling danger, a loincloth, also used as a banderole to bar access to the hut in which Ekpe members are deliberating. This type is less organized than the other, the animal drawings, and the Ekpe signs themselves, are larger and more numerous; and there is also the executioner with the stick who watches over morals, and then again the temple and grade insignia with Nsibidi signs drawn here and there.

The Fon produce a vivid appliqué cloth that is well known to tourists. Undeniably decorative, this hanging offers a chart of all the monarchs who reigned over Dan-Home (Dahomey, and now Republic of Benin) from 1645 to 1900. Each drawing or group of drawings characterize one of the eleven kings. A copy still in our possession was explained to us in Cotonou. Here is a transcription, with dates and each potentate's emblematic proverb:

- 1 — Wegbaja (1645-1685): "You will end up building on my belly".
- 2 — Akaba (1685-1708): "In spite of its size, the chameleon gets to the top of the highest trees".
- 3 — Agaja (1708-1732): "He who took the way of ships".
- 4 — Tegbesu (1732-1774): "It is hard to strip a costumed buffalo".
- 5 — Kpengla (1774-1789): "A stone in water does not fear the cold".

- 6 — Agonglo (1789-1797): "The pineapple avoids the lightning that strikes the palmtree".
- 7 — Adandozan (1797-1818): "Two suns cannot live side by side".
- 8 — Ghezo (1818-1858): "The powerful buffalo roams the country without meeting obstacles".
- 9 — Glele (1858-1889): "Lion" symbol of his friendship with "Brazilians".
- 10 — Behanzin (1889-1894): "Shark", perhaps because of his resistance to the colonial armies and his stamina in weakened circumstances.
- 11 — Ago-li-agbo (1894-1900): Put into power by the French, this brother of Behanzin was finally exiled by his colonial friends.

Ki Zerbo (1978), an African historian, sees in these proverbial symbols "a conservatory of untold wealth", observing that some of them are "subjects for profound political reflection" (280).

Au Royaume du signe. Appliqués sur toile des Kuba, Zaire (1988) contains eight articles and many illustrations. Falgayrettes compares the *tshak* with certain works by Klee, Penck, Chillida. These *tshak* denote the Kuba world and further point to the relational mode of this artefact with ancient and perennial Kuba perceptions. The presence of a related set of concrete signs is a compelling indication of the existence of an evolving dynamic in the images, percepts, sentiments, and memorable gestures proper to the Kuba peoples. The inventory of the first set is limited in numbers, variations, and groupings. It is stylized, geometrical, perforce reductive and symbolic compared with the second one. It fills two or three centuries of symbolic activities and occupies a privileged center in the Kuba cultural space. Most of the authors make use of the concepts sign, writing, memory, narrative, history, progression, figuration, language, and symbol. Alone Husson (81) claims that for there to be writing, its reading must be possible. He proposes three levels of interpretation, in terms of whether the appliqué's function is to sacralize, mimic or use nature. In his view the *tshak* signs and their modes of organization speak the language of abstraction, the language of the prime logos, in which Carl Jung saw precisely the "alphabet" of peoples without writing, these prime forms being the manner and history of the successive orderings of the primordial chaos, of the structuration of thought emerging to the world. Husson conceives that

The purity of the geometric components, the formal and temporal permanence of the artistic motives of these works...set them aside for a moment from ethnographic science. Works of art are to be read in the light of subjectivity, whose sole reason to be exposed is in the constituent lineage of the history of thought and its forms (87).

Husson warns against an exclusively esthetic reading and pleads for acceptance of the concordance of the various semiotics systems in the reading of tshak. Here no one can say if we are in the presence of one of those modes of writing which Leibniz wished to substitute for all the writings of his time, of a codified system of signs closer to logical and mathematical types of formulation. Since they note the articulations of thought independently of phonological systems and, in part, of the idiosyncrasies of language, ideology and culture, they are named "universal languages" or pasigraphies if they are accompanied by the invention of a writing (Nöth: 1990, 277sqq). Regarded as utopian or limited in their uses, the numerous and varied pasigraphies that have been proposed, some as early as in the 18th century, express nonetheless western doubts as to the perfection of the Latin alphabet, doubts which have increased with the widening of the cultural horizon, the deciphering of dead languages and the analysis of non-European languages.

On the Kuba textiles, Meurant (1986) believes in a reciprocal acculturation of Europe and the peoples of the Kongo coast in the 17th century:

Confrontation of designs observed on 17th century velvet cloths with tattooings, braidings and engravings of the Kongo and the Kuba tribes, whose velvety embroiderings offer the widest gamut and the best illustrated by a significant number of objects, makes it possible to distinguish a common imagery, geometric/rectilinear, straight/oblique or with in-laid/oblique compositions in horizontal and vertical divisions of the support...The elements deduced are the variously combined materials of the creation of a plastic dynamics proper to the Kuba, along two streams: one founded on numbers, whereat the Ngongo excel, the other on spectacle and plastic invention, through perversion of the geometrical legislation, essentially laid down by Shoowa embroidery in general; while the peculiar embroidery of female dancers' robes, more open to composition and inventive interpretation of figures, is especially exploited in that spirit by the Ngeende and the Ngongo. Three centuries of isolation from extra-African influences, but of wide regional irradiation, have enabled the Kuba to blossom out an original design (113).

Note the codification of the motives. But Meurant goes further:

Geometry emerges in the sphere of plastic creation well before it rationally organizes the techniques of measurement as the prop if not the motor, on the one hand, of the expression of pure imagination if this can be, and on the other, of the expression of an abstract figuration of nature (by stylization or schematization) or of culture: a pictorial synthesis of ideas originally construed with elements that were once probably representative of nature or of cultural objects but whose meaning has side-

slipped in the direction of the meaningful dynamic principles. In themselves, these expressions do not, strictly speaking, fulfill any function or signal any meaning other than that of their own channels. The functions to which they are generally reduced or which justify or explain their appearance are shared by ornamentation and supporting ideological discourses whose projection-loci, signals and memories they are, unless they be individuals' projection-loci independent of the convention, or, contrary to the convention, the writing of a discourse that would be content to follow the lie, leaving each and everyone alone confronted with their understanding of the symbols, as they are alone confronted with the world (130).

Meurant, who sees decoration and signification, owed it to himself to pre-empt the question of the relative importance of ornamentation and thought expression in the objects studied.

History begins with writing, but writing is much older than history. It proceeds from drawn signs as early as High Paleolithic, geared down to forward-reverse all along Neolithic. Articulation is the crucial moment in this process, as it is of all language, of all mind. The outing of a range of elementary interchangeable articulations capable of organizing the delusion and configuration of figures into motives within a grammar is a moment in symbolic imagery (preceding writing in letters or otherwise) that accounts for verbalization, on this or that side of the ideogram. The Kuba ensemble gears down the universal signs tracing the prime elements of graphic language... The figures are the potential constituents of a discursive writing... [They] are made of rectilinear signs, except the circle, all present in the inventory of simple or modular elements of Kuba design, at least in the expressions that are non-connoted accents. This is also the case in South-Semitic and Runi writings, in which similar elements of comparison exist. Equally distant from sign and letter, the marks of the stonemasons of Pharaonic Egypt (i.e. before the Phoenician alphabet, or coeval with it and later with archaic Greek and its diffusion around the Mediterranean and with the Greek and Etruscan alphabets), those of monuments in places where these alphabets were known, like also the residual marks of ancient alphabets in Europe down to the 17th century, all these carry the set of simple elements found in Kuba rectilinear geometry or its curvilinear equivalent. Kuba design "lacks" only a few Semitic and Celtic elements. The comparison of Celto-Germanic glyphs with germane Kuba figures speaks for itself (117).

Meurant suggests that colonization and the consequent cessation of local textile production stopped the evolving dynamics of the Kuba design. The stopping of autogenous evolution by colonization is an idea shared by many authors. Isichei suggests also that Nsibidi would otherwise

have become a fully developed writing system. The Bamum too would have used their script and produced all kinds of work.

A very fine text, aimed at youth, describes and explains tshak (Curtis: 1991). It presents tshak (N'Tchak) as a festive loincloth in Kubaland. The author recounts the legend or myth that tells of the creation of these Kuba loincloths in Zaire:

It is told that the son of a slave who had become king thanks to his magic powers once showed the Kuba people how to weave and embroider.

This King, Chyaam a-Mbul, encouraged all artists to work. So the tailors, the carvers and the smiths set about covering with drawings and colors cloths, costumes, furniture, musical instruments and drinking cups. The Kuba even started to decorate their bodies by incising their skin with lines called scarifications.

Other kings succeeded Chyaam a-Mbul, and every time a king ascended the throne, he had to imagine a new decorative motive.

Centuries passed and the designs multiplied. It is said that, toward 1920, king Kot Mabintch, while traveling among neighboring peoples, set about copying the drawings that decorated their dwellings.

Missionaries showed the King a new motorcycle they had just received. But this brand new product of modern technology drew little attention from the King. What fascinated him were the traces left in the sand by its wheels... So he immediately copied them.

Woven for kings and their families in palace workshops, the royal cloths were embroidered by the women of the harem. An artist named *Nyibiin* controlled the quality of the weaving and chose the materials and colors of the embroidering.

And so it came about that chests and trunks in the royal palaces filled up with quantities of magnificently embroidered cloths. But the most beautiful loincloths, those that the women took months and sometimes years to imagine and make, were especially reserved for the *Itul* dances. Itul was a feast that lasted two days and cost a great deal. The King's mother, wives and daughters would dance barebreasted, their lengthy loincloths wrapped around their waists and flowing down to their ankles. These dancing loincloths, called n'tchak, were so long that they could wind six times around the waist (double center page, no n°).

If we turn to the motorcycle story, we can see that the design of the motive is a synecdoche, the part for the whole, in this case the trace left by the whole, a way of thinking characteristic of hunter peoples. Certain abstract signs and sets of signs are recurrent, small pieces of red or black cloth sometimes mask voids in the cloth and would seem to have a meaning. The whole tshak suggests an ordering of original chaos, a

non-arbitrary redistribution of motives chosen from the environment, the observance of certain laws governing the input of chosen elements. One observes a selection of motives and a perennial codified distribution. But how is one to see here a "double articulation" in the linguistic sense, when the meaning the Kuba possibly gave to these tshak, if not secret, is probably lost? The competition from the printed loincloths of Manchester and Amsterdam, together with the weakening of the Kuba monarchy after colonization, have put an end to this art.

The sequence of the monarchs' symbols surely formed, as for the Dahomeyan appliquéés, an archival genealogical series. Finally Curtil describes the manufacture of the cloth:

The cloth is made from raphia leaves, as follows: the long leaves are detached from the tree, the interior membrane is bared, left to dry and cut in two. A fibre is thus obtained, which serves as weft and warp. The men weave the cloths on small looms.

The production technique is close to papyrus making. The motives are cutouts sewn by hand on the loincloth by the women using iron needles, formerly made of bamboo. The decorative pieces may be left in the natural color of the cloth or dyed in purple red or black. They are sometimes sewn with a dark thread that brings them out on the backcloth.

We can hardly imagine, with the care they put into making these loincloths, obviously with an eye on decoration, that they did not also have some meaning in mind, on which we can only partly lift the veil. This may be the case for sundry waning graphic modes of communication that retains the prestigious forms of a distant past but whose meaning has been lost or confusedly remains in the minds of a few old people.

The Bambara women of southeastern Mali produce dyed cloths that have been studied mainly by Brett-Smith (1982, 1983, and 1984). The author has specialized in the study of the signifying mode implied in the making of these cloths, especially of *bogolanfini*, a cloth dyed like batik. When she publishes her article on *bogolanfini* (1984), she is very close to seeing in it a unique mode of writing. The title announces the intention as well as the caution: "Speech Made Visible: The Irregular as a System of Meaning".

Bogolanfini is covered with similar geometric designs, some of which are recurrent. One readily notices irregularities and variations that cannot all be errors or whims but must, one feels, be intentional. These cloths are documents of Bambara knowledge and the irregularities serve to conceal the knowledge from all but the initiates. They are analogous to the ambiguities of their speech and writing. In Bambara culture, saying things directly, concretely or crudely is "not done", and

savoir vivre demands the use of metaphors, ambiguous turns and parallel discourse. Straight forward communication of knowledge may even be regarded as a form of madness. So it may be that the irregular motives on bogolanfini reflect some of these cultural values attached to writing, speech and communication.

Long neglected by ethnological research, the Pygmies are now the subject of many inquiries and exhibitions. Being surrounded by an aura of fear by Africans themselves, their environment was hardly favorable to European missionaries, administrators, and ethnologists. Their music and painted cloths are now relatively well known and other aspects of their disappearing culture are being studied. Their painting on bark has been presented in Geneva (Barbier: 1986). The exhibition catalog describes the production, uses and esthetics.

Barbier had to face the Pygmies' reticence as to the possible meaning of these paintings, here tentatively described:

The applied motives are nearly always abstract, geometric; less frequently we see ideograms and seem to recognize a fish, an animal, the sun, figures and letters, etc... the fruits of an influence, or figments of our imagination? However that may be, the Mumbuti does not like to linger on the meaning of his drawings and turns ill-humored if one insists (27-8).

Hence, Barbier's recourse to abstraction, probably nothing more than stylization or simplification in the representation of objects, emotions, events or ideas familiar to the Pygmies. The decorated libers in the catalogue remind one of Mum, Yoruba, Efik, Ibibio and Ibo dyed, sewn, tied, waxed cloths. It may be recalled that all over Africa oral tradition speaks of the immemorial presence of little "red men", but it cannot be asserted that these techniques were theirs and were left behind when they were driven out of their habitats. The organized representation of similar or differentiated motives on a same liber suggests a most varied and codified selective and organizing logic. The intelligence attributed by oral traditions to the Pygmies, "first occupiers of the soil", "little red men", ingenious, furtive, feared and respected, sometimes thought to be jinn, contrasts with Muslim and Western visions, which integrate them in nature and until quite recently dismissed them as "the primitivest of primitives".

For her part, Falgayrettes (in Thompson & Bahuchet: 1991), in her Introduction, refers to Anati on the paleo-Pygmy rock paintings of Malawi, an art founded essentially on the repetitive and synthetic morphemograms that flourished there some 12,000 years ago. Apart from ancient texts and representations, mainly Egyptian, we knew nothing about the Pygmies before the beginning of the century. But until very

recently, the most instructive studies were devoted to Mbuti dance and polyphonic chants. Thompson prefers the expression "beaten bark" to "painted liber". His choice of words conjures up collective unconscious feelings of brutal force and nature, versus those of liber connotating: book writing, technique of production, which evoke civilization. In the same perspective, the whole of Renaissance painting could be designated "tight canvas" or Mozart's music "instrumental noise". True, the word liber is pregnant with meaning, being directly at the origin of the French word for book (*livre*) and of the whole semantic field which includes liberal, liberated, librarian, libretto. It is moreover inaccurate to designate the liber by the term "bark" —it is an underbark—, and beating is only one aspect of its production technique, which also includes tearing down the bark and its drying, separating bark and liber, felting of the latter, its washing, cutting, and eventually its weaving. Europe long used the liber layers of the lime tree, as well as parchment, for writing, until it took up paper made of papyrus, an African or, with rags, an Asian invention that arrived in Europe through Morocco and Spain, both under Arabic law, bearing the name of "cloth parchment". This is not an isolated case: Africanist discourse, apart from its logic, is full of words that reduce African culture to nature or the material. The word "tribe", clamped on Africa, was first used by Julius Caesar in *De Bello Gallico* to designate primitive groups like the Germans who were without writing and political organization but believed they had a common ancestor. Lévi-Strauss calls the Cabinda *taampha* a "soup bowl cover", Mercier & Marchal the Ethiopian volumen "rolls". These expressions are not downright false. They are culture to culture translations, but they depreciate and belittle African people and things, so creating a deficit that leads to prejudice. In his chapter titled "Naissance du dessin "nègre", l'art Mbuti dans une perspective mondiale" (27-104), Thompson, and especially in the section titled "Les signes Pygmées", (68-79), deals with the Pygmies' own graphic system. He points out the analogy of this system to other Pygmy cultural forms, like cord figures, ground drawings and clan symbols. The skin, leaves, the ground, the liber are the supports of Pygmy writing. The motives painted on the *murumba* and those of their body painting are clearly similar. The perennity of the forms of Pygmy culture has been attested for at least a century. They vary little from group to group and are largely independent of the material and techniques used. The Pygmies see themselves vested with supernatural powers. They know the medicinal virtues of plants; they are good hunters. One Pygmy turned art critic observes that a liber "is well conceived ... because to achieve such variety, the woman had to think a lot before she found those motives", or "This is the best one; it surpasses all the others in beauty, be-

cause it is complicated. All the others are simple (*si nana*). [Here] all the motives are good because they all remind you of something". Thompson's comment: in other words, multiple iconography and wealth of meaning were to him as important as plastic beauty (37). Let us posit that the signifying system of Mbuti painted libers is radically different from all those we know of. The question is: does it have any meaning? Did it ever have one? We must notice that Colin Turnbull (1983), curiously enough, do not mention the Mbuti libers. The fact is that the ethnologist who is the authoritative specialist of the peoples of the Ituri forest is silent on a possible Mbuti system of graphic signs.

These sets of painted motives distributed over the liber would indeed seem capable of forming common matrices of narratives, chains of identity and kinship, inventories of beings and things, proverbs and "fables" in the Barthesian sense. The reduction to formulae of textual units of varying sizes permits a certain freedom of interpretation. Vesting these polyvalent forms with personal values of the readers and narrators and with the circumstances of the narrative endows them at every step with a new life, unique on the superficial or anecdotal level, but at least analogous on the essential one, an ethical project, a historic fact, or a supernatural event. Their numbers are limited by the boundaries of the Pygmies' cultural tank and by the type of structure represented, and conditioned by the circumstances of their appearance and the person who interprets them. Hence the narratologist would seem to be better equipped than the art historian to decode the Mbuti libers is. Should our hypothesis be verified, the liber might be able to generate an immense library, an infinite number of finite texts and an unknown number of texts to be invented? Comparison is possible with the Ifa divining art of the Yoruba (Gates: 1988), in which the figure produced on the ground by a throw of cowries is capable of limited, coded, conditioned interpretations that leave room for creativity.

Alone an inquiry in the field shall decide whether they are actually meaningful. But the beginning of a confirmation may perhaps be seen in a sentence of Thompson's: "The Pygmy storytellers suggest the unfolding of the narrative by the repetition of a single word" (78). In fact he is quoting Arom, another Pygmaeologist. What most frequently happens in storytelling in Africa is that the audience knows the gist of the narrative it is receiving orally. The storyteller's art then consists in juggling with themes and circumstances, forms, and intonations. Let us suppose that the story is known and that the audience is precisely expecting this sort of performance. Through repeatedly spectating the same narrative scheme, the audience has memorized the sequence of nodes and cruxes, which it is able to spot under the most daring variations. Those are the moments the teller signals by repeating this word,

but not "identically" every time. In his drama course in the 1960s, René Simon used to make his student actors say "yes" in forty different ways, some of which had to be the opposite of another. This sort of gymnastics is known to the Tokoror of the Futa Toro, to the Mandinka "masters of speech", to all African peoples who cultivate the arts of rhetoric, prosody and poetry. The same lexical unit's sound sequence may have up to sixteen different meanings in a tone language. In Pygmy narrative, each repetition of a unit produces added meaning, corresponding perhaps to one of the hero's avatars in the development of the story. Such a phenomenon we have personally observed among the Guinea Guerze in the 1960s. Down south in Tunisia a blind storyteller accompanied himself on a fiddle. He would create a sound background of varying intensity and rhythm, with brief sudden interruptions, a suspense in the manner of the opera singer's discreetly phrased solo preluding, accompanying and concluding each phrase in the development of the action. The polyphonic chant of the Pygmies is one of the finest examples in the world of phatic communion in an esthetic event.

In short, Pygmy culture knows the art of reducing a recurrent phenomenon to its simplest barest structure. Some would be tempted to say that the Pygmy analyzes and abstracts. We should prefer to think that he identifies, the form of the narrative underlying the surface anecdotal structures and then, anew in each production, its transformations and deviations from the norm. During the performance, the audience adjusts its own sense of time with the storyteller's, who becomes the leader in a communal mental activity devoid of speech activity in the strict sense. The story is intimately, immediately experienced on the screen of memory, a pure unadulterated silent event. But how is one to ask a Pygmy whether our bundle of hypotheses has any firm foundation? Psychologists might try. Ethnologists, anthropologists, art historians have little chance, however, given the ethics of their disciplines, of finding an object situated outside their purview. As of today, no description of Pygmy cultures seems to contradict our suppositions. They stand available as pointers for further research.

The Pygmies' painted liber art and its motives seem to have influenced the choice of graphic symbols in neighboring cultures, such as the Mangbetu, Kuba and Tabwa.

Thompson, in four tables and sixty figures, delivers an inventory of recurrent signs, but without really giving their meanings. To name a sign "star, triangle, curve or snake" doesn't add anything to the figurative design, even stylized. Let us note however the presence of complex signs (suggesting possible combinations), of proverb-signs, of cultural lexemes (domestic objects, plants, animals). The sense-producing manner of a liber is not explained, just asserted and reasserted. Knowing the vocabu-

lary of a language does not enable one to speak it. What we have here is a representation of the form of the syntax, of the sequence of thought. Lexis and semantic units are missing. Recent modern "scores" of music are mere drawings, abstract forms inspiring their interpreters.

Comparison of these signs with other series of African or Diaspora graphic symbols in a diffusionist perspective is always tempting, possibly logical, but impossible to demonstrate in the present state of knowledge.

Adinkra is said to have originally been the mourning cloth of the Ashanti of Ghana and of the Gyaman of the Côte d'Ivoire. Locally printed, its symbols, seen worn on kings' togas, were thought to be a sort of writing. At that time, each cloth had only one symbol repeated all over its surface. By wearing it, the king advertised his position on such and such a problem, event or decision. According to Ofori-Ansah (1978), symbolized concepts may be classified as esthetic, ethic, human and relational, religious. The figures may be plants and animals, heavenly bodies, the human body, artefacts, and non-figurative forms. Each symbol has a name derived from a proverb, a historical event, a human, animal behavior or vegetal aspect or quality, an object. *Adinkra* is not the support of writing, but it is readable and functions as a repertory of text embryos, inscribable at any time in the affairs of society.

The *dugoy* cloths of the Dogon seem to have been studied only by Calame-Griaule (1986). She curiously titles her article "The Speech that is in the Cloth" and publishes it in the *Cahiers de Littérature Orale*, mirroring DeFrancis when he calls writing "visible speech". Calame-Griaule eruditely interprets the symbolic system of the *dugoy*, showing how it lies in the "texture" of this "textile", in its choice and organization of symbols, which constitute a general emblematic representation of the perennial institutions of Dogon society. No symbol is exclusively decorative, having a codified referent open to commentary and known at least to all initiates. These symbols signify within the organization of this two-dimensional material. But their signification, which may be detailed and explained, tends also to communicate globally, as we have shown for *adire* (Battestini: 1984). These mnemonic sets of signs constitute neither a speech, nor a discourse, not even a writing in the restricted sense, but their system may be compared to the way tarot, heraldry and stained glass signify, in the sense that they may be commented on, verbalized, but not really read, by those who know the commentary.

Dugoy, then, are not texts, but they exist to concretize a set of memorized texts and generate a body of commentaries about them. In this respect, semiotics may step in where ethnology cannot see writing systems and text.

Certain objects, more discrete than masks, carvings or cloths, serve to note collective memory and perhaps to communicate a message. The best studied are the Akan gold or bronze weights. Certain Berber jewelry was well known but *Africa Adorned* offers a fine inventory of body ornaments. Pearls compose colored messages or advertise a name, a problem, and a happy event. They may even compose letters. Seeds have preceded them in similar functions, but it seems that certain cultures produced glass beads before the slave trade, concurrently with seeds. Charms and amulets, Muslim among others, often include writing: Koranic verses, false Arabic writing, 'ajami, cabalistic signs, drums, calabashes, copper pots, ostrich eggs, sandals, bags, leather cushions, furniture, blankets and hangings, carved ivory. In fact, every domestic object may accommodate symbols or writing.

Akan weights are a unique phenomenon in Africa. The generic term Akan designates all the peoples who speak the Twi languages of Ghana and the Côte d'Ivoire: the Baule, Ebie, Ashanti, and others. Gold is a symbol of prosperity, prestige and power, wherever it has been traditionally associated with a centralized power. For many, Akan weights, beyond their obvious and marginal functions, are a "proto-writing" of 254 pictographic (figured) and morphemographic (abstract geometric) signs, described and classified by Paulme-Schaeffner (1941), Gabus (1967), Niangoran-Bouah (1984) and many others.

Each weight is a symbol, capable of being read on several levels. The symbols are autonomous in relation to the weights. They are found also in complex Akan headdresses and especially on adinkra cloths. Usually abstract, they are used to represent objects, proverbs or stilted phrases, narrative elements illustrating moral or religious teaching, but also to "write" profane, commercial or diplomatic texts. They stand under the authority of Nyame, the supreme God. Today, on walls, boats, trucks and buses, the whole proverbs are written rather than their symbols. Niangoran-Bouah compares the expressive and mnemonic system of the weights with some of the better-known African writings (193-204), taking up various other authoritative studies. Paulme-Schaeffner (1941) shows that the weights, according to what they represent, refer to a proverb embodying a precise meaning dependent on a shared experience and specific cultural connotations.

However, the message of the golden weights varies with possible interpretations of their symbols. Contexts and relations also contributed much to the meanings of the geometric and figurative forms.

The relation between objects and their verbalization reveals condensation and expansion devices recognized by text analysts since Aristotle, internal regression, an essential element of live text for Derrida and Greimas, but also the defining notions of gratified or disappointed

expectation, of prospection and retrospection, arch-reading and contextual reading, connotation, utterance and statement. To these narratological concepts Crownover, in *Arts of Goldweights* (1977), adds the logic of discourse analysts (14, 19-20) The interpretation of these messenger weights, which is complex, suggests more than popular wisdom: an ability to extract, analyze and apply concepts drawn from recurrent experience. The weights are empirical signifier, of pragmatic concepts, in which one may see a sort of Kantian "schematism". Durkheim, who thought "this concept was an inexhaustible source of potential judgments, these in turn explaining it ad infinitum", could only have seen in this process of abstraction the stamp of an original philosophy. The Akan weights involve three areas of human thought: art, science, and philosophy. With their 5,000 inventoried proverbs, they represent an object lesson of the Akan worldview and society, in which they performed numerous religious, educational and literary functions. They were often carried in small bags named *adja*, which enabled the owner to tell a story, or remember a commercial transaction, a treaty, and an act of justice. Different bags had different contents. A chief wore the *fo-too*, made of monkeyskin, on the belt as he traveled. Larger weights were transported in a bag made of an elephant's ear. Some *dja* were used like a Bible to tell a moral or spiritual story or to inculcate knowledge and harmony. Mixed in the same bag, weights of diverse complexity and significance were sometimes drawn out at random like tarot cards, and then it was up to the storyteller. Today there is hardly anyone left who can interpret and compose these texts, although one may still find in the villages an old Akan who remembers that an image used to be associated with a proverb, which makes some observers say that the whole system was just a bunch of vouchers, tokens, mementos and sayings. Out of context behind glass in western museums, each one is reduced to a semantic unit of a primitive language: a myth or a proverb. The Ashanti are granted a state and records and communications of a sort, probably inherited from foregoing Savanna and Sahel kingdoms and empires. But writing? Yet the influence of Mande clerks on politics, administration, and trade (contracts and letters of credit), the judiciary and religion is documented. Bowdich (1819) informs us in 1817 that in Kumasi, capital of the Ashanti kingdom, captains and subalterns wore Muslim charms enclosed in small square gold or silver cases and curious embroideries, now known to have contained verses from the Koran.

Those square cases are phylacteries. Ashanti worthies still wear them, not on their heads but around their arms or waist. These amulets, containing Arabic or derived writing, are proof that there were exchanges with the Mande clerks referred to by Bowdich. In the eyes of the West, if Akan and Ashanti have writing, they no longer fit into the

categories we have assigned them. Well then, here is a quote from the caption of illustration (27) of Preston (1985) describing the cover of the terra cotta funeral bowl of food offerings, whose craft, by the way, reminds us of the woyo Cabinda pots:

Aside from their figurative carvings, Akan memorial objects comprise vases, oil lamps, and bowls to serve meals for the dead. This bowl is surmounted with a cock, a cocoa fruit, a chameleon, a tortoise and a snail, at the top of ringed columns. Together all these figures compose a description of the rituals celebrated before the person died and promise him/her a happy passage into the other world (47).

The composition is strictly intentional. This is the representation of a discourse. We may not know its meaning, but we evidently have here an arrangement of motives based on a narrative logic of closed structured elements retracing the order of a rite. Comparable chains of meaning exist elsewhere in Africa.

In an article on Tuareg jewelry, Dieterlen & Ligers (1972) describe their symbolism and uses, with three pages listing the names of jewels in Tifinagh writing and a French translation.

In the court art of Cameroon, pearls often cover the whole surface of carvings, masks, thrones, and decorate noble clothes and headdresses (Northern: 1975). But apart from a few symbols (52-3) like a stylized frog (malice) or spider (wisdom) there is no writing. Yet we know that the Bamun have a writing of their own, which they use only on sheets of paper imported from Germany and bought from a Greek trader in Foumban at exorbitant prices.

Many African peoples use pearls. It seems that the Mum of Cameroon and the Zulu of the southern African savannas are the greatest users of this mode of decoration. Twala (1951) shows how important they are as "regulators of social life" and explains that the *lit* (pearl) denotes a kind of social censorship, a set of regulations, i.e. in that peculiar art of the love letter. Pearls and their arrangements are no more than a visual support for the communication and preservation of certain cultural values.

The purpose of "Muslim" charms of the Savanna and Sahel is mainly to protect the wearer, but they also signify the prestige and powers of writing. In the colonial and intestine wars, the Muslim literate was allowed to roam through enemy lines unscathed. Rubin (1984) studies the birth of interest in the influence on Africa of the ancient cultures of the Middle East, the Mediterranean region and Indian Ocean, thus putting an end to the myth of African isolation, "the syndrome of darkest Africa" as he calls it. He shows how writing was introduced for magic and informative purposes and adapted to the local cultural envi-

ronment. But the Africanist's blind eye for writing in Africa, says Rubin, has also made him impervious to African Islamic art. Rubin further describes the various types of Hausa amulets, covered with writing, and he translates many magic formulas, all written in Maghribi Kufik, as in Fischer's illustration. Bravmann (1974; 1983), side by side with his illustrations of Koranic tablets, flags, sandals, cushions, clothes, weapons, a Hausa fan, has geomancy drawings and texts, an inkstand, a Tuareg tcherot and a Koranic amulet attached to a seat; but the only objects, curiously, to attract comment on writing are the last two: the amulet bears the inscription in Arabic: "O God bless our master Mohammed and grant him eternal peace". It includes a rectangle divided in a hundred parts, each containing apparently Tifinagh letters and digits. The Hausa fan (fig.12) proclaims one of Allah's 99 names "Ya Hafiz' (O Protector or O My Keeper!)," and in an inside band "May God bless you and save you!" True, there is also a chimp's skull (fig. 20), covered with digits and letters in Arabic script, and a Mende crest-mask (fig.17) bearing six small wooden tablets with "pseudo-Arabic" writing.

Many such cases suggesting object-text associations are crying for study, like pokerwork calabashes (Dognin: 1989; Pedrals: 1948, followed up by Obenga: 1973), copper pots (Warren: 1976), drums, motive-covered cloth bands, incised bracelets, ownership marks, etc.

The West has imported ivory, a prestigious material, since Antiquity. Two cultural ivory-carving areas seem to have associated it with writing in diverse ways: Benin and Sierra Leone.

Ivory tusks carved in bas-relief and associated with bronze objects are part of the art of Benin. They naturally refer to historical events and personages of that kingdom. Blackmun's computer study of the iconography (1984a, 1984b) and Hau's articles (1964) tend to assert that the tusk decorations may be a kind of writing. Blackmun (1984a) describes in three volumes their main characteristics and sets them in the context of the history of the Benin Empire. Her inventory comprises 101 elephant tusks, including those seized by the British Army in 1897. To her photographs, she adds her unrolled drawings. Interpretation requires mastery of the Edo language as well as a fair knowledge of Benin tradition. Some symbols are probably morphemographic, and Hau is far more categorical than Blackmun as to the presence of a pre-Portuguese Bini language and ideographic writing on the tusks.

The other region is composed of modern Sierra Leone and Liberia, where the Vai script, one of the most ancient in West Africa, was created and is still used (Scribner & Cole: 1981). It coincides with the production area of the Afro-Lusitanian salt boxes during the European Renaissance, in a tributary region of the Ghana and Mali empires. Some of

these saltboxes, and ivory export products, bore Latin and Portuguese inscriptions in gothic letters. Monteil (1951) suspects the existence of a writing system, probably used by the administrators of the Ghana and Mali empires, before the arrival of Moslem clerks and their Arabic script, a possible but unprovable source of present-day Vai.

French ethnologists took an early interest in African symbols, and notably Sudanese graphic signs, but refused for long to see writing in them. The inventory of African sign systems which Calame-Griaule published in 1969 with Lacroix implicitly introduces the notion of writing in its title, "Graphie et Signes Africains", yet the article was published in *Semiotica*, although the third part deals with writing in the restricted sense only. Tuchscherer (1995) studied the script kikaku in Sierra Leone in 1993-1994. He disputes their statement according to which the kikaku was only used in the immediate surrounding of its inventor and is forgotten. During fieldwork investigation, he saw that the kikaku script is still in use in all of the Mendeland, in the southwest of the Sierra Leone, close to the border of Liberia, and this from at least 1907.

Where Griaule & Dieterlen (1951) and Dieterlen (1951b), saw mere collections of signs, a renovated ethnology finally feels able to distinguish *Systèmes de signes* (1978), a logical mutation from lexicon to language or symbols to writing. Here can be found an approach to symbolism in the Bwete Secret Society of the Tsogho people. Motives on a door are in semi-relief and painted in red, white and black. They represent the celestial vault (a bow), a rainbow, the river Moboghwe (a zigzag line), the sun, the moon and a star (fig.4, 227). A small graph denotes a person, and in the median axis a larger symbol is supposed to represent the Supreme Being. They are generally highly figurative pictograms. Schweeger-Hefel (1978), for his part, shows pictograms on the membranes of stone drums.

However that may be, many African peoples have undoubtedly constructed articulated sets of symbols, sometimes ordered like a narrative or discourse. Thus the Abomey appliqué cloths may be read on three levels. At the lowest, the elements can simply be named. Next, and hardly more "readable", we find signs representing proverbs and brief narrative elements characterizing a monarch. Here again, order is unimportant. The third, most enlightened, reading is organized from top to bottom and from right to left and tells not only the genealogy of the kings of Abomey, but the main events in the history of the kingdom of Dahomey from its foundation in 1625 to the brutal colonial conquest at the end of the 19th century.

In southern Africa, a red line connecting juxtaposed or superposed rock paintings suggests an order between the narrative and explanatory

units. The cord in certain Yoruba àrokò and mythograms from Zaire fulfill the same function. A Yoruba 14th century pot, found near Obalara, Ile-Ife (Nigeria), bears a set of pictographs in which a face, a hand, a bracelet, a gong are discernable. Their linearity and stylization suggest an intention to communicate and to codify.

Gabus (1958) deals specifically with the petroglyphic systems south of the Sahara and Savanna, but he also describes the numerous "trademarks and brands" of the desert tribes. He offers examples of symbols used in local geomancy and of the rich traditional decorative motives of all the ethnic groups of the region. In 1967 he actually sees systems of signs, which he thinks might be writings, the Abomey bas-reliefs and appliqués, the Tschokwe morphemograms of Angola and others. Griaule (1937) recognizes the possibility of a heraldic approach to the totemic blazonry of the Dogon. Williams (1974) studies symbolism in African metal arts (especially bronze) but cannot see any writing in them.

A symbol and more evidently a set of symbols, as in the case of their association with religious art, must be perceived as a total social fact (see chapter 4: Society).

Wenzel (1972) describes the decoration, similar to the Ndebele, of the houses of northern Sudan in a region which nearly entirely disappeared under the lake created by the Aswan Dam in 1964. Modeled with dried mud or painted on the pisé walls, these decorations are inspired by ornate plates, motives borrowed from the packings of imported products (plants, animals, people, buildings), local symbols, others taken from neighbors, geometrical motives and even Arabic-like writing.

Rock art is common to all Africa. Willcox (1984) gives an important inventory of petroglyphs, wall paintings, often-featuring geometrical designs and figurative drawings of humans or animals, many of which may well be heraldic writing. Such are found in the Sahara, in Libya, Mali, South Africa, Shaba and Zimbabwe.

Apropos these lasts, let us examine the most typical approach. During an ACASA conference, Garlake (*Symposium on African Art*: 1992), speaking of the *San* rock paintings of Zimbabwe, pointed out that most of them were between 2,000 and 4,000 years old. A surprising continuity, over such a long period, perennizes the use of graphic forms simply superimposed on the same face. The simplification and stylization of the imagery reveal considerable selectiveness as well as perennial structural organization. The human figures are clearly types, not portraits. In the thousands of works studied there is no concern for realism. Everywhere reigns a strict economy of detail. Nowhere can the mark or style of an individual artist be seen. They all seem to have been

painted at the same time by the same artist. This implies, as for ancient Egypt, unvarying rules common to all performers over thousands of years. Few depict hunting scenes, fewer still dancing. Dating may be risked by referring to the backgrounds, although colors, black, white, ochre, seem to have been used without identifiable codification. Thousands of sites have been studied in the last hundred years or so, with little progress. We are in the presence of archetypes, always presented according to a strictly codified mental organization. The bodies are supine and the heads round. Sexual organs are depicted to indicate role distribution: pounders can only be women. The characters are idealized sexual and social types. This seems to suggest that this art's function was to represent each person's role in society. Reduction of individual selves to social archetypes is a way of transforming the natural into a cultural world. But it is not possible to "read" these millenary paintings of practices that have recently become extinct.

Frolov (1988) interprets primitive wall paintings in terms of ethnomusicology. Bâ & Dieterlen (1966) have a radically different approach. They thought that by comparing the cattle frescoes of Tassili N'Ajjer with Fulani oral and written traditions they could interpret the former and verify the latter. And indeed Bâ believes the frescoes can be attributed to the Fulani, a nomad cattle people of the Savanna, with convincing reasons. Numerous and easy to identify motives recall Fulani initiatic texts. Bâ (1961) had published a translation of *Koumen* texts. Among them, the *Lotori* seems to fit best with the Bovidian period frescoes, which appear to have played in Fulani society the same part as stained-glass windows or icons in a long Christian history. In Dieterlen's words (1965), the paintings were "a way of inscribing in a determined place certain mythical facts to establish a sort of archive connected with initiation"; and they add that they point to something like a "theory of the graphs and their roles" (143). Some of these were realized in several coded, superposed stages, each representing a moment in the myth, painted abstractly and/or schematically and/or realistically in the same place. Noteworthy also is the fact that these frescoes were often renovated, touched up like palimpsests. Seven frescoes are commented upon (read?) in details with references to Fulani myths.

Between Garlake's "impossible signification" and the inflation of meaning by Bâ and Dieterlen, a compromise should be possible. Some of these rock paintings and engravings are supplemented with later superimposed writing, but there seems to be a connection between this writing and the images. The writing could, however, have been meant to supersede the images. Mauny (1954, 38) offers a table of the characters of an unknown writing discovered in the Itchuma grotto (Kaouar, Niger).

Monod and Monteil, *inter alia*, have noted short and cryptic inscriptions on these wall works, those that may have preceded the adoption of the Arabic script.

When abbé Breuil (1952) and Mortelmans (1952) published their works on Katanga, revelations were expected. All they suggested in fact was that the representations were not or not exclusively decorative, but that the principles of representation, organization, and reference were unknown. So they concluded that there was no writing here. Again in Breuil (1954) or Breuil & Lhote (1954) there was no perception of writing, although an attempt was made to "read" the organization of the images. Hugot (1974) likewise mentions a "written stone".

Chaplin (1974) studies the prehistoric rock art of the Lake Victoria region, where the Ishango bone, thought to be 25,000 or 30,000 years old, was excavated. This art is abstract, and motives are more numerous in the south than in the north where many have become undecipherable. Certain signs seem to have been copied by peoples of different cultures, over considerable periods. Chaplin thinks that these copies may have aimed at conjuring up the powers of the writers of the originals without knowing what they meant, rather like in the Oluorogbo ceremony in Oshogbo, Nigeria. But the most figurative of these illustrations show a high degree of stylization by reduction to essentials and stunning use of symmetry, pointillism, geometry, series, grouping, and variations of concentric circles.

It can thus be seen that arrangement and stylization take on an important function in rock art. Some may see in these stages in the elaboration of the earliest hieroglyphs. The next thing was to recognize discourse sequentiality. Woodhouse (1977), who draws attention to a line, painted in reddish ochre with red and white dots attests this. The function of this line seems to have been to materialize cinematographic continuity, language discursive and narrative sequentiality.

Painting on house walls is of course less resistant and durable than on rocks. Right from the beginnings of exploration testimonies accumulated, rarely documented, however, of graphic signs on dwellings and other buildings. Some have spoken of "hieroglyphs", in Angola and the Congo, others of abundance of fine quality drawings. The palace walls at Abomey bore cartouches with all sorts of colorful representations. The walls of the capital of Benin have delivered thousands of bronze plaques. The façades of Hausa houses carry in bas-relief stylized shahada or other invocations in Arabic script or 'ajami. The Dogon rock face showing the famous "White Fox", painted for initiates, is paralleled by the paintings, sculptures and carved posts of the *Toguna* or assembly houses. Scohy (1951), in an article titled "Ekibondo, or walls that want to talk", presents Congolese wall paintings and tries to inter-

pret their symbols, in which he is not afraid to see the birth of a morphemographic writing. For him, the paintings are not just decorative, they signify in the manner of heraldry.

Drum language studies (Herzog: 1945; Alexandre: 1969; Sebeok & Donna: 1976) often refer to writing in ways that are sometimes of considerable interest for our purpose. Alexandre, a linguist, is convinced that drum language is writing in sound. In his conclusion he demonstrates that drummed or whistled proverbs "are capable of plastic and graphic symbolization" (280) and he cites the *abbia* tarot chips "which constituted a sort of hieroglyphic proto-writing".

He gives an example of drum language:

Anatomical Definition	Homo Sapiens Ensemble		
Drummed Acoustic Image: VV_ VV_			
Said as: / <i>Kekele kekele</i> /	Signified		Referent
Graphic Signifier: < (!) >	vulva	=	female
Read as: / <i>lu dyone te-mfendele</i> /			

From which he concludes that drum language should be regarded as writing. This classical Africanist linguist constantly refers to African "writings". He might have clearly added that the sign systems he describes, functioning in similar, although not identical, ways to western writing, could constitute writings in the wider sense. What mattered was to revisit that old definitions of writing as a result of the wider field of experience, not to close the eye to new perceptions in the name of a general discourse, of logic and of definitions born of dated and, of course, more limited experiences. Referring to the drum language of the Banda-Linda, its morphology and syntax, Arom & Cloarec-Heiss (1976) help us understand semiological systems in which language and music are simultaneously involved. In describing as linguists the characteristic modes of transmission of messages, they demonstrate that drum talk rests on a schematized reproduction of the pitches assigned to Linda vowels. In their example of an invitation to the investiture of a local chief, they show that its form results from a refined analysis of the relative melodic pitches and rhythms of the language.

As a poet and dramatist, Osofisan (1977) sees in the drum the first alphabet of thought. It may indeed be said that the creation of a set of rhythmic and melodic segments and their combinations like in language demand the same intellectual ability as the creation of a graphically noted phonological system, i.e. a referent to a referent in the same way as writing. Herzog has demonstrated that point as a linguist. One dif-

ference might be the primacy of the ear over the eye. Another, that of collective (drum) over individual (literary) communication. The study of African drum and whistled languages may be divided into three periods. The elders, like Labouret (1923) and Rattray (1922-3), are still pertinent. Then the period just after World War II, passionately interested in all forms of communication, puts everything back into the melting pot (Herzog: 1945; Carrington: 1949). This is also the time when some major works on the history of writing were published, later giving birth to a communication science, a product of recent history: the war had demonstrated the power of all forms of communication over the populations of the world. Finally, an anthology (Sebeok & Donna: 1976) brought the subject up to date, with 82 articles on drum and whistled languages. Aside from his usual capacity to innovate and synthesize, Sebeok brings to it the point of view of American semiotics. Rattray, Migeod, Labouret, Alexandre and Nketia are there.

Labouret describes the use of drums and pipes in communal communication. He works on the answers to questionnaires he has sent to administrators. The advantage is comprehensiveness, but fabricated answers are not to be excluded. We have known two such facetious administrators.

Rattray, on the other hand, is curious, painstaking and pragmatic as was usual in his time. He shows, for instance, that songs composed in native languages by teachers and missionaries on western rhythms and melodies become incomprehensible because their tones and intonations are different from those of African languages: Africans were invited to produce sounds that had no meaning for them, or, worse, expressed the opposite of what they were expected to utter. Ferdinand Oyono's *Une Vie de boy* is worth rereading in this context. He implicitly shows how important it is to note down tones and tonality.

Sebeok & Donna's title, *Speech Surrogates: Drum and Whistle Systems*, clearly shows that for them these systems were substitutes for speech, not for thought. Indeed, they are built on an analysis of the tonality and sound contrasts of speech. Nketia, for instance, shows that the Akan actually study the relation between language and drums. For them, "The drum can and must talk" (772). Words and phrases may be transformed into drum sounds. The modalities of speech rhythms must therefore be studied.

African art often aims to teach culture, to create a cultural space or field of reflection. We have seen that it is far more symbolic than figurative. This characteristic brings it close to language. For the people at least, it is often the only conveyer of knowledge. As a result, a comparative approach to art and language is frequent in Africanist literature. Segy (1951-1952) is the best known example. Aniakor, on the other

hand, believes that the sculptor's approach to his object is governed by his will to express: from the choice of material onward he wants to put over meaning. We are close here to something fairly common in Africa concerning the signifier-signified relationship. Between them a link exists, perhaps to some extent arbitrary, but always related to a particular situation from which it acquires meaning as an experience shared by producer and receiver. The resulting meaning often owes much to connotations and other associative modes.

Let us recall that in the semiotic sense the concept of writing includes alphabetical, syllabic, mythographic and logographic systems, and that in Africa the last three were the most frequently represented. Other artefacts, like domestic objects, carvings and textiles, may serve as mnemonic supports, as signifying manifestations of *orature*. The graphic representation of certain texts that are to be said (read?), interpreted, even if it is limited, demands a revision of present definitions of *orature*, bringing it closer to literature instead of separating them.

Myths and legends place the origin of writing in nature, when certain natural forms appeared to be intentional, different from their immediate seemingly chaotic environment. These forms, composed of recurring elements, suggested a graphic framework for the organization of a writing system and therefore of text. They were taken up and transferred on the artefacts. Substitution, recurrence, sequentiality and articulation gave birth to models of communication autonomous from their material base, that were in turn memorized and put into relation directly with the local system of thought and knowledge rather than with the existing oral language. An example of this transfer of textuality from one medium to another is the contemporary use on textiles of graphic signs and geometrical forms that were previously used as scarifications and body painting.

Some texts may be superficially read, as a series of symbols. But the same text can be read on several levels. It may be a list of names with their connotations, or a series of sayings or proverbs, narrative sequences or a narrative. The thread of a necklace of different pearls, a red line linking figures on a wall painting, the string on which are tied the various objects of a mythogram indicate serialism and the continuity of the narrative. The recent comparison of prehistoric paintings and ancient myths reveals formal similarities.

Complex forms, as in architecture, may be associated with writing. This is the case with the mosques in the region of the Senegal River, with Islamic calligraphies and Egyptian hieroglyphics. The text of Koranic and geomantic tablets is never perceived as pure writing: they are decorative and evoke another world. Images forbidden by Islam

may occur in scientific manuscripts such as pharmacopoeia or works on astronomy. Prestige and authority are attached to ivory tusks with narrative carvings on them. Here the stylization and codification of figures and their attributes suggest both an esthetic concern and an evolution towards pictographic systems.

The text, whose autonomy from the object is sometimes very close to independence, acquires value only through the performer's inventiveness. Orature is an essentially creative art. The forms of the artefacts are less affected by the passing of time than the accompanying texts are. Creativity associated with respect for the past seems to be a permanent value of many African societies. With time, narrative elements and narratives themselves may be totally transformed into other narratives. The way the text is received is determined by the storyteller's art. He will modify, add, and ignore whole sequences in order to model his text on a situation. But the story, known to the audience, must at any moment be recognized. Every "fable" tends to constitute a unique entity, like the *dja* bags of Akan goldweights or the calabashes of *minkinsi* objects.

Writing may be without signification but nevertheless have a meaning. Pseudo-writings are frequent. A cult linked with the creator of a forgotten script illustrates this point. The memory of choreography and footprints on the ground form a text, since dance mimics a story. Gestures, costumes, masks, percussion and music, body paint during the dance add to the memorized text, which will serve again. Scarifications publish identity, biography, genealogy, and the degree of initiation. The choice of certain materials (wood, branches of certain plants, colors) may rest on their connotations or on playing with homophones in their names.

The perennity of some forms ensures the permanence of their power as manifestations of primordial authorities. The Ethiopian revolutionary posters borrowed prestige from the radiant cross of the Coptic Christian religion. Arabic or 'ajami pseudo-writings adorn the insides of masks, adding power borrowed from abroad. The obvious purpose is to create a synergic object charged with the power of all the texts these writings suggest.⁶

African modes of writing are numerous and diverse, like the objects which support them. They offer new perspectives on the function of text in society. And, of course, they demand a new theory of writing, one that will encompass the theory of the insertion of text in society.

⁶For a comparison with Judaism: 'Iconizing the Text/Textualizing the Body: Judaism as a Graphocentric Religion,' by A. Farber & C. Gandelman, *The American Journal of Semiotics*, 10, 1-2 (1993) 11-34.

So the African text, an articulated ensemble of signs, is never corpified, any more than the perception of the characteristics of the object. As much as elsewhere, there is no fatality in the relation of text to object: the object resulting from a text recovers the formal ensemble of the text and perhaps some of its contents. Knowledge of systems, symbols, and of the text in the memory of some leans on the object to (re)produce the text in the presence of the object, but never slavishly or identically. The teller's art is often measured by his ability to play with these differences. So the African text is as much invented by the teller as by his hearer whose active participation he demands. It is "scriptable" (Barthes) rather than "legible". It is an "open" (Eco) text that gives the "reader" an activated reflective and imaginative part to play, both intellection and pleasure. The French symbolist poets (Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé) produced poetry of suggestion. Baudelaire's correspondences between the material and spiritual worlds constitute infinitely retraceable tracteries of meanings. From the birth of symbolism through Dujardin and Joyce and the French "Nouveau Roman", to writers such as Tournier and Le Clézio and on to the decline of the Nouveau Roman runs a period of history that exactly fits the colonial period. During this period, the influence of Africa over European arts is well known. Can we not see in the emergence of symbol and later of the open text the possibility of an acculturation of Europe discovering (or rediscovering) in the Other new modes of expression? Should we not understand that out of the encounter with alterity, out of the temporary void it creates, out of the desire to fill it with new modes of feeling, thinking and acting, is being born a radical mutation, from the preservation of knowledge (text) into its necessary endlessly anticipating pursuit (texture)?

Grammatology reappropriates the concept of writing. Conceived as a cipher of pure thought sustaining the freedom of all discourses, writing may liberate more than it contributes to enslave. That ancestral art object, the Pygmy *liber*, will appear as the original irreducible element of the alliance between a transformed natural material and a type of liberated and liberating thinking endowed with an infinite narrative capacity by the urge to create and enjoy. A text manifests itself to our perception as a sensible or material object of a particular type. The ensemble of objects and texts we have summoned is made up of an infinity of intentionalized or natural forms that are culturalized. Everywhere there has been the recognition and the will to inscribe a message to be preserved in time in a material form and to create a coded object to transmit the message. Forms and formal ensembles offer a surface cohesion, which implies the internal coherence of object and text. This is what your informant reveals to you, as he constructs his explanatory

discourse with the help of diverse notions: information (in the prime sense), events, situations, intentions, intertextuality, comparisons and associations. This form in the material text and object, named purport by Hjelmslev, reveals the homeomorphism of these two inseparable cultural manifestations. But the text and its readers influence one another. The one acts on the others so that they change and conform to its project. The others impose on the text their mental schemata derived from their experiences and their intellectual, emotional, and acting abilities.

There may then be three orders of relation between the object and its text: logical, temporal, and shall we say, spatial. The first is made of causality (existence, motivation, consequence, connotation) and works as disjunction —conjunction, inclusion— exclusion. The second is made of temporal successiveness, which may be evident or discreet in the object, but necessarily incumbent to narrative, commentary, and description. This is the order of portraits, genealogies, collective memories, biographies, and is in particular associated with power, in court art, for instance. Thirdly, when there are thematic correspondences, associations (by similarity or dissimilarity), geometrical dispositions (*mise en abyme*, insertion, encasement, rhythmic and patterned distribution, interlacing, retrospection, prospection) and recourse to supra- and infralinguistic elements, the spatial order is invoked.

Any communication requires a "common" ground or a code, social memory, cultural connotation, shared sensibility, modes of action and transformation. To posit conditions for the study of text in the African object is incidentally to posit the presence of culture. Todorov, who saw in the text the only immediate reality we are capable of perceiving, has asserted that without text, there would be no object to study or even any possibility of thought.

The existence of a text, a cultural object, in a material world of natural objects is attested by the pertinence of structured autonomous sets of signs emerging from an immediate environment of non-textualized objects. These form the catastrophic substance on which, for some, meaning has been imposed, and therefore the text, but perhaps at the price of the erasure of the latter's context, thereby uncovering one of the potential significations of a moment of the texture.

The men who invented and perfected writing were great linguists and it was they who created linguistics.

Antoine Meillet

The written or spoken words do not seem to play any part in the development of my thought. The fundamental elements of my psyche are definite signs and more or less clear images, which can be reproduced and combined at will.

Albert Einstein

And this is how hieroglyphs were freed from degenerating into a simple alphabet.

Herman Hesse

Chapter 6

Paroles: From Spoken Words to Thought Writing

Meillet, the master of a generation of linguists, which included Ferdinand de Saussure, was unable to inculcate in any of his disciples his conviction that writing had been important in the birth and growth of linguistics.

Thanks to a totally unwarranted reduction of its object from phoneme to sentence, linguistics was able to appear for a while the most exact of the human sciences. Gesture, mime, whisper, song, cry, intonation, situation, figures, discourse and text had been excluded, in the same way as thought, as infra- or supralinguistic, or as too subjective for scientific analysis. Language, the object of linguistics, did not include thought and was nothing more than sentence. All that was left was the form of what is said, in other words, morphology and syntax, perhaps phonology, certainly not phonetics, prosody, phonostylistics, lexicology, nor semantics. Deaf-mute language, primitive symbolic systems, Morse, stenography, rebus, the Highway Code were to be ignored by the linguist. However, Saussure saw a fault in this and handed over to general psychology some areas left on the wayside in the science he was reorganizing, in particular what concerned the communication and preservation of thought and emotions.

In Africa, sculptors (Bateke, for example), impervious to the meanings of the objects they produce, are content with faithfully reproducing a set of gestures which has proved its effectiveness in the past. A second actor then charges the image with "medicines" and other attributes, thereby orienting its potential of meaning. But it is the customer who will use it eventually in sacrifices or intercessions. Likewise,

the ukara maker does not know the Nsibidi script with which he covers his cloth. Masks are carved by artists belonging to neighboring peoples and then charged with significant powers. Outside the ceremony, the mask has no meaning, the traces of gestures that informed it correspond, even if elusively, to the intention to communicate and preserve a message.

When structural linguistics studied a sentence in its form, contemptuous of its meaning and sociocultural context, it acted exactly like the anthropologist who studies masks in a western museum, even if he does use texts, films, photographs to recreate the context. *En situation*, the object espouses its essential function, the perpetual rediscovery of its own potential. The object signifies less in itself than it receives by way of connotations.¹ A sign may receive as much meaning from its contexts as it brings to it. Saussure regards as the objects of semiology all modes of communication that are not linguistic in the strict sense, i.e. all that is left when he has constituted the optimal object — material of his science, which he can then conceive as exact. The history of semiotics as it is being constructed goes back to the discourses which first described and questioned all and sundry signs, including speech and writing.

Encyclopaedists like De Brosses and Condillac, questioning language, did not separate speech from writing and devoted several pages to the latter (Auroux: 1979). The theory of writing will probably have to reject the linguistics — semiotics dichotomy. Speech and writing are different systems for the preservation and communication of thought. From this point of view, linguistics appears to be the semiotics of speech. Porcher (1976) expounded the methodological problematic of the identity and difference of linguistics and semiology. For him, if the object of linguistics and that of semiology are of the same nature, the signification of the choice of method is indifferent. If the objects of the two disciplines are not the same, the method of description could be the same. Finally, if the objects and methods of the two disciplines are different, the problem arises of comparing the results of the inquiry (12). In our view, deciding about differences and similitudes between two objects of communication may be a matter of idiosyncrasy, of a collective stereotyped vision, or of the level of analysis. This is shown by writing, taken in its restricted or semiotic sense, as also by the meanings of the word <text>, ordinary and anthropological, but it may not be necessary

¹In this respect, cf. Gilbert Durand's reflections on *L'imagination symbolique* and John Lyons' *Semantics*. The latter easily shows that the statement 'it is raining' in context is perfectly unnecessary, but that it could mean many other messages that linguistics will always fail to capture, like "the picnic is out," "no need to water the garden," "don't forget your umbrella", "the telly's wrong again", etc. The symbol has an immediate meaning, often redundant, but above all an infinite power to liberate meaning.

to decide. The theory of writing and text will never be exclusively inspired by semiotics criticizing its own processes. It must include the study of all object systems capable of being perceived as writing; it will thus benefit, critically, from other perspectives, methods and results.

Among all the works published on writing in the immediate post-war period, Gelb's (1952) stands out. The glorious time of phonocentric linguistics had not yet come. When it did, those who wished to carry on with writing were not entirely dissatisfied: excluded by linguistics, the study of writing could then have become an autonomous science. Gelb had an inkling of this as he termed it "a new science [attempting to] establish general principles governing the use and evolution of writing [or] grammatology", (5) a formula Derrida was to take up with different ambitions. Before him paleography had studied writing in the various phases of its evolution. But for the technique of writing and its graphic characteristics, the word *grammatologie* was sometimes used in French.

Gelb's was long to remain the only classic work or at least the most cited, studied and reprinted. Its perspectives still rule over research on writing. Some Anglo-American academics see in it the summa of all knowledge and perspectives on writing, in spite of Harris' text (1986). Academe still draws from Gelb the intellectual comfort of knowing that mankind, after going a long way strewn with successes and failures, had finally discovered the "perfect" instrument in the Latin alphabet.² Yet Gelb should no longer satisfy reflection on writing. Many of his assertions are steeped in obsolete knowledge, a belated convulsion of western pride and racism.

Gelb, who was quite well informed for his time, mentions a fair number of African writing systems. But they are the work of primitives, comparable in spite of being contemporary to the first halting steps of prehistory. At least his theoretical gropings had the merit of lifting writing out of the exclusive historical perspective. He suggested the creation of a multidisciplinary grammatology, to be simultaneously or successively historical therefore evolutionistic, diffusionist and comparative, in the philological tradition but also drawing from the two rival linguistics of the moment, the diachronic and synchronic.

All linguistics posit that writing, being a means of fixing language, is bound up with it and the phenomena that govern it. Some linguists have taken more interest in writing than others have. Meillet devoted to it the last chapter of his program, Bloomfield one, Gregersen two, Février several works, Cohen three volumes.

²The *Unesco Courier* (February 1984) is entirely devoted to literacy through the Latin alphabet, under the title "Literacy: the Ladder of Achievement."

According to Bloomfield (1961), "Writing is not language, but simply one manner of recording language with visible marks". This calls for two remarks. The article "one" implies that there are others. The word "language" designates an abstract unit, constructed from the greatest possible number of real paroles and styles and impossible to note in writing: one cannot "write" the French language. One writes in accord with recurrent, identified, described and classified phenomena, which stem from paroles. This text of Bloomfield's, constantly refashioned, remained for many Americans and for several decades the unavoidable reference in the sphere of linguistics. In the 1930s, it was the only important work that referred to writing, mentioning Egyptian writing and even Vai. The author risked a metalanguage on writing, which for the essential was not taken up. There were other works of this type, but most of them chose to ignore writing. Gleason (1978) was the first manual of linguistics to grant writing a position of some distinction (two chapters). In "Writing Systems", he lays down essential notions and basic definitions, in a linguistic perspective, concerning the ways in which writing functions. Then his classification of writings is again inspired by linguistics (only with Holenstein: 1983 is the important criterion of the "Double Articulation in Writing" stated, and at that leaving open the question whether it concerns phonocentric writings only). Trager (1974), with "Writing and Writing Systems", could be useful in redefining certain writings — writing being, for him, any system of marks, drawings or other artefacts representing the characteristics of a language (377). The expansion of the field comforts semiotics, but his notion of language is a complicating factor, for one does not know whether he understands by it speech or thought, or a combination of both, and in this case, which gives access to the other.

A table of Cherokee and Vai writings allows comparison. Gleason adopts the thesis, dismissed by Holsoe (1971), of affinities between them, as also, curiously, with *Oberi Okaimé* (Southeastern Nigeria). The influence is claimed to be of American missionary origin. In his chapter on written languages, he mentions a few African languages as examples of those reduced to writing by missionaries, such as Shona and Ibo. Gleason adds a few important remarks about the notation of tones and intonations, thus showing that he is aware and abreast of one of the key problems raised by African orthographies conceived by western or westernized scholars. These invented scripts ignore, perhaps for the sake of economy, the consequences for pronunciation and, still more seri-

ous, for comprehension of neglecting the characteristics of African phonological systems, often tone-based.³

The deciphering of ancient scripts and other forms of writing had the essential merit of exploding western perspectives on an Other who seemed to be fulfilling this high criterion of civilization. At the same time it provoked a reappraisal of western cultures. Champollion had shaken some western convictions with his deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Since then the questioning of Western centrality and perfection has been pursued, notably by anthropology. Semiology, too, benefits from new techniques applicable to archeological objects for semiotic analysis: Maya ceramics, for instance, have revealed what they ate, how they dressed and decorated their palaces. Soon it will be possible to know all about their palace intrigues, their cosmology, and their entire linguistic and social setup. Let us hope Africa will one day reap the benefit of such highly technical inquiries, and that sites long lost to human memory will be opened up again. We need new Champollions to explain new significations and shake up our present ways of looking at the Other and ourselves. But yet in our time, a Doblhofer (1961), at the end of a detailed analysis of Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mesopotamian cuneiform writing, the Hittite, Etruscan, Turkish and Cypriot scripts, having carefully established the genealogy of writing without omitting African scripts, lo and behold: he dispatches them to the dawn of the continuum, putting us back into square one: these people have not changed much and they have invented nothing.

The study of writing —of its function, logic and modes of representation of thought and speech— is a science in infancy, sorely in need of a general theory. True, individual writings have been deciphered, but whenever the point was to understand the texts of vanished civilizations, they have been shoved into the historical teleological Latin alphabet-oriented scheme.

The continuum so constructed, from pictographs to letters, gradually but thoroughly erased the direct initial notion of the association of thought and writing in favor of that of speech and writing. Linguistics, ups to Culioli, and now to Chomsky, has ignored not only writing, but

³Meanwhile, in the field, isolated initiatives surfaced for tone notation. For the Yacouba of Côte d'Ivoire, certain typographical signs are used with success. The signs < " >, before a syllable, indicates high tone; < ' > a mid-high tone; nothing for the unmarked; < - > to represent mid-low tone and < = > low-tone. Elsewhere, a numeration is used for the 5 existing tones. However these efforts are not totally satisfactory as they do not solve the problems of compound tones, combinations of tonal inflection with intoned pitch contour...See *The Alphabet makers, Catalog of the Museum of the Alphabet* (1991, Waxhaw, North Carolina), the text of which has been composed by the Summer Linguistics Institute (SIL).

also semantics. Intent on describing syntax, linguistics had reinforced its phonocentrism, at last denounced by Derrida in the 1960s. The ostracism of writing and semantics had made it impossible to think of a theory of writing directly relating the medium and the message. Coulmas & Ehlich (1983) divide into three perspectives (linguistic, historical, and psychological) the field of writing studies and tackle the theme with more than twenty approaches, principally literacy and reading. They emphasize that

this book is concerned with writing and written language. The study of writing has a long history, a history that reflects the fundamental importance of this historical achievement. Written language...has hardly ever been made an object of scientific investigation. Moreover, the relationship between writing and written language has only rarely been seen as a problem in its own right (1).

On the jacket of Coulmas (1989), Hymes says that it:

gives the general reader insight into the major writing systems of the world...More than that, it challenges the linguist (and the social scientist) not to take writing for granted, but to be aware of the ways in which it conditions their work. Not to take its effects and meaning as shaped by diverse histories and emergent patterns of communicative conduct.

But nobody explains the choice of certain scripts or the absence of African systems. Africa outside Egypt and Ethiopia is ignored, even if Arabic and some of its derived scripts are mentioned incidentally, e.g. Swahili,⁴ the 'ajami, Somali. According to Coulmas, writing is a phenomenon of real complexity, characteristic of complex societies, which probably explains (save the incongruous and negligible case of Egypt) its absence on the African continent. Coulmas, however, is not touched by the common Latin alphabet fetishism.⁵ He accepts and shows that Asiatic alphabets may have achieved some effectiveness. Coulmas follows on Gelb and Goody. We are left wondering why the widening of the corpus to Asia did not cause a change in definitions and references.

Instead, past occurrences of writing are minimized as bygone stages or likened to those in contemporary cultures that are ignorant of the Latin alphabet, even if they have other means of recording their memory and transmitting coded messages.

⁴For Swahili, one may consult Velten (1901), one of the earliest texts on its orthography. Also a practical reading and writing guide.

⁵The expression was coined by Dossou (1987) in "Fétichisme de l'alphabet". Harris (1986) speaks of the 'fallacy' of the Latin alphabet.

Derrida (1967, 1972) provoked a renewal of interest in writing. His epistemological standpoint, at one time semiological, was to restore to writing a first-class role in the Western episteme. Repressed, occulted, marginalized, writing —the concept and the thing— enabled Derrida to work out the concept of *différance* (deferment) or arch-writing. A meaning constitutes itself on the trace of other meanings, no more of the logos but in the midst of a particular texture. There is in Derrida a way of thinking that grew on a background of colonial history, occulted yet omnipresent. He was the first to assert that there was no society without writing. He remains essential for an understanding of the power of stereotypes about Africa, seen as without writing, therefore without history and without culture, Africa the foil and stooge of the West, the justification of colonial ideology and of all forms of exploitation, from slavery to neocolonialism (Battestini: 1988-1989). Derrida was little interested in sociology, psychology and even linguistics. For him their discourses are metaphysical, whereas we would suggest that tomorrow's Africanist discourse would belong to physics and to its "aftermath", that became concomitant.

Speech may be thought, for intonation, type of voice, stress or the lack of it, a whisper can convey messages, independently of what is said. Speech reduced to writing is, aside from meaning, a phonetic transcription or notation. Written thought could then be regarded as the trace of a didactic discourse.

There is that psychic phenomenon —thought— a faculty whose object is knowledge, untouchable outside the medium that supports it. The self finds him or herself soliloquizing, that mode molded into the writing of certain new novels since Dujardin, Joyce and Faulkner. The individual talks with that Other one in him, himself. The author concocts this discontinuum that comes to our ken through the motions of our reading espousing the moments of his writing. Generally we come to know of thought through the need it creates for itself of being preserved in time and/or communicated in space using a system different or autonomous from speech or only indirectly related to it. The ensemble of African graphic systems may conveniently be divided into syllabaries and alphabets on the one hand, pictographs, logographs (including mythograms) on the other.⁶ The former display the sequences of speech, the latter are non-linguistic and can therefore be read in different languages or dialects. These directly represent logos, thought. The imported cultures, Arab-Berber or European relatively less influences

⁶This convenient division does not stand up to analysis. In fact, it is extremely difficult to classify systems of writing. The categories depend on criteria, some of which may coexist in several systems.

them. Thus an African graphic system of the kind less influenced from outside would tend to represent thought rather than language. Literary text is only one of the numerous media through which we can apprehend thought in flow. Thought coded and materialized in a medium proves its existence through the material in which it has been noted and inscribed. Hence the frequent confusion between certain material traces of thought (book, library) and knowledge, quantity confused with quality. Yet the illiterate who sits begging in front of the Library of Congress doesn't become a scholar. A people is judged without history if it has no written document on its past. Quantity, seniority, but also evolution and complexification: writing is supposed to allow the promotion of all, their liberation, their well-being, their ethic.

So there is thought and its modes of representation with which it is often confused. Speech is one of the means with which human beings are endowed to express their thought, but for ages it was confined to their clans. Out of the need to communicate beyond the physical reach of the human voice were born systems of sound or visible signs, substitutes of speech sometimes constructed from its formal model. Another of these means is writing. Both follow the double articulation principle: monemes⁷ (form and meaning) and signifying units are articulated with phonemes⁸ and graphemes (discrete units). The theory of writing and text articulates discourse sequences in narrative, discursive and explicative sequences, and lexical units, paradigms available for intertextuality. The moneme is usually defined as a language unit of no or little meaning with a propensity to associate with others, so receiving more meaning than it imparts. According to Derrida, it has no other meaning than that of a trace of all those from which it differs (i.e. *différence*).

⁷*Moneme* may be defined as the smallest meaningful unit in speech: there are three monemes in de-cant-er. The *morpheme*, often confused with moneme, is the smallest grammatically meaningful unit in speech: gender, number and configuration markers are the easiest to identify in any language.

⁸*Phoneme* is the minimal distinctive unit of the sound system of any language. All French phonemes organized according to their mode of production constitute the phonological system of the French language. The minimal pair /part/ - /port/ shows that /a/ and /o/ are probably phonemes in English as in French, as it helps to distinguish the meaning of two phonic sequences which otherwise would be semantically identical. A phoneme may be realized in different ways within a large group of speakers of the same language. These allophones help to create the notion of archphoneme, noted for example /A/ or /O/. Most graphic systems denote only archphoneme, ignoring their different oral realization. Each phoneme is made up of the combination of a certain number of features, linked to their mode of articulation, which are discrete units, i.e. unknown before analysis of the sound. The number of true phonemes of the languages of the world may vary from 13 to 50.

No system is absolutely superior to any other. All serve the same purpose. The difference is not in the function but in the medium. Some better render certain services than others. All are directly connected with thought, spoken or written.

Nobody can observe language with a microscope. The concept of language rests on the possibility of superimposing several paroles and pages of writing. Comparative analysis reveals recurrences, resemblances and differences that, being experienced in their interplay, shape the idea of language. It was long believed that language was in morphosyntax. The latest development in linguistics starts from the moneme (lexeme or morpheme) and looks for potential semantic associations in the spoken chain and in the culture. Before that linguists had constructed an object that was distinctly less resistant to analysis but was only distantly related with the total act of communication.⁹

The concept of writing, that phenomenon one is entitled to call universal, shall be founded on a superimposition of all its real, past and present, but also yet to be discovered or imagined manifestations. The object of the theory of writing shall be determined by the recurrences and differences to be discovered in the functions of the simple or complex signs that serve to communicate and conserve non-oral messages.

As soon as thought becomes writing, it tends to knit philosophical prose: objectification of the message, critical distance, analysis and synthesis. A writing ceases to be one, becomes parole in performance: the theater, and reading aloud. A writing without thought is only conceivable in the surrealists' automatic kind, or else in eye-reading, speech organs disconnected, in which reading the text creates a film of images, sensations, reflections detached from the printed text, its material support as well as the trace of the writer's labors. This soliloquy, much in favor since Joyce, does not claim to be a language utterance, but an experience. It would seem that the logos —ability to dream and reason— is autonomous, perhaps independent, from the means of its conservation and communication.

From this point of view it has been possible to deny the advantages of sound-oriented scripts and to plead for the morphemographic, especially in multilingual societies, in which, whatever the languages and their dialects, the same system denotes them all and written messages circulate without having to be translated. Such systems, common to several cultures, imply similar forms of thought, local articulations and modes of knowledge, cut out of the substance-situation. But it has so

⁹Doob (1961) in *Communication in Africa: A Search for Boundaries* (New Haven, CONN.: Yale University Press), describes especially the types of interaction between the protagonists of discourse, their social status and position in the communication scheme.

happened that peoples with kindred cultures, speaking variants of the same language, have been described as having different languages and divergent mentalities. This form of balkanization has been consummated whenever such a people has been forced to adopt a different orthography that flouted its phonological system. It must be reasserted that there are as many languages in Africa as there are Doctors in African linguistics. Experience shows that peoples living geographically and "linguistically" far apart understand one another. Some psycholinguists claim that, for the "primitive", language is energy, a material substance that is part of the universe as much as of him.

Curiously, Kristeva (1989) thinks that this primitive speaks, symbolizes and communicates, but that he is incapable of the idealization and abstraction implicit for others in the use of and reflection on languages: for the primitive, speaking or writing are acts of participation in the world. Would this not mean, then, that Klee, Gotlieb, Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Artaud are primitives lost in a civilized society that has itself lost access to the noetic-poetic, to fantasy, to dream?

The Latin alphabet or its avatars offered to Africa has undeniable qualities which do not conceal its faults. A serious disadvantage of a phonetically written language becomes apparent in a clinical reality. In a brain trauma if the lesion is in the seat of reading or writing, it is observed that these faculties are more difficult to recover by a subject brought up in an alphabetical than in a morphemographic writing (Bouton: 1984). Japanese spelling, however complex it may seem to us, is acquired more easily, rapidly and definitively by schoolchildren than the subtleties of their so-called phonetic writing by their French and English counterparts. Arrivé (1994) helps us understand that to reform French orthography one must first realize what it is. We know all the dross that written words carry with them, not just useless and diverse but truly a burden on our visual memory. It is mainly our relation to these written (or drawn) words, which is essential, because spelling requires excellent visual memory. We have to register and put on hold quantities of signs that are redundant for any representation of the spoken word — if we want to spell properly. Arrivé sees authentic hieroglyphs in some French words and Cohen a morphemographic system in the English script. Mahmoud (1979) has observed the same in Arabic. All this is yet further evidence of the absurdity of the Latin alphabet idolatry, in itself and as a cultural yardstick to measure the rest of the world. All existing forms of writing and text, be they alphabets, syllabaries or sound or visual pictures, are there to constitute the bedrock on which the theory of writing and text shall be built. The study of writing and text must rest on the mode of production of text, i.e. writing, and on its product, the life of the text in its society. The process of writ-

ing is a manifestation of texture, that area of activity where conscious, articulated, objectivized and purposeful thought is patterned out. The whole could be formulated in glossematic terms: Substance is *chaos*, but being in-formed it becomes *writing*. The form of content, in the motion and frame of writing, becomes *text*, whilst the substance of the content in which it manifests itself and which it reflects and produces testifies for *texture*.

So, if script (etic) is made of discrete signs and writing (emic) makes up the form and content of expression, then text, whatever the nature of its presence, becomes a seizure in the flow of texture, an object of folklore or a textuary, but also a cross section capable of productivity. It receives its meaning from all the meanings that it doesn't have, from its intertextuality, its relations with its cultural environment. It is a syntax of narratemes, i.e. of explicative, descriptive and, of course, narrative functional elements.

Morphemograms and pictograms possess an infinite syntactical potential, whereas Latin-type writing is more logically determined, so quantitatively limited. Morphemographic, logographic and pictographic systems may be regarded as better adapted to more creative, imaginative (less scientific in the narrow sense) forms of thought. Scientists' spelling is generally terrible. Most of them read and write formulae made up of unspelt symbols that have the advantage, among others, of being readable in all languages. These formulae are precise, concise, and rigorous in the expression of thought. So, either by ignoring it, or by decorating it with a "red bonnet" (like Victor Hugo), or by using a non-phonetic non-language tied system, scientists like musicians or choreographers may to some extent break away from a mode of signification they find constraining and issue forth into idiolects and styles of their own which, unlike conservative phonetic writing, are less culture-bound and capable of greater conceptive, imaginative and communicative power. Yet, writing *stricto sensu* is more conservative, and its modes of representation free a certain power of imagination, within certain cultural limits. Universal, scientific writing is limited to the few initiates, and has become a "local knowledge" of a different kind (Geertz: 1983).

Coulmas (1987) explains the distortions writing can inflict on language and delivers a few important theoretical reflections on writing and written language. Surveying current research, he advocates a relativist approach and suggests new directions. He shows that the arbitrariness of Latin and Latinate alphabets has led to the autonomy or quasi-independence of orthographics.

We have attempted to show (Battestini: 1989) the relationship of writing and speech in Africa by applying Goody's (1987b) and Kroll &

Vann's (1981) conclusions. The imposition of the Latin alphabet in the former colonies has modified the languages of West Africa at all levels of semiolinguistic analysis. Recalling the characteristics of these languages, we compared them with local scripts and inferred that Africans had enjoyed writing systems better suited to them than those imposed on them by their masters. In this we had used the Arabic, Tifinagh, Nsibidi, Vai and Mum scripts.

African scripts are generally less economical as producers of written text than the Latin alphabet. They are cursive ('ajami, Vai, Mum), as they are conceived for production by hand. This does not mean that printing types could not be made for these three scripts and others, even symbolic ones. The computer opens up possibilities for them that were inconceivable until quite recently.¹⁰ There were molten fonts and a press for the Mum script, which were destroyed by order of a French administrator. An 'ajami presents no more difficulties than Arabic, except for some diacritical signs for vowels. Vai, for instance, has printed Koranic or Biblical texts.

The study of the graphs of local West African scripts, mostly syllabic or morphemographic, shows similarities between them, which suggest the possibility of regional use, for instance in the case of the Mande scripts and those of Cross River and the Grasslands. As graphic designs often match, chains of sounds and ideas may do so too. One may regret that none of these scripts inspired an orthography.

The teaching of African languages suffers from a feeling of their inferiority vis-à-vis imported languages. For some Africans, any non-Latin system must be inferior to the Latin archetype. Others simply ignore them. Yet others will not hear of combining old symbolic systems with new techniques or sciences. All say that African languages must be studied and taught. UNESCO (1953) saw that very early on, but not the importance of local scripts.

The vernacular may be used only orally, or its written form may be used for a short part of the school period and in adult education...The main linguistic problem, however, lies in making literary an unwritten language, fixing first its grammatical and phonemic structures, giving it a working vocabulary and then providing it with a practical script and orthography. But it is an equally difficult task to recondition for general educational purposes a language with an old aristocratic literary tradition but unfitted for modern school teaching, or to improve a written vernacular so that it can become an official language as well as a suitable instrument for scientific and technological education (12-3).

¹⁰Decomposition and reconstruction of any and all graphs in pixals is now a game with the electronic screen.

Not a word on African scripts. The omission is tantamount to an irrevocable death sentence. This UNESCO text was typical of those would-be models of development conceived elsewhere for passive peoples living in desolate landscapes, models that have since become legion. Instead of tackling existing local scripts, it offered advice for the creation of new words, mostly technical. In "providing it with a practical script and orthography", the experts consider only recent systems that had served to write languages until then oral or that had been rejected, ignored or condemned. It seems that Pike was the mastermind of this report.

It must be recalled that such distinctions, however useful they may be for description and classification (when they are understood as functions), tend to conceal the numerous variants and interpretations of these systems. Few people know that the Latin "F" was once a slug or realize how many morphemograms and hieroglyphs the users of the Latin alphabet produce and consume every day. In the very same culture there may be different writings¹¹ and two, close but linguistically different, cultures use the same signs for radically different purposes. The French graphic sequence <oiseau> for /wazo/ is illegible on first sight for a foreigner. George Bernard Shaw once suggested writing <fish> as "ghoti", because of the pronunciation of <gh> in <laugh>, of <o> in <women> and of <ti> in <motion>.

Humor is hardly the hallmark of M. Calvet's or Dalby's exemplary work. M. Calvet (1965), as a phonetician but indirectly, exposes the inability of the French graphic system to note Wolof, the unofficial language of Senegal, because of the pertinent duration of vowels and true geminates.

Diachronic linguistics and philology had texts for their object. Writing and text, long occulted by structuralist linguistics, can be redeemed. L.J. Calvet (1976) pays no attention to local writings or ignores them. M. Calvet does not go beyond the inability of the Latin alphabet to note African languages, and Dalby beyond the description of West African systems of writing. Nobody suggests they might be useful, or seems to have taken the hint that the existence of other systems of conservation and communication is in it a challenge to the current conception of writing. As linguists and phoneticians, they can only, at best, see in them phonocentric systems, unlike ethnologists who only describe systems of symbols little or unconnected with speech. The contribution

¹¹One needs only give an Italian who does not know English an English text to read to realize how little the Latin alphabet takes into account the phonological systems of the western languages which use it.

of semiotics will be to gather up all signs for a theory of their functioning in society.

And yet, as early as 1941, Vivay offered a whole range of reflections on the phonetics of African languages. Already he was worried by the inadequacy of the transcriptions: no account taken of tone, duration, phonemic variants, tone, sandhi, vowel harmony-bound events (these he names tonemic plurality, the combination of tonemes and intonemes, a phenomenon yet unstudied) and contrasting emission forces: all significant or distinctive traits.

On the systems of transcription (situation even graver today), Vivay remarks:

However incredible this may seem, linguists have not been able to agree on this point. Each scientist, missionary, explorer has his own alphabet. The plague of Europe since the word philology was invented has been transplanted here (110).

One solution would be to homogenize all these imported alphabets. Nothing much has been done in this direction. Wellisch (1978) is a serious work on transliteration and transcription, often done but little thought about. Beyond his interest in African problems, Wellisch is attractive on the transcription of proper nouns from one script to another and of a written language in the writing of another language. The UNESCO report on language unification (1966) had a decisive influence on the writing of West African languages. In principle the object was the relative standardization of phonetic notations and some orthographies. The impact was strong on Mandinka, Fulfulde, Tamasheq, Songhai-Zarma, Hausa and Kanuri. Nevertheless, phonocentrism and the Latin alphabet dominated this reunion of western and westernized African linguists. Alexandre, who was there, later (1983), reflects with his usual pertinence on some practical problems of African onomastics: toponymy, anthroponymy, ethnonymy, and proposed remedies. Howe (1964) had suggested, in an Anglophone perspective, ways of writing African names using some of the existing solutions to this problem created by the colonizer and Africans themselves. He not only lays bare the confusion caused by the imposed scripts but the ineffectiveness of the Latin alphabet used and pronounced in different ways. The multiplicity of its variants is enough to convince anyone of its vernacular idealizations. Westerners and Westernized alike still will not see its inability to transcribe languages that differ a great deal phonetically and phonologically. Even in the same language, historically and geographically distant cultural contexts determine different uses of the alphabet. Lado (1961), ever the pragmatist pedagogue, warns against naive attempts to fit a language with a script conceived for another.

But even he, with all his experience in that very area, falls into the phonetic trap when he enunciates that in "syllabic and logographic scripts alike, there should be a symbol for each distinct syllable or word, nothing more nor less". Certain scripts, like Chinese or Nsibidi, may be read in radically different ways. Tending to express visually an infra- or prelinguistic logos, made up of images and forms, they are above linguistic provincialism and can be verbalized in all the languages that possess the same script. Ladefoged (1968), although unconcerned with writing, eloquently shows the phonetic diversity of West African languages and the absurdity of trying to write them in the Latin alphabet without modifying them, directly or no, at every level of language analysis.

Fishman (1977) offers quite a complete set of methodological and theoretical reflections on the creation and revision of writing systems. An article by Gregersen goes far beyond its title, "Successes and Failures in the Modernization of Hausa Spelling", in stating the problems of multiple orthographies in African languages. Diki-Kidiri (1983) bravely edicts rules for endowing any non-written languages with an optimal orthography. The concision, pertinence and clarity of this article make it one of the most important published by an African linguist. Winter (1983) lays down the problematics of alphabet creation: experience shows that a solution that will satisfy everybody is practically impossible. The best to be hoped for is a compromise between fidelity to the oral and economy of means. In the case of Fulfulde, we have Rueland's verification (1981). Comparing the recording and its transcription, he observes with the help of a native speaker that the transcribed text, in its details and articulations, conforms to the original. Only when it is translated, transculturally of course, does the text change.

Logocentric functions are said to be more frequently encountered in "traditional" than in industrialized societies. They exist however in all societies.

An older text, still topical (Butt-Thompson: 1929), presents the organization, roles and rites of secret societies in West Africa. It analyses their names, languages and songs, drum languages, and structuration of messages, and then provides an interpretation of a large number of signs and symbols. An ambitious but authoritative piece of work, all the more praiseworthy for the —perhaps not surprising— difficulties encountered by the author in collecting his information.

The Dogon wall paintings include drawings of the White Fox, related to a myth of initiation. Teachers use these drawings as mnemonics of Dogon lore with young initiates. In a Yoruba àrokò, two cowries facing the other way will symbolize two friends on bad terms. The func-

tioning of these messages may seem complex, but no single mythogram embodies all the functions. A culture will use a limited set of monosyllabic objects and devices that associate sound and meaning, like in the Yoruba àrokò. Bloxam (1887) explains in detail the meanings of eight àrokò clothes. We have received from the London Museum of Mankind a photograph of 10 other African mythograms, probably Yoruba, although more geometrical and complex than Bloxam's. It seems that such modes of communication occur in non-Islamized societies in contact with Islam. The Yoruba àrokò, often a mythogram but capable of using objects named after one-syllable words or only the first syllable of the name of the object, like in charades, represents a chain of sounds which, read aloud, coincides with the soundtrack of a message, independently of the meaning of the objects involved. Some mythograms would then seem to be phonogrammatic, since the images (mythoi) they integrate are used only for the sound sequence (in toto or in part). This is an example of a system a linguist could consider but which he ignores because he is obligated to orality and the Latin or phonetic alphabet. Formalism and phonocentrism, what with their preponderant influence over methodological developments and so over the finalities¹² of the human sciences, are responsible for the prevailing ignorance of African writing systems.

An inventory of the *Conseil International de la Langue Française* (1978) offers a collection of monographs and bibliographies that contains some information on writing systems. No ideo- or logographic —i.e. non phonographic-system— is mentioned any-where, be it omis-

¹²T. Kuhn in *La Structure des révolutions scientifiques* (1983. Paris: Flammarion), by his showing that science is embedded in history and the aims and practices of specific communities, is thought to have largely contributed to the crisis currently affecting rationality. In doing so, he widened the gap that for a time divided linguistics from literary theory. See Fabb & Durant's Introduction "The Linguistics of Writing: Retrospect and Prospect, After Twenty-five Years" in Fabb, Attridge, Durant & MacCabe (1987: 1). On the same premises, Braudel has advocated that history should be constantly rewritten, and Chomsky is indeed periodically shaking the old Adam, on a backdrop of continuously waning Cartesian positivism. V. Y. Mudimbé signals us that Koyré and Canguilhem should have been mentioned before Kuhn. Indeed, the whole history of the relationship of philosophy and science could have been summoned here. Let us recall, with Koyré, that whenever philosophy dominated them (Antiquity, Middle Ages), the sciences became sterile; they are conditioned by ideologies, philosophy benefits by having to challenge these. Of A. Koyré's work (1961: 231-46)) it is essential to revisit "A propos de l'influence des conceptions philosophiques sur l'évolution des théories scientifiques" in his *Etudes d'histoire de la pensée philosophique*, as well as the first forty pages of G. Canguilhem's *Idéologie et rationalité dans l'histoire des sciences de la vie* (1981. Paris: Vrin), in which they both summon their leading thoughts and readings, notably of Kuhn, Bachelard, Popper and Kant. As for us and for Serres, the renovation of reflection on writing and text demands a complete overhaul of premises, definitions and classifications.

sion or commission. Yet a phonographic reading of some of these signs, like the Yoruba mnemonic mythograms, is often done and they can all be verbalized. Bertraux (1985), apropos western linguistics and Bambara divination, points out the Bambara use of sand as a support for divinatory calligrams. His principal merit could be that he introduces the notion of "social anthropological grammars", sets of rules of human transformation, on the basis of particular narratives.

It was Islam (7th century for Northern Africa, 9th for West Africa) that offered the Arabic script to Africa. In the Islamized societies with state structures or in the local empires using the administrative services of Berber scribes, Arab writing gives a fillip to political and economic development and a more discreet nod to culture and ancestral religion. There are few works on the transformations of African societies under the influence of Islam. To be sure, the documents left by Arab-Berber "geographers" are biased and no document of non-Islamic origin has reached us. But clearly the introduction of the Arabic script, with Islam and the Koran, went hand in hand with a slow but radical transformation of society, internally led and propagated, not experienced as the result of foreign influence.

Hale (1990) informs us about the use of writing in the Songhai Empire that followed on the Ghana and Mali empires. Leaning on the two Timbuktu chronicles, *Tarikh-el-Fettach* and *Tarikh-es-Sudan*, he shows that writing was used at least for safe-conducts, documents freeing slaves, requests for favors, recourses to justice, sundry diplomatic uses, prayers, diplomas, contracts, marriage proposals, wills, religious poetry, genealogies, inventories, bills, etc. The rest of the chapter throws light generally on the role of writing in administration and the preservation of social cohesion. Meanwhile, the people continued to use their own language. Songhai was to be written, in 'ajami, only towards the end of the 19th century, and in a Latinate alphabet quite recently. The presence of Arabic in Songhay institutions permeates the mentality of the law, religion, morals, calculation and money, the whole vision of the world. The vocabulary of the language is enriched and popular mentality changes. Even progressive, Islamization is a massive, total enterprise, nowhere completed even now, African Islam being deeply culturalized. The historic cultural strata on which Islam's vision of the world and way of life were grafted still have a powerful existence, orally and graphically mixed in everyday life with the imported culture.

This acculturation/inculturation is comparable to what happened with the introduction of the Latin alphabet by colonization. But Islam has penetrated Africa over many centuries, colonization over decades. Alexandre (1961) points out again that the ways in which the Latin

alphabet was imposed on all the colonies were determined by the "Scramble for Africa" at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885. The resulting frontiers ignored not only language, but also cultural and even geographical boundaries. It would have been comparatively simple to create single graphic systems for kindred languages, if they had been maintained in the same colonial apparatus. But in each French colony, for instance, there could be up to 200 languages, belonging to up to seven different families. Alexandre refutes Cheikh Anta Diop's and Delafosse's claim that all African languages belong to the same family. He demonstrates some of the more radical divergences between Swahili, Fulfulde, Yoruba and Hausa. Between the wishful thinking of the former and the linguistic demonstrations of the latter, we are inclined to believe that there are far fewer languages and dialects in Africa than is generally advanced. Numerous languages and dialects that have been adjudged distinct are mutually understandable (Battestini: 1988). Far more work should be done by African linguistics, a very young science, before it starts taking up positions on origins, diffusions and groupings, or on any kind of generalization, which can only begin to be scientifically founded when most African languages have been described.

The Latin alphabet, whose pronunciation varies with the language using it, has created a continental complex as heterogeneous as the 'ajami in their own sphere and time, when they added all sorts of diacritical signs to the parent Arabic script. Holas (1954) poses the problem of different spellings in the texts of the human sciences relating to Africa. He distinguished two sorts of texts, those reserved for specialists and those destined for a wider public. For these he suggested approximate spellings, depending on the resources of the Latin alphabet when used in the language of the text. But also for those, he proposed that linguists and other researchers should wait until they were agreed on a simplified practical list of phonetic signs before they used special spellings outside initiate circles. While devoutly wishing for the advent of the miracle, he of course voiced serious doubts in 1954. He could not guess that there would still be no consensus as we now write. Indeed, the number of "harmonized" orthographies, per country or region or destined for the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, has since proliferated. The few agreements reached were immediately transgressed or ignored. The exception was Somalia, where a strong man was able to impose a single script within a few months, one of the rare achievements of the African fraternity of dictators. Yet, even with Somali, there are still problems to be solved. Hared (1992) mentions those concerning the modernization and standardization of the written press. In 1968, Dames had already made proposals for Somali orthography, which doesn't mix well with the Latin alphabet, refining the choice of signs for certain consonants in

typescript. He probably hadn't heard of interchangeable keyboards and couldn't imagine the extent of the coming computer revolution.

To Holas' analysis one can oppose the man in the street of an African capital. If he can read the paper, fill in a form with some help, he can seldom draft a letter or an application without resorting to that vital cog of African society, the public scribe. Usually seated in a post office or under a tree nearby, the worthy man writes or types under dictation a love letter, a request for money from an expatriated nephew, a petition about a problem son or his own livelihood. But Lambert (1984), who knows all about the "model" alphabetization of Mali, informs us that these modest benefactors are getting scarce around the post offices, simply because nearly everyone now has a friend or relative who can do the job. Let us not forget that until World War I scribes¹³ still existed in European cities or in the country. An oriental painting by Ludwig Deutsch, *The Scribe*, has immortalized an Egyptian exponent of the trade, represented starry-eyed for inspiration, inkstand, paper and style in hand. Sembène Ousmane was amused to play the part of one in his film *Mandabi* (in Wolof = That Mandate). As a writer and filmmaker committed in both media to the reform of Senegalese and African society, he presents the scribe as a necessary go-between the small man's African society and the world he perceives as belonging to the White man. Returning to Lambert, he forgets to mention the autochthonous systems of writing, but he does refer to teaching in the Fulfulde, Songhai, Tamasheq and Bambara languages in 90 Mali schools, with orthographies normalized and homogenized by official decree. These different languages had writing before colonization.

Such ignorance about local scripts and literatures in African languages is not universal. Westermann & Bryan (1952) draws attention to the many African languages enabled to be written by the use of the Arabic alphabet. He also presents the Mende (442), Mum and Nsibidi (443-4) and Bassa (445) systems.

Phoneticians had, as early as the 1930s, described the phonological systems of dozens of languages. A little later, phonetics went out of fashion and was superseded by morphosyntax - oriented structural linguistics. Walker (1932) had produced an alphabet for Gabonese languages, largely inspired by the International Phonetic Alphabet. Ward (1933) had suggested a new way of reducing the Efik language to writing. She used a compromise between Latin alphabet and the IPA. She was also original in her description of the tone structure of Efik. She

¹³The public "scribe" (a letter-writer) offered many diverse services such as the writing of 'acts,' 'of 'contracts,' divorce papers, requests for payment of debts, private out-of-court litigations, etc. There was one in Dakar in the 1970s in front of the post office in the old Avenue Pinet-Laprade.

produced a similar work on Mum and, with D. Westermann (1933), a "practical" orthography for African languages. Later, the discredit and exclusion from linguistics of phonetics signified the decline of the deliberately pragmatic scientific spirit of the interwar years. The active development of schools run by whites overshadowed these efforts, to be sure mainly harnessed to missionary objectives, to the benefit of the compulsory implantation of the imperial languages and the Latin alphabet. Meinhof (1931) had supplied "Principles of Practical Orthography for African languages" and G.E.G. Westermann (1927) a regional alphabet for four Ghanaian languages. Gregersen reminded us privately in 1982 of his personal contribution to the alphabet initiated by the founders of the International Institute for African Languages and Cultures (1930) (I.I.A.L.C.), the organization that produces *Africa*. This Latinate alphabet, supplemented by a few IPA signs, was originally created to reduce African languages to writing. Later on, it was used elsewhere in the world and it is now known as "World Orthography" (WO). Gregersen told us that he knew of at least one African language, Ewe, which used this system.

Missionary schooling, because it was initially in African languages, could probably have done something to arrest the flight from the countryside, the overcrowding of cities and the ruining of agricultural economies and cultural traditions. It preserved not only language but also culture and converted only on the surface. The middle and long term effects of colonial education have been estimated, without any action resulting on the people. Some idea of its impact may be reflected in Havelock's (1982) "The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences", a history of the development of the ancient Greek writing system with its sociocultural consequences. During the 1960s, in the wake of the Independences, linguistics woke up a bit. Houis (1957-1958) again put an old question: "How should African languages be written?" Abercrombie (1965-1966), reporting on phonetics and its current position in linguistics, grapples critically with some forgotten phoneticians who had asked questions essential for the theory of writing, restated the problem of the nature of the letter and its sound-representing function, studied the systems of writing without apriority and excluding none, not even Pitman's shorthand, explained the notation and recording of dialectal material and stated the problem of the relation of writing and the phoneme. Abercrombie is remarkable not only for his no-nonsense, humorous and objective choice of subjects, but for the original prospects he opened up. He has a pragmatic sense of service, of the need to apply the laws of pure science, and he asks fundamental questions. His approach, evidently phonocentric, suggested that the theory of writing, so far as the speech-based systems were concerned, should rest

on phonetics. Rejected by linguistics, Troubetzkoy's methodological contribution to phonetics, for instance, turned out to be of first-rate importance not only for linguistic research but also for most of the human sciences, and Jakobson, Harris and Lévi-Strauss have clearly acknowledged the debt they owed him. Apparently forgetting Abercrombie, linguists and language arts experts, like Ouaba (1986) for instance, never seem to tire of looking for new bases for tackling the problem of the teaching of African languages.

On the one hand an international organization like UNESCO publishes *La Bataille de l'alphabet* by Burnet (1965) and on the other Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines in Abidjan a method for Jula (Dumestre & Retord: 1974). Burnet commends the diffusion of the Latin alphabet in the world and seeks to justify the promotion of literacy. The book is full of illustrations showing the will to learn of people of all ages. With idyllic good conscience, he presents the western Latinate model as the salvation of mankind, without a word about the systems that existed before the intrusion of this new tool of Western imperialism. Undaunted by the fetishism of an international institution dominated by westernized Africans, in the field some authors facing concrete problems requiring immediate solutions are at work. Dumestre & Retord (both western teachers) propose a manual based on recognition of the fact that Jula has been the unofficial language of Côte d'Ivoire and of neighboring countries for centuries, that French is spoken there (with varying degrees of accuracy) by an "active" minority of the population. The method is based on the official transcription norm for African languages (Decree no. 71, 566 of May 21, 1971, M.E.N.C.I.)

Well then, two extremes can be distinguished in the efforts to bring African languages to writing. One Jacobin extreme, international, centralized, willfully ignorant of phonological diversity and of the existing local writing systems, proposes to legislate for the whole Continent. The other, local, pragmatic, widely opened to all African languages and their writings. In-between, on the ground, the eye spies a multitude of balancing acts. An American missionary association decides that each African people is entitled to be evangelized in its own language. African linguists want to homogenize the writings of all the languages of their country, like Kouassi (1977) for Côte d'Ivoire, whose compromise plan is tailored for immediate use but relies on the colonial graphic heritage without any reference to preexisting systems such as Arabic, the 'ajami, Bete and others. Proposals for the homogenization of imported scripts exist for cultural regions comprising several countries. Caprile (1976) stresses the practicality of his plan to introduce a (very Latin) script for the Tumak of Goundi in Chad. The word "practical" in his title, however, cannot conceal an ideology, which,

under the cover of pragmatism, imposes a foreign value with ominous consequences for the culture concerned. But of course, in the short term this kind of orthography is attractive and convincing.

The same concern for practicality surfaces everywhere. When jegede (1986), a Nigerian poet and artist, writes us he repeats the argument he has expounded in *West Africa*:

The Yoruba language is extremely musical...The Latin alphabet does not flow, it cannot communicate the music, that is why I am constructing a dictionary [sic] (121).

This poet feels that it is "the thought-rhythm of meaning" that writing must represent, instead of sounds. What is notable behind the non-specialist terms is the pertinence of the observations produced by an esthetic as well as by a communicative need. Yoruba is a tone language and jegede the musician feels in its tonal outline a combination of rhythm and melody, which the Latin alphabet cannot render. jegede goes even so far as to contest the alphabetical listing of entries in dictionaries, justly felt as absurd by a speaker of a tone language, in which a single monosyllabic word may have several different meanings according to the tone or the combination of tones with which it is pronounced and even the position it occupies in the intoned sequence!

For other, non-tonal, languages such as Kanembu, a so-called practical orthography is also proposed (Jouannet: 1976). The graphic system is presented as fairly autonomous from the phonological system, and as having a limited number of signs, generally present on the keyboards of western typewriters or easy to make. Before electronic writing, this was undoubtedly an advantage. But Kanembu has been written in 'ajami for centuries and its users find it simple and practical. Not Jouannet, who thinks they must give it up. The universal methods for the teaching of French, as a foreign language, elaborated in Paris, have proved their effectiveness wherever they have been used rigorously (CREDIF, BELC). Deliberate ignorance of the cultural milieu produced an efficient deprogramming-reprogramming that was not far short of cultural rape (Battestini: 1994a). Elsewhere they have been rejected or ignored. Those born on the spot, linguistically less informed, more grammar-inspired, with a logistical approach and thematic content, appear to be doing well. They take account of the learner's cultural environment. To be effective in the long term, the teacher of FFL must, before fixing his objective and methods, study the milieu on which he is going to act through his students. Some French teachers, particularly those working in the institutes spawned by the CLAD in Dakar, have tried hard to improve the teaching of French, inspired and informed by comprehensive comparative studies of French and the students' languages. Cham-

pion (1974) thus proposed a methodology based on such a study of students' mistakes in France and in Central Africa (Congo, Cameroon, Zaire).

Let us recall that the first FFL course, using the CREDIF method, took place, at the University of Ibadan, in 1963. In French-speaking countries the concept arrived in the 1970s, with new experimental pedagogies. Many teachers perceived it as a scandal (Bouche: 1993; Makouta-Mboukou: 1993).

During colonization in so-called "Francophone" countries, the best results were obtained with what was called the *Livre unique* of the type of Dabène's *Mamadou et Bineta*. It offered reading texts that introduced immediately reusable grammar and vocabularies, dictations and grammar exercises, composition subjects and models, simple illustrations close to the children's life and milieu. Centers of interest such as "the family", "the village feast" taught practical vocabularies and grammatical forms. "The post office", "The railway station", "the big city" opened up the village pupil's mind to the outside world, to dream if not to myth. Other themes such as "The arrival of the Governor", "My village" introduced, evidently not without ideological ballast, the civic notions of authority, taxation, political organization, individual responsibility. Agrarian themes taught the country pupils to sow, thresh, reap and sell in French. The Lebanese, Syrian, Greek or Moor's shops, and the CFAO, SCOA and Niger Company agencies, served to introduce the language of trade, credit exchange, domestic economy. Finally hygiene, sickness, the dispensary and hospital completed the picture of responsible citizenship in the organized society the child was learning to integrate. In the last two years of primary schooling, dialoguing with some teachers would encourage an informed and critical look at this colonial society. It is now generally accepted that Independence was the most positive result of the absurd logic of colonization.¹⁴

Thus the African child learnt a foreign language tendered as a key to colonial society, a means of expression and communication in a society considerably more extended than what he could see of it. Certain African languages, like Wolof, Yoruba, Fulfulde, Hausa, Bambara, Berber, were spoken by millions of individuals. In Senegal alone, between 1830 and 1930, teachers, secular and religious, thought of using local languages as the medium of education (Bouche: 1993). Some of the most renowned are Mother Javouhey and many of her sisters of Saint Joseph de Cluny, R.F. Boilat (who produced a *Grammaire de la langue*

¹⁴For alphabetization in French, see Champion (1974), the *Conseil International de la Langue Française* (1978), David (1975), and Dumont (1983).

woloffe, A. Lo (who published *Méthodes d'écriture de la langue ouolof en lettres latines*, 1934) and many others like J. Dard (with his *Dictionnaire Français-Wolof*, 1855, and his *Grammaire wolofe*, 1826). Arabic was known to a minority of intellectuals in an area covering almost the whole of Africa north of the Equator. It was the vehicle of a religion that was a way of life, prestige-laden but above all perceived as African: Umma, the community of the faithful, had no frontiers. French was offered as the language of change and modernization (one did not yet speak of development); at the lower end of expectations, officially displayed as an objective in pedagogical circulars and instructions, it was the language that opened the way to a job in the civil service. The ideal was to become a local agent of the political and economic power.

The CLAD was to modify radically the spirit and letter of French teaching in Africa. Leaving aside the nature and objective of this pedagogical "revolution", the milieu in which it took place may deserve a moment's attention. Having been taught structural linguistics in Dakar by masters like Calvet and Sauvageot, we are in duty bound to confess that linguistics in the 1950s was insolent, iconoclastic, and triumphalistic. In the realm of the social sciences, the sole bedfellow to claim the status of a science was history, and the only way for the tenderfoot to sharpen his claws was to plant them in history: the new age linguistics would be synchronic. At one time glorified as the most rational students of humanness, its exponents held the other "human sciences" in nothing but contempt. And these duly bowed and hastily borrowed its concepts and methods. One may perhaps understand a Lévi-Strauss for transposing Saussure into the discourse and methodology of structural anthropology. But in the field of literary criticism the debate reached lyrical heights unequaled since the Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes or the more recent diatribes, which ended in the deaths of a certain Racine scholar and of an anthropologist.

In the most extended case, the child learnt to read and write in three graphic systems:¹⁵ Latin, Arabic and a local —pictographic or syllabic— script. For him writing was much more than graphic forms. It was closely bound with widely differing cultural sensibilities and activities, whose diverging finalities he could feel and experience. One led to the civil service and so to some measure of economic and social autonomy; another to an intimate awareness of spirituality and the obligation to outgrow the self; the third to social insertion, with perhaps a manipulative approach to the supernatural. All this is clearly too schematic to be exact, but the point is that the African child is nearly always a polyglot exposed to several ways of writing language and

¹⁵For a parallel with Anglophone Africa, see Nyei (1981).

thought. It might be believed that, each language having its writing, confusion would be minimal. But some African languages have several scripts, like Hausa, Fulfulde, Wolof, and Bambara. Script homogenization for a given language is sometimes complicated by a will to harmonize several scripts within a group of kindred languages or, even more serious, the scripts of a country with languages belonging to different families. Bamgbose (1983) is a good example of attempts to reflect on existing orthographies (in Nigeria). It helps to understand the difficulties of some African, and other, linguists in rooting orthographic principles in the better-known conventional phonetic notation. None of the three linguists edited by Bamgbose is capable of responding to the specific conditions of writing. Moreover, they deliberately ignore graphic systems which preexisted or were coeval with colonization and are still in use. Hausa is written in 'ajami as well as in a Latinate alphabet. Some Ibibio know Nsibidi. Yoruba was written with a Latinate script, the so-called Romanists', and has known other systems, like àròkò and Oshitelu's writing, and may one day know jegede's.

The most original and ambitious global enterprise was Barton's (1991), who invented Afrikuanda. This system aspires to be universal, but it aimed primarily at writing all the languages spoken in Africa and the African Diaspora. Invented by a young Saint Lucian, it stands out through its (justifiable) complexity. Barton started from the premises that no present system could survive because the languages it would have to come to serve would be too numerous and different. The graphs of the proposed system represent the position of the organs of phonation for each sound, consonant plus vowel, or consonant modified by a diacritical vowel sound. The script is therefore alphabetical, one sign for one sound, but it may also be syllabic, one complex sign for a syllable. In addition, it offers the precious and original advantage of being able to note tonal languages. It can serve for deaf-mutes. The idea of symbolizing the movements of phonation is not new (Abercrombie: 1965-1966). Alas the drawbacks of Barton's script are numerous and major. It ignores the principle of economy, has no cursive or capitals, assumes that each writer can analyze his phonation, that all speakers of all languages phonate exactly in the same way (e.g. posits that the English /r/ is identical with the French /R/, and that all languages distinguish /l/ from /r/. He can't have known much about African phonological systems). But the fundamental error was to believe that people could distinguish the discrete phonetic oppositions of a language they do not know. We transpose them into our own system, so that a Francophone African using Afrikuanda would write what he hears of English, i.e. his own faulty pronunciation of that language. An American trying to use Afrikuanda to note Yoruba, a tone language, would write a sound

sequence that would be neither Yoruba nor American, but Yoruba as an American who did not know Yoruba would hear it. And yet, Barton's script is a net advance on the hundreds of Latinate scripts that have been unloaded on Africa. Any phonetician can learn it in less than an hour. A special computer keyboard could provide it with the necessary printed version. Yet it may seem strange that, precisely when are being developed methods of rapid reading, disconnected from the act of speaking, the Diaspora should want to take up a system that codifies articulation and is therefore even more phonocentric than the good old Latin alphabet. Yet again, this defect may be seen as a quality. In the universal anarchy of graphic systems, Afrikuanda may seem to be justified, imperfect but perfectible. It is up to Africans, at home and abroad, to make the decisions that concern them. They alone will finally decide the future of Afrikuanda. Experience shows that no system is perfect and that making one operational depends on a central authoritarian political power. Seen from the Diaspora, the harmonization of scripts may seem all the more important since Africa is believed to have no writing or only writings imposed by missionaries of various persuasions. Thus Sleweon (1979), a young Afro-American, proposes in *Journal Enconjoint* (a publication of the "Conjoint Alphabet" invented in 1972) a system which has the originality of not being based on the Latin alphabet but of giving some of its letters the value of a syllable through diacritical signs. Lepsius (1858) did something of the kind when he tried to reduce ancient alphabets, Sanskrit, Hindi, Persian, to a single alphabetical system. Having shown that those systems partly coincided, Lepsius proposed the common part, with some amendments, for the languages of Africa (268-88). Writing in the middle of the 19th century, he is little informed on Swahili, Kafir [sic], Ibo, Ewe, Kumasi, which he can just mention. Lepsius' influence was considerable, since he inclined to the then authoritative belief in the universality of the ancient languages. Barton innovates more than Lepsius, but at the end of the day neither contributes much to simplifying the enormously complex problem of writing in Africa.

Barton's initiative is not the only one out of Africa or Afro-America. Mbengue (no date) created Nuulange, a writing system for the languages of Senegal. He published it at his own expense and founded an institution of which he remained for a long time the only member, the *Office des Lettres Sénégalaises*.

The point of this, and other enterprises of the kind, is that they show up the dissatisfaction of Africans with the imposed Latin script. Mbengue's script, which does not seem to have attracted any users, is both alphabetical and syllabic. In 30 pages, this *alphabet — syllabaire* aimed at having a national script taught in a country where

the Muslims already used two scripts (Latin and Arabic). Senegal has now harmonized the scripts of all the languages spoken there. Published before the official decision, Mbengue's brave attempt at least showed that political power and linguists were responding to a popular need. Today Nuulange is dead and forgotten. Fal (1985) says: "The present state of research enables a start to be made in the process of schooling in the national languages", showing how far the French Jacobin-inspired, egalitarian brand of colonization was behind the more liberal live-and-let-live British system, which at least allowed African languages to be taught. In West Africa alone, who knows what the future of the Guerze script (attributed to Gbili), the Mande (Momolu Duwala Bukele), the Mum (Njoya), the Wolof (Asan Fay), the Fulfulde (Adama Ba), the "dita" Fulfulde (Dembele), the N'ko Maninka (Souleyman Kante), the Bambara (Woyo Couloubayi), the Mande (Kisimi Kamara), the Toma (Wido Zobo), the Bassa (Thomas Gbianoodeh Lewis), the Bete (Bruly - Bouabré) will be, all described by Dalby (1986) in the fine catalog of the exhibition *L'Afrique et la Lettre*? We know that two scripts have crossed the Atlantic: Afaka Atumisi's Juka of Surinam, also called *Para-maribo*, believed to have come from Liberia; the Gola script, said to be still known by the Gola of the east coast of the United States. Let us recall that each 'ajami is more than an adaptation of Arabic, that they all resulted from an analysis of the Koranic script, from comparisons with the graphic and phonetic systems of Arabic, from additions, innovations, rejections. The sheer numbers of present and past 'ajami are adequate proof of dissatisfaction with the reduction of African languages to avatars of the Latin or Arabic scripts and of the will to maintain the cultural identity connoted in writing.

The importance of syllable in West Africa's local writing systems is well understood by linguists as a result of their empirical analyses of the phonology of these languages. The uses of drum language are based on the splitting of language into sounds combined with relative harmonics, found also in double gong (percussion and vibrato) communication. Without this analytic quality, drum language could not communicate phenomena like vowel harmony or consonant permutation, let alone the tone scheme of a message or wordplay with permutation of syllables. Orality-inclined peoples usually possess the keenest capacity for auditory discrimination, hence their talent for learning to *speak* foreign languages.

Alphabetization¹⁶ in the narrow sense consists in teaching a people to read, write and, accessorially, to count. That is the main objective of primary education, but literacy campaigns are usually targeted at adolescents and adults, the active or aspiring part of the population. There are various types, according to the resources used, the public concerned, and above all the kind and level of literacy aimed at. There are basic literacy as defined above, functional literacy to boost productivity, and what we might call the state of literacy to define a people that possesses writing and uses it to promote and diffuse its culture.¹⁷

Under the promising title "The Graphical Tradition-African Writing" (in UNESCO's *General History of Africa*, edited by Ki Zerbo, 1981c), there is no reference to African documents written in local scripts. When the year 1990 was declared International Year for the Eradication of Illiteracy, Bhola directed a special issue of the *African Studies Review*, the official organ of the African Studies Association of the United States of America, with articles by Bhola, Ouane & Amon-Tanoh, Van Dyken, Robinson, McNab & Carron. With its bibliographies, statistics, reports, leading and other articles, this publication is essential for everyone who is interested in literacy in Africa. Yet the question of African writing is practically ignored. It seems to be taken for granted that the Latin alphabet still goes. The last decade of the century was to have seen a doubling of the adult literate population, according to the Jomtien Declaration of March 9, 1990, which stressed the priority of women, left behind by local education. With its comprehensive information on literacy in Black Africa, especially statistical, this document seemed to offer a good base for understanding and correcting the situation. Colonial efforts had had scanty lasting effects, and contemporary strivings seem to have run into the ground for lack of funds. Another cause of failure is the lack of follow-up, in the form of hawking literature, perhaps, or of any such incentive to use what has been acquired.

When Brusciotto (1882) republished the grammar of Kicongo, two hundred years after it had been written, and just before the Berlin Conference officialized the Scramble for Africa, the idea was to get to know better all these primitive peoples with which Europe was preparing to come into close contact. Written in Latin, it had originally been published in Rome in 1659. The missionaries intended to teach the Holy Scriptures in the local language. Catechetics, Bible reading and

¹⁶For an important bibliography, see *Alphabétisation et développement en Afrique* (Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique. Paris: ACCT. 1979). Consulted at Centre de Documentation, Ecole Internationale de Bordeaux.

¹⁷For a serious approach to the sociolinguistic problems of literacy, see Stubbs (1980).

exegesis were supposed to go hand in hand with the introduction of writing and the development of literacy; and indeed, the process of evangelization, nearly everywhere in Africa, was for a long time to remain the only means of progress towards literacy in African languages. Father Brusciotto's grammar presented the fundamental rules of the Congo language, but in Latin characters and in accord with the Latin eight parts of speech. After colonization, Protestant (to a greater extent than Catholic) missions continued to teach their converts in their own languages. They made this a right for all Africans, and American linguists, like those of the S.I.L. in Yaounde, compiled a library of descriptions, maps and translations. One of their reviews, *Studies in Nigerian Languages* (1976, n° 5), inventories them and incidentally defines two types of literacy and the material required for each: non-religious, readers, children's books, grammars, dictionaries, and conversation manuals. There is an abundant literature in Hausa, Fulfulde, Igbo, and Efik. And religious: New and Old Testament translations, prayer and catechetic books. Likewise, Nussbaum could publish in 1958 *A Selected Bibliography for Literacy Workers: With special reference to Africa*. The reading was not confined to the churches: schools, seminaries and vocational training centers soon brought up the rear, in which basic literacy was taught, with a miscellaneous culture that often sufficed to integrate Africans in the local colonial white-dominated society. Few of the catechumens were able to get to universities abroad, though. Often the targeted populations felt this education to be second-rate, discriminatory, and UNESCO was sufficiently alarmed to organize a meeting on this theme (UNESCO: 1970b). Experts analyzed the negative reactions and advised that such teaching should be preceded and accompanied by explanations and justifications in the local language.

The Latin alphabet was naturally ideal for developing Romance languages in literacy, but from the outset inadequate for noting the other European languages to which it was applied and seeing them through their phonetic evolution. But the church used the strong arm of salvation, abetted by heathen classical literature, to preserve Latin's position as the language of religion, administration and scholarship. Every teacher of French knows one long-term result: there are two French languages, one spoken and the other written.

The failure of the recent attempt to reform the orthography¹⁸ of French is the last in a long series, dating back to the 17th century, of

¹⁸Orthography is the conventional norm of a written language; but being also influenced by usage, it has to accommodate and reconcile all sorts of historical, morphosyntactical, logico-semantic demands. About the evolution and incoherence of the French orthogra-

successful and failed attempts, some adamant, some tolerant, to preserve the Latinness of French. The foisting of patched-up European orthographies on African and other outlandish languages has compounded an already confused situation. Grivelet (1994) reveals the difficulties of the current reform of writing in Mongolia. Mahmoud (1979) identifies the sociolinguistic forces, which stand in the way of planning and implementing a reform of Arabic orthography. Analysis is useful for an understanding of the phenomenon in itself, whatever the culture involved. He also looks at the reforming Chinese and Hebrew scripts. He believes that success lies in the emotions, values, attitudes and habits of the "orthographic community". Contrary to lexical reform (e.g. introduction of new technical words), changing the spelling of a language involves all layers of society, illiterates, new literates, intellectuals and the powers that be. All writing experts have questioned orthography as a whole and in detail, but they are generally allergic to any attempt at a global reform in which they see a threat to their prestige and to the culture for which they feel responsible. They cling to the past. But all successful users of orthography are there to assist them in resisting the efforts of authority.

A planner has to convince people of the absolute necessity of reform. His intrinsic demonstration must be irrefutable. He must also show that the intended reform is "natural", just a rational anticipation of the inevitable. The key ideas are that a preemptive strike will gain time without betraying the past, and that the future lies in the past. Who will listen? François 1er's Edict of Villers-Cotterêts (1539), which made the French of Paris the administrative language of all France, or the imposition of the Somali script by a Siad Barre were not works of persuasion, any more than the recent half-baked bankrupt reform in France.

The CREDIF method for FFL holds back the introduction of writing until very late in the basic intensive course. The idea was to prevent beginners from contaminating their pronunciation of French with the phonology of their mother tongue. The authors of the method must have been comforted by Bamgbose's remarks (1966) about the earlier Yoruba grammars, which aimed at making users 'discover' in Yoruba the established categories of English.

Scripts invented by Africans¹⁹ seem to understand the economy of African languages better. Tone is not easy to define, but it is surely

phy see the extraordinary *Dictionnaire historique de l'orthographe française*. Nina Catach, ed. Paris: Larousse. 1995). Modern African orthographies being by definition unhistorical, do not have these diachronic problems.

¹⁹For scripts not directly inspired by Westerners, see Battestini (1988), Campbell (1983), Dalby (1967, 1968, 1969, 1970), Westermann & Bryan (1952).

agreed that, whatever its function or action, it affects the syllable or more precisely the syllabic center or the vowel.²⁰ Africans have thus observed, through their prelinguistic analyses, that alone a syllabic script is likely to note their languages faithfully.

Faced with multilingualism in their economic area (rivers, regional markets, and crossroads), the creators of Nsibidi must have thought that a script readable in several languages, therefore logo-morphemographic, would be best adapted to their needs. And in effect the Cross River Nsibidi is picto-morphemographic. It has subsisted since the 18th century in southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon. No orthography here, but even if each sign admits of several allomorphs, certain accuracy is observed. Orthography—or correct spelling—certainly evolves through the art and freedom of different writers, but the economy of the system confine variables within the limits of the domains of written communication. Variants, however, are few from one village to another, and these allo-signs are known to some speakers, allowing accent or a few strange words to help define the origin of fellow users. As in Chinese, nobody knows all the signs, people know their place according to the number of signs they can read and write. It matters little that the languages are tonal, or whether vowel harmony or vowel/consonant duration is pertinent. One can see that all the problems raised by the need for oral-written conformity are lifted, but the number of infinite combinations they offer creates other problems. Yet such a system could not have maintained itself for so long if it had not answered the needs of the group. Will it survive the challenge of computerization? Japan and Korea seem to have demonstrated that continuity is possible, with a few adaptations. In any case, few people now master Nsibidi.

North of the equator, the most widespread African script is 'ajami, derived from Arabic (Battestini: 1986). There are many, since the languages of Islamized peoples have different phonological systems, have differently drawn from Arabic and innovated according to their specific needs. The major changes are diacritical signs for vowels, signs for non-Arabic sounds, signs that do not represent the same sound as in Arabic. The word 'ajami means "non-Arabic". One must see the expression of surprise on the face of an Arab literate who does not know 'ajami when he is shown an 'ajami text to understand just how "non-Arabic" 'ajami really is. One should also be aware of the veneration enjoyed by writing

²⁰Tucker (1978), for the orthography of Dinka, makes several observations about the graphic notation of tones and vowel duration. Few are the linguists who have shown an interest in tones, particularly in relation to the problems they pose in the reduction to writing of an oral language.

in Islam to appreciate the humility of those who deliberately choose to write in 'ajami: they are simply sacrificing their pride in the Koran to the need they feel of propagating it more quickly and effectively through a local, less prestigious language. It is strange that such attitudes seem quite unknown in decision centers occupied by westernized Africans. Westerners have striven to rationalize the use of Arabic to write African languages. Addis (1963) for instance aims at familiarizing speakers or learners of Mandinka in Gambia with the local 'ajami which is taught in some schools and used by a quarter of the population, that is more than the part schooled through the Latin alphabet. There is however still too little published literature in this script (one text in 1963), and no uniformization of the two alphabets has yet been decided, although both have been adapted to Mandinka phonology. Two or three Arabic letters may denote one Mandinka sound.

More than 350 million Africans are in contact with an 'ajami and Arabic writing. Nearly all learn to read and recite verses from the Koran and some go beyond this basic catechism, to *medersas* (roughly our secondary schools) where they are tutored in the Ancient sciences, along with theology, grammar, versification and rhetoric. A few of these then spend long years as *talibés* by the side of one master or more who impart university-style teaching. The language used is generally Arabic, but the local language is often broken into, especially whenever the master-disciple dialogue heats up. Born of a pressing necessity to pass on the essential Message to the widest possible audience and speedily, this teaching could be a model for the use of local languages in development. If this happened, many millions of African literates could no longer be branded with illiteracy because they were not schooled in the Latin alphabet.

Functional literacy has limited objectives. It aims at importing enough writing to a population regarded as illiterate to enable it to participate in a modest economy. It teaches them to fill out a form, read instructions for the use of a product, local papers or bulletins, directions. The schooling may be done in the local or a foreign language, in any script and sometimes just with symbols.

When Faye (1966) published his *Tereb Nitku Nyul* (The Book of the Black People), he sold it in the streets of Dakar. As leader of the Movement of Teachers of African Languages, he was militating for the rejection of the colonial language. In 1968, the Movement published an article by Sène about Faye's (also spelt Fay) Wolof alphabet. It advocated keeping people in their villages and teaching them there how to survive, in their own language and a unified national script. We were unable to observe the impact of these publications on the writing of Wolof in Senegal (they were on sale from 1958 to 1985 without much

success) or of another effort promoted by the Fédération des Etudiants d'Afrique Noire en France (undated, possibly 1959). A publication of the Ministry of Culture of Senegal, *demb ak tey* (Book of Myth), on the theme Education and Initiation (undated) gives a series of articles on non-western and non-Islamic education among Wolof, Serere, Bassari and Fuladu Fulani; but writing is not mentioned, not even the officialized script for all African languages of Senegal.

Very many orthographies have been created here and there, sometimes with reading and writing instructions. Oyoyoh (1943), leaning on linguistic studies of Efik and Ibibio, identified problems and suggested solutions for the writing of these two kindred languages in a Latinate script. In 1963, Samarin, studying Sango writing with Bible translation, discusses punctuation and intonation, etc. He is convinced that the Latin script would be unsuitable, citing errors due to the script in the translation of a New Testament text. He suggests no other, himself using the IPA. He does not seem to know Schmidt (1907) who created a general linguistic alphabet in an attempt to write down the sounds of all languages. Meier & Meier (1967) introduces to reading and writing of Izi, a Nigerian language. His humorous title, *Read and Write Izi: it's Easy*, belies the seriousness of the text, published in Enugu by the Institute of Linguistics, which contains practical exercises in a Latin alphabet. In Ouagadougou (Burkina-Faso), a sub-committee of the Office National de l'Éducation Permanente et de l'Alphabétisation Fonctionnelle et Sélective published a highly official document titled *Comment transcrire correctement le Mooré* (1977). Contrary to expectation perhaps, it is a good example of rational transcription of an African language, using the Latin alphabet for Mooré. Another official text, *Eléments pour une orthographie pratique des Langues du Tchad* (1976), a special issue of the Annales de l'Université du Tchad on functional literacy, *inter alia* uses the results of group and centers of interest studies to highlight the progressive difficulties encountered in the writing of Sara (105-7). It is mostly about writing proper but it gives also indications for a better adult education (152-6). In the same issue, Tourneux (1976) writes a preparatory note for the writing of Mulwi, another Chad language.

Having herself invented quite a few systems of writing, Africa lately finds herself overwhelmed with orthographies. We cannot yet be quite sure whether the swinging pendulum will one day enthrone English as the official international language, but there is much interest in this type of universality. But Burney (1966) was probably too far ahead in time, except perhaps for the enthusiast of Esperanto or the Latin alphabet, in proposing that there should be one single language for the whole of mankind. In his historical analysis of pre-computer artificial languages, he omits inter — and translingual writing such as

that proposed to UNESCO by Raymond Queneau, based on pictographs representing objects, emotions, ideas, and gestures that, although not quite universal, are largely transcultural.

Tucker (1936), a Dinka specialist commissioned to devise a script for that language, discovered that in real life usage of a linguist or phonetician designed script may not live up to expectancy. His own script, as any other for languages with tones, could not be telegraphically transmitted. One sequence of written signs, deprived of their pitch contour and social context, had no or too many meanings. So he turned to the phonetic scripts adopted by several languages of Nigeria, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast and Southern Sudan to solve the telegraph problem. Many years later (1971), he produced "Orthographic Systems and Conventions in Sub-Saharan Africa", and finally (1978) his "Dinka Orthography". When the New Testament was printed in Bor and Padang Dinka, he composed a bilingual dictionary in the same graphic system. While he does contribute solutions to the notation of tones and vowel duration, and of their combinations, the resulting text is overburdened with diacritical signs, to the point of looking almost like pure phonetic writing. Tucker's production covers more than 40 years on the quest of African languages optimal writing.

Burssens (1950) drafts a note on the typographic signs to be used in Congolese (now Zairese) languages. The same author (1972) takes Tucker to task and throws down *La Notation des langues négro-africaines: signes typographiques à utiliser*, a new system of phonetic notation for the languages of Africa.

The "Africa Alphabet" is a modification of the Latin alphabet proposed by the London International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (1930). The authors wanted to harmonize existing orthographies. Later, Africa Alphabet was suggested for the reduction of all oral languages in the world, changing its name to "World Orthography" (WO). The new letters of this alphabet were borrowed directly from the IPA as the International Phonetics Association had conceived it. To cope with widely diverging phonetic systems, it constantly had to add local "pure" graphic signs plus diacritics. Conceived by phoneticians, this alphabet staggered under the burden of having to figure out all the distinctive features and significant nuances of all the sounds of all human speech. Any departure from sound in the written system looks like treason to phoneticians. Soon there were angry protests against a mission judged impossible and, what was more, undesirable. Taylor (1928) had shown even before its appearance that this African Alphabet made short shrift of individual phonologies.

As for Fulfulde and Hausa, scripts exist and have been in use for centuries, which cannot be dismissed easily as they have supporting

literature and libraries in the North of Nigeria. Taylor protests against the recent creation of an alphabet for Africa by the IALC. However, he himself had by then invented a "Universal Language", indeed a system of symbolic writing readable in all languages. Later, he created an alphabet better adapted to the English language than the Latin patriarch, with 18 vowels and 25 consonants did. The former seems to have vanished somewhere in Her Majesty's Post Office and the latter to be relegated to the author's archives. But make no mistake: Taylor had thought a lot on the subject, had been out there in the field and knew what he was talking about, even if he was sometimes a bit of a blimp. He was mistrustful of phoneticians and thought linguists were better fitted than they were to create orthographies. He knew that all writing was imperfect, being made of signs of a different nature than those they are supposed to represent, and therefore to a large extent arbitrary. But this, he explained, did not matter: "For speech, the essential is the tonal rhythm of clause and sentence. For writing it is the context, not the orthography, of each word". So he is against diacritical marks and complex signs that burden and slow down writing and reading, and very much aware of the importance of the semantic context. The rest of the article uses Fulfulde and Hausa to buttress the thesis.

Most of the languages of the world, except those written for centuries in a script that had not been conceived for them, have a writing that is 90% efficient. The English alphabet is no more than 20% so: it has 40 sounds that it spells in 200 different ways. Many proposals have been made for the creation of strictly alphabetic systems. One such is named "Unifon" and was created in 1959 by Malone, a Chicago economist. Intended for English, it had indeed 40 letters, one for each of the 40 sounds of English (Culkin: 1986). It was therefore 100% efficient but remained an amusing curiosity, though it had revealed to a large public a real need of simplification and its possibility. A few years ago, George Bernard Shaw and Raymond Queneau, and the members of the umpteenth reform committee in France, and the authors of Basic English with normalized orthography, still didn't believe in the perfection of the alphabet dutifully adopted blindly by so many African countries. Queneau, as we have seen, took up pictography in a considerable way, while the linguist Jespersen bowed to phonologists and phoneticians with his "analphabetic" notation of sounds by formulae developing the positions and apertures of the phonation organs, to replace the IPA.

The alphabet principle in its pure simplistic form ignores that writing also requires auxiliary signs. Punctuation is extra-alphabetic, morphemographic, like scientific formulae. The number of signs a

western adult must know to be able to read his cultural landscape is about 1200, not 26. Of great pertinence are the studies collected by Augst (1986) in *New Trends in Graphemics and Orthography*. Twenty-seven experts in European orthographies look at them from several angles: representativeness of sounds, psychological and graphic interferences. Latin alphabet fetishism justifies or clouds many imperfections.

Many alphabets, in their present state, can only in part apply the alphabetical principle. One of the reasons is that orthography has not been able to take changes in pronunciation into account. The mixed character of Egyptian writing gave birth to the Semitic alphabet (Gardiner: 1916) and singularly the Phoenician (Rougé: 1874). One of the most ancient alphabets, the North Semitic, developed towards 1,700 BC in Palestine and Syria, had 22 consonantal letters. On this model the Hebrew (500 BC), Phoenician (1,200 and 814 BC), Arabic (700 AD) alphabets were created or acquired prestige. Towards 1,000 BC the Greeks who added some vowels used the Phoenician alphabet. The Etruscans' script inspired the Romans' (750 BC), and one by one all the western alphabets.

African languages that were not yet written in 1850 were thereafter transcribed through the Latin alphabet, in particular through Lepsius' system (see Koelle) which used complicated diacritical signs, and later the IPA or the International Institute for African Studies' with its double or auxiliary letters substituted for some diacritics. Those who remembered that writing is something to be read for instruction as well as for pleasure, proposed reading manuals. Trilles (1898) for Fon and Dion (1980) for the Kinyarwanda-speaking adults of Rwanda both base their methods, nearly a century apart, on the same phonetic Latin alphabet.

The problem of the regional homogenization of African alphabets has often assembled international experts at the UNESCO in Paris, or elsewhere. The Bantu (UNESCO: 1970a) and Sudanese (UNESCO: 1981b) families both ignore the African systems of writing, except N'ko in use in Guinea, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire among Jula traders. Nigeria, a region in itself, has created many orthographies, the oldest of which is perhaps Wolf's (1954).

Smaller cultural regions enjoyed the same sort of attention. Tadadjeu & Sadembou (1978) propose a general alphabet for the 100-odd languages of Cameroon, based on an exhaustive inventory of all their phonological systems and the choice of one sign for each sound or group of close sounds. Bouny (1976), confining himself to Kotoko (Chad), adapts and creates signs. Oyelaran & Yai (1976) concurrently laid down a few principles for the creation of a set of common symbols for the lan-

guages of Bénin, Ghana, Upper Volta (now Burkina-Faso), Niger, Nigeria and Togo.

Likewise, where there are two or more scripts in the same culture (Battestini: 1989). Zima (1974), in the case of Hausa digraphism, tries to determine the relation a language has with its writing systems. Hausa has two: an 'ajami and a Latinate. The 'ajami has endured for more than a century, though it includes allographs from one part of its vast area to another. It is perceived as the religious, authentically Hausa script. The second is constantly questioned and modified, never satisfactorily. It is looked upon as foreign and unsuitable for the language and milieu.

This fairly peaceful coexistence may be compared with the linguists' running battle over the writing of tone. Bailleul (1983) draws first blood from the conclusions of two articles by a certain Creissels. Granted that a language may have two parallel writings, one alphabetical and the other mostly consonantal, no agreement seems possible between any two linguists when it comes to describing and noting any one phonological system. In the studies collected by Luelsdorff (1989), those by Sgall, "Towards a Theory of phonemic Orthography", by Melchers, "Spelling and Dialect", are the most directly pertinent to informed reflection on the relation of phonology to orthography, a topic that must precede any script creation or adaptation. Migeod (1913) had already shown that a syllabary is more suited than an alphabet to represent a local language and satisfy local needs. Pike (1975) differed on this point, although he privately admitted to us that a syllable-based system might be preferable for tone languages, which he said he had not envisaged in 1947.

Pike's major contribution (1982) is prerequisite to any serious analysis of the relation between culture and language when foreign to each other. To support the recurrent argument of most of the authors of our bibliography, Pike points out that while teaching even an illiterate to pronounce the syllables of a sentence is comparatively easy, getting people to isolate sounds from one another is much more difficult. This is a fact that makes another far less surprising: namely, the dual fact that syllabic writing has been invented many times in the history of writing but that nearly all (perhaps all) alphabets that were invented owe a significant debt to an accident that occurred in the Middle East, the filching of a few signs from Egypt to make an alphabet of consonants.

Pike was well aware of the fact that Egyptian writing had progressively acquired phonetic symbols, without of course giving up its previous components. His private remark that syllables or groups of sounds might be better to pronounce a foreign language invites a paral-

lel and a reflection. Attempts in France to reform learning to read were first founded on the word (global method), then on the syllable (semi-global). Precolonial African scripts were mostly syllabic. The French concern for French children parallels Africans' concern over the equally difficult for them Latin alphabet. Each word or syllable was learnt as a reusable image. The consequences on orthography were catastrophic.

The Latin alphabet lobby is ubiquitous and multiform. Not only innumerable individuals, notably linguists, but institutions have proposed alphabets for the whole Continent and even for the entire universe: e.g. the Church Missionary Society since 1848, the IPA since 1888, the International African Institute since 1927, UNESCO since 1966, the Francophone Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique since 1984.²¹

The teaching of French as a foreign language (David: 1975) is therefore part of a vast multilingual and pluriscriptural landscape and should take heed of the fact. Indeed, the ACCT acts positively in this matter of the study of African languages. This is just as well in view of the backlog in teaching them in the former French colonies.

While the problem appears to be complex at macro level, on regional and state scales the village or the city district school is linguistically homogeneous. On the whole, children speak no more than two languages and have to use, as in the Savanna, only two graphic systems, Latin for French plus their Latin orthographed language in church, or Koranic in the schools of that name. The number of languages increases with the administrative importance of the townships. Civil servants, soldiers, policemen are recruited and circulate in a milieu larger than the homogeneous village or district. In town, classes tend to be more heterogeneous, but children and teenagers quickly learn to communicate in the dominant language(s). They commonly express themselves in a local pidgin, the imported language, their mother tongues and those of playmates.

Creators of African orthographies are almost as numerous and diverse as their systems, but what distinguishes them most is the scale of their ambitions. A careful typology of these would be interesting. Some

²¹ About writings created for specific languages, see: Amegbeame (1975), Bamgbose (1983), Barreteau (1978), Caprile (1976), Coninck & Galand (1960), Dames (1968), Diki-Kidiri (1977), Dion (1980), F.E.A.N.E.F. (1959?), Hallaire (1969), Jegede (1986), Jouannet (1976), Nikiéma (1976), Oyoyoh (1976), Samarin (1963), Tourneux (1976), Trilles (1898), Van Everbroeck (no date). About improving existing writings, see Coninck & Galand (1960). About the creation at national level, by a single individual, of a single unified writing system for all languages see Mbengue (undated).

aim at the whole Continent,²² and want to reduce it to a single graphic system, like the World Orthography that is only used for a single language in Sierra Leone. Others create a single script for a regional unit overshooting political frontiers on the basis of the phonology of all the mutually intelligible languages of this region (Oyelaran & Yai: 1976). The christianization and unification of the Germanic tribes remotely guide missionary activity, made possible by the Ulfila Bible. They take chapter and verse from Pike, but they also call upon versions adapted from phonetic alphabets like that of Yoruba (Ajayi: 1970), from the IPA, or simply from the system of phonetic values they see in the Latin letters as used by their own language.

It is easy to illustrate the problem of multigraphism by examining a few anthroponyms or toponyms as they are revealed in history books. Sékou Touré, whose first name could have been written <Saikou>, <Cheikou>, <Chaikh>, <Cheik>, and last name <Turay>, <Ture> just as well as <Touré>, rebelled against the French connotations of "blanc" and "noir" (as in "blanc comme neige" meaning devoid of guilt, pure, innocent and honest, or "noir dessein" meaning devilish plot), of which he had a long list. Nor did he suffer gladly what he regarded as an orthographic monster, which in fact was nothing more than an inconsistency: the spelling of his capital city Conakry. He clamored for Konakry. There are many such inconsistencies in the spelling of names of this part of the world: Sise, Cissé, Sissay or Diop, Jop.

The successive colonizations of <Cameroon> (English spelling) earned that country four names: <Cameroes> (Portuguese for shrimps), <Kamerun> (German) and <Cameroun> (French). A comparison of atlases likewise shows <Sudan> and <Soudan> (the Blacks in Arabic), short for the Bilad al Sudan (country of the Blacks), <Tchad> and <Chad>, <Morocco>, <Maroc>, <Maghreb>, <Moghreb>, all meaning the West in Arabic, lurking in <Marrakech> and <Markasi>, the latter being the name of those living in Timbuktu who claim their lineage from Marrakech. This kind of whirligig is not specifically African, but its originality in Africa is that foreigners who were ignorant of local languages transcribed most personal and geographical names. The historic Christian Kongo is graciously distinguished from the modern Congo Republic, by the initial capital letter. Nkrumah pointedly gave his new independent state the same name as the old Ghana Empire's, with the same spelling, which leads many to confusion. The same idea led Mali to pick that name.

²²See Bot-Ba-Njok (1974), Burssens (1972), Culkin (1986), Gregersen (1977), International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (1930), Lepsius (1855), Taylor (1928) and Pike (1975) indeed.

Other dialectical contradictions, such as tradition versus progress, may lead to epistolary and political duels like one that lengthily opposed Léopold Sédar Senghor and Sembène Ousmane about how the title of one of the latter's movies should be spelt. A certain type of free Wolof warrior, a sort of samurai cum mercenary, is named <tiédo> in Wolof. Boilat (1984) wrote the word as <thiédo> (and did not spare the holder) (308-11). The initial Wolof [t] is apico-alveolar. Only as a final is it aspirate, but then it is considered a variant of /t/. A French ear²³ hears an apico-dental and perceives it in /tyedo/ as vaguely aspirate. We write /tyedo/ here to follow the recent trend in usage from <th-> to <ty->, i.e. towards palatalization. As for the /d/, Sauvageot's definitive study (1965) shows that the geminated /dd/ very much exists in Wolof and has three consequences: it requires emphatic lengthening of the double consonant itself and of the preceding vowel, and a more forceful articulation of the group. Thus Sembène Ousmane, following the trend, did not write <thiédo> or <tyédo> but <ceddo>, pronounced /tjã:ddo/ in which the /c/ is an alveolar, vaguely palatalized /t'/. Of course Senghor, an *agrégé de grammaire*, knew all about the scholastic quarrels about the presence or no of geminates in the phonology of French. It would appear that in this memorable bout with Sembène (in which he occupied the true-blue corner and his opponent the red corner), Senghor, determined to stop once and for all the tide of phonological iconoclasm, knocked geminates out of Wolof and for many years banned the film from Senegalese screens. For our part, we are quite sure of having heard /D/ as not only geminated but also implored in Wolof, but it may have been a variant of the Jeri, as in the Fulfulde /diddo/ meaning two.

The African orthographies were invented mostly during the triumphant reign of structural linguistics and generative phonology. Africans who have bestowed writing on their languages were phonetic

²³The history of phonetic change in European languages shows that the consonantal framework of words resists longer than supporting vowels. Yet, vowels are better heard, being longer, more sonorous than consonants. It is remarkable that the non — westernized African country-dweller hears as well at 85 as at 20, whereas the city European's hearing gets progressively weaker because of the noise. Given the phonetic law according to which one learns a foreign language with greater ease if one does not transpose its phonology in one's own — this may happen when one's ear is particularly keen —, then it is easier to understand why Africans are so good at learning languages other than their own, and why they will usually choose the syllabic mode for their writing systems. In Europe the consonant, as its name implies, was long the vowel's helpmate; but for the phonetician the vowel remains the syllable's worthy stalwart, which may explain why the cenemic letters (those that are seen but not heard) are in French mainly consonants, and also perhaps where their pre-eminence over vowels in prosody and elocution comes from: Written language.

scriptwriters rather than creators of alphabets or scripts. Ignorance of the relative autonomy of sound and graph was the norm. Coming on the scene after a long period of transgression of the "one sign for one sound" rule, they applied it with a vengeance, they intoned and nasalized vowels and garnished the letters they gave them with diacritical flourishes and endowed them with additional phonic traits. What with divergent political think-tanks, lack of real language policies, multilingualism and -graphism, a sorry picture emerges. Yet, the African schoolchildren we have known were rather better at French spelling than their counterparts in metropolitan France.

P. Dumont (1983) shows, mainly about Wolof, how difficult it is to create an orthography, in particular whether to separate words or not. He gives an objective account of Senghor's politicized controversy with the linguists, which he sees as a round in the running contest between friends and enemies of the *statu quo* for African languages everywhere in Africa. Linguistically, the line-up is phonetic versus phonological element, tradition versus innovation, determinate substantive + isolated functional moneme versus single moneme integrating isolated moneme, single consonant versus consonantal gemination, and a thousand other details that serve to heap more confusion over the already problem-ridden teaching of African languages (266-77), not to speak of the political repercussions, the fullness of which this valuable work does not fail to impress upon us. It would seem that for Senghor the crucial point was to save his analysis of Wolof, conditioned by a whole body of pre-Saussurean, philological, diffusionistic, romanist and comparatist semiosis against the mainstream of contemporary linguistics: a reactionary bundle perhaps rooted in an early ideological choice on his part.

The Latin alphabet is not suited for African languages, as implicitly proved by Ladefoged (1968). Aside from the often cited /kp/ and /gb/ phonemes, it lists voiced implosives, labiovelar, voiced aspirates, a host of back consonants from post-alveolar to uvular and glottal, a total of 88 consonantal sounds, 18 of which for Wolof (13 common to Wolof and French).

Senghor, in a poem dedicated to his mother, uses the expression <paragnessé>, an approximate transcription of her (and possibly other Serer's) pronunciation of the word <français>. The /p/ is the closest Serer labial to the /f/ she wanted to produce and thought she did, having heard it so. Yet there is a /f/ in Serer, and the Serer /p/ is never clearly plosive in this vicinity. The /r/ is rendered not as a velar but as an apico-alveolar /x/, without vibrations. Senghor used letters of the Latin alphabet. Using IPA signs he would have written /paxa/. In the word <français>, that one perceives and attempts to reproduce, there is

no /a/ between the first two consonants, so the subsequent vowel /ã/ is regressively assimilated in a denasalized form, there being no nasals in Serer, and the failure to nasalize it is over-compensated by the introduction of an unnecessary /ñ/ just afterwards. The last syllable is correctly rendered except for the transcription <-ssé> for <-çais>. A glance at the two words may have been enough to awaken the reader's sympathy for the good lady's efforts to do justice to her son's other side, but we make no apologies for rubbing in a crucial point of our argument: the enormous difficulty of transcribing from one language to another.²⁴

The teaching of African languages, wherever it is accepted or tolerated, suffers from a dearth of qualified teachers, resources, real motivation and outlets, but above all from their inferior status. One must note one of the few exceptions: Nigeria is an active promoter of its languages. Awoniyi (1982) offers a comprehensive survey, defines the objectives in primary and secondary education, the principles and practice of grammar and semantics teaching (taking Swahili as an example), proposes directives for the evaluation of progress. Although Swahili is not a Nigerian language, many Nigerian intellectuals regard it as a potential lingua franca for the Continent, which it already is in East, Central and partly in Southern Africa. It has the merit of not being historically connoted like Fulfulde and Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, the main languages of Nigeria, and of being spoken by possibly one hundred million Africans. At first a pidgin, of Arabic and diverse Bantu dialects, Swahili became a creole and is well established as a literary language.

In Ghana, consensus has been easier to reach. Local languages have been taught since Independence. Since the 1970s progress has been made in their scientific description, in the pedagogy and economy of their teaching in schools, in adult literacy. There alone, it would seem, are traditional oral literatures taught in transcription (Ansre: 1969). Curiously, the internal status of Ghana's languages has benefited from their teaching abroad. A fair number of teachers were properly trained in Linguistics and in their own language at SOAS and in America. But neither here nor in likewise officially Anglophone Nigeria, let alone in the so-called Francophone countries, does anyone ever think of teaching them in a local script.

Writing in the Latinate sense is opposed to the semiotic meaning of the word, which includes all systems of signs or symbols. The dichotomy has been epistemological. Other pairs were city & countryside, sociology & ethnology, culture & folklore, metropolitan country &

²⁴On the relation between the oral and the written in general and more especially in Africa, see Vivay (1941), *Cultural Anthropology* (1986), Coulmas (1987), and Battestini (1989).

colony, civilized & primitive. The act of choosing the wider definition was therefore not innocent, but a decision between two visions of the world. Choosing the narrower, intentionally or in blind obedience to established science, meant deciding against respect of the Other and for intolerance and exclusion. Our own determination comes from living for one third of a century in Africa and rests on analysis of collected facts and experiences.

It does seem that writing is a social institution, a type of thought communication and conservation, and one that often uses the notation of the sounds of speech. Better still: enlarged to include all the signs and symbols of a culture, it becomes the material of its social texture, its text, the inventory of past, present and potential meanings that society exhibits for the observer. Writing in this sense would then be the signifier of all possible messages, of all systems and their logical imbrications. It would also be a psychical activity, since the signs language is made of exist only to express, conserve and communicate ideas and emotions. Materially, writing is a product of mechanical activities. The motions of the hand, the various ways and means, the places in the brain that rule over it demand psychological study such as Richaudeau's on the mechanisms of reading (1969). The theory of writing belongs to philosophy but also to several sciences because of its multiple object: sociology, communication science, semiotics, psychology, linguistics, and logic. Essentially, it aims to grasp thought in writing, that is to say text.

Just as and when linguistics is rediscovering the need to study the relation of thought and language, semiotics is widening the concept of writing to all systems of signs. The theory of writing's object is thought manifest, modeled and perceived in the traces of its precipitates and condensations. Images and configurations on wall paintings, chains of ideas in a philosophical essay, narrative, descriptive and explanatory developments in a novel, shots and their montage and editing in a movie, all these can be regarded as paradigms of the divisions of the substance-situation and their intentional reorganization. The theory of writing posits that every articulated whole has been written. They all result from an intention to communicate and conserve thought through a system of signs and the creation of pre-texts which are necessary but of no more use after communication has been achieved. The medium being not the aim cannot be idolized.

The general theory of writing will include both the domains comprising the pairs script-message and writing-text as inscribed in society. Yet this is what presided over the parting of the ways of *phonetics* and *phonemics*, and why we distinguish between script and writing. With the latter we begin the revisiting of thought, through the need to

verify the distinctive pertinence of different meanings, thanks to phonemes. A deliberate choice of distinctive signs to embody articulated thought is made in all communication systems, together with the choice of their modes of association, linearity and sequentiality being the most frequent.

For it is in between the demystifying objective truths and the insatiable constitutive will-to-be that poetic "remythifying" freedom installs itself.

Gilbert Durand

How is it that the world, that is the sum of practices and meanings that bind humans together and with things, was open to strategies conducted "in the name of science"?

How is it that all those whose activity, knowledge and meaning were destroyed or redefined did not rise against change of meaning? Why did they not protest the fact that, far from being acknowledged and associated as "allies" and recognized in their freedom to evaluate new proposals and possibilities, they were judged and disqualified?

Isabelle Stengers

Chapter 7

Knowledge: Of the Necessity to Evaluate Knowledge Through its Perceivable Symptoms

The African set of relationships to "text", designated as sign articulated systems, delineates a mode of unequally distributed knowledge and two other types of knowledge. For Goody, the knowledge is pragmatic and conservative, and African literacy is restrained. Yet the diffusion of this knowledge throughout society, its accumulation and conservation, are —and without paradox— ensured for all while reserved for a few. Knowledge, whether it is associated with writing, is founded on experience and shared only in applied forms of services and goods, advice and products. What is shared is pragmatic and material. The possessor of knowledge, as we have often experienced in West and North Africa, exhibits nothing but contempt for those who do not possess it, a contempt that contrasts sharply with his generosity towards those who need his services. His shall we say relative knowledge is perceived as absolute by society, whereas he himself probably knows it is reactive while aspiring to the absolute.

The discourse, which goes with applied knowledge, can only be metaphorical, since it transfers a somewhat scientific or logical meta-language into the field of everyday experience for the benefit of the non-initiate consumer of services. In terms of objectives, society requires that this knowledge is useful, and no matter if it is metaphorically ex-

pressed. One may therefore see in it no more than a can-do rather than a know-what, an esoteric discourse, perhaps just an effort to overcome practical problems of translation or vulgarization. Exhibited science, at each singular moment of its staging, is a peculiar experience of a skill that will be judged by its results. The abstract logic that underlies activity is absent from the staging or concealed behind a noetic-poetic rhetoric of the same order as the Pre-Socratics'. The appearance of this discourse is the surface seized on by the passing western scholar, in which he sees proof of its existence but also the totality of the systemization of perceived facts. Repeated implementation induces in the possessor's mind a logic that enables him to resolve unpredictable cases. To the perennial stock is added new knowledge born of experience, borrowing, and invention.

An objective consideration of a few of the rare existing African writings on knowledge, that is of those written by and for Africans, before or independently of any foreign scrutiny or logic, such instantaneous texts of the dynamic texture of African knowledge should enable us to seize on this theoretical function in action and judge its effects, direct and indirect.

Research is slowly progressing into the mathematics, pharmacopeia, architecture, cosmogony and astronomy of non-western peoples. Ganay (1950), Zaslavsky (1973) and Kubik (1987b) are models, but still exceptions.

Wherever there is said to be no writing, even in the widest sense, there is a body of texts forming the oral tradition of that culture, its modes of feeling, believing, thinking and acting, its rapport with individuals, groups, nature, without which no society could function and endure. Herein is woven the text that will condition each individual's personal and social destiny. This is what Ogotemmêli explained to Griaule, asserting that weaving art cannot be separated from verbal discourse, and this since the beginning of the world. The visible side of this texture represents an inventory of symbols, gestures, costumes, paroles, landscapes, rituals, all the modes of existence, the ontological and teleological texture of that culture, which may or may not depend on the presence of writing. In this sense, text becomes immediate reality (Bakhtin: 1978). Without the text there could be no thought. After Derrida and living a third of a century in Africa, we claim to posit that there is no African society without some form of writing and text.

The languages of Africa, their lexicons and syntaxes, confirm this assertion. Cheikh Anta Diop (in *Bulletin de l'IFAN*: 1975), when we were in Dakar, demonstrated the possibility of translating set and quantum theory and the theory of relativity into them by showing that the logic and lexis of Wolof could express such abstract concepts with-

out using writing. Many theorists believe that the invention of phonetic writing was a decisive step forward, due to or at least associated with an increase in the scale of human exchanges and in the complexity of the human brain, until then incapable of understanding and applying the principle of causality. All very well, but Kokot (1981) presents a formal model of the Zulu system of beliefs concerning the nature and causes of the human condition. He bases his study on a collection of autobiographical and philosophical essays by Madela Laduma, a Zulu lightning-doctor, written in the new Zulu script and orthography. Barber (1991) analyses the complexity of the Yoruba Oriki and demonstrates its intellectual potential. Moore (1973) sees in the invention of Vai a contribution to communication science. Jeffreys (1948), the decipherer of Mum, saw in the diffusion of cowries proof of the spread of culture from Egypt throughout Africa, but not in the opposite direction or in both. The whole argument for cowries ex Egypt and of their use as money¹ rests on the existence among Ibos and some other peoples of a sexagesimal system used exclusively in conjunction with cowries, all other forms of counting being decimal: this shows that cowries must have been imported for special purposes and restricted to these purposes, says Jeffreys, who lists other cultural traits which may have come from Egypt, like the "dual organization" of society in Africa and the winged sun disk [sic]. The use of money is generally regarded as a prior condition to the accumulation of goods and capital and of the appearance of a structured state. But the diffusion of one or two cultural traits is not sufficient proof, as the author himself reminds us, citing Lowie's *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (1946).

There is no real proof that writing had the alleged epochal impact on the development of the intellect and of humankind. But the emphasis laid on this criterion, instead of on the dozens of major progress-inducing inventions in the Neolithic era, inflicts yet another unnecessary prejudice on Africa.

The answer seems to lie in the evolution of the human brain. The function of language consists of:

- 1— a system of sounds adapted to the phonation organs and ear of the speaker;
- 2— a system of concepts based on experience, developed and transmitted from generation to generation;
- 3— an arbitrary link, peculiar to each language, between words and the concept or thing they denote.

¹The only cowries used as coins were imported from the Maldiv Islands. They are very small shells (1cm or less) named *Cyprae monetana*. They were used in Africa and South Asia, which must have formed an economic region at a time.

The elaboration of concepts and mental images involves the whole cortex. Phonetic mastery of a language is a special function of the language area of the brain, between the left temporal and parietal lobes, as is shown by loss of memory and word blindness when this area is damaged. The frontal lobes, the seat of reasoning, play an essential part in ensuring communication between the structure of the self and the cognitive functions, including one of the highest, the symbolic function, located (according to Laborit, 1970) in the neo-cerebrum. Thinking is associated with perceiving, without reference to the outside world: the mind acts on the image, not on the environment. We do not follow Goody in his extolling of alphabetical writing, even if a contemporary tendency in linguistics sees in the written word a global image, disconnected from any phonocentric function, and therefore close to the morphemographic function.

Ansre (1980) believed that the future of Africa depended to a very large extent on her ability to solve language-related problems. He examines the role of language in intellectual, economic, practical, judicial and sociocultural development. He proposes practical solutions, but none on the role of writing (469), which he does not (as Goody does) regard as essential for development in all its dimensions. Ethnologists are mostly strangers in the "field" they have chosen. One of them, Augé (1982), observes that they are

... caught in the uncertainties of their own intellectual tradition and in some cases too sensitive to the functional aspects of a system of beliefs and references whose rationality they think they have exhausted when they have related it to the general logic of a cultural system (213).

Even if we leave aside Egypt for writing, for reading and libraries, medicine, mathematics, architecture, agriculture, breeding, astronomy, mining and metallurgy (with Meroë and Kush); Phoenician Carthage for its shipbuilding technology and international trade; Roman North Africa and the so-called ancient sciences in Islamized Africa from the 8th century onwards, we can observe in "Black" Africa cosmogonies and skills that would have been impossible without a general mastery of the environment, refined observation of recurrences in the substance-situation and of man himself, from anatomy to psychology. Some will not admit that the Fulani shepherd who can help a cow to calve, who knows the herbs and minerals that heal warts, eliminate parasites, cure diarrhea, who speaks to his obedient flock, who knows how to fight a drought and predators, common endemics and epidemics, is a practitioner of the veterinary art. One must have observed these shepherds for a long time to understand how much they know and have ap-

propriated of nature in their thoughtful and masterful practices. Baerts & Lehmann (1991) demonstrate and illustrate the point abundantly. One inherits the status of shepherd at birth and begins to learn its skills with one's first steps in life. Knowledge is transmitted by word of mouth, observed in action and verified every day, applied by the apprentice and controlled by the elders, sanctioned with affectionate laughter or punishment. For anyone who has seen them set a broken bone, accurately lance the swollen belly that would kill if left unattended, put a plaster on stings, bites and cuts, there are enough signs here of an art if not of a science.

In spite of its contributions to European civilization in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and of its scientific and technical development before modern times, Islam is now regarded as obscurantist. Three Muslims have been awarded the Nobel Prize since it was founded in 1901. The Koran emphasizes the superiority of the *âlim*, the individual who possesses intelligence and advances on the path of knowledge. Only 250 verses are concerned with the law, while 750, nearly one eighth of the book, exhort believers to study nature, reflect, make the best of their reason in the quest of ultimate reality, and of knowledge and understanding an essential element in the life of the community.

Mathematics is there everywhere, in the decorative patterns of leather, textiles, architecture and common objects, in educational and recreative games, in dance and wordplay. Zaslavsky (1973) describes the complex and varied written and gestural representation of numbers, of geometry in plastic art and architecture, in mathematical games and divination. What is at work here are essentially applied arithmetic and elementary solid geometry. It has been claimed that Pythagoras borrowed from the Egyptians, who for their part evidently found the Romans barbarians.

Kubik (1987b) explains, as a phenomenologist, the Tusona's space and time complex, a key notion in the West for the identification of any mode of knowledge. If we accept that there are profound differences between the words used to describe numbers and written mathematical representation in any language and from one language to another, it is noteworthy that when we operate in a numerical system we lose our linguistic specificity (Posner: 1983). Hence the magic simplicity of mathematics for linguists.

Zaslavsky's treatment of Akan weights is of particular interest. Apart from their numerous religious, economic and literary functions, these weights are used to teach mathematics. They not only measure gold powder, alloys, medicaments, but also embody arithmetical and geometrical values. Bosman (1705), quoted by Niangoran-Bouah (1984), says that these tin or copper weights were common in all this part of

Africa and that they were founded and crafted by the Blacks themselves. Their divisions were different from those of the European trading partners, which did not prevent agreement and settlement of accounts. The weights allowed all four arithmetical operations. Abel (1952) analyses the system, whose base was 5. For instance, one weight weighed 1408 *taku* (the unit of weight) or 225.28 grams. The symbols it bears and their disposition figure the calculations that were necessary to arrive at that number. Abel collected 741 different weights in 32 villages. Their geometrical shapes reveal knowledge of the circle and its divisions, of several pyramidal and numerous triangular and quadrangular forms. In this study of Ashanti, Agni and Baule gold weights, only weights with a geometrical form are dealt with (96-114). In the same journal, but in 1959, Abel specifies that the image of each weight refers to a number and therefore to a weight. The caliber of these weights, which had many different shapes, was determined by the weight of the lost wax used in founding them. Wax forms of different shapes but identical specified weight were used to model bronze weights of those shapes and weight-value.

The fact that the density of the wax and bronze was assumed to be always the same produced slight differences, which were adjusted by making holes or adding lead in hollow parts. The standard reference was to the red black-capped seed called *abrus precatorius* of about .08 gram. The unit used in the *taku* was worth two seeds or .16 gram and in the *ba* three seeds or .24 gram. Abel numbers seven double series: seven female or weak for purchases and loans, seven male or strong for sales or refunds. The differences yielded the interests or the profits. Weights differed only slightly in weight-value, as there were so many of them. Coded signs on the weights gave equivalences: 1 stroke = 1; 1 arc = 2; 1 arc + arrow = 3; etc. Sometimes two numbers that had to be multiplied indicated the number of two-seed units. A weight measuring 252 *taku* (x2 seeds) is marked 12 and 21, the product of which is 252, or 40.32 grams, which is the weight named *benda*. Each shape, apart from its name and numerical value, had a figurative meaning. The square was 'day'; zigzag was 'fire'. These lexemes could be interpreted as proverbs. The crocodile symbolized fertility, but two crossed crocodiles meant «We have each a throat, but only one belly», (meaning = recall the debt and the family link). Combining numbers, denotations and connotations produced a semantic charge thanks only to the existence of a memorized textual fund of the order of a *pharmakon*, whose articulations could be reorganized almost at will, making it possible to create discourses of varying lengths. These time-resisting concrete objects scientifically studied by Abel reveal a complex system of references of scientific and practical value, unified, coded, open-ended and susceptible to

poetic-noetic treatment. Close to western pre-metric systems, their understanding does not require logic categories different from ours. Let us recall in passing that the Latin notion of *scriptulum* (small writing) gave birth by corruption of the word to *scrupulum* (scruple, a weight of 1.296 grams, as in Molière's apothecary's *scrupule*), a notional confusion perpetuated by the double use of the Greek word *gram*, meaning both a weight and a letter or writing.

Africanist discourse does not seem to mention the knotted cord, although the Dogon used them as a calendar based on astronomical observation. Griaule (1934) mentioned the combination of arithmetic and geomancy in Ethiopia before returning to the Bandiagara cliff, showing an early interest in African modes of knowledge. Dogon cosmology will never cease to intrigue. Zahan (1951), concerning the Dogon and Bambara notion of ecliptic describes the mathematical and graphic method by which these peoples represent the movements of heavenly bodies, particularly the sun, around the Earth, which for them is the center of the cosmos. Their ecliptic is egg-shaped and the habitable world is a cylinder stretching north and south of the equator between the tropics. The sun's observed daily and yearly movements are represented by a two-dimensional zigzag line $/\backslash/\backslash$, in which variations indicate the precession of the equinoxes and the changing duration of the day with the seasons. Apices in the line represent the cardinal points. Each line from one apex to another represents a certain number of days (in the abridged form 90 days, the sun year being divided into 360 days). Zahan insists on the fact that these representations are neither mathematical nor abstract in the western senses of the words, but on the contrary form an integral part of the people's daily life. The zigzags are reproduced on earthenware vessels, tools and weapons. They are also seen in the tilling of the soil, in the decoration of houses and votive altars, in ritual dances. The ecliptic pervades the entire Dogon and Bambara cosmology, according to which the universal rhythms of heaven and earth are repeated in all the activities of men and societies. Noteworthy is the roll-out presentation of the ecliptic, as on an ancient vase. One has to perceive the zigzag as $a/b\backslash c/d\backslash a$ to understand the spatial representation of the four angles, forming a closed circle.

Meanwhile, outside the West certain peoples knew things that were only discovered later in Europe, such as the atom and the molecule. For centuries the Dogon had an atomistic view of the world. Their atom was the tiny millet grain, which, associated in certain conditions with other minute elements, could engender an infinity of other millet grains. It was the smallest element in the universe, the open-ended alpha and omega. At the other end of the scale, let us not forget

that the Dogon had an accurate conception of the whole system of Sirius, of which they couldn't see Sirius B, an astonishing phenomenon. Its ellipse was drawn on the ground in three dimensions by the dancers of *Great Sigui* (Sirius A = the great mask; Sirius B, its small satellite = the other masks). Its wall design is common in the caves of the Bandiagara cliff. Sirius A and B lie in the Canis Major constellation. Sirius cycle (The Great Year) is 1460 years. It is 8.64 light years removed from the earth. Sirius B was only discovered in 1862 in the West. The Egyptians knew Sirius A's (Sothis) appearance in July, at the time of flooding of the Nile, 4,000 years ago. But the favorite object of French ethnology, the Dogon, is no exception. The Shilluk call Uranus "The Three Stars", two of which, the satellites, are invisible to the naked eye. Western astronomers discovered them in 1787.

It is just conceivable that certain existing systems have not been perceived because of their unthinkable appearance and their real difference. Much can be expected, in this respect, from the description of African semiotic systems by non-westernized Africans.

Semiotics, let us say it again, has risen on the tripod medicine, logic and linguistics. The first textbook on the subject, Sprengel (1801), was a summary of symptomatology. It would therefore seem natural, in this inquiry into the African contribution to writing, to examine the African way of reading the signs of illness and the relation of writing and the treatment of illness (Battestini: 1994c). Using a corpus of three texts, we tried to show that African medical practice is largely based on the tradition of Hippocrates and Galen. The texts show an active, dynamic science, whose scope should not be exaggerated, but which cannot be ignored.

From about 1975 to 1985, a lively debate took place on the value of a body of African practices founded on the supernatural. According to Pool (1994) the concept of "ethnomedical systems" (meaning a reaction to the imposition of the foreign system on local semeiological and therapeutic practices) hinders and can even prevent the observation of these practices. Africans have probably made more use of empirical practices and fewer of moral and social principles than was first apparent. It would seem that the diatribe is founded on a misunderstanding between western biomedical thought and a disparate African etiology based on variously oriented searches for naturalistic causes whose boundaries are hard to define by the imported medicine. According to Foucault (1963), contemporary medical science rests on the exclusion of a metaphysical evil and the eclipse of the individual, to the benefit of the concepts of organism and morbid anatomy. Nor are African practices founded on evil and the individual. They understand morbidity as deviance from the natural and cultural norm. They do not separate the living organism

from the psyche or society. However, the notion of death as it has emerged in modern western clinical science does not exactly cover the status of death in the various African conceptions of the world (Thomas, Luneau & Doneux: 1969 and all Thomas' texts on the idea of death in Africa). One is left thinking that only comparables should be compared, except, if one will have it, the respective successes of either school in the therapeutic saga.

Contemporary medical science once decided that Harvey's discovery of the mechanism of blood circulation had created a gulf between it and archaic medicine. Until then, the sacred authority of medical writing had been the bedrock of practice, and at the same times a powerful hindrance to experimentation and progress. After that, Galen continued to rule officially, in company with alchemy, but this no longer prevented progress.

There is a type of African written scientific discourse that verges on poetry: the one that deals with health and illness. Its scarcity makes it all the more valuable for our demonstration.² It has influenced and informed health-related attitudes and behaviors from Egyptian antiquity to the present. In some ways it is literary, noetic-poetic, religious in its apparent practical effectiveness. That Africa writes, like the West *and* differently, throws up many problems concerning her uses of this discourse, her relation to her texts, her therapeutic applications of a knowledge that proceeds from the book. The Africanist may be surprised, perhaps not to learn that Africa writes, but to find himself invited by this book-informed science to take a look at the ideology that has blinded him so far to this evidence, and perhaps even to review his own perspectives and methods. Mudimbé, in the preface to his essay *L'Odeur du père* (1982), echoes Lévi-Strauss's Foucault-inspired plea for an impassioned questioning of history to precede any structural analysis and for Africanists to inform themselves of the archeology of their objects of research: an indispensable methodological prerequisite for anyone who claims to speak in the name of Africa (8-13).

The oral and written literatures in African languages we have become acquainted with since the 1950s, namely those of the Maghreb and West and Central Africa, seem to us to give more pride of place to health and disease than those written in received languages. This may be because the westernized, urbanized African writer is less informed on the subject than his less acculturated brother in the countryside. In the vernacular literatures, mischievous or malicious children are like no other anywhere else. They may be physically handicapped or have

²Some of the following text about illness was discussed at University of Nice (APELA, Sept. 20-21, 1991) and part of it was published (Battestini: 1994c).

gone through a difficult birth. The hero may be deformed and have to be made whole before he can accomplish extraordinary feats, like Sundiata Keita (see for example *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue* de D.T.Niane, 1960).³ Although since the sixties illness is increasingly diagnosed and treated in the Western way, hybrid works like *Dogui-icimi* (1938) by P. Hazoumé and *Le Devoir de Violence* (1968) by Y. Ouo-loguem still contain descriptions of troubled minds and bodies, antidotes for poisoning and village therapies. And yet there are in Africa ancient treatises on medicine, many times copied over the centuries, and others more recent. Their authors were characters who share some traits with those here described by Lévy (1991):

For a long time the official doctor was only a healer among others, and even if he knew disease and illness better, that was not what interested his patients. He was educated of course, but he had little practical training and his science was no more effective than that of his rivals. In time he was to borrow a great deal from popular empirics, while the quacks, having learnt to read, were to take in much of Hippocrates and Galen (97).

Ibn Tofayl, Ibn Rushd, Cheikh Nefzawi or perhaps Njoya are here characterized, as well as hosts of faith-healers, marabouts, *babalawo* whose practices are directly, or more often indirectly, inspired by this kind of knowledge.

A certain type of written medical discourse may be regarded as literary as well as (pre)scientific. A poesis, it informs praxis and rhetoric dominated by metaphor and the projection of the paradigmatic axis over the syntagmatic axis, Jakobson's (1960) criterion for poetic discourse. In Africa, it includes incantations, polyphonies, onomatopoeia, plays on words, chants and choruses like among the Ulliminden. The practitioner's gestures, his dispensing of potions, balms, drugs, plasters, poultices, cauteries, bloodletting, enemas, purgations are accompanied and reinforced by colorful words that speak to the

³Sundiata Keita's birth-handicap (crippled legs) was always thought to have been caused by a spell and cured by magic. In Africa, any unexplained illness is magic. But even a scientific explanation, based on knowledge and expressed in terms that are foreign, is locally perceived as esoteric and akin to magic. Official medicine today, while it relegates its former practices and remedies into the history of its infancy, does not regard them as having been inspired by magic. The same logic could make today's physician tomorrow's witch-doctor. Why go on pretending that those African medical practices that are thought or proved to be of Hippocratic origin, or that are informed by recent or ancestral experimentation, or that rest on a comparison and verification of a corpus of local practices, are not real medicine in a world ever more attracted to soft medicines like homeopathy and acupuncture?

mind in a resolutely psychosomatic approach. Dotted with edifying anecdotes, this written discourse visibly aims at being read with pleasure, which is no longer the case, regrettably, with our scientific treatises. The African medical texts (north of the equator) may be divided as follows:

- 1— Texts in
 - a. Arabic
 - b. Local languages;
- 2— Texts in imported languages written by
 - a. Africans
 - b. Non-Africans;
- 3— Recent records, in non-African languages, of
 - a. "African" or tropical medicine (Diouf: 1969; Iwu: 1993)
 - b. Other texts concerned with healing in the new religious movements.

We shall use two texts of the 1a type (Nefzawi and Abd-er-Rez-zaq), one 1b (Njoya), and several 2a (e.g. Touré, Akhmisse), one 2b (Imperato) and some others (e.g. Ekodon-Nkoulou: 1959). For their lack of concern with writing, no text of the third type will be considered.

Type 1a texts, the most numerous, come from North Africa. They take over, modify and adapt the ancient medical sciences of Egypt, India, Persia, Greece, Morocco and Moorish Spain. Still present in Northern Africa, they are also attested south of Mauritania and in northern Ghana and Nigeria.

Ancient Egyptian medicine, enriched by contacts with Asia, the Middle East and the Mediterranean, was innovative and used tested and codified scientific procedures from which the ordinary practitioner could only deviate at his own risk, especially when he treated important people. He also used magic and placebos. He was often a priest, whose function was then invested with an authority that exceeded his person. The codex he used had a sacred value and force of law (Evans-Anfom: 1986). Mummification⁴ had led to considerable progress in anatomy, the skeleton, the internal organs and their physiology. The Greeks, and later the various peoples of the Middle and Near East, in-

⁴The Ebers, Smith and Kahun papyri deal respectively with internal disorders, surgery, traumatology, inflammation and troubles linked to gynecology. The first is 3,500 years old. We believe that one of them may mention *ephedra sinaca*, which was still recently used against asthma (with broncho-dilative effects) and is even now used by millions of westerners against the common cold, influenza and bronchitis in conjunction with other drugs to combat its side effects on the heart and nervous systems (palpitations, increased blood pressure).

cluding the Arabs, benefited from Egyptian medicine in all practical areas like pharmacy, surgery, anatomy. The Egyptians were the first to codify pharmacology, naming, describing and classifying the plants, minerals and animal products they used to prevent and cure diseases.⁵ Godart (1990) says that 18th dynasty texts refer to magical formulae from Minoan Crete and other lands:

Incantation for the *tanet-amu* disease: ... That is what the inhabitants of *Keftiu* say in this case... This incantation shall be said over [such or such a medication]...(93).

These texts reveal the existence of an etiology, a Semeiology (or symptomatology) and the practice of borrowing from other codices. The recent results of the genetics of prehistoric populations (Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman: 1981; Cavalli-Sforza: 1991), the archeology of Antiquity, with for instance the Chariot Road and the wall paintings of cattle-raising Sahara peoples (Lhote's works), the texts of Arab geographers for the Middle Ages (which have come to confirm the results of the Teqdaost, Niani, Kumbi-Saleh, Ain Fara excavations)⁶ and the European contribution from the 15th century to our time, all these converge to prove the permanence of cultural and other exchanges between the Mediterranean world and what is called Black Africa. Taking good care to avoid the scientific and ideological diffusionism⁷ of a Cheikh Anta Diop, it is surely possible, on the basis of numerous recent studies, to agree that this Egyptian lore influenced Nubia and Meroë, Axum and Ethiopia,⁸ possibly Kanem-Bornu, and that exchanges were probably mutual.

⁵See *Papyrus médicaux de l'Égypte pharaonique*, by Th. Bardin, 1995. Paris: Fayard. An analysis of an impressive ensemble of Egyptian medical papyri by a physician.

⁶Connah (1990) is more inclined than others (Davidson: 1970; Hull: 1972; Garlake: 1978) to question received thought concerning the origin of the state and of civilization, in particular the link established by Engels and Goody between the appearance of writing and that of technology and the modern state. A long time ago, one evening under an African verandah in Ibadan, we came to an agreement with Mounin on a definition for semiotics: "The archeology of the living". It was to be foreseen that the semiotician's and the archeologist's quests, the one for the writings, the other for the vestiges of the habitats of man, should one day meet.

⁷Brenner (1985) describes and analyses "the process by which Islamic ideas, concepts and practices spread among *all* Muslims, educated or not, and in certain cases among non-Muslims" (1). He tries to "reconstruct the history of this teaching from the 17th to the 20th century" and refers to books in Arabic and in Fulfulde, the latter written in 'ajami. But in this text Brenner confines himself to theology, epigraphy, numerology and geomancy.

⁸Pankhurst (1990), who mentions no Islamic or Greco-Egyptian influence on Ethiopian medicine, although these areas were in contact from the earliest Antiquity, bases his

It has long been agreed that the capital of Meroë was originally an Egyptian military and trading outpost in the 18th dynasty and lately that Christian monks from Nubia, in the Middle Ages, established one of their communities in Dar Four, near a branch of the road from Timbuktu to the Indian Ocean and Egypt. To the Islamic centers of learning in southern Morocco, Mauritania and Niger must therefore now be added the presence of a Christian monastic center east of West Africa, whose possible influence could then have preceded that of Islamized Egypt from the 14th century but particularly from the 16th century onwards (Battestini: 1986).

In Islamized Savanna, writing is everywhere present. The nomad and sedentary peoples who have lived there for more than 6000 years have evidently known disease and how to treat it. Their geomancy may have gained from imported writings. Signs drawn on the ground may seem more characteristic to the outside observer than clinical signs or talking to the patient and his relatives. But all this apparent guesswork is informed by long experience, observing the patient, talking about him and to elders, and a psychological gift. All this leads to treatment, an absurd one probably in western eyes. But it is the best they have in their circumstances. Faith in the healing may not go very far, but it is not to be scorned. A local herb administered whole may have no effect whatsoever elsewhere, but in a particular natural and cultural milieu, given to a sufferer with a medical history and a metabolism close to others' in the same group, will work. In Cameroon there is a homeopathic drug for the treatment of a prostate problem (K. Drieu, private communication). The French firm which now produces it makes a special effort to respect as much as possible the original production technique and recommends that it be applied as close as possible to the traditional way, knowing how much the conditions are of great importance. Two researchers from McGill have observed low levels of cholesterol in the cattle peoples of the Savanna. They believe this may be due to the addition of some barks containing catechu and tannin to their slowly cooked food. Among the Fulani of Futa Toro and Jalon, and in Korhogo, we have observed that the water for washing writing tablets, which contains the ink used to write Koranic verses, is considered to have a therapeutic virtue when drunk or applied on a wound, sick part or a rash. Actually, the water is treated with a corro-

findings on local manuscripts. These writings in Ge'ez and later in Amharic, the earliest dating from the 9th century, relate epidemics of yellow fever and smallpox (6th c.), leprosy (9th c.), syphilis (16th c.), typhus (19th c.), and illnesses of important personages, naming remedies. An inventory of medical terms exists, but the meaning of some terms remains unknown. Ethiopian (Axumite) mercenaries are said to have introduced smallpox in Arabia in the 4th and 6th centuries.

sive vegetal or mineral product to make it more effective; or, seen at Korhogo, the dark wooden writing tablet is whitewashed with liquid china clay; hence a natural laxative or calcium buildup effect. A people credited with more nature than culture also rubs ash on the skin.⁹ This is metaphorically explained by references to primitive myths of fire that ignore that ash contains soda¹⁰ and potash, two components of soap: mixed in sweat it eliminates parasites and protects the skin. The ethnologist's "magic" interpretation, based on the informant's figurative non-scientific explanations, totally misconceives a practice born of experiences codified and forgotten but permanent in the heritage. The Koran, with the Sunna, a compendium of law and natural science, a God-ordained and medically informed code of ethics, nutrition and sexual practice, affords little place to disease in itself. Yet some exegetes see in it some major medical innovations. The headman of the Pellal district (now in the Labé circle, north of the Futa Jalon), by name Jallo Modi Yaya Labbo, once explained to us in the fifties, a roguish look in his eye, that Allah had invented total anesthesia to excise Adama's rib and fashion Awa, the first woman. The Islamization of Northern Africa, the Sahel and the Savanna began shortly after the Prophet's death with Oqba ben Nafi's escapade towards the end of the 7th century. Generally slow but potent, it accelerated its process twice with two proselytizing and imperial phases, one from Morocco at the end of the 16th century¹¹ and another, Fulani or Tokoror, in the first half of the 19th century. The cultural revolution that went with the Moroccan conquest of Timbuktu (end of 16th century) resulted in the diffusion and

⁹Is not observation supposed to modify the object observed? Mead and Griaule have been accused of having in part created their object.

¹⁰The word soda (*suwwâd* in Arabic) means an alkaline substance (*alkali*) obtained from a coastal plant whose salty branches when burned yield much sodium carbonate.

¹¹African women played leading parts in these intellectual and religious movements. Zineb al-Nefzawi contributed powerfully to the creation of the Almoravid Empire, which extended from Andalusia to Senegal. A wife of Ibn Tachfin, founder of the al-Morabitun (monastic order), she counseled him and helped him with her connections and fortune. The University of Al-Quaraouine, the oldest in the world, was founded in the 9th century by Fatima al-Fihria. After primary studies at the Koranic school and a secondary cycle at the medersa, it offered curricula founded on the 'ancient sciences,' which included Islamic as well as Hebraic, Greek and Asian studies. Meriem al-Fihria, Fatima's sister, had an Al-Andalus mosque built at her own cost. After the Reconquista by their most Catholic Majesties, another woman took command of the jihad against the infidels from the North. She became so powerful that the Merinid Sultan had to marry her 'in order to consolidate his tottering power.' Others like the Kahina, that Kabyle Joan of Arc, and saintly women like Saint Augustine's mother would also deserve more than passing mention. In our time, women played a decisive part in Algeria's war of independence. Sembène Ousmane, in *God's Bits of Wood*, stresses the role of women in the pre-independence Dakar-Niger railroad strike.

local adaptation of a knowledge until then concentrated in and around the mosques of urban settlements like Timbuktu and Jenne (Battestini: 1986).¹² Medical knowledge and the *Rissalat* (Malikite law) were now part of the cultures of the Sahel-Savanna and influenced the northern part of the forest of West Africa.

The Arabs had brought ancient medicine forward, among them the Jew Maimonides, Andalusians, Moroccans and many Berbers. A scholar owed it to himself to be a physician of some sort, like Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Averroës (Ibn Rushd). Ibn Tofayl's *The Vigilant's Son* tells the story of a young lad lost on a desert island who reconstitutes all the knowledge of his time, including the art of preventing and curing disease. This text by a Moroccan writer is a compendium straight out of the Koran but teaching a mixture of mankind's achievements, combining the art of a storyteller and pedagogue's work. Nobody denies anymore the influence of these Arab authors on the Christian West.¹³ From the Arab-Berber contacts with the Savanna and Sahel one is lead to infer a strong impact on neighboring Black Africa, for Islam is more than a religion: it is a culture that has much received and given. Nobody who has lived in the West African bush for any length of time would dream

¹²Barber (1991), a Yoruba specialist, mentions the existence of "Islamic doctors" in the Nigerian city where she spent many years. These were expatriates back from Ghana, whom she distinguishes from those who stayed at home and could be *babalawo*, "herbalists or Islamic priests". This distinction between priests and doctors echoes the same made by Ibn Battuta in the 14th century. Barber shows in passing that migratory movements in Africa produced acculturation. Monteil had already shown the permanence of intellectual relations between Senegal and Kano. This is a good reminder to cease regarding any African ethnic group as a closed society. Even living in the forest it may well have been acquainted with parts of Islamic lore and in particular its medicinal aspects.

¹³The chapter on "Medicine, A link Between The East and the West," of the *Itinéraire du savoir en Tunisie* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1995), brings to our knowledge the existence of the medieval Kairouan School of Medicine, and of a very special bibliography on this science. Lévy (1991) points out the impact of the Arabs on western medical theories and gives a simple definition of the Hippocratic theory of the humors and its modification by Galen. There are many traces of this medical tradition in the French and English languages: "a cold in the head", to be "in good or bad humor", "bilious", "hypochondriac", "flegmatic". Some doctors still recommend sweating to combat influenza. In Africa, women's submission to the obligation to become pregnant as often as possible may have preceded Hippocratic-Islamic medicine, but this injunction is well present in the latter and can only have reinforced their attitude. This medical theory dominated the world for 2200 years. It has still not completely disappeared, in spite of Harvey and its refutations from the 18th century onwards; the main benefit of which has been the radical separation of magic and religion from medicine. But we now know and can say, paraphrasing Pascal: "*chassez le surnaturel, il revient au galop*," as is shown by the wave of "homeopathic," "soft," "parallel" medicines and acupuncture currently submerging the West.

of denying the influence of Arab medicine in those parts. A Fulani creation myth shows knowledge of Hippocrates' four basic elements, fire, earth, water and air,¹⁴ the creation of which is credited to <Gueno> or phonetically /geno/. While the identical basic natural elements may be a coincidence, how are we to explain the common consonantal structure /g-n/ between the initial creator in this myth and the Greek word *genos*, the Latin *genus* and the Arabic *jinn*?

The authors of *Africa* (1977) have noted the simultaneity of the two cultural phenomena:

As the scope of trade widened, so did conversion to Islam, or at least accommodation to outward Islamic practice. The use of Arabic and literacy in Arabic became more common. Perhaps by 1400 or so, certain African languages may have been written in an Arabic script, doubtless slightly modified. Islam also advanced in the Saharan and trans-Saharan regions because of its medical ideas and theories, and through Islamic magic, particularly medical magic. Without organized medical services, any new techniques had value and could be absorbed by local non-Muslims. Whether Islam came in at the grass roots, as in the case of medicine and magic or as an "imperial cult" in West Africa is uncertain. However, it is obvious that a range of Islamic belief and practice existed in West Africa from an early date, with full acceptance or orthodoxy at one end and superficial accommodation and integration at the other. This diversity became a political issue in certain places in the sixteenth century and again by the mid-eighteenth century (102-3).

The influence of magic conveyed by Islam is attested in the whole of Islamized Africa and around. Ferrand (1909) comments on the publication of Arab-Malagasy texts on: 1— the jinn; 2— magic invocations; 3—the guardian angels of the different parts of the human body. Associating magic and medicine, these geomancy, astrology and numerology texts present graphic forms and combinations that are open to interpretation (Mouloud: 1972). We can vouchsafe that in Senegal and the Futa Jalon of Guinea asthma is treated in ways too close to the prescriptions

¹⁴At the beginning of Time there was a gigantic drop of milk.

One day Doondari came and created stone.

Then stone created iron;

And iron created fire;

And fire created water;

And water created air.

Doondari came down for the third time,

And he came as Gueno, He who is Eternal,

And Gueno triumphed over Death.

From Beier U. (ed.), *The Origin of Life and Death: African Creation Myths*,

Oxford: Heinemann International Publishing, 1966 (a Fulani story from Mali).

of Hippocrates and then of Galen (129-201 AD), later taken over by Maimonides and the West, for this to be just a coincidence.

Asthma is common in West Africa. Mothers, and of course healers, are quick to recognize the onset of restricted breathing, fever, phlegm, delirium and to treat all these symptoms together. At Yambering, north of Labé, the potion they administer is a grind of "plants macerated in water, boiled, filtered, boiled again slowly to a honey-sweet electuary" (quoted by Peumery: 1984, 57-8). There is more to this for the specialist than the simple act of isolating and combining active principles, as in our modern medicine.

As we were suffering once from an onset in the bush, far from any chemist's, Dalenda, the first wife of the chief of Yambering, treated us. She explained the various principles contained in her remedies. One was for the rheum, another was an emetic to get rid of the phlegm in the breathing organs, a third, an extract of *kinkeliba*, a febrifuge and diuretic for the relief of bronchospasms, delirium and sleeplessness. The treatment was just as effective as those then prescribed in France, the mustard plasters, the cuppings and ephedrine. If we turn to Maimonides' *Treatise on Asthma* or Peumery's *Histoire illustrée de l'asthme*, we can see that Dalenda's reasoning, if not the plants themselves, was essentially derived from Hippocrates and Galen. She had probably never read a medicine book; but in her position she must have met many Fulani marabouts and itinerant Muslim scholars who visited her husband at the Yambering crossroads, some of who may have learnt from masters who had read the classics. But we suspect that Dalenda had added to these perennial philosophy tidbits taken from the pre-Islamic Fulani substratum, perhaps even homeopathic elements from the slaves who had been the first inhabitants of the Futa Jalon. She had looked after many of her husband's children (in the fifties he had several dozen wives). Nobody thought of her as a doctor or a healer, but her limited empirical but accurate and affectionate skill made her a *grande dame*, the very opposite of a mistress of old wives' tales. If medicine is the handmaid of nature, we firmly believe that Dalenda's human warmth, her religious curiosity for creation, her will to serve her fellow-creatures put her little by little on the path of the best possible clinical medicine in her place and time. Fainzang (1983) studies some examples of West African cures as myth in the treatment of sickness. May we also put in a good word for our student Malik, of Pellal (Guinea), who cured our gazelle of dysentery, and for an orderly of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ibadan, who relieved us of a persistent headache with the foulest concoction in the entire history of human medicine.

Writing, even if it is not always immediately present and there is no western-type schooling for it to serve (a type, by the way, partly borrowed from the Arab world), may nevertheless deeply influence attitudes and behaviors. We have seen some of the conditions of its impact and transformations in Africa and of its integration into local systems of knowledge.

Let us take a look at those three African medical works we have chosen. The first is out of 16th century Tunisia, the second from 17th century Algeria and the third from early 20th century Cameroon. They have this in common that they are not in Latin script, being the first in Arabic, the second in dialectal Algerian Arabic and the last in Grasslands Mum, a script invented at the end of the 19th century. All three have Africans for their authors: Cheikh Nefzawi, Abd-er-Rezzaq and the sultan Njoya.

Cheikh Nefzawi, a "Tunisian" who lived between the 16th and 17th centuries, was a scholar in science and literature, as well as a jurist, and is mainly remembered for his textbook of erotology, *Er Roud el âater fi nezaha el Khater*, truncated in western translations as *The Perfumed Garden for the Recreation of the Mind*. He describes it so:

I have divided this work in twenty-one chapters, in order to make it easier for the *taleb*¹⁵ to read and help him find the matter he desires.

Each chapter, then, deals with a particular subject, often anecdotally, e.g. the genital organs (Chapters VIII and IX), how to induce abortion (XV), impotence and other male problems (to be treated homeopathically) (XVII), a full inventory of methods to enlarge and glorify small members (XVIII), women's ruses and treasons (XIX), more chapters about suppression of odors, improving partners' performance, curing certain little attendant ills or a whole etiology founded on the interpretation of dreams. The connoisseur will recognize loans from *Ananga Ranga* or the *Kama Sutra*, or from Persian and Arabic texts like Mohammed ben Djerir el Taberi or Azzedine el Mocadecci that were in all the libraries of the Islamized world.¹⁶ This is not an original work. There were hundreds like it from Morocco to India. Some passages are like Aretino or Boccaccio or a bowdlerized La Fontaine. The work is

¹⁵The Arabic word *taleb*, or *talibe* in Black Africa, means the disciple, the student or pupil. Literally, it means "He who reads".

¹⁶One of them, *Le livre de volupté*, subtitled *Pour que le vieillard retrouve sa jeunesse*, translated from Turkish into French by Abdul-Haqq Effendi, was written by Ahmad Ibn Suleiman in the 16th century (Paris, Minerve, 1989). Yasser Ali's preface tells us a great deal about the status of Muslim women. The work has often been stripped of its strictly medical parts.

known in Europe and often re-edited, but few realize that Cheikh Nefzawi was a Tunisian.

The second work is less well known. Abd-er-Rezzaq, an Algerian physician, was the author of several works, but his medical treatise is quite different from Nefzawi's, much less anecdotal, and far more scientific. Curiously, it is alphabetical, an innovation at the end of the 16th century. It offers a survey of the state of the art in his time, borrowing from Galen, Paul (of Egin), Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Daoud Al Antaki, Ibn Beithar and many others, even copying a whole text of Dioscorides. He was careful to record the traditional Algerian pharmacopeia, mentioning new medicaments then circulating around the Mediterranean, like sassafras, sarsaparilla or cinchona. But Abd-er-Rezzaq is no mere copy-cat. He sniffs a lot around the authorities, but at the same time he adds, adapts and innovates. Like his contemporary colleagues in Europe and many practitioners in the Maghreb, the Sahel and the Savanna today, he raved about Galen's theory of humors. Today, among all those local medicine men, Tuareg, Fulani, Hausa and Malinke (Wall: 1980) who can be seen blood-letting in the marketplace, those who know Galen are rare, but they trust in their knowledge and are trusted for it. In Mali, temporal scars believed to be tribal are in fact incisions that are made to relieve inflammations of the optic nerve in populations in which trachoma is endemic.

There is no doubt that Abd-er-Rezzaq's work is scientific and that it comes from the African continent.¹⁷ His treatment of his material is methodical and rigorous. For each medicament, he first defines its active principles, elementary and general, then lists its effects and side-effects, prescribes doses and suggests alternatives in cases of failure or counter-indication. On the supply side, he carefully describes the best ways of cultivating, harvesting and storing plants. This encyclopedic work comprises 1000 entries, although some are just cross-references, often in Algerian dialectal Arabic. His repertory had the effect of durably extending to the whole Maghreb the use of certain terms of Tamacheq, Kabyle, Arab or Greek origin, e.g. in today's Algeria the word *seris* (wild chicory) is Greek. Dioscorides used it as well as Abd-er-Rezzaq.

While less literary than our preceding text, Abd-er-Rezzaq sometimes buttresses his science with stories involving characters, well-known lore or literature. Thus in Leclerc's French edition (1874):

¹⁷ About the contribution of Africa to science, see *Africa and the Disciplines*, R.H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbé & J. O'Barr, Eds. The University of Chicago Press, 1993, an impressive and comprehensive study which however omits linguistics and religious studies.

Mary prayed God for a flesh without blood, and God sent her the locust (*djarad*)...One of the properties of locust flesh is to cure consumptive leprosy.

Leclerc's Introduction shows this 19th century French physician's solid respect for his 17th century colleague from Algeria. The same respectful, even admiring tone is found in the writings of many explorers, administrators, soldiers and missionaries who lived and traveled in Africa between 1850 and 1918.

The medical writings of this part of Africa also include written records of oral medical traditions of our types 2a (like Akhmisse: 1985) or 2b (e.g. Imperato: 1977) and digests of reflections on contemporary and traditional African medicine.¹⁸ Imperato deals with Bambara popular medicine and other subjects, Akhmisse with Moroccan

¹⁸The World Health Organization (Brazzaville, 1976)) defines traditional medicine (TM) as follows:

TM is the sum total of knowledge and practices, whether rational or not, that are used to diagnose, prevent and eliminate any physical, mental or social impairment and are based exclusively on observation and experience transmitted from generation to generation, orally or through writing.

TM may be regarded as a solid blend of dynamic medical knowledge and ancestral medicine.

TM may also be regarded as the sum total of practices, measures, components and procedures of all kinds, material or not, which from time immemorial have enabled Africans to protect themselves against diseases, to reduce their sufferings and to cure themselves. The traditional healer is a person recognized by the community to which he belongs as competent to preserve the health of all by the use of vegetal and mineral substances, and by certain other methods based on social, cultural and religious customs as well as on lore, attitudes, beliefs prevalent in the community on the matter of physical, mental and social well-being and the causes of diseases and other physical and mental handicaps.

An issue of *Cahiers de l'ORSTOM*, titled *Médecine et Santé* (XIII, 4, 1981-1982), introduced French research in ethnomedicine, a science predominantly American up to that time. Many articles are concerned with Africa.

In 1980-1981, in Calabar, a WHO expert directed a project that aimed at training healers in first aid, hygiene and fighting epidemics and endemics. Intensive training was followed by controls on the spot. The keynote, based on a belated-recognition of the fact that the healer is an ideal intercessor between medical science and rural patients, was to use his know-how and trust in order to introduce a few universal ideas and practices and lodge them in the local culture. The WHO expert told me that adding elementary asepsis to the routines of midwives, circumcisors and foster mothers was saving hundreds of lives. Let us note that traditional medicine in the Calabar area has developed independently of the Hippocrates -and Galen- inspired medicine of the Arabs, a fact which may have influenced the WHO's choice of this region for the project.

In 1995, Professor Montagnier protests the indifference of scientific scholars about fundamental research in Africa. He underlines the interest of the study of local traditional medicine: "We have a lot to learn from African empiricism. We must study the effect of certain plants on the biological markers. Without mentioning the intensification of help to the training of therapists, to prevention and to equipment." *Jeune Afrique*, n° 1798, 27.

medicine, magic and witchcraft today but is also valid for large parts of the rest of the Maghreb. We were unable to find Amadou Touré's pharmacopeia, supposedly published in 1965, which according to Imperato covers northern Nigeria, Burkina-Faso, the Côte d'Ivoire and Mali. Imperato calls it monumental and says it contains thousands of remedies. At a guess, the story of the publication of this work would provide an exciting yarn on the relation of disease and writing in Africa.

Medical writing plays an important part in Morocco, a country that has the same cultural foundations as the two works we have just spoken of. Western medicine here jostles with magic and witchcraft, but also with ancient teachings prevalent in Fez and Marrakech and sourced in Ibn Sina, Ibn Tofayl, Ibn Rushd, Maimonides. These three traditions are not mutually exclusive but enjoy the catholic respect of patients and practitioners alike.

Imperato does not believe in the influence of the Greek-Arab-Berber classics on Black Africa. Yet he says:

After interrogating the patient, [the marabout] will determine the specific reason that the illness has occurred, either by reading passages from the Koran or Arabic medical texts, or by interpreting the position of cowries thrown on the floor (24).

After the interview, common to all, three etiological approaches are followed. The first is religious and relies on divine guidance through the Koran. The second is founded on the written medical science of Islam and chiefly concerns us here. The third is geomantic, on the basis of figures that, although codified, are not really writing. They are conducted in three types of discourse, oral and graphic: sacred, scientific and magic.

Imperato, a western medical doctor, feels he has to correct the information he has just given, through a footnote:

Most Islamic clerics who treat illness in sub-Saharan Africa do not have access to Islamic medical texts. In addition, many have a poor understanding of Arabic, so that these texts would be of very limited use to them (note 1, 24).

An opinion, no more, that may include the possibility of some medical training prior to taking the turban, or the presence of quacks, like all those Birago Diop and Sembène Ousmane have made us laugh at. But quacks don't last long if they are not successful. Patients are like investors.

Imperato, like any westerner or westernized operating in another culture, finds it difficult to conceive of scientific thought without writing. Yet it is not unthinkable that the written origin of lore be forgotten while the lore itself remains in circulation, perhaps unchanged or in fact modified and consolidated by constant usage.

Imperato might at least have tried to give us a more precise idea of those medicine books he mentions in passing, all those libraries of *malams* reported by many researchers in that part of Africa. There is not a single type 1a or 1b work in his bibliography. He could have compared *marabout praxis* with the contents of these works and tried to evaluate their impact. But that was no part of the way he conceived the object of his study; having arrived convinced that Africans don't write, he could only feel uncomfortable before evidence to the contrary: if he could not reject it outright, then it had to be suppressed, put out of mind or declared trivial, negligible, an unwarranted challenge to the observer's infallibility. Imperato's intellectual honesty is not in question. He just looks at Africa through the lenses of an inherited semiosis. But we believe the time has come for Africanists, be they westernized Africans or not, to decolonize themselves (Battestini: 1988-9).¹⁹

It seems that Imperato could not apprehend the idea of the "stupendous" memory of "peoples without writing". We all know Amadou Hampaté Bâ's memorable "Whenever an old Negro dies, a library burns"²⁰ and Léopold Sédar Senghor's verse "The scribe's ink has no memory". Abbé Boilat, himself born in Senegal, studied in France, where he never ceased to extol that stupendous memory of the griot historians of the Senegal valley, going so far, in 1842, as to suggest that a

¹⁹Type 2a works abound. The oldest might well be Palisot de Beauvois' (1804). This French physician struck up a friendship in Paris with prince Bondakan of Warri (in present-day Nigeria). Having studied tropical plants brought to Europe, he took this opportunity to study their natural environment and traveled for fifteen months with his friend in Benin and the Niger delta, collecting plants and studying their effects.

²⁰The reference to the "burning library" is heavily loaded with an ideology that seems bound up through allusive analogy (the burning of the African Library of Alexandria by the Romans) with the public to which the metaphor is addressed. But its field of reference, which includes many "passive" writings awaiting reactivation by reading, is involuntarily pejorative. Contrary to Boilat's impression, this astonishing memory results from early and systematic training, with carefully graded exercises, punishments and rewards. But that is not all: the ability to memorize and recite texts of several hours' duration, which is the foundation of the actor's craft, may develop into an art. By modulating his voice, by adapting his delivery to a particular audience or event, by creating a unique atmosphere, the "sayer" comes to be appreciated as a virtuoso artist working on a score known to all. This is a far cry from machinelike information retrieval. It must be added however that the artist's variations may be hoped for, simply tolerated or even unwanted and forbidden, according to the nature of the "fable" or the circumstances of the performance.

surgeon should look into the physical structure of their brains (Boilat: 1984).

The notion of the superiority of peoples who possess writing claimed to be the best over "tribes" exhibiting writings of whatever kind, alphabetical, syllabic, symbolic, picto-, logo-, or morphemographic, seems to be widely accepted by Westernized Africans. Appiah's fictional essay (1992) sounds at times a bit like Maurras, when he revisits the foundations on which the West built "his father's house", his African homeland. On writing, he considers that its absence is a sign of premodernity. Deictics in speech play the part of details in writing. Hence writing is more universal than speech since understandable outside context and situation. Orality requires social memory, individual connotation, and a specific elocutionary situation. Writing favors abstraction and generalization, the oral confines to the concrete and the particular. Writing overshoots the contingent and points to the scientific and philosophical discourse. The oral revels in metaphor, deictics, implicit connotations and discreet references. Appiah might have remembered Socrates, who did not write, begging Euthyphron to stop showing him pious acts and get down to telling him what makes all these acts pious, the paradigm of piety. The gift of analysis is not confined to "literate" cultures in Appiah's sense. To say that scientific discourse begins where figurative or metaphorical language stops is to ignore the modalities of scientific discourse. To believe that this discourse is the key to universal knowledge is to forget the controversy opened by Lyotard on the compartmentalization of science, by Geertz on cultural finalities. Eschewing the trap, the essayist observes that, aside from writing,

there are many devices for supporting the transmission of a complex and nuanced body of practice and belief without writing (132)...[and yet] intellectual style in cultures without widely distributed literacy was for that reason radically different from the style of contemporary literate cultures (133).

Different, yes, but not necessarily inferior. True, writing, by fixing on successive coherences and semantic isotopies throughout its star-crossed career, has demonstrated that "literacy, then, makes possible the "modern" image of knowledge as something that is constantly being remade", (133), but it tends nevertheless to a certain unification of knowledge. But on the other hand, African literates and intellectuals, by making use of their double competence, their experience of their own traditions and of other models from afar, will probably one day consummate a fusion as yet unpredictable, which J.Jahn (1961) called

skokian (cocktail). It is to be hoped that it will include, inter alia, the acceptance of the onus of proof through a new universal rationality rooted in and influenced by certain African values themselves transformed. But the need to examine the legitimacy of their discourse appears only later in Appiah's text, taken from Lyotard and indirectly from Habermas. Our own reflection on writing and text as they appear in Africa necessarily implies a critical attitude towards the legitimization of the type of Africanist discourse practiced by Appiah, of his borrowed project and premises, of his evidently provisional and arbitrary conclusions. Appiah (1993) points out:

Once we see the essentially reactive structure of Afrocentrism —that is simply turned upside-down— we can understand where its intellectual weaknesses lie. It is not surprising, for example, that in choosing to talk about Egypt and to ignore the rest of Africa and African history, Afrocentrism shares the European prejudice against cultures without writing. Euro-centrism, finding there a literate culture and a significant architecture, set out claiming that Egypt could not be black. Afrocentrism chooses Egypt because Eurocentrism had already made a claim on it (5).

But meanwhile the key concept of writing and text is everywhere being revisited and challenged, broadened and refined, enriched and universalized, therefore reduced. Nobody requests them before inferring vast dichotomies between literate and "without writing" cultures, before suggesting models of cultural and other development. Why does one have to insist on the need to verify the meanings of the key words of a discourse and their articulations in order to understand the mechanisms of one's own legitimacy? When an African uses a non-African language he cannot help adopting the logical categories of the culture encasing that language. This is perhaps inevitable, but he must learn to distrust the most ordinary words of that language he thinks he is appropriating. One can write without possessing the Latin alphabet or an avatar. One can think without writing. The ability to generate text is not a privilege of certain cultures, even if modes of production differ. Difference, where there is complexity, does not necessarily create a hierarchy. Our project cannot aim to bestow on Africa techniques already known by many cultures of the Continent and since ancient times. Our goal is to show that the Africanist discourse apriorisms is still molded on colonialist ideology, and that the stereotypes of the historical discourse on writing perpetuate a scientific error which creates a prejudice against Africa, but even more denounces the validity of sciences unable to criticize their own foundations.

The combined effect of the proven presence since the 14th century of medical text in north and west Africa (Battestini: 1986) and of that

stupendous memory of the literates and "masters of the word" in Sahel and Savanna justifies our contention that these texts, even if not very many, have exerted considerable influence in medicine, as it is recognized they have done in religion, in Malikite law, in geomancy, astronomy, ethics and social administration, over all areas of behavior. Thanks to the teaching of medicine in Marrakech and Fez, Timbuktu and Jenne until the end of the 16th century and the flight and dispersal of scholars after the Moroccan conquest, certain aspects of Hippocratic and Galenic medicine spread to the vast expanses of West Africa. Islam is a cultural whole and *Black Islam* (Monteil: 1964), with its distinctive cultural traits, is worthy of admiration. It nurtures for the written word of knowledge and for the scholar a profound respect that is not often found in other cultures. The type 1b text we should now like to present briefly is Njoya's pharmacopeia.²¹

Africa south of the Savanna, the Africa of the forest and woody highlands, does not seem to have produced any writings on health care before 1920, apart from the copies of Greek and Arab-Berber originals, an indication of influences from Southern Morocco and later from Egypt.

It is generally agreed that Njoya was induced to invent his system²² through contact with German missionaries and Islamized Fu-

²¹The original comprises 82 unbound quires, which include 161 handwritten and 3 blank sheets, with the watermark P, & H/Hand Linen. It is written in black and red ink and in ink and pencil. The quires measure 21.8 by 13.8cm. The scripts are *aka u ku mfemfe* (new, small) and *aka u ku ngutngure* (old, broad) and perhaps other previous scripts. A few pages have summarily been translated into French. Friends in Berlin inform us that L.L Lamaré published a small book in French in 1975 in Yaounde on Bamum Medicine. We have been unable to find it, but we have acquired a beautiful copy of the *Pu lewa...* and some other manuscripts.

²²The Mum scripts are innovative compared to those that might have influenced them, such as Arabic and 'ajami. The Arabic alphabet is essentially consonantal. The earliest Mum script was logo-ideographic. It evolved into syllabic and phonetic versions, retaining some signs from one into the next, like the Egyptian scripts. From the contact cultures Njoya may have borrowed the concept of writing but no more. Possession of writing seemed to him so important that he decided to have one, but rooted in Bamum symbolism and history, with, later, additional signs supplied by an analysis of the phonology of the Mum language. He called upon many notables to participate in the creation, thus showing that he conceived the language (and the projected written version) as the foundation of social cohesion and perceived the need to legitimize the innovation by a process of consultation. By enshrining writing in the graphic history of his people, by taking care to consult broadly, by assigning a leading role to the phonology of the Mum language, by writing three works on the history, medicine and religion of his people, by creating schools and a press, training teachers, mapping his Kingdom, Sultan Njoya made himself a thorn in the flesh of African ethnology. Like Sequoya the Cherokee, he was pitilessly stamped out by the colonial system.

lani.²³ He wrote three books in this script. The first deals with the history and customs of his and neighboring peoples, the second with a new religion which apparently had little success, and the last is the Mum pharmacopeia. Dugast & Jeffreys' (1950) inventory of 90 works and various documents written in Mum is impressive. Njoya's pharmacopeia has not yet been published but there are three or four extant hand copies, which were seen by Jeffreys and Dugast. The one we were able to consult at the Foumban museum was reluctant to unveil its mysteries to a hopeful learner, and the following is based on Dugast & Jeffreys and our local inquiries. Let us say in passing that the Bamum country is in contact through the Cross River with three other cultural zones which also have systems of writing: the Efik-Ibibio-Efut-Ibo with Nsibidi, the Ejagham with Eghap, the Oberi Okaime of the Ibibio of the village of Itu, all three on the Nigerian side of the border with Cameroon. At Foumban, recently, a Mum school has been reinstituted, more out of nostalgia for a noble past than for pragmatist reasons. Elsewhere in the world, other peoples, in the wake of liberalism and democratization, or again of renascent nationalism, are rediscovering a need for their long forgotten or proscribed script and writing: the script of Gengis Khan in Mongolia and the Tifinagh of the Berbers of Algeria are two of numerous examples.

This is remarkable if we remember that the celebrated Maya, having totally forgotten the meaning of their hieroglyphics, have only just come to redecipher them and more out of a desire to recover their identity than as a means to record and communicate their thoughts and texts.

At the end of the 19th century, Njoya invented with his notables a system of writing that is of limited use. Yet, in view of renewed worldwide interest in Njoya's genius, it is not possible to "write-off" once and for all this system of writing. The system has been modified six times. The Mum schools taught all the versions, except one that was reserved for the court, the administration and remained secret. With many others, the texts mentioned above were included in the curriculum of these schools, which were destroyed by the French. They were attended not

²³ According to Tardits (1991), the only influence was Arabic (and perhaps 'ajami), since the Germans arrived 5 to 8 years after the creation of the first script. There had been Muslim Fulani at Foumban for several decades, who enjoyed cordial relations with Njoya. It appears however that Njoya's father Nsangi, who reigned from 1863 to 1885, acquired from a Hausa merchant-cum-missionary, for an enormous sum, seven Arab manuscripts including a Koran. Njoya was between 6 and 9 years old when his father was killed and he invented the first version of his script when he was about 29 and after he had been in frequent contact with Fulani and Hausa.

only by Bamum children and adults, but also by the noble offspring of neighboring chiefs.

Njoya's text *Pu Lewa fu nzut fu libok* (the Book of Healing) is written in the script called *Shü möm*. The original is said to have been composed in the *nii nyi men* version between 1908 and 1910, during the German colonial period. No one can say how many copies have been made of it and indeed in which scripts.

The work consists of several booklets, each covering a specific theme. One gives a list of medicinal herbs; another explains confinement and how to treat its complications. Others deal with etiology, with impressive lists of the causes of disease in man and woman, with the Semeiology and correct diagnosis, with dreams and their interpretation. One is devoted to the proverbs and spells that accompany treatment and increase its effectiveness.

Sultan Njoya's method in establishing his text may be considered to have been scientific. It is comparable to western methods of inquiry in the social sciences. Njoya had appointed fifteen physicians who were specially attached to the women of his court and fifteen to his own person. Forty others had been posted to the main urban centers of the kingdom. Njoya questioned them all, compared and tested their statements, thus arriving at the most effective diagnoses and cures, which he thought worthy of being embodied in a representative text of Mum medicine. In this text there are some practices of Islamic or even western inspiration, but on the whole it is based on local knowledge.

The theme of sexual relations and their sundry consequences was a common concern of the three type 1 works we have chosen to study. They are part of a vision of the world and of society in which procreation is an absolute necessity, the principal source of human energy and the only assurance of survival in old age.

This remarkable, largely independent work is yet another reminder not to ignore those African cultures which probably owe nothing to Islam, or those which, having been influenced by Islam, did not disavow their pre-Islamic medical practices. The ethnological literature of these practices is of uneven value. Ganay & Zahan's classic work (1978) shows that even in this context writing may appear. They end their analysis of a Bambara myth by showing that the perennial immaterial principles (the *ni* and the *dya*) which are reincarnated in newborn children

are also manifest in the realizations of thought that are transmitted from generation to generation by speech, by writing (i.e. all the signs, incised, painted or woven) or by gestures (160-1).

Indeed, a teacher is named *kala-tigui*, or the one who possesses all the signs. *Kala* means writing.

The founders of new religious movements often speak of their initial vocation as resulting from a trance during which they received a new system of writing. These founders of churches (at least 7,000 in Black Africa) are nearly all healers. Some resurrect the dead. Many are inspired by movements that claim to be Christian, contemporary, fundamentalist, North American. The early missionaries were often doctors; or else they arrived with medical guides and plenty of medicaments. These men of a religion of the Book established schools and dispensaries, associating in their daily activities the teaching of Holy Scriptures and profane subjects with health care, the body with the spirit. Semantic anthropology should be able to evaluate the impact of missionary work on the various African cultural substrata and at the same time try to reconstruct a picture of these bygone worlds. Let us recall that the word <spell> comes from the Frankish *spellôn* (to tell) and that it also means a magical formula. The object, its perception and/or representation, creates and summons powers.²⁴

The French public has been privileged to figure out for itself an idea of Ethiopian medicine. Mercier & Marchal (1992), with their inveterate ethnological approach,²⁵ have accentuated the sensational out of all proportion.

²⁴The reader may like to revisit a novel like A. Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* (1957) with Marc Augé's *Le Dieu objet* (1988) in mind. Both texts derived from their authors' encounter with Africa and their concordances are typical of a way of thinking that may be described as post-modernist (see the conclusion of our thesis "Essai de sémiologie appliquée à l'oeuvre d'Alain Robbe-Grillet," Paris III, 1980). Augé's remarks: "The 'fetishists,' they said wondering, worship 'wood and stone'" or "'They have no choice: they think'" (140), parallel the jealous hero's soliloquy of Robbe-Grillet's text, a writer in whom Barthes, in a moment of aberration, saw a 'chosiste.' Only the modes differ. Since Husserl at least, we should know that to be conscious is to be conscious of something.

²⁵The surprise which attends the "discovery" of a system of writing in a people said to be primitive is caused much more by the disturbing effect it has on the ethnographer's own references than by any intrinsic anomaly. This sensationalism abounds in the articles written by missionaries and soldiers at the time of the first contacts. It is not confined to Africa. Thus when A. Sibeth (*Les Bataks: un peuple de Sumatra*, Geneva: Ed. Olizanne) analyzes the historiography of the discovery of this people's writing, he leads us through the usual phases that follow the discovery. First the surprise, of course; and then, as the discovery insists on being real, a neighboring culture already in the book as literate is credited with a decisive influence over its appearance: this preserves the credibility of the existing frames of reference while eliminating the possibility of independent creativity at work and warding off the risks it entails for the Latin alphabet's cultural hegemony. Next, the inventory of diverse texts is trivialized into an array of moral precepts, myths and legends, pseudo-medical recipes, i.e. the first idiolalia of emerging humanity. Having a writing, a written history, texts of scientific, moral, religious, historical value, these primitives can only be, at this point in ethnographic discourse, an exception which

This exhibition at the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie was more concerned with art forms and images than with medicine. Yet, a series of articles, mostly by Ethiopians, afford good insight into the importance of "plants and their virtues" (27-59) in "traditional medicine". The association of the reading of Saint Michael's Homilies near the sources of the Nile with the benediction of healing springs is mentioned (61). Likewise, Mercier begins his presentation of the section of the exhibition named "The Gods of our Forefathers" (77) as follows:

Whenever illness persists or reappears after going to the sacred waters and the resources of the pharmacopeia and of writing have been exhausted, then, short of giving oneself up to divine will, one returns to one's domestic problems.

The section "The Way of the Literate" he presents thus:

Listening to some Ethiopian clerks, there is hardly an illness they cannot cure. Don't they have books? Are they not capable of acting on the causes, of commanding to those who are responsible for disease in the measure imparted to them by God? We shall try to define the significance of the talismanic enterprise, taking care to differentiate it from anything didactic or ornamental. In presenting the preparatory and attendant rituals, the specific evolution of forms, their relation to writing, the iconographic choices, we shall try to answer the fundamental question: what potentialities of image have the clerks explored? (95).

One can see a discrepancy here between the question just put and the title of the section it refers to. The presentation seems to be aiming at diverting attention from the theme of the section, centered on the written and illuminated *volumen* (rolls)²⁶ and the literate culture they represent, towards the amusingly interesting, but obviously ineffective, uses of the images alone.

And so that literate African province is blended into the stereotyped landscape of symbol-producing and consuming Africa, whose rare writings are devoid of interest.

The texts of this section inform us on the rolls and divination; on knowledge and mystery; the history of the rolls in Ethiopia; the literature of the rolls and its history; the sources of the Ethiopian talis-

confirms the rule, a rule that must be applied to all those 'primitive' peoples whose duty, fixed by the West, is to remain so.

²⁶Mercier had a choice of words between *volumen* and *rouleau*: the first learned and linked to classical erudition; the second prosaic and banal. He selected the second. Ideology reveals itself also in the lexicon one uses.

manic art and its original myths; on the Book of Enoch and the Apocrypha in Ethiopian culture; how an Israelite king, Solomon, became a universal magician; pictorial art before the 16th century; two-and-a-half centuries of painting at Gondar (1630-1880); the profane art of the march-past and procession; traditional religious painting; the permanence or reversion of geometricism; the eye and the style; color; Gog and Magog; concerning interpretation; numbers; the eye and its reasons; angels; the talisman of the cross; the Ethiopian saints; Sousenyos and the protection of the newborn; the Cavalier saints; Alexander the Great; the lion; the Gorgon's round trip; the Gorgon: angel or friend?; From the workshop to the painter, etc., etc.

The last section, our "Contemporaries", shows that the painting and writing of volumen continue on their secular way, but at present under external influences, artistic and sometimes lucrative goals, and new techniques. The text in Amharic accompanies the painted image as in strip cartoons. Mercier (1992) again lavishes his sensational descriptions: "strangely", "distinctly singular", "the only instance in the world", "this is unique!" "these fabulous objects", etc. And here a quaint piece of "information": "Ethiopian beliefs are made up of contributions from the Middle East, a Voodooesque vein, recourse to medicinal plants and, of course, a more recent Christian faith". Voodoo...Recent Christianity...To what lengths will disinformation go to harm Africa? And why single out the use of herbs, which is just as common in the West? Does he know that the Copts have pharmacopoeia inherited from the Ancient Egyptian codices and Arabic books of medicine and pharmacy, which were of Hippocratic and Galenic origin? This amused and condescending tone deserves to be contrasted with the seriousness of Strelcyn (1961), Gerresch (1973), Makinde (1987, 1988), Spaulding & Salim (1989), Finch (1990), Pankhurst (1990) and, of course, the decisive Bardinet (1995), all authorities but only one of whom is to be found in the bibliography. Mercier was interviewed and said in conclusion: "The situation in Ethiopia is catastrophic. Its heritage, even oral, must not disappear!" In order to sell itself in the West, or simply to arouse interest, Africa has to be radically different, difficult to understand, mysterious (like the image we have of our own distant prehistoric primitive and of course illiterate past), even if the objects presented in this exhibition are covered with writing several hundred years old as it is in Ethiopia.

In *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, Strelcyn describes the Ethiopian medical treatises in very different terms. He regrets they are so little read, for they are

of considerable interest for the history of science, in particular the spread of classic Greco-Arabic medical teaching, for the history of Ethiopian civilization and finally for our own knowledge of Ethiopian medicine. We are confronted here with an authentic empirical medical tradition (67).

Under the various foreign contributions, Arab, Greek, ancient Egyptian, Coptic, Strelcyn is looking for the magical and empirical Ethiopian substrata. All the studied and referenced texts are written in Amharic or Ge'ez.

Ethiopian medicine is an integral part of a higher reflection heralding a general philosophy of existence. Sumner (1976 to 1982) published six volumes of commented and annotated Ethiopian philosophical texts, the whole written also in Ge'ez and Ethiopic, the latter being the language of the ancient Axum empire. Sumner translates and comments on this voluminous monument, originally in five works:

The Physiologist (5th-7th Centuries AD)
 The Book of Philosophers (13th-18th)
 Life and Maxims of Skendes (end 13th-18th)
 The Treatise of Zaire Ya'aqob (1599-1692)
 The Treatise of Wälda Haywat (end 17th-18th)

Ethiopia seems quite remote from the modes of representation associated with the so-called primitive cultures of voodoo persuasion; the Kingdom of Prester John, which gave us Saint Maurice the Crusader, was one of the earliest Christian nations.

From a structuralist point of view, and according to Foucault, each of these cultures, at any given time, constitutes an epistémé. The number and epistemic evolution of these cultures render any generalization on African knowledge hazardous. The snapshots taken by ethnologists offer epistemic synchronies, which obliterate the evolution of these cultures and fix them in time. His or her sheer numbers make sure that anybody who ventures to extrapolate from one cultural group or region to a larger grouping will meet with immediate contradiction.

Everywhere in the world there are signs and systems of thought, mutually imbricated, each of them transcending and developing the other. From pictographic script to the literary text that helps to return to images, from myth to the illustrated text, analysis and synthesis, symbolics and imagination interbreed.

Prejudices are the piles of civilization.

André Gide

Theories never proceed from facts. They proceed from previous, often very ancient theories. Facts are just the way, seldom straight, theories proceed from one another.

Georges Canguilhem

Chapter 8

Text: From Written Text to Culture

A certain semiotic science of the 1930 tried, in the wake of Leibniz Pragmatism, not exactly to create a language common to all sciences but a logical discourse whose goal was to decompartmentize them, enable exchange of information between them, and homogenize methods of analysis, interpretation and theorization. The underlying principle was to create, on the model of formal logic and mathematical or scientific formulation, a universal system of signs that would not be culture-bound but readable in all languages. The uniformization of the morphemograms in use in all the "non-loci" (non-lieux) of the world and the symbols of modern computer science are feeble examples of the potentialities of these efforts, extended since the 1950s to the whole of society with the development of communication science and its ambition to transcend the epistemological conditions of the moment.

To the then current notion of the cell, the smallest element of any living organism, was made to correspond the sign, the smallest element of any system of communication, a concrete object, intentional or not, that represents for somebody, something else. In the thrust of American Pragmatism, Charles Morris assigned Semiotics the task of creating this unmarked polyvalent system of writing and scientific discourse. The resulting discourse would have led to oust all contents and hitch up all the logics. The universalization of the means of conserving and communicating scientific and technical thought demands the integration of other modes of thought. Bachelard and Canguilhem have influenced Michel Foucault as much as the Senegalese scholar and poet Gaston Bergier. Having demonstrated the presence and weight of the epistemological conditions of scientific thought, Bachelard shows how pathos, conditioned by the fixations of memory (*lieux de mémoire*), by ideology, by fallacious naturalized generalizations or uncritical and

undistanced finalized perceptions and experiences, by the modes and contents of history and science teaching, in short by all possible forms of inertia in the way of scientific development and poetic imagination, must be put into question again. A discipline shifts its frameworks, buys new concepts, harnesses new methods: these silent revolutions Bachelard named epistemological breaks. The introduction of African facts into the field of reflection on writing is such a break. It will not replace previous reflections. It can only change their course. Nevertheless, our arguments and facts aim at provoking a catharsis without which there cannot be a new theory of writing and text. Georges Canguilhem, that philosopher of life, opened up with his polarity of norm and pathos a path like that of our own pair: common sense and signification, the first pointing to pathos, the second to health. Bachelard included the metaphysics of imagination in his propositions. Rejecting the positivist logic of an unswerving continuum of scientific advancement, he makes room for accident, intuition and poetic-noetic reasoning, the unforeseen and the catastrophic, for *La pensée sauvage* while undomesticated. At the time of the Independences, many African intellectuals recognized the importance of Bachelard's and Canguilhem's thought. An epoch was ending in the relation of Europe with Africa. Imperialist "Good Conscience" and "White Man's Burden" were giving way to a bitter sense of guilt; and on the African side, humiliation hardly swallowed, the anguish of severance was penetrating the joys of an ephemeral present. In reality, Africa does not seem, any more than Africanist discourse, to have learnt how to exploit the new scientific spirit that could have made her aware of what she has always been: a complex plurality, an unpredictable masterpiece of imagination. The stuff of contemporary life, African and other, now seems to permit no more than judgments in which the provisional and the arbitrary compound circumstantial, relative and conditional logics.

It is not suggested here that sciences be reduced to a single science. It may be regretted however that, beyond the autonomy each requires to ensure rigor and depth, they do not seem to know how to rise above their contingencies to partake of the logics, methods and results of them all. There will be a higher level when sciences and cultures are at last capable of communicating without losing their identities and relevances. The issue is no new one, the debate between rationalists and romanticists continues. Africa, for its part, does not seem to see in it an aporia. Recent analyses of the African situation point in the direction of a holy alliance of "universal" codes of management and local modes of prehension of the ideas of progress, happiness, order, and identity. The African conceptual discourse will probably be, as elsewhere, rationalistic as well as poetic-noetic as it makes room for causality besides

unpredictable impulse (Monod: 1970; Prigogine & Stengers: 1986; Stengers: 1993).

More seriously, this is the prospect from which in future chance and necessity will be questioned, as also the holy alliance of the human sciences and the others. Already voices have demanded the unity of the sciences, the reconciliation of *la pensée sauvage* and scientific rationality. Text will no more be capable of being understood without recourse to writing and intertextuality.

The fact that Africa writes is less significant in itself than its denial or ignorance. One day will dawn the even greater import of observing *the ways* in which Africa writes. Why does she write? One may suspect a trace of the old paternalistic colonial ideology in pretensions to endow her with writing on a backcloth of general disbelief.

Before defining oneself *en soi*, one does so against the Other, then one becomes the Other, before finally finding oneself. The first West African literary works in French were mere imitations of Balzac, Zola, Kafka, until writers began to define themselves by denouncing imperialism and then by questioning their convictions and traditions, and attempting to identify themselves individually. The text of a culture, its semiosis, constitutes itself as it deconstructs itself. If the semiotic definition of writing is acceptable, Africa has always had to communicate messages and conserve thought with the help of signs. Africa has always written. Perhaps one should evaluate the performance of African systems of signs in terms of their objectives, their cultures, their semantics and functions, the degree of literacy of individuals, groups and societies, etc. Since Africa writes like the West *and* differently, she must have similar and different literatures; there must be, here and there, analogy, congruence, and identity side by side with divergence, difference, and incompatibility. The multiple diverse African text hardly matches its Western counterpart. Our hunch is that it would open up new prospects on the Western text and, as with art yesterday, habilitate new relations to metaphor, textual image and text.

There was really not much point in rubbing out African writing, in denying Africa the quality of Belles Lettres. Africa does not have to be like the West. She no longer has to define herself against or with it. What matters is to see her live her own life, indifferent to our observation, without self-complacency, integrating her values in the universal, shunning all apartheid.

We shall not return to the arguments of symbolics as they oppose, or share differently, those of the Semioticians. Let us agree that if the symbol is distinct from the sign, this is because the former has only two faces, one of them material, whereas the latter may not be material at all, but at the same time be dyadic, triadic, tetradic and even more.

Symbol is one-to-one and belongs to the order of analogy, while, within a culture, sign is a simple object with a relation perceived as logical, natural or conventional to a non-finite complex reality. The semiotic study of writing necessarily includes the study of text, i.e. a composed, written and interpreted symbolic set. We must consult Nöth (1990) to try and distinguish these two neighboring notions. There is a large library on symbols. It contains three types of works: reflections on symbol (such as Alleau: 1976), comparisons with linguistic sign (Malmberg: 1977), and inventories. The dictionaries of symbols like Chevalier & Gheerbrant (1990) that bring in dreams, customs, gestures, forms, colors and numbers, or Cirlot's (1972), belong to the realm of a symbolics very close to hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, oriented towards a logistics rather than a logic. The first has room for writing, letters, the baboon and Thot,¹ and devotes much space in many articles to African symbolics. The second strikes us as rather peculiar. Its presentation of symbol as arbitrary, provisional and culture-bound strips it of any claim to universality. Cirlot tries to establish that there are similarities between symbols observed in cultures isolated from another: * for active; — action on passive subject; — passive; — for material and active; — to separate above and under worlds; O or the center of the infinite; X for active and dynamic; a triangle for neutral and successive. Such an exercise may be regarded as a warning against generalizing on the basis of formal similarities without common history or semantics. On the whole, if the diffusionist hypothesis has been able to gain provisional credence, this is because it has been supported by a dominant ideology, nationalistic for instance. And yet, it is conceivable that each symbol preserves the trace of a universal human experience, and its form to some extent perhaps the memory of that experience and, more likely, the mechanical and material contingencies of its setting-up as a symbol. Balenci & Delesclauze-Beaume (1985), in two teaching notes on Kabyle symbols from Algeria, based on Moreau's work *Les grands symboles méditerranéens dans la poterie algérienne* (Algiers: SNED, undated), observe:

This work was presented during workshops with teachers, with emphasis on the possibility of using these signs to develop language in children. What had personally struck me, and could be worth exploiting, was that a whole story could be told by reading decorative symbols on Kabyle pottery (36).

¹The choice of a monkey as a symbol for the god of medicine finds some support in contemporary research on animal self-medication, and notably in Madagascar, Kenya and Cameroon. For example, one antiparasite and a molecule with an antibiotic power have been recognized and are being studied for eventual human therapy.

Some teachers of foreign languages or in primary schools use strip-cartoons without words to encourage speaking and even writing. The logic of serial pictures closely follows that of a single discourse, or of one that allows pupils little freedom. The symbolic series of the Dogon, the recent rock painting from South Africa, the rock art of the Sahara and Katanga (now Shaba), but also the Bayeux tapestry, Saint Anthony's Temptation on stained glass for Flaubert, the North American original people's picture-writing, Maya writing and the Nuttall codex, but also the Instructions for use that come with gadgets in Western societies, all depend on the same combination of text and image (Baron: 1981; Sampson: 1985, chapter 2).

Whereas clue establishes a causal relation with its signified, and icon, like symbol, an analogic one, sign needs a convention to mean a thing or an act. According to Lacan, symbolics is structured like a language. A script is a set of signs drawn or constructed by hand, homogenized in making by its own single system. When this script includes picto- and morphemographic signs, these may be, or may have been, symbolic. Often they were symbolic before being iconic and before becoming cenic; but this view does not in any way justify the chronological perspective, since a system may appear at any moment of this evolution and all its transformations take place within a few decades. Phonocentric writing, to produce meaning in a different way, had to expel the first meaning, that of myth or image.

An African ethnologist avoids the fuzzy concept of symbol and replaces it with that of sign. Cissé (1975) describes the graphic signs and concepts of the Malinke and Bambara of Mali with interesting originality since from the inside. From an analysis of the representation of man, woman and parts of their bodies he deduces the local philosophy of the person. In "Graphic signs, masks and myths" (1987), he reconsiders the concept of *bakara*, a spirit of divine essence, with its sign the circle that appears on the *bakaramisi*, a mask featured in a "masquerade" in which the ox prominently expresses values of order, creation and fate. Cissé's idea was to describe the synchronic dynamism of mask, graph and myth. He thus recreates in the best possible way their mode of signification, global, simultaneous and live, in a text that is a synecdoche of the Bambara Malinke semiosis.

To Cissé's rigorous reasoning, founded on the sign, we may compare the contradictory propositions of Fell (1982) and Don Luke (1985), founded on symbolics. Fell assigns a collection of artefacts of "Celtic-Iberian" origin, while Don Luke thinks they are evidently African. The error, for one of them at least must be wrong, might come from the megalithic inscriptions associated with these objects, which could not be compared to any "Teutonic" writing. Fell claims to have discovered a

new system of writing of a Nordic type, naming it "Tifinag", and suggests the areas of its extension in Scandinavia. The same areas have been described as showing the greatest concentration of "proto-negroid" and "proto-australoid" skulls and skeletons in Scandinavia. Accentuating the sensational, Fell recalls the attack of the "sea-people" from the North in the Delta of the Nile in the times of Ramses. Having been defeated, they settled in Tripolitania with their writing called *Ogam* or *Ogham*, which they bequeathed to Africa where it became "Tifinagh", still used today by the Tuareg. Fell believes it would be worth looking up the Niger valley for any traces of the same writing from Scandinavia.

Such structuration of isolated facts, places and times, to fit a hypothesis that was a foregone conclusion, should be taken with a large grain of salt. We hear a lot about white or albino frizzy-haired brachycephalous Norwegians, and of migrations towards Asia and Europe, at the dawn of mankind 30,000 years ago, of Blacks and their technological innovations. No serious research has yet explained the Black Diaspora in Mesopotamia, the Dravidians, the Blacks of Caucasian Georgia, the Black man of the Grimaldi cave in Nice (France), and the Aborigines of Australia. It seems to us that the symbolists' logistical, analogical, often diffusionist and comparatist discourse justifies Eco's rejection of the concept of symbol as historically too heavily loaded with meanings and contexts for it to be of any use in interpreting with any logical rigor.

The linking of language and thought with systems of signs very different from the Latin alphabet may not have been self-evident. Non-intentional graphics could have been merely decorative. They are gestures that, as Freud might have said about the cigars he chewed in front of his students, are just what they are, and about which it would be abusive to look for meanings and connotations. Nevertheless, the decorative design that comes straight out of the natural order, that is chosen, stylized and perpetuated in culture, becomes a sign of that culture and of its identity. Apropos the Yoruba adire, we observed that the absence of certain motives that were present and obvious in the everyday lives of the women who made them was just as significant as the presence of the stylized culture-specific elements they chose to inscribe in their work. These recurrent presences and absences belong on the production side to the realm of literary emphasis, and on the reading side to that of semantic-field research of the kind found useful by sociological (Goldmann), psychological (Mauron) and psychothematic (Guiraud) criticism. The sign, once extracted from the natural landscape, subjected to various manipulations, set with other signs from which it receives meaning while it contributes meaning to the set, is

perhaps no longer innocent. A configuration of signs may always be verbalized. Such potential discourse on the set cannot be but linguistically and culturally finalized. Although potential, unpredictable within the limits of the culture, it will take up the lexicon and logic of that culture. Between the decor, which may be more or less innocent, and the texts of the culture are inscribed sets of organized and referenced signs of varying significance. A complex mat, a wrought ceiling, an earthen bed with bas-reliefs, a votive altar, corded pottery, a pokerwork calabash, a painted or dyed cloth, variegated Kabyle vases and a thousand other objects "decorated" or covered with graphs, shapes, colors can provoke and aid a lesson on morals, citizenship, religion, or storytelling. The potential becomes evidence only at the moment the text manifests itself. A book in the library is just paper, ink, forms awaiting the reading act that will change its neutral and potential status to that of a significant narrative, descriptive or explicative whole. In literature, symbol is a narrative, descriptive or commentative unit or articulated group of units capable of several interpretations, some material and some of the order of thought. No two readers, nor any one reader at different times, see the same story in a novel. Yet, the book, a set of surdetermined signs, simply limits narrativity more than the object that carries a set of symbols. The power of imagination is more in the symbol than in the printed and read text. The word *liber*, etymon of library and liberty, means the fibrous vegetal texture enclosed between bark and wood. But the book, once a liberator, had become for many a source of indoctrination into contentious values, of mental torpor, of the death of imagination, understanding and explanation. This was the common starting point, during the 1950s in several countries, of some authors, travelers or transculturally inclined, who invented unbeknown to one another a kind of fictional writing that invited the reader, presumed intelligent, to invent the other half of the proposed text, his own half, never the same. Ideally, writing was to become, as it was read, quickly and superficially, the experience of raw living, on which critical reflection then set down to work, creating an esthetic impression, priming and establishing diverse narratives.

An African object, the *Asen*, *An Iron Altar From Ouidah in the Republic of Benin* (1993) —Ouidah, capital of the Savi kingdom in the 17th century—, was created to perpetuate the memory of the dead. These altars were stored in a cabin of their own, called *dehoho*. The various figurative small sculptures and small iron motives: objects of ordinary use (calabash, cord), of ritual significance (cross, axe, ladder), animals (bird, dog, ox), plants (banana tree, palmtree), etc., are references to events in the lives of the departed, biographemes. The motives of the *asen* were ordered by a friend and made by a blacksmith. Their

significance, singly and as a whole, was best known to the dead person's contemporaries. After a generation, few can use this short-lived mnemonic to tell the story of his life, while all know that it is immortalized in the metallic artefact. This is typical of the relation to text in both Africa and the West. Alain Resnais titled his documentary on the Bibliothèque Nationale *Toute la mémoire du monde*. His cameras traveled along miles of books we shall never read but which are known by all to contain this universal memory. The Ouidah altars are analogous with those huge libraries whose earliest ancestor was the Alexandria library, the library of African Antiquity. The Houeda who first invented the asen produced a mode of conservation of memory that vaguely resembled writing. What is perennial is the will to conserve, the certainty that asen will preserve, the respect for what asen stands for, the memorial of the family's long rich history of beings and events. No matter if the living do not know it so long as it is there, enshrined in metal. Likewise, many Europeans walk past statues whose models are supremely unknown to them but which remind them that their past is rich in glorious personalities, principles and events. It is the same here. Yet, it was initially a pictographic narrative, a text. Some motives take on the part of a rebus; others recall a proverb or a pleasantry, a ritual, a nickname, a semantic value. This complex continuum enables a story to be built up, that of course will match in parts the original story, but without anybody knowing which. Thus the same elements taken from their environment serve to tell the story of all Houeda lives. The choices made in the thesaurus and their organization in asens form a vocabulary and syntax, which limit arbitrary use without eradicating it. There are no more identical asens than similar ones. The general make up, certain recurring elements, the material chosen and its treatment, the common function, designate them all as asen, a solidified discourse, forgotten in its anecdotal triviality but still inspiring the respect first enjoyed by its details and groupings. All elements and all their possible organizations constitute cultural texture. Inscribed in the object, the text does not have to be produced to exist. But there are also texts that are manifest and signify differently. Baines (1989), about the integration of Egyptian art in writing, explains that hieroglyphs, a picture writing, were also analogous to a cursive. The Egyptian scripts originate in the predynastic period and they remain connected for 2,000 years. Baines shows that the radical distinction between image and text is solidly established in the western world, although it is on the wane since the intrusion of other forms of representation and communication than writing, such as the audiovisual. In ancient Egypt, text was image as much as discourse. An image-text signified in various ways and its semantics was not reduced to what was said "in black and

white". For the intellectual elite, text was more discourse than image. For the people it was more images than discourse. Both categories perceived the formal staging of a complex power. The image-text manifested and acted both the logos of divine political inspiration (non-verbalized, powerful, intangible) and speech (the spreading of particular facts and events). We had concluded in the same sense our analysis of *adire* (Battestini: 1984) and of *ukara* (Battestini: 1991). It would seem that the African-American sand drawings and quilts of the Diaspora follows the same principle of global rather than literal signification. Two or three-dimensional graphics, although organized, may not be sequential like speech or discourse. Its configuration is a matter of codification, and the agreed convention, known to some in the group, to the whole group or to several groups, is first and foremost in direct contact with thought, not with the sequentiality of language. There may be three-dimensional syntaxes, palimpsest syntaxes, syntaxes to be discovered and created. The ordering does not matter, so long as it is known and applied, so long as it weaves the texts into the social fabric. Westcott (1967) was one of the firsts to see, literally to "read", textual and cultural meanings in the prehistory of Africa, and to attempt comparisons with African languages. He also stated problems concerning relations between African languages, pointing out some lexical and phonological resemblances. Alexandre (1961) opposed this and any ambition to prove the linguistic homogeneity of all African languages. The vernacular view of the immense Continent is of the same ilk as the equally absurd conception of the sole Egyptian origin of all African languages and cultures. Any cultural, linguistic, historical, diffusionist reductionism is an insult to the creative genius of Africa, to her many-sided values and human beings, landscapes and thoughts, arts and religions.

In Africa as elsewhere the invention of writing was no accident, no sudden and unique phenomenon arising out of an irresistible pulsion. It was spread over 25,000 years of trials and errors, aborted or partial successes, borrowings, minute inventions of details. If intuition is but unconscious reasoning, even the genius of certain inventors of scripts is debatable. Most of them were content to modify an ancient local system, taking a few ideas from one or several contact or remote scripts.

Whatever symbols the first explorers', traders', and missionaries' banners carried, they must have influenced iconography in Africa. The banner itself may have been borrowed and may still lurk somewhere as a symbol on indigo dyed or appliqué curtains. But the Westerner was in African eyes a set of symbols different from their own. With the invader lands an assortment of new symbols: costumes, sails, figureheads (sirens, *Mami Wata* = Water Mother), gestures, weapons, designs on swopped objects. Soon it is no longer possible to recognize the foreign

contribution. But if it is a fact that in English pidgins of the West African coast certain similarities with the jargon of early 19th century sailors have been spotted, it is likely that graphs, colors and shapes were borrowed as well as objects. Some proof of this can be seen in housewall painting in South Africa and Nubia and in bronze plaques in southern Nigeria, in the appliquéés of southern Benin, in some Yoruba sculptures which have foreign motives (Gelede masks) and graphs (textiles).

The diachronic vision of the evolution of writing teaches that the present notions of writing and text distantly originate in a host of systems of signs that served to preserve and communicate messages, knowledge, the collective past.

Langacker (1973) is one of the few linguists who include writing in their work. He believes the technique of writing came from the more widespread institution of drawing (59-66). Drawing an object suggests more than that object; drawn writing evokes a situation, a shared experience about the object.²

Reading the drawings aloud involves the mediation of language, making it however redundant. The sequences of drawings and of thoughts are in accord. To say, when you are looking at the rain, that it is raining is redundant or means something else. A situation can be described by drawing a picture or by talking about it, and writing combines both aspects, being a representation of a message that has been thought out and orally expressed. The transition from direct to language-mediated representation took place when certain conventional images or signs were understood as designating words instead of things and ideas. According to Langacker, all the symbols of writing systems designate linguistic units rather than things or ideas. Nearly everything that is said can be written, but not everything: tones, undertones, mime, situation are often left out. Hence the difficulty of conveying irony in writing. Literature does not usually divulge the intonations of characters; they can therefore lie with impunity.

Systems of writing differ in two fundamental ways:

- 1 — by the inventories of their symbols: the ideal alphabet, like Unifon for English, applies the one-to-one principle (one letter for one sound);
- 2— by the type of units designated by the symbols.

²But the drawing must be stylized and composed to achieve meaning. A model of this type of drawing takes up and improves the orthogonal perspective, which has the advantage of being universal (Lévy-Ranvoisy: 1987).

No writing system is uniquely logographic, consonantal, alphabetic, syllabic or otherwise. Champollion's genius in deciphering the Egyptian scripts was that he forsook the beaten track and saw that the signs had different functions: phonetic, ideographic, syntactic, semantic classification, and mixity, a universal aspect of writing systems. Moreover he was the real discoverer of the semiotic concept of writing, for he could not have analyzed the writing if he had not had a solid knowledge of the culture, which was further enriched by the meanings of the texts and their comparison and criticism. We must therefore give up classifying sign systems according to categories that happen to exist in varying proportions and functions within each system. Champollion did more than decipher a writing: he reconstructed part of the civilization of Egypt, or in our terms its texture.

The logographic function rests on the word, without any reference to phonetics or phonology. A sign can therefore be "read", i.e. it evokes directly an image or other sensation, which can be expressed by signifiers in, more than one language. A simple or complex sign is incidentally, for a Japanese, the equivalent of the word pronounced in Japanese. In this context, the logographic function of the sign is often only structurally effective, in that it receives confirmation of its meaning through its textual and cultural context.

Against the alphabetic principle, deepest Africa prefers the syllabic function. As in the alphabet, there is a one-to-one relationship, but between signs, simple or complex, and syllables. The syllable may consist of a vowel only, but most African languages follow the consonant-vowel scheme (CV). It is so easy to read that French pedagogues, after the failure of the "global method" of teaching to read, tried to apply a semi-global method, based on the syllable. Learning to read became easier, but the change led to difficulties in learning to spell. The on-going spelling misfortunes of French schoolchildren will fatally lead to the impeachment of orthography itself. It is often difficult to fix the limits of and therefore to define both syllable and word in the sound sequence, whereas they are obvious in writing. The alphabetic function tends to represent one sound by one letter, but we well know that there may be more or less sounds than letters, many ways of representing the same sound, mute letters and hundreds of complementary signs. Nothing is simple. <7> is read like a logogram. <M> once designated, by graphic analogy, water and mountains and is read, in isolation, /em/. The single sign <3> designates three sounds instead of one. It is easy to criticize the alleged simplicity of the alphabet, since French, for instance, often uses signs such as <FF>, <\$>, <&>, <-ph> and <f>, <x> for <-ks-> as well as <-gz->, <\$>, <n°>, <_>, <ù>. The number of signs used by computer literates is about one thousand. <-

ough-> is a standard joke in the Anglo-Saxon world, like the different ways of writing <o> in France. Graphic memories still clutter up the most recent orthographies, like the unpronounced <m> in mnemonics. Conversely, many French people say */dilemn/, probably by contamination from <indemne>, for what is correctly orthographed <dilemme> in the dictionaries.

But the truth is that, however complex it may seem to others, one's own system is always simpler. To observe how another system functions one must be guided by someone who is culturally at home in it.

The teaching of African languages is essential for political, economic and cultural dynamism. Many linguists plead for schooling in national languages, now possible thanks to African linguistics which has exploded the colonial myth that they were incapable of promoting scientific and technical progress and economic development. This myth was a product of the folklore/culture dichotomy. African languages were said to belong to a fixed, arrested repetitive structure: a folklore, which lost its status and its very name if it dared to change: it then became a culture. Culture is dynamic. In it we possess a sense of history, fast or slow, but not static or cyclic. It boasts of Belles Lettres, while proverbs, tales and legends belong at best to the outgoing generation or the rural cousins. An evolving African language, which enriches its vocabulary and techniques of derivation and composition, multiplies and complexifies its logical articulations, keeps up-to-date with its environment, seems capable of preserving its cultural identity as it sails through the winds of change of the 21st century.

We had concluded (Battestini: 1983) that the homogenization of the phonemic transcription of the Cross River languages was necessary before the mapping of their isoglosses. We showed that the alphabetic reduction of these languages by men of good will but with different phonological systems such as the English, Scottish, French, Portuguese, German could only have contributed to the acceleration (followed by the fixation through the conservative effect of writing) of a phenomenon of phonetic and linguistic but also cultural fragmentation. We mentioned the imposition of the Efik script on Ibibio speakers, which had led to the appearance of the "Ibibio-Efik" language. In striving for a linguistic atlas of the Cross River state, we had observed that wherever the consensus of linguists and administrative limits tended to separate two languages in contact, the weight of shared language traits was greater than that of features which differentiated them. All the observed languages were mutually intelligible; i.e. they were mutual dialects of each other. The peculiar situation was that none of them, or all of them, could claim to be the dominant language, others variants. At the time the center for evangelization was in Old Calabar and Efik

language dominated the region. Later on democratization showed that numbers gave the Ibibio and their language power over the Efik. The linguistic map we attempted, with its diaphanous isoglosses, was in danger of creating a divisive political situation by exaggerating the differences that were mainly phonetic rather than grammatical.³

The inflation of writing, and of the media, favors the accumulation of capital and power and leads to an aberrant society, flooded with writing but denigrating and ridiculing the intellectual and the literate (Bloom: 1987). The American student reads little but watches television three hours a day on average. Vertical and horizontal social and economic mobility is measured in dollars. In France, 30% of army recruits are technically illiterate. Inflation of nonsensical publishing material and the wide spreading of anti-intellectualism in developed countries are paralleled with the rising of a thirst for practical knowledge, eminently useful in developing countries. Nationalism is the order of the day, within absurd borders, in Africa, while it is collapsing in the West, for various reasons: the slow disappearance of historically antagonistic states, the rebirth of provincial-ethnic identities and the emergence of at least economic federalism and calls for more powers to the UNO, and certain international institutions such as NATO, IMF and WB. Corruption in the political class and political skepticism among the people are ushering in the collapse of traditional values, including writing and literature. Nationalism (Garibaldi) and institutional centralized knowledge (J. Ferry) were recent myths anyway. The generous socialism of a Jean Jaurès has been shown up as utopian. The cooperative glass factory he created has been automated without either freeing or alienating man, who finds himself unemployed, divorced, and idle, illiterate and disillusioned. *L'Humanité*, the paper he founded, belongs to a party he would have combated if it had existed in his lifetime.

It is agreed that the teaching of French (as of English) in the African bush has destroyed the family and the social fabric, contributed to the rural exodus which has ruined agriculture and created giant anarchical cities and shantytowns, juvenile delinquency and a disproportionate growth of civil services, unemployment of graduates and a brain-drain⁴ from the Continent. Since its inception, Dakar has doubled its population every ten years. International credit institutions are recommending the limitation of schooling and the closure of universities, made responsible for graduate unemployment and the ruin of the

³See J.-L. Amselle (1990) for similar conclusions but about the Banmana and at the cultural level.

⁴See for instance Bokamba (1976), Bokamba and Tlou (1977), Bot-Ba-Njok (1974), and the *Mouvement des Enseignants de Langues Africaines* (1968).

primary sector. In any case, many schools and colleges suffer from shortages of books and paper and most of the better-qualified teachers go abroad. Education has to be thought out again from top to bottom, an overhaul which must include a revision of the notions of writing and text and their relation, to improve all the values rooted in the African society, intrinsically developing them, empowering local dynamic trends. Awareness of texture follows awareness of history and promotes the pursuit of reasonable happiness.

In all Africa north of the equator, during the colonial period, African children could attend either European lay or mission schools, Koranic schools or even traditional "schools" of initiation. All had their rites of passage. Combining these competing systems was not uncommon, depending on the circumstances (Hunter: 1977).

Until quite recently in most of the Francophone countries, French was taught as a mother tongue. This was a political choice, seen as imperialist by some Africans and denounced by the CLAD in the late 1960s.

Second and foreign language teaching evolved rapidly in America and later in Europe around the end of WWII along with, inter alia, the training in allied and enemy languages of US Intelligence Service officers. Entirely new intensive methods based on the natural process of language learning were created, using new technologies. The repetitive taperecorder, the authenticity of the native speaker's recorded voice, individual training within the language laboratory were a few of the advantages of a pedagogy not yet called audiovisual.

Initially, in a language laboratory, the target language was heard but not in its situation. The recreation of the linguistic situation necessitated pictures, first as filmstrips or series of slides, coordinated with the sound sequences, now an audiovisual methodology. Writing and reading were avoided during the first weeks of learning to prevent the pronunciation of the script of the source language interfering with that of the target language. Batteries of exercises taught the learner to detect and distinguish sounds and their combinations, to acquire the phonology of the target language before learning it in a recreated situation, its syntax. Then, the student was exposed to every conceivable "at home" cultural and language situation. Africa profited much later from these developments.

During the colonial period, far from the cities, methods like *Mamadou et Bineta*, just a textbook, addressed to young people for whom France was a dream, offered them the French language as the best possible means of expressing the African cultural context of the time, demonstrating in passing its universality, since it was shown to be capable of expressing even the feelings, thoughts and events of Africans.

Surprisingly, the results were first class, except for certain similarities with the Canadian methodology of cultural and linguistic "immersion".

Here in these schools began the first Francophone African literature, before, during and after Independence. The primary and school-leaving examinations included a French dictation and a French essay. There were two kinds of results: catastrophic or astonishingly good. No Gaussian distribution here. They could usually be forecast long in advance. The star pupils worked extremely hard, in outrageous conditions: malnutrition, poor health, no electricity, no library, and no communication in French back at home. No wonder the average pupil could not cope.

On the Christian side, missionaries tend to keep to their systems for religious purposes, deemed pretty harmless by the political powers, or even an "opium" against potential subversion. Linguists get the government's go-ahead for the creation or harmonization of the scripts for national languages.⁵ But no press is created, no book printed in these new scripts, nor does any undertaking see the light of day to teach and propagate their use. For instance, there are no translations of texts essential for democracy, such as constitutions, declarations of human rights, or of more mundane instructions for the use and maintenance of imported machinery, or of humanitarian texts for the prevention of common health risks. Somalia was an exception. Adam (1968) describes the work of the commissions of 1961 and 1965 on the selected scripts (Arabic, "National", and Latin), the efforts of a handful of local inventors and their reasons, then the political stage (referendum, diktat, and parliamentary recommendations). This was a model for other African countries, mooted surprisingly early: already in 1932, a third of a century before the final decision, Cerulli had made an inventory of the efforts then current. For the use of the Arabic script by Swahili speakers, Allen (1945) published a report describing common current practice and went on to suggest their rationalization. According to Mvenye Elimu, a Swahili literate, "many Swahili can write letters in Kiswahili". The script can be learnt in a few days by a good speaker. Consonants only are represented as in classical Arabic. His book teaches the system, which in the last resort is an 'ajami.

⁵See our bibliography, notably: *Annales de l'Université du Tchad* (1976), Bouny (1976), Caprile (1976), Bamgbose (1983), Kouassi (1977), Lacroix (1968), Oyelaran & Yai (1976), UNESCO (1966; 1970a; 1981). The ambition is not new, Walker (1932) had already stated the problem and proposed useful solutions for Gabon. The UNESCO 1966 Report immediately resulted in the near standardization of phonetic notation in African universities and common ground for orthographies were provisionally agreed. Even speeches by non-linguist politicians no longer refer to local writings or symbolic codes.

Elsewhere, a system of writing apparently heading for oblivion may find new breath in a rising or renascent nationalism. The Tuareg's Tifinagh comes from the Phoenician,⁶ and Coptic from Egyptian Demotic. Both serve to remind us that the Berbers and the Copts had a civilization with writing and literature long before the Arab invasions and Islamization. Amharic script was imposed on all the Ethiopian peoples who resisted the central state, powerful under Selassie and then the military Marxian regime. The Soviet withdrawal, the rejection of communism, and the weakening of central power come together to endanger the future of the Amharic script. Fulfulde, the language of the Fulani, spoken all over West Africa and written (but in several different scripts), will probably never be used to unify writing in that region, for two reasons: the supreme contempt of the Fulani for political agitation (except among themselves) and the historic distrust in which they are held by most of the other peoples of West Africa. Politics and history may thus help or hinder a writing bound with present or past conflict. In little or non-Islamized West Africa there are many systems of writing, most of which have been described by Dalby (1966; 1967; 1969; 1970). One of them, Vai, is better known on the Anglophone than the Francophone side, being used in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Many neighboring peoples seem to have drawn upon it to create their own systems. It is said to derive from an ancient logographic system (Massaquoi: 1911). It is syllabic as most African scripts, and tonal like many languages south of the Sahara, even though the wider the geographical area of a language or the greater its contacts with widely extensive languages, the lesser are its chances of being tonal. Welmers (1973) has shown how linguistics has neglected tone in African languages. This omission has helped seal the fate of many African writing systems: the grammars ignore it or belittle it. Most linguists and others who have taken an interest in African languages seem to think that tone is an esoteric, unanalyzable, therefore negligible phenomenon, a mark of obscure, benighted languages, or something like a malignant growth on a linguistic system that might otherwise have been quite viable (77). Yet the need felt by Jegede to note tones in a Yoruba script of his invention (1986, private communication).

Enormous sums are spent teaching another language, when logic would seem to command that people who can read and write in their own language, or who could easily learn, be rapidly informed and given

⁶Blake (1940) deals with Ethiopic, Syriac, Hebrew, Devanagari, but he forgets Tifinagh, which reappears from time to time in the nationalistic movements fighting for Berber (nowadays in particular Kabyle and Tuareg) cultural identity.

the means of extending its uses as much as possible.⁷ Instruction in citizenship, agricultural extension, storage, sale and transport of local produce, hygiene and prevention of endemics, directions on powdered milk, canned goods or fertilizers, all these could be printed and distributed within the existing infrastructure and would soon enjoy the same prestige as the Latinate paraphernalia. But Koranic education was often criticized by colonial administrations and still does not open the way into the civil service. In any case, the IMF and the World Bank are seeing to it that African states cut down on civil servants and the salaries of those who remain. The brain-drain, the weakening system of education, the reduced numbers of civil servants and unemployment, distrust of politicians, while reducing the prestige of westernized education as a means to an end which is becoming unpredictable and depreciated, are enhancing the chances of local systems of education reoriented towards a new society, which will be aware of the past, and with reasonable limited ambitions for the immediate future.

This is where vocational education in a local script and in an African language could come in and indirectly help redress part of the economic situation. Perceived as endogenous, it would, at little cost, help people to stay in their villages and offer some future to the new city proletariats, in other words pave the way out of underdevelopment and dependence on imported food. Are these precisely the reasons why those who rule Africa tacitly avoid such a program? How can we understand that after 35 years of development programs failures, African rulers and external influential powers still do not feel the need of rethinking their modes of intervention in Africa? No one seems to want or be able to forestall real needs and aspirations, although this would enable them to manage, control and satisfy them. The ACCT, a French organization, tries to further literacy in African languages as well as in French (see *Alphabétisation et développement en Afrique*: 1979). It helps the description of African languages and indirectly their teaching, but leaves to African initiative the production of primers and the implementation of programs of alphabetization in local languages, and very little, if anything, is done in this direction. A bold example (Giesecke & Elwert: 1983) compares two literacy movements in the same place but four centuries apart. History may not repeat itself, but why should it not teach? They conclude that the success of efforts towards literacy in another language depends in part on the quality of the teaching and materials used in mother-tongue literacy. Few au-

⁷The recent advances in computerized reprography have put paid to the old argument that the use of these African systems would be uneconomic.

thors have taken an interest in the preparation of teaching aids, and MacCullough's Guide (1974) is exceptional.

The attitude of the Senegalese government towards the CLAD is a case in point. French government support to Senghor and the subsequent creation of numerous CLAD-type institutes in Black Africa confirm and comfort Foucault's concept of governmentality, echoed by Bayart (1989). The role of power is to control the course of public opinion and social movements by anticipating them in discourse and action. An institute of Applied Linguistics was such a means of forestalling and controlling the future. Objective research proved against all odds that Senegal was not a French-speaking country, and that it was erroneous to teach French as a mother-tongue. As a result, an instrument of power became a powerful element of opposition to the government, which had to annihilate its potential effect on the people, and did so.

Faik-Nzuji (1992) describes some of the African symbolic systems. Her inventory could only be limited, of course, but her title announces more than it proposes. This attempt at inventorying and classifying African symbols, particularly but not exclusively Bantu symbols,⁸ is ambitious but points to the basic research required. She uses the term symbol where we would use sign, but her conclusions are very close to ours. She emphasizes that each symbol must be examined:

- 1 — as an individual entity;
- 2 — in its relation with other near symbols;
- 3 — in its relation with the culture that uses it;
- 4 — in the linguistic implications of the terms that designates it.

Faik-Nzuji's chapter 10, "Décryptage et interprétation de symboles graphiques, modèles d'analyse", offers an attractive prospect on the study of African artefacts, paralleled, as far as we can see, only in P. Nooter's work. Faik-Nzuji has published in many fields, but generally from a linguistic and semiological viewpoint. In a curious manner, her work reminds us of Goody's idea of restricted literacy, but in the area of symbols and their systems. She could not see that the apparently unshared knowledge (the symbols of which are nothing but its representation) while kept secret by a minority, was verbally but really shared with all and for the benefit of all. Although she never uses the term writing about configurations of symbols, she concludes:

⁸Kibanda (1989) can also be consulted for a more semiological approach.

The study of graphic symbols has shown that, although she has privileged orality, Africa possesses complex semiological systems, capable of correctly and intelligently transmitting messages in specific contexts.

These systems appear to have a strongly marked sacred character, which makes them objects of secrecy, reserved for initiated persons only. Hence the obscurity which surrounds them and lack of knowledge as to their values and functions (181-2).

Faik-Nzuji's conclusions confirm that a culture gives itself the writing system it needs and finds sufficient, so that it is useless to try and judge it with the criteria of another culture. What is new in her work and Kubik's is the recognition that this part of Africa possesses graphic systems of communication and conservation of thought. Should we infer from this that the previous absence of work on this region was probably due to extreme forms of racism and colonization? However that may be, the fact remains that colonies set up for economic exploitation were more prolific in inventoried and described systems of signs than those intended for settlement, which were almost completely devoid of them. To have shown this, even if incidentally, is one of the great merits of Faik-Nzuji's study, together with its synthesis of work on Bantu graphics and of her own work, and the methodology she suggests for future work. Indeed, she herself (1993) goes on to question local symbolologies for evidence of the sacred in Black Africa. Her documentation consists mainly of studies (unpublished undergraduate essays and doctorate theses, monographs by missionaries and other clergy) produced by Africans and kept in Belgium and Zaire. Her text remains however within the limits of ethnographic description. We may recall that the history of African art is often the work of experts trained in the study of the European Renaissance, whose museographic way of thinking first produced all those "old curiosities shops" and private collections of out-of-context objects. Synthesizing texts, which replace objects and symbols in their contexts, puts the matter right. Numerous quotations from them, the explanation of the uses of diverse paroles, the exploration of different symbolisms, often original and didactic drawings and illustrations further enrich this inventory of African symbols.

The idea of exhuming ancient or discreet information from private collections, confidential writings, forgotten libraries, specialized publications has become a general trend, now that Africanist fieldwork is proving increasingly difficult if not impossible (research permits, restricted zones of security and rebellions, supposed association of the researcher with money, power and government). Ethnography used to be an ancillary tool for submission, conversion and exploitation. It can now serve to educate — on condition it decolonizes itself. Faik-Nzuji man-

ages to persuade the non-Africanist of the absence of Islam in Black Africa. Her small errors of location, placing Bambara in the Sudan (Khartum) and Fon in Guinea (12) do not invalidate her general thesis. The origins of the symbols with which she heads her chapters are not given, and disquieting is the monotheism the author sees everywhere in Africa, but no more than amusing the name of Catholicism she gives all forms of Christianity. The map purporting to give the distribution of populations is vague and not always reliable. The author is more at home with Central Africa and Zaire than with other regions of Africa, although even here it is surprising to find no references to the Tusona-Luchazi morphemograms or Congolese cosmograms (Kubik: 1987a), to the Tshokwe figures (Falgayrettes: 1988) and the painted libers of the Pygmies (Thompson & Bahuchet: 1991).

African visual symbols all contain universal elements such as interdiction, danger, poison, punishment, numbers, and symbols for illnesses, types of behavior, common feelings and more. They could therefore be used as coded scripts for minimum essential communication, for instance on bags of fertilizers, packets and crates for refugees, bags and cartons in the fight against famine and endemics, instructing the preparation of baby and other food and drugs, helping to solve sundry problems of domestic economy and hygiene. They could also assist in controlling the behavior of illiterate citizens on the street and in public buildings. The use of symbols is common to all Africa, where reading signs in the human or natural context is no problem for non-westernized people.

Symbol, a substitute for a fable or a concentrate of texts, signifies also when associated with other symbols. As a text, it can be nested in larger texts or, like certain Chinese novels, have several meanings. Such generative potential is limited only by the number of divisions in the substance-situation in the given culture and by the number and complexity of their logical articulations, which is tantamount to saying that the number of texts is practically infinite in each culture. Every culture possesses this capacity to generate texts, which it uses to produce the types and quantities it feels it needs, both functionally and esthetically. We have seen that the "writingless" Africa stereotype implies absence of writing not only in the restricted sense but also of all systems of signs capable of forming texts, therefore of literature and history.

Writing in the semiotic sense, which includes all signifying sets of social signs, points to the notion of texture, social fabric, web of experienced and accepted constraints, chains of possible imaginative pulsions in a given culture. Writing, of whatever nature, can help understand the mentality of its users. Thus, in 1989, the acronym DNMICRS, on the front of the divisional office of the Nigerian Ministry of Information of

the Cross River State, was painted in superb gothic letters of supreme complexity. It was unreadable. On the architect's elevation for the future extension of the Nigerian University of Ibadan's Faculty of Arts, which kept us busy in the 1970s, the silhouettes planted to give an idea of the scale of the building were Victorian men and women about town in bowlers and crinoline with umbrellas and sunshade. So much for these African architects' acculturation to Africa! Amaeshi (1977) briefly recalls the existence of some non-Arabic and non-alphabetic West African systems of writing, with the consequent contradictory effect they have on the western perception of Black Africa. He points out that African manuscripts of literature in local languages exist, without indicating with any precision the quantities preserved and inventoried for research. The first stage for a real study of African and Asian manuscripts in local writings would be to make a bibliography along the lines of Matthews & Wainright's *Guide to manuscripts in European languages on Asia and Africa in the British Isles*. As librarians, they suggest that these local texts be listed and studied. Interestingly, they take up from Cunha (1971) a broader definition of book, bringing in pre-historic wall paintings and engravings, tally bones and sticks, "and several other artefacts on which man, since remotest time, has left a history in pictures, phonetic symbols, engraved letters". Manuscripts in non-European languages as well as all systems of conserving memory and transmitting thought outside the British Isles were not to be included but their perspective and categories instigate a new look for the future inventory of "texts" in Africa. Nwabara (1965) gives the following information on Nsibidi supporting materials: "walls, the ground, calabashes, and locally produced cloths [were used]. Ground signs were made with a stick, on the walls with chalk, on calabashes with a knife, on dyed cloths with thread and needles made of bamboo" (19). The inventory is incomplete, but representative enough. In fact, any surface could be used as material support (e.g. bronze containers, palm tree stems cut in thin blades, human skin, carvings, and helmet-masks), and vegetal extracts (camwood, local indigo) served as ink. Amegbleame (1975) tells us that there are enough books in Ewe (Togo) for a substantial bibliography. He gives the titles of printed books and a critical introduction on the state of writing in African languages. Pommier & Ricard (1973) analyze contemporary systems of communication in Nigeria, describing the oral type (with a classification of Nigerian languages), but also confronting it with printed communication, giving a list of private, university and government publishers.

For the Bicentenary of the French Revolution, the Republic of Senegal issued a commemorative stamped envelope. The stamp shows a hand holding a pen and writing the last word of the Declaration of the

Rights of Man in French. This writing hand imitates a human profile wearing the Phrygian cap with the tricolor cockade of the revolution. Equating writing with the liberation of man is a well-known theme. But in Senegal universal education⁹ in the Latin alphabet is still far from being a reality, except that here learning to be liberated is done in a foreign language and that the script imposed by colonial order aimed to erase Arabic script and 'ajami used by Muslims since the 10th century.

The semantics of writing is the study of the functional meaning of the signs that conserve and communicate messages. The word semantics itself denotes other concepts and activities of secondary relevance here, explained by Guiraud (1975) who sees three principal orders in semantic problems (We have replaced his <word> by [sign] as the word is also a sign):

- 1— A psychological problem: Why and how do we communicate? What is a [sign] and what happens in our mind and our interlocutor's when we communicate? What are the psychological —and philosophical— substratum and mechanism of the operation? Etc.
- 2— A logical problem: what are the relations of [sign] with reality? In what conditions is a [sign] applicable to the object or situation it is its function to signify? What are the rules that ensure true signification? Etc.
- 3— A linguistic problem, or rather problems, since each system of [signs] has its specific rules which depend on its nature and function.

Without deviating from Guiraud, we propose to grant semantics the capacity to study all signs that serve to communicate and produce and store text. What are signs? What are the relations between the form and the meaning of a sign? How do signs relate to one another? How do they fulfill their function? Those are the questions.

We may posit without risk that Africa offers a corpus that is sufficiently representative of the general functions of writing to be able to answer these questions.

The Semantics of writing should be able to lean on the language of formal logic, which detects the motions of local and eventually of "universal" thought. But we know that this logic is culturally determined and that, at least since Auguste Comte, it has left few chances of survival to poetic-noetic thought, and therefore to symbolic imagination and myth. Durand (1964) defines European history since the Mid-

⁹The schooling rate between the ages of 12 and 17 is 16 %, the rate of illiteracy for men 48 % and for women 75 %. 5 % of the national budget goes to Education (2 % to Defense, 1.8 % to Health). Yet the 86 % Muslim and 6 % Catholic population are book religionists who presumably know chapter and verse. (Source: *L'Afrique et l'Europe, Atlas du XXème siècle*, Ph. Lemarchand, ed. 1994. Paris: Editions Complexe).

dle Ages as progressively iconoclastic,¹⁰ as confirmed from Islam to Protestantism. Correlatively, the same perspective may be described as gradually alphabet or writing fetishistic. Systems of writing founded on image, on types of sensibility rare in the West, on modes of action and explanation related to madness or to the most liberated arts, conceived to answer specific non-phonocentric needs, representing a thought that is fundamentally outside the scope of language, cannot be easily reduced to formulations and symbolizations and certainly not if they are conceived exclusively in the West.¹¹ Calvet (1984), in his treatment of *La Tradition orale*, contrasting one African traditionalist oral corpus and its corresponding written corpus, shows certain relations between orality and written history, and above all the interplay of literacy and development, not only economic, coming close to a psycholinguistic analysis. Ortigues (1981), from the viewpoint of a now classic African psychiatry, makes a comparison between cultures dominated by writing and orality. One of his most remarkable points, for the notion of African text, could well be contained in the following observation:

The myth [in oral civilizations] is offered in shreds... Everywhere ethnology consists in patiently collecting the shreds of knowledge dispersed in diverse cultural or institutional contexts (83).

Because these scattered bits and pieces, like narrative modules à la Greimas, exist in isolation, they can be assembled each time differently (Barber: 1991). The soothsayers, the storytellers, the priests, the men of influence, the herbalists, have at their disposal paradigms of elements whose codices are limited and culturally recognized, whose capital of meaningful utterances they draw upon, articulate and structure to meet the needs of every new and singular situation. Hence, a surface

¹⁰Some attribute the origin of this movement to Saint Bernard (1090-1153). When he protested against the carved monsters of the Abbey of Cluny, he prefigured the iconoclasm of Protestantism and the earlier missionaries who destroyed idols in Africa, a behavior Segy (1975) could have compared to an auto-da-fé. But when he condemns the image because it turns away from reading manuscripts, he privileges writing against figuration. To a mystic, the written text conditions thought and behavior, guiding the faithful and universalizing the message. The 'rationality' of the image is materialistic, culturally shaped, and borrows from daily life.

¹¹A comparable event to what happened, in the city of Calabar, but at the beginning of the century, to Macgregor and recounted elsewhere in this text: A young American colleague of ours, who taught logic, discovered that his students refused to adopt for themselves the schemes he presented to them as universal. They played the game, learnt and applied his logic, but simply would not have it that it was 'universal.' To do so they would have had to condemn their own, and therefore their religion, their history, their cultural identity. A legitimate rejection reaction took place.

may be covered with signs showing no apparent order other than the one it will receive, since these signs are part of a non finite inventory and need the know-how of an initiate to reveal an order, which will yet be recognized as possible, included in a certain orthodoxy albeit difficult to define. One may think here of the game of tarot, or of the different exegeses of a same biblical text, of the aporiae of certain modern literary attempts, of the *ifa* divination of the Yoruba, of the course chosen by a taxi driver, of the infinitely complex (for us) and remote family linkage retrieved by an Australian Aborigine. A complex form may be fixed by a perennial function, as in the case of architecture. Materials and functionality combine creative acts and borrowed acts to build a structure, which one knows renders the maximum service expected of it. For the narrative, Bourdier (1993) looks at the mosques of the Futa Toro, the Senegalese Futa. Studies of architecture in Africa are few and fewer those linking it to writing. The mosques of Futa Toro, along the river Senegal, are remarkable for their original material and structure; the latter based on the Prophet's house, but with a *mirhab*, a *minbar* and a *minaret*. Some date from the 17th century but have been redesigned several times. The ground plan is often square, like certain amulets (the Arabic *khatem*, the Fulani *hatumere*, and the Tuareg *tcherot*) known as phylacteries. These charms contain sometimes certain *surats*, the *shahada*, the name of Allah or other formulae. In Senegal, we have opened some which contained bits of paper from cement bags covered with pseudo-Arabic writing, groundnut shells and straw. The decorations of mosques suggest, by "their alliance of straight and curved lines, the permanence of God in the plurality of the world" (39), or "the mystic implication of internal stability in a world in constant change" (40). The perennial text of the Koran, a compendium to help live through the confusion of the universe, also expresses the same binary association. Very striking is the way most of these mosques play with sunlight. A small aperture in the west wall allows a daybreak sunray to light up the east wall of the *mirhab* on which the name of Allah is calligraphed and next to which is the *minbar* where the imam reads the *khotba*, the Friday prayer. So "the physical and spiritual lights blend together, to show that Allah Himself is Light" (44).

In short, something is given, a limited list of known units, and there is an apparently infinite, but calculable, possibility of combinations of these units. To each of these combinations corresponds a particular situation, a singular event, an individual or the relation that binds individuals. Each unique casting of dices can only generate an exceptional configuration. A psychiatrist's juggling with categories, for example when he tries to interpret a particular case among many similar ones,

belongs to quite another way of thinking, close to an art, in which scientific law may appear incongruous and theorem a joke.

A large number of African languages have been described and reduced to alphabetic writing, but psycholinguistic studies remain few. Halliday (1984) draws a balance sheet of linguists' research, doubting their ability to bring into

consciousness the unconscious knowledge about language that must be there, in our collective gut, for writing to have evolved at all (62).

Not only he implicitly adopts the view that writing was a spontaneous creation, he further creates a new false problematic, of the alleged sudden impact of an imported writing imposed on a people said to have known none. We do not know whether neurolinguistics will or will not confirm, in this matter, that function creates (or adapts) the organ. For what is posited here is that the collective conscience, therefore each member's brain, innately possessed the faculty of writing even if not using it. Perhaps these sudden leaps are highly doubtful. Van Sertima (1989), with whom it is impossible to agree on everything, critically examines our knowledge about ancient Egypt and its relation with the Middle Nile, the Sudanese and Nubian ancient kingdoms. His perspective is that the Egyptians were a black people who inherited their culture from Black Africa, as the Greeks did theirs from Egypt. Hence the invention of writing is due to Black Africans. A vast quantity of archeological documents, of quotations of diverse origins, sustains this consistent and often convincing argument. Egyptologists had never been able to explain the sudden emergence of the first dynasty, any more than the complex culture that followed immediately. Nobody believes any more in the spontaneous generation of Ancient Egypt as a "gift of the Nile",¹² or in the anteriority and influence of the Mesopotamian cultures over Egypt. It was in the prehistory of Southern Egypt, which is in the direction of a natural downstream influence, that denial of the alleged isolation of the rest of Africa could be found. And indeed the latest archeological discoveries indicate an influence of the South over the North, of Upper Egypt and Ethiopia over the lower Nile Valley and the Delta, including perhaps a slow and progressive invention of writing. Every cultural shoot has roots.

¹²Th. Obenga quotes Herodotus: "The Egyptian region which the Greeks visit (the Delta) is a land which added to Egypt, a gift of the river." (II,5) and explains that the Delta and the Nile Valley, which were both flooded, were a gift of the Nile. Neither Herodotus, Aristoteles nor Plato reported Egyptian civilization to be a gift of the Nile. All mentioned the geographic phenomena (*Ankh*, April 1993, 2: 10).

An exhibition on the Nubian kingdoms at the University of Boston and later (1992) of Philadelphia confirmed the influence of the South over Egypt and, paradoxically, of predynastic dynasties [sic]. Both exhibitions confirmed the cautious questioning, since about the 1970s, of the views until then prevailing on the relations of Egypt with Nubia and consequently on the participation of Black Africa in the history of mankind. The sound and prudent texts of the two catalogs answer a pressing need, which is to document African civilizations so that their values may be integrated into American educational programs, at present dominated by an optimized and almost exclusive view of the once minority WASP contribution to the construction of the United States. Cheikh Anta Diop's heir, Th. Obenga (1973), musters his master's theses, but with a new interest in writing. Under the title "*Signes graphiques africains*", he inventories numerous systems of writing. He deals with the Yoruba àrokò (361-78), borrowing from and reviewing and augmenting Bloxam (1887); with the Giscandi writing of the Kikuyu of Kenya (379-82), the Nsibidi of Southeast Nigeria (383-90), the Mande of Mali and neighboring countries (391-402), the Toma or Loma of Liberia (402-11), Vai (412-24) and Mum (424-42), comparing them in a diffusionist perspective. On the whole, he adopts the thesis of the Egyptian origin of African cultures. He brings together a large and qualitatively sound bibliography in a systematic long-awaited review of scattered information. He is slightly inaccurate in using expressions like "prehistorical and historical writings", and "alphabet-ology" for writing science,¹³ a term which would exclude most African writing systems. His classification of the Yoruba àrokò does not consider their phonetic values in the composition of messages, somehow similar to our rebus. We have examined elsewhere the thesis that Africa does not need to be endowed with writing, in a non-semiotic sense, and criticized this paternalistic point of view. We think that the African systems of signs, so far excluded, just like the African modes of relation to text, from the data base on which the linguistic and Eurocentric concept of writing has been built, deconstruct this very concept of the hegemony of the Latin alphabet and open the way to a universal theory of writing and text.

Scinto (1986) poses in different terms the question of the role of writing in the development of the mind, using the psychologist's, teacher's and clinician's points of view. Cultural implications may be inferred, but with caution. None seems to confirm Goody's convictions.

¹³The historian cannot accept "prehistoric" writings: signs and symbols, yes. But, in any case some of these systems being contemporary, they cannot be labeled prehistoric.

Ethnology delivers cosmogonic inventories but few logical articulations of the concordance tables. It is anyway in the African languages that the mental schemes of certain cultures different from ours can be fully concretized. African philosophy and semiotics are either impeded by their non-African origins or too recent. It is nevertheless from them, and from psychology, that we may hope to draw an understanding of behaviors, forms of association and modes of reasoning which morphosyntax allows us to guestimate and sign system analysis to lay open.

Eurocentric literary criticism is ill-equipped to interpret African oral literature. In the West, it has long ousted (or belittled) all literary genres more or less linked to orality: the tale, the legend, the proverb, nursery rhymes, wordplay, and even to some extent drama (except tragedy) and poetry (compared with the novel and the essay). Barber & Moraes Farias (1989) present a selection of twelve texts on the theme *Discourse and its Disguises. The Interpretation of African Oral Texts*. The introduction emphasizes, inter alia, the unsuitability of Eurocentric categories¹⁴ for the study of authentically African literature. Note the quandaries into which the authors are thrown by the oral/written dichotomy:

On the one hand, it was suggested that our writing-centered view of the world goes deeper than most oral literature specialists acknowledge. It is not just a question of our habit of ignoring the musical and vocal aspects or the expressive functions of body movement, so often a significant feature of the "performance" of a "text". Our scriptocentrism may blind us to the most fundamental constitutive principles of the texts' literariness: blindness made inevitable by the way we define the literary object under scrutiny. On the other hand, however, this very writing-centered scholarly tradition has also produced an extreme notion of a gross cultural and psychological dichotomy between "oral culture" and "literate culture": divided by a gulf whose existence is not at all confirmed by the empirical evidence. The notion of the sheer incompatibility of written and oral modes of literary expression, originally proposed by Parry and Lord, has begun to be questioned, and several of the papers here contribute to this move. They show that the relationship between "orality" and the specific philosophical and literary products of specific African societies is variable, historically based and in need of detailed empirical

¹⁴In a linguistics class at the University of Calabar my students found examples for all the rhetoric figures in their respective languages, all from the Cross River Region of Nigeria. The Fulani literary critical language, inspired from Arabic and, indirectly, from Greek, is rich in literary critical terms but often without corresponding concepts and objects similar to Western tradition. These remarks do not undermine Barber and Moraes Farias' masterful work. It shows how complex are African cultural literatures.

investigation. The continuities between Zulu traditional oral and modern semi-written praise poetry are described by Gunner; Brenner discusses the re-oralisation of sacred Arabic written texts; and in Furniss's paper, the division between oral and written appears almost invisible, for the Hausa poem he discusses was written within the Arabic-influenced literary tradition in which orality and literacy have been intertwined for at least two centuries without one giving way to the other. The common theme that emerged from these discussions seemed to lie in the notion of the text as utterance or as a species of social action; in asking what the text does in society; and in the recourse to the old science of rhetoric, dealing with persuasion, conviction and effectuality in texts, or to the notion of poetic license: both of which are ways of getting at the capacity of the text to activate spheres beyond the confines of its own textuality, and be implicated in social and political action. (3)

The Birmingham Center for West African Studies publishes this text in a series devoted to "African Oral Texts" but points out the difficulty of drawing a clear line between oral and written literature. The collection "Classiques Africains", subsidized by UNESCO and distributed by Les Belles Lettres, was created to publish works of "orature", but it also occasionally prints African manuscripts. There have been numerous conferences on the definition of oral literature, still problematic for many because of the apparent underlying contradiction between what is written and what is said. All these publications, collections and symposia, precious and necessary as they are, do not seem to have shaken the universal myth of a primitive and illiterate Africa, even if it may have relativized it for a few specialists. Africa remains inhabited by "peoples without writing" and, at a pinch, with "orature". Wherever a literature obviously exists, it will be vernacular, stripped of any claim to universality. The way out of this rut is to come out of the anthropological concept of sociocultural text.

Literacy in a country is the state of general education, achieved by the successful learning and general use of a system of writing (some call it alphabetization) of all the people. Beyond functional knowledge of writing, there is a level of education which includes reading and a limited critical capability, an esthetic sense of the written text and of the beauty of language, a cultivated taste for creativity, various cultural references ("lieux de mémoire") and bench marks that permit judgment, categorization, comparison, comprehension and explanation.

Besides the individual, literacy becomes in society the vector of Letters and their moral and esthetic lifeblood, and of their practical teaching. The "restricted literacy" Goody would invoke here is for us, in a given society, the state of a clan of individuals (*al kitabi*) whose *métier* is to read, discuss and memorize texts the contents of which are

thus at any time available to all through consultation of the "clerks". The highly valued ideas, categories and logical articulations are orally shared and freely circulate within the society with optional mention of their written textual sources.

The notion of "alphabetization" does not cover this kind of rapport to the written and to culture. Apart from functional alphabetization, specific and limited, there seems to exist an alphabetization that aims at integrating the illiterate individual in his literate society by teaching him/her the three Rs. In French society, literacy would then refer to all those people who occasionally read, watch cultural and literary programs on TV, go to shows and talk about all this with their kin and peers. Some of them know texts only through hearsay or journalistic criticism, but feel free to talk about them and sanction them on the basis of what they have heard from a critic, a friend and sometimes what they have picked up about the ideology of the writer. There is no cause to praise or scorn this type of sub-culture, it need just be acknowledged and possibly watched for its manipulations by the media and in its day-to-day word of mouth functioning. But it means literacy in the second degree, indirectly sourced in the reading of real texts by others, writers, journalists, professors, relatives and friends. In Africa as in the West there are these intercessors between writing and the public. Once upon a time, literary criticism was divided into the spontaneous, professorial and artistic types. Nowadays each and everyone may pose as an intercessor. Be it *ex cathedra* or *ex media*, a critical discourse-in-being may be observed, whose frequent effect is to exonerate people from reading and writing. Yet, in Africa as in the West, new ideas, new articulations of thought and events do percolate down to various publics, who memorize and discuss them. Baülm (1980) has the merit of showing that this class of intercessors, the interpreters of cultural skies invisible to the people, may possess other languages, have access to various and differentiated fields of knowledge, appeal to all times and all cultures. He explains what were the *Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy*, showing the influence on the common people of those who could read and write Latin. The same distinction is applicable to different types of contemporary societies. Olson & Torrance (1991) offer a selection of texts, which compare and parallel literacy and orality, in a reflection that began with *Literacy, Language and Learning* (Olson, Torrance & Hildyard: 1985). In their introduction, they emphasize that

The effects of literacy on intellectual and social change are not straightforward...it is misleading to think of literacy in terms of consequences. What matters is what people do with literacy, not what literacy does to

people. Literacy does not cause a new mode of thought, but having a written record may permit people to do something they could not do before — such as look back, study, re-interpret, and so on. Similarly, literacy does not cause social change, modernization, or industrialization. But being able to read and write may be vital to playing certain roles in an industrial society and completely irrelevant to other roles in a traditional society. Literacy is important for what it permits people to do — to achieve their goals or to bring new goals into view.

The contributions are mostly from semioticians, psychiatrists and communication specialists. They agree with the conclusions of Scribner & Cole (1981) but disagree with Ong's (1982). But agreement seems to have been reached on the following conclusion:

Oral discourse is often about archival written texts, about how to go about consulting them, interpreting them, criticizing them, paraphrasing them, and finally, creating them, always for some purpose. It is this oral discourse about written texts that provides such fertile ground for modern, skeptical, interpretive thought.

This frame of mind, exegetic, so independent of text and the generator of other texts, is common in the Savanna, because or in spite of the rarity of overvalued texts, and even if it does not always achieve its ends. What matters is that thought keeps moving, in spite of being confiscated by a few. Postmodernist literary criticism can only emphatically agree. Thus writing — a precious tool — finds itself well rid of any fetishistic cult. The ultimate aim becomes clearer for many. Writing is less essential for the notation of the sounds of a language than for the intellectual dynamics generated by superimposed similar and diverse readings. The massage of our cerebral capabilities stimulates the nurture of ever more complex logical articulations. This is the activity named *tasjid* by the *Sufi* of Black Africa (Battestini: 1986), namely the daily obligation to improve oneself intellectually in order to get a little nearer to God every day, without any hope of ever reaching Him. We agree with Ong (1982), who studies the psychodynamics of non-literate cultures, that all thought is analytical. We disagree with him, like Verger (1972), when he believes that abstract, sequential, classificatory thought, the explicative examination of a phenomenon or of an established truth are impossible without writing and reading. Nobody has so far been capable of solving the riddle of the kinship structures of the Aborigines of Australia, even with the help of higher mathematics. Dogon cosmogony transcends the analytical, claims explicative status and functions as such for the Dogon.

The most remarkable text, for an understanding of the realities and possibilities of an alphabetization leading to literacy through an authentically African script, is Scribner & Cole (1981) on the *Vai Literacy Project* of 1973 to 1978, an effort to evaluate the chances of literacy in an African language and its own original script.¹⁵

Apart from the attempts in favor of Mum and Oberi Okaime, aborted, of Wolof, ignored, of Mande, suppressed, and the successful Somali project, enforced by a brawny power, there have been precious few such since the beginning of the century. This study deals with the social context, the relations between the official educational system and the system based on Vai, with the oral/writing relationship, and with memory and the use of writing. It envisages possible improvements to the script and expansion of Vai literacy. They give us illustrations of writing on a ceremonial mask, on a government poster, on a road sign before a village, on a shop window advertisement, on a tombstone, and the public notice of a meeting in Monrovia. In all this they remind us that possession of writing separates history from prehistory (Goody & Watt: 1968) or recently discovered primitives from "civilized" peoples (Lévi-Strauss, in Charbonnier: 1961).

Their way of life is both modern and traditional, which is fairly common in Africa. Confusion between analytical and classificatory terms may also create prejudice.

When Vico (*The New Science*: 1725) created a science of society on the model of the natural science of the Renaissance, he began by suggesting that the primitive or Other be considered neither ignorant nor barbaric, but poetic. He knows a metaphysics of metaphors, symbols and myths, so of texts, attesting the dynamics of a texture. The function of this metaphysics is cognitive, but with a double feeling of impotence and provisionality. These beliefs are neither lies nor errors, but complex modes of knowledge, encoding, and classification, achieving a certain amount of control over the substance-situation and its chaos. Vico thought that his new science should begin with the study of mythology, which is nothing but the ideology of a people at a given moment, a form of explanation, a text, imposed on the milieu, the meaning (*verum factum*) of the world for that culture. This is what happens in any culture, since man can only know the world through his arbitrary visions. For Vico, man created himself, out of his own mind. Yet he thinks that all men have in common a faculty of structuring this world, this "logos"

¹⁵Graham Greene (1980) had been surprised to find a piece of paper covered with Vai writing hidden under the roof of his cabin, during his *Journey without Maps* through Liberia in the 1930s. Scribner & Cole have spawned followers, as shown for instance by Berry & Bennet (1991) in connection with the literacy of the Cree of Canada.

and "sapienza poetica". To this poetic science he adds the capacity to communicate, that is to set to order and represent as a convention contents modeled by it into more and more complex figures and patterns. Africans communicate in their own languages and through other media, including scripts and symbols, but they are denied the capacity to conserve messages and communicate efficiently, unless they learn a foreign language, borrowing foreign categories and logic to betray their own systems of thought, a handicap at least. It is true that literacy is more seldom achieved by Africans in African languages and scripts than in a European language and the Latin alphabet. Smith (1978) describes literacy in English in Rhodesia in terms of functional literacy, ignoring political and economic implications of the kind discerned by Stock (1983) in a text which does not concern Africa on *Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*. The written word has supplanted the oral and a new relation has been established between them. Stock analyses the relation between language, text and reality, on the one hand, rituals, symbols and interpretations on the other. The parts played by the written and the oral have changed, and this has modified culture, religion and human relations, but there is no question of subordinating the one to the other.

Goody is an authority on literacy. The development of his ideas from 1968 to 1993 is well worth examining. In 1968 he publishes the collective *Literacy in Traditional Societies*. He attributes a decisive importance to the introduction of writing, or to its extension wherever it was restricted to a particular group. Once generalized,

it objectivizes speech, provides language with a material correlative, and in this material form speech can be transmitted over space and preserved over time (jacket).

Throughout his introduction, there runs an evident tendency to rank cultures in terms of degree of acquisition of writing. He does not envisage the existence of other means of conservation and transmission than a phonocentric alphabet. If certain societies acceded to a new episteme, they owed it entirely to writing.

For Goody, it seems, a film stills and rushes are more important than the movie itself. Opera, film, happening, all moving scenes and their reinterpretations, all sequences of colors, plot, dialogue, background noises and music, gestures and décors, costumes, camera play, what have you, need to "hold it" so as to give analysis and criticism time to operate and improve all later films. He forgets that moving proves movement. He will persist in holding his ethnological camera on the stilted group of our dead past, on the old curiosity shop blown up

into a museum of natural history in which every exhibit must be dead and severed from context to be of any interest. What he is saying is that we are pledged to constant revision of our knowledge if it is to be systematized and developed, and that this precisely requires us to dam and cut up the flow of thought here and there, now and again, if we are to win the ordeal of modernity.

Goody's point of view is widely shared and possibly reassuring for many. We refuse to sacrifice to the fetishistic cult of the Latin, Latinized and Latinate alphabets, and above all to associate it with any alleged intellectual development of the individual or superiority of modern or postmodern societies. We admit the formidable intrinsic qualities of the Latin alphabet, but without downgrading all other systems of writing.

In Goody (1968), four articles deal with Africa: Wilks (161-97), Goody (198-264), Lewis (265-76), Block (277-97). The first two cover Western Sudan and Ghana, the third the Somali, the last Madagascar; and the interest of the whole is enhanced by a study by Goody & Watt of the consequences of literacy (27-68). Goody's article, "Restricted Literacy in northern Ghana", based on the LoDagaa and Gonja peoples, shows the impact of writing on non- or partially literate ethnic groups. He tries to circumscribe some of the factors that led to "Restricted Literacy", his own expression, meaning literacy limited by factors other than those pertaining to writing itself. This article, with Wilks', remains a valuable bibliographical and analytical source on Arabic and 'ajami manuscripts, on the teaching and uses of these texts, on the literate, on the sociology of West Africa. The word "restricted" seems to mean "restricted, compared to the Western use of writing" rather than by any cultural limitations of the West African literate world Goody & Wilks uncovers for us. Goody considers that the failure of Arab type literacy to maintain or advance knowledge was largely due to the religious orientation of the educational system. Goody feels free to remind us of the "dissection taboo" in Islam, forgetting the major contribution of Arab and Andalusian medicine to medical science (see Chapter 7). He goes on to inventory the disciplines taught in the Koranic schools and medersas, and later by prestigious masters for the happy few. In this he is the first to point out that western ethnologists and anthropologists were wrong to ignore the systems of writing of the peoples they were studying. Onward from the two texts, the *Impact of Islamic Writing on the Oral Cultures of West Africa* (1971b), which we shall examine later, and *Technology, Tradition, and the State* (1971a), the initial thought is confirmed and amplified, liaising with all those who, without being informed like Goody, would mix up the advent of writing with agriculture, capital, exploitation of man by man, birth of the

state, therefore of contemporary civilized mankind. With *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977), Goody contests most of the anthropological works based on epistemological dichotomies of the "We-They" type. He succeeds in showing that the evolution of mentalities depends on transformations in modes of communication and specifically on the successive modifications that corresponded to the development of writing. Then appeared the two volumes containing short articles and works by him: *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (1987a), and *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (1987b). In the first Goody

assesses the impact of writing on human societies, both in the Ancient Near East and in contemporary Africa, and highlights some general features of social systems that have been influenced by this major change in the mode of communication. Such features are central to any attempt at the theoretical definition of human society and such constituent phenomena as religious and legal systems, and in this study [he] explores the role of a specific mechanism, the introduction of writing and the development of a written tradition, in the explanation of some important social differences and similarities. Goody argues that a shift of emphasis from productive to certain communicative processes is essential to account adequately for major changes in human societies. Whilst there have been previous discussions of the effect of literacy upon social organization, no study has hitherto presented the general synthesis developed here. (Dust jacket)

We should be inclined to reject this thesis, on the ground that it also has to be proved that the acquisition of other means of communication and recording did not have an impact similar to the one invoked, which is loaded with ethnological preassumptions of another age. In the second volume, Goody groups texts that extol the merits of writing in the restricted sense. Even so, the fundamental significance of speech in human interaction is unanimously recognized, that of writing much less. In this series of articles, Goody examines the complex relation between the oral and written modes of communication. He considers it in three major contexts: in certain given societies; between cultures and societies with and without writing; and from the individual's language life point of view. He analyses the historical evolution of some systems of writing, the historical impact of writing on some Eurasian cultures, the reciprocal influence of oral and written cultures in West Africa and the contemporary problems thrown up by the search and understanding of literacy.

But he tarries (1993) in coming to the problem of the reaction of the substratum to the Arabic script and is content to tackle it in terms of con-

tiguity: "Icons and Iconoclasm in Africa". Islam prefers the uttered word to image, the abstract to the represented, therefore the signified to the signifier. With the written word, it brought to Africa (Goody does not say which) an imageless culture (with some exceptions). For a long-time, and still today, Muslims lived in harmony with non-Muslims in the same societies. The values and cultural objects of all circulated freely. Sometimes purists would rise against "heretical" blends and demand the abolition of all human or animal representation. In Africa, Christians and Muslims distinguished themselves from all others by the fact that they prayed instead of making offerings. Goody reminds us that the imageless religious doctrines imported from the North destroyed many idols and with them ancestral modes of representation like dance and masquerade. The iconoclasm of the imported religions in Africa may be associated with three more general intellectual problems. The creation of images is similar to the creation of the world and is therefore impious. The creation of religious images reduces the divine to immediately intelligible forms, that is to say the sacred to the profane and, ultimately, materializing the Creator himself. The invention of writing solved these problems, which may explain the role of sacralized texts, of "Holy Scriptures", of dogmatic treatises, of major classical works, and generally the fascination still exerted by *Belles Lettres*, by writing as distinguished from the oral. Hence the refusal of representation has led to privileging the abstract and the written and, by way of consequence, to the establishment of the sort of complex thought which alone permits accession to modernity. However, Goody observes that while in Africa the direct representation of God and Creation are avoided, all borrowed forms are perceived as created and art object figure the discourse of intercession. There is an aniconic prehension of the divine in Africa, but different from what it is in Europe and Asia. This would explain why written cultures explicit problems and contradictions that remain implicit in oral societies. Goody gives us to understand that in offering this explanation, he is only trying to avoid belittling Africa by showing similarities as well as differences in the problems with which she and Europe were confronted. In 1993, this apology is offered us as no more than a possible interpretation of what may have happened. Social psychology may verify these assertions. Ethnology can only be on Goody's side.

The diffusion in Africa of western-type writing, of the book, that latter-day liber, should engineer a revolutionary change in mentalities. With or without writing, Africans will go on thinking, but in a more diversified way, more futile too, since necessarily more contradictory; futile in contents, ephemeral and anecdotal, to feed the increasing complexity of economic, social, political and cultural tectonics, so frag-

ile as soon as they begin to petrify. A modest African author, Kalanda (1967), makes of *La Remise en Question* the "basis of mental decolonization". He invites "each one of us to learn that he is his own god" (199) and therefore that he has the duty to invent himself, be his own perpetual creator. The mutant is not that exceptional being who jumped out of nowhere one fine *Matin des magiciens*, the great hype of the 1960s. We are all mutants. Fulani people like to say that even corpses evolve, going back slowly to the elements by which they were evolved. We might compare Kalanda's ideas with those of Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986) on literature, and with ours (1988) from a psycho-sociological point of view. Opening up new mental schemes is like "perchance to dream". A specialist in dreams tells us about writing. Lacan (1966) in "Symbole et langage comme structure et limite du champ psychanalytique", tends to assimilate dream forms and sentence structure:

Let us therefore go back to Freud's work in the *Traumdeutung* to remind ourselves that the dream has the structure of the sentence, or rather, to confine ourselves to its literality, of a rebus, that is, of a writing, whose primordial ideography could be represented by the child's dream, and which in the adult reproduces both the phonetic and symbolic uses of the signifying elements one finds in the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt and preserved to this day in Chinese characters (145-6).

One gains the impression, perhaps from the short-cut nature of the statement but nonetheless clearly, of a groping around semantic fields, in terms of opposites: child, morphemography, primordial/adult, phonetic/symbolic, evolved/non-evolved, perpetuating the old Eurocentric shibboleths, we-them, civilized-primitive, and confusing chronology and logic into the bargain. The last straw is in "preserved to this day", as though in contempt of the general evolution of mankind. And yet, Lacan, who was no historian of writing but a psychiatrist critic of Freud, could have helped the historians of Africa, the prehistorians of African rock art and all those who study symbols in Africa, out of their rut. If the analysis of dreams has advanced with Lacan, if dreams are structurally like mythograms in the Freud-Lacan tradition, then the interpretation of the Yoruba Ifa rebuses or divinatory configurations should be made all the easier. Colors, webs, bark painting, pokerwork on calabash and mask, scarification are all materializations of symbolic thought, but even more so are logo-morphemographic writings like Nsibidi, Vai, the Dogon and Bambara codes, the first writing attempts of the Bamum, to mention only a few. Lacan and his disciples do not seem to have succeeded in persuading anyone of the pertinence for psychoanalysis and possibly for the study of symbolic representation of that celebrated announcement of theirs that dream and language are

homeomorphic. They have done little to help go beyond Marichal's conclusions (1963) on the relations of *L'Ecriture et la psychologie du peuple*.

Literacy can be achieved without books, but to teach the subject one needs textbooks that can be efficiently and economically produced and used. Helping to produce such is precisely what McCullough (1974) does in his *Preparation of Textbooks in the Mother Tongue*. In this work language, writing, reading and culture are taught simultaneously. In the same perspective of integrating teaching and language, Merryfield (1989) inventories the theme of *Cultural Literacy and African Education*. He deals with four countries: Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Zimbabwe. Describing post-independence reforms in primary curricula, he observes that the changes concerned essentially history, geography and civic instruction. Nowhere has anybody seemed to think of including in these new programs reminders of the ancient systems of communication. Nigeria, the extreme case, confined itself to contemporary problems and completely ignored its linguistic past, however rich it may be, probably because this could endanger national unity, the integration of its 200 ethnic groups. To be sure there are few phenomena in Nigeria comparable to Vai (Sierra Leone and Liberia) or Mum (Cameroon), but the north of Nigeria knows the numerous 'ajami and the southwest Nsibidi. In any case, Nyei (1981) shows that plenty of scripts are no guarantee of successful development. He describes literacy among the Vai through three scripts: Arabic and 'ajami, English or Latin alphabet, and Vai. Nyei is a Liberian who took part in the teamwork on the Vai (Goody, Cole & Scribner: 1977). He has a precious fund of knowledge at his disposal concerning the origin, the history and the uses of scripts in the region, and particularly of Vai. He illustrates with translations of short texts (letters, one parable). He shows that English has little influence, and exclusively in town. Arabic, for its part, is an integral part of rural life. But Vai, without the support of any official and institutionalized system, religious or governmental, serves private and public needs everywhere, and notably for the transmission of news between people in different places. He concludes:

My work among the Vais has made me aware of the great potential resources existing among the Liberian rural people that go untapped in current developed programs. I have realized how usefully the preexisting communication system could be applied to problems of rural development that would help promoting functional literacy for general development programs (21).

Numerous systems have been obliterated because their users have been dominated by another culture or did not belong to the dominant culture

of their society. A Chinese example also illustrates this phenomenon, suspected by many Africanists but difficult to identify in Africa. The abandonment of a system of writing is often accompanied by the rejection and oblivion of the culture that underlay it, or at best by a feeling that it has no power anymore. Silber (1992) describes a system of writing that has lasted secretly for a thousand years. *Nüshu*, in the Southwest of the Hunan province of China, has been practiced exclusively by women since the beginning of this millennium, but is now on the way out. Some of its signs are derived from the official Chinese writing, although the women repudiated it on the whole as *nanzi*, "men's words".

The existence of the script was linked with the circumstances of women in a patriarchal Confucian society. They were subjected to men, in turn their father, their husband and their son. Through this script they created a system of communication that enabled sorority links to be maintained, information to circulate and occasionally economic assistance be obtained. *Nüshu*, generally not understood by the men, could be tolerated as an infantile aspect of women's life that did not endanger the male-dominated social order. The origin of *Nüshu* is unknown or legendary. It could be a trace of one of those cultures conquered and assimilated by the Chinese during their expansion early in this millennium. According to Silber, it is better suited to transcribe the Hunan dialects than the Chinese script. Each sign denotes a sound sequence, a signifier that receives its meaning from its context, the situation, individual connotations and collective memory. Thus the French sentence "mon veau vaut vos veaux" (my calf is as good as your calves), would, in *Nüshu*, have noted the four /vo/ with the same symbol, but the context would have cleared up any uncertainty. Few women could write *Nüshu*, but many could read it or memorize texts. The 1949 revolution put an end to the transmission of the script, as young women forsook it for the Red Book, which at least had the merit, in this and other respects, of unifying script and language in all China. The libraries of women literate in *Nüshu* had to be burned at their funerals. This means that the only extant texts are recent. These collections include poems, letters of condolence, support or counseling, autobiographies, books for newlyweds, narratives of local or national events, prayers, Confucian manuals for young women, tales and legends known throughout China. Silber, like every discoverer, likes to see in *Nüshu* a unique phenomenon, but he does refer to a possible secret script used by women of the Niger. This could only be a form of Tifinagh, the script of the Tuareg language called Tamasheq, of ancient Phoenician origin, which is in fact better known to women than by men. Let us note that the secret writing of the Kimbanguists of Zaire also resulted from the marginalization and persecution of a religious minority group, but of men belonging to a local

church which confronted the colonizer and the imported Catholic Church. Secret, their writing, like Nūshu, circulated various kinds of information, but here essentially strategic, adding anti-violent violence to the network of solace and solidarity that characterized Nūshu. Kimbanguist writing is more of a cipher than of proper writing, since it uses the Latin alphabet with its punctuation, with different phonetic values.

Studying an African secret society, one of the most tightly closed to foreigners, Bellman (1984) describes the secret Poro language, with the symbols and metaphors of its rituals:

In this book I examine a large complex of secret societies with a major secret society...More specifically, I analyze instances in which the secrets are communicated within the societies, and I conclude with a focus on the most recent series of initiations...It is possible to examine the variety of forms that secrets take and thereby isolate secrecy as a phenomenon. In this manner, I call attention to practices that are relevant to the communication of secrets in every culture...through an analysis of the operations and transformations of the symbols and metaphors used, I provide a detailed account of ritual secrecy...that secrecy is both observable and analyzable because it is an accomplished interactional phenomenon (44).

The text that comes out of all these games cannot be corpsified, since it is constantly to be redone with new data, old articulations renovated and enriched, in the face of changing contexts and civilizations. Bellman's study covers a considerable area of the West African forest: Liberia, the South of Sierra Leone, part of Guinea and the south of Côte d'Ivoire; but its conclusions may be extended to the whole of West and Central Africa.

Literacy authors seldom worry about what is to be taught and in what languages, whereas the salvation of Africa could lie in a relative homogenization of the world community of humanitarian organizations. Richmond (1983) maintains that all African countries are facing a common need, which is to produce qualified, competent teachers and carefully prepared programs for the development of language and literature teaching, on pain of being for ever excluded from the contemporary world. But in this world yam and fonio will still have to be grown, and we know how negatively the teaching of imported languages influences rural economy and social cohesion. Confining himself to government action, Sow (1977) analyses the language policies and practices of African states. On the ways and means of literacy programs, he pleads for the inclusion of African languages in cultural activities and adult education schemes. This implies the preservation of the customary frameworks, expressed in local languages, with certain additions, to be

experienced as transformations of ancestral life: improvements in techniques of production, public health, entrepreneurship, exchange circuits. Literacy by book through the improvement of local symbolic and writing systems and of the perception of the environment begins with the preservation, consolidation and diffusion of the local knowledge. Progress rests on gradually improved achievements making a better world possible, all contingencies taken into account. To writing glorified as the jealous preserve of the Latin alphabet must be opposed the great multiform host of signs and symbols that are experienced as writing, just as we never ceased to oppose the pairs town and country, sociology and ethnology, nurture and nature, culture and folklore. These oppositions mark the epistemological fault which, for us, rests on the basic assumption of a writingless Africa. To extend the concept of writing is to choose between two visions of the world. The moment is ripe for a determination based on facts and experience. Writing, whether of language or not, does seem to be a social institution, a type of communication and conservation of thought. Better still: extended to the whole range of signs and symbols in a culture, it becomes its social fabric, or if we will, its texture, the crisscross weft and warp signaling us what a society really is. Writing in this sense would then be the signifier of collective memory and conscience, the rallier of all possible messages. It would also be a psychical activity, since the signs of writing are there only to express, conserve and communicate ideas and feelings. As a product, writing is the result of mechanical actions. The motions of the hand and other means and supports, the waves from the brain that instruct the hand have a pathology which must be studied, like the mechanisms of reading by Makita (1968) and Richaudeau (1969). Its object being manifold, the theory of writing is not only a philosophical subject but pertains to several sciences: sociology, communication science, semiotics, all cognitive sciences including cognitive and conceptual semantics, linguistics, logic. Its objective is the study of the inscription of thought in text. Whereas linguistics is rediscovering the need to study the relations of thought and its expression in language, semiotics extends the concept of writing to all systems of signs, and the theory of writing takes as its object visible thought, modeled and perceived in the material traces, for a moment stilled, of its anchorages and their articulations. Rock paintings with their configurations, philosophical essays with their logical developments, novels with their narrative, descriptive and explicative elements, films with their close, medium and long shots, the synchronizing and editing of morphemo-mythograms, all these artefacts are fashioned into as many paradigms of the substance-situation and its arbitrary divisions, and of the logic that presides over their organization. The theory of writing will posit that

every articulated set which is the result of the intention to communicate and conserve thought has been written with the help of systems of signs, these being necessary pre-texts but forgotten as soon as communication has been achieved. Popular language speaks of the fate of mankind as a great book in which everything is written. Goethe invoked an urform and Foucault the episteme. Conversion to a Book Religion endows heterogeneous societies with a new homogenized fabric like Ulfila's Bible for German tribes or Njoya's texts for the Bamum of Cameroon. Written or unwritten, known orally or through exegesis, original or copied, spread by word of mouth or ex cathedra, living in the mind, constantly reinvented in everyday life, TEXT is a snapshot of a moving process, a live network that constitutes culture, a culture before culture (Lotman: 1990, 252) and part of TEXTURE, the dynamic set of all possible, past and future, texts for a given culture.

Ut pictura poesis

Horace

My most constant interest, I would say even before philosophical interests, if that is possible, was directed towards literature, towards writing considered literary

Jacques Derrida

Chapter 9

Literature: Effects of African Writing and Text on Other Cultures

Writing theory borrows from narratology and discourse analysis the models necessary for its formation. Writing is enriched with the concepts of intertextuality, productivity, texture. The sciences of the text, of its production, consumption and reception are capable of instructing the procedures of the decipherer of wall art, of scarifications, just as they do for literary criticism. All practices that have the form and meaning of texts as their object, such as they have been developed since Propp, Tomachevsky, Chklovsky, and more recently with Prince, Brémond, Greimas, Metz, Coquet and Lyotard, can be successfully used in the analysis of functions of writing. The compartmentalization of disciplines is hurting Africanist research. Works of literary criticism like those of Mauryon, Richard, and of Guiraud on the semantics of literary texts, show that iterativity (Searle) and iterability (Derrida) are related even if irreconcilable notions, and that the coherence of the text results from the field in which they confront each other, given that they continue to confront each other, and that no interpretation be privileged, except for the very game of interpretation. The truth offered as a result of the hermeneutic interpretation of a text can now claim the coherence of this interpretation, but only an imperfect and biased coherence, compared to all the potential or realized truths shown for the same text. Not only does the truth sketch out an ideology but also it dries up the source of interpretations, and suffocates the life of interpretation. Its main virtue is to stimulate criticism at the same time as it instructs it on a meaning among others, in a quest, not for a series of aporiae but for the critical reflection possible. Schlegel's "augmented au-

thor" is this reader who covers all the critical paths during an ideally denotative and connotative reading.

The ideas of reader and archreader are recent in literary criticism, and writing is only to be read. The "reading" of African signs requires of the reader an active participation at least equal to that of the writer. To convince oneself of this, one need only reread Adam (1984) who surveys and summarizes narrative studies, notably from the formal point of view. If these representations conserve text, suggest text, permit recreations of text, there must be a formal and/or iconographic link, however slender or implicit it may be, between representations and the text.

When Richaudeau (1969) analyses different types of reading, in *La lisibilité*, he compares orality, printed text, thought and intellectual capacity in relation to reading. This scientific analysis of the types of production of the written, of its perception and of the relationships between human and artificial memory constitutes a rare illumination of a very poorly understood experience, reading. It helps our understanding of the phenomena linked to reading and to the "printed" text in particular. Richaudeau points out (70) that the ideal alphabet, suitable for information theorists, pedagogues, readers and machines, would include a fairly large number of signs: "several hundred at a minimum, without a doubt, and probably several thousand". This estimation, based on hard laboratory research, would suffice to undermine the belief in the economy of the Latin alphabet. Richaudeau goes further when he shows that some morphemographic systems, admittedly archaic and inferior in many ways, are superior in certain respects. Thus, only 1% of Japanese children have difficulty in reading even though they must memorize 1850 graphic signs compared to 8-15% in countries using an alphabet of Phoenician origin. He bases this on Makita (1968). This fact would seem to point in favor of the African syllabic and pictographic systems. The Bete and Mum systems include, respectively, 80 and 500 signs. One may denote tones and the other can be read by peoples having different languages. Coulmas (1989), a specialist in Asian writing, had first believed he should refute the works of Makita, but in the end he presents them as such:

Makita was among the first to report on the rarity of reading disabilities in Japanese children as compared with their alphabetized Western peers, again suggesting that the structural differences between alphabetic systems of writing, on the one hand, and syllabic and morphographic systems on the other, have functional correlates in differing processing mechanisms. Since the early 1970s many experiments have been carried out to investigate the hypothesis that different writing systems rely on different functions of the brain and/or are localized in different parts of

the brain...it is clear that the differences between morpheme-based writing systems and those sound-based writing systems are not just superficial differences of coding, but relate to neuropsychological differences concerning the storage and processing of written language units. Research in this general area opens up new and promising perspectives for a better understanding that, for literate speech communities and literate individuals, scripts are part of the overall system of the language for which they are used instead of being mere mapping devices, and have a powerful effect on the formation of language units and on the linguistic consciousness of their users (134-35).

For reflections on the dialectical relations between the written and the oral, one should, for Africa, consult *Cultural Anthropology* (1986) by Tyler, Swearingen & Bieseke; but their conclusions are similar to those of Richaudeau and Makita.

Writing, at least in the West, is, beyond the capacity of equipping oneself with a literature, the literary itself. We speak of the writings of a particular author, of writing up, down, in, up, off and out, and of word processors, and we forget that all texts note the spoken or exist to be read. Most French people can only become acquainted with African oral literature in bilingual texts. These texts, reduced to a phonetic written form and to the juxtaposed French translation, are scarcely more appealing than the silent reading of a libretto and an opera score. They have the advantage of affirming the existence of texts. The roles of these oratures, formerly called oral literatures, and the characteristics of the relation between the African narrative and its public, also lay out a series of relationships to the text, different from those on which African literatures in African and imported languages are founded.

The essay, along with theater, poetry, the tale and legend, epistolary art, the private diary are written, but their discourse is often shaped by the spoken word. Compared with narration, which is narrative, ornamentative and explicative, the essay is clearly more commentative. Its function is mainly discursive, but not to the exclusion of the other two functions to which it sometimes has recourse to such an extent that it becomes a narrative, as in Voltaire's *Candide* and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë*. The Association for the Study of African Literatures has devoted a workshop to the essay in sub-Saharan Africa. The diversity of the studies is at one with their quality. They cover the essay in French, Portuguese, English and Swahili (*Afrique Littéraire*: 1990,n°86). Often diachronic, they read like bibliographical articles, combining inventory and evolution, for the Continent or a country, or even a single field like philosophy. The authors only use the term "writing" in the sense of literature or written discourse.

There are ancient African literatures we know nothing about. The libraries of Alexandria or of North Africa didn't have only Asian, Greek, and Latin works, even though some of these had African authors. *The Book of the Dead* of Egypt, the writings of St. Augustine, a Rhetoric teacher at Carthage, such as *The City of God*, *Christian Rhetoric*, foundations of Western Latin Christianity, as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass* by Apulée, are part of the literary heritage of humanity. Most of Egyptian literary production, though up to 3000 years old, is unknown to the general public.

Many are inclined to see these ancient literatures as only a province of their European or Asian counterparts, without a link with the works in African languages and those in recently imported languages, and still less, with those of the American Diaspora. Gates (1988) chooses to develop a myth reminiscent of Thot's, to suggest *A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. He takes up the Yoruba creation myth and explains the role of the malicious Eshu-Elegbara whom he compares to his black American cousin the Signifying Monkey. Thus he lays the foundations of a literary theory and criticism inscribed from the beginning and developed inside the black world without external influences. This recent profound and already classic work starts from premises similar to our own: to refresh Africanist discourse on the basis of African perceptions of African culture. The direct interest of this study for writing and relations to the text, in Africa, begins with the first pages where Gates reveals the extension of the semantic field of "reading" (*didafa*) of the "writer or scribe" (*akowé*), of the "reading of the signs" (*iyipada*), of "memory", of "interpretation" (*itumo*) in the Yoruba world, one of those peoples called "without writing", but whose strong cultural texture is undisputed. We will note, for example:

Ifa [the Yoruba divinatory art] consists of the sacred texts of the Yoruba people, as does the Bible for Christians, but it also includes the commentaries on these fixed texts, as does the Midrash. Its system of interpretation turns upon a marvelous combination of geomancy and textual exegesis, in which sixteen palm nuts are "dialed" sixteen times, and their configurations or signs then read or translated into the appropriate text or the appropriate, fixed literary verse that the numerical signs signify. These visual signs are known in Yoruba as the "signatures of an *Odu*" and each signature the *babalawo*, or priest, translates by reading and reciting the fixed verse text that the signature signifies. These verse texts, whose meanings are lushly metaphorical, ambiguous and enigmatic, function as riddles, which the propitiator must decipher and apply as is appropriate to his or her quandary (10)...Curiously enough, the oral literature is described with the aid of chirographic metaphors: the process of oral narration is likened to writing (12).

Probably for fear of falling into a facile diffusionism, nowhere does Gates venture to compare Eshu to Thot. Gates confirms in passing our thesis on numerous points and points to several new directions. He notes that African writing is intimately linked to the oral, that the oral is a manifestation of the written, that the oral is based on an "ur-text", independent of the presence or absence of writing. Most African texts are made to be consumed aloud. It is a stimulant to orality. It is more precious, more essential, more living than the manufactured and classified object of Western libraries. The text runs alongside its interpretant, who constantly refers to it and bases the legitimacy of his discourse on it. Its value depends on the discourse it allows, which is sometimes verbally transmitted far from its double origin, the written text and its interpretant. The perception of Ifa by the Yoruba leads us to return, as a phenomenologist, to the classical definitions of writing. Far from Belles Lettres are literatures like those of the Onitsha market. Hogg & Sternberg (1990) introduce us to this popular chapbook and highway literature, much read and imitated. It is a phenomenon neglected by western and westernized scholars, with their elitist criteria. This literature uses the Latin alphabet and its derivations and is sometimes written in pidgin or in very popular English. It has the merit of responding to real needs, and the volume of production and exchange that it represents must be enormous. It shows that the people would read more if westernized writers reached out to them. Let us note, however, that since the 70s, works considered literary are displayed on market stands and that this popular literature is often found in western-style bookstores. Obiechina (1969; 1972), who analyzes the growth of English-language literature in West Africa, which can compete with Western literatures for academic study, notes other literatures more culturally rooted, like those in local languages, frequently in pidgin. He remarks that often the writing of these popular texts is inspired by texts created by missionaries for religious instruction but pays little attention to travel journals or correspondences from the beginnings of colonization in an adapted colonial language. The most characteristic example might be that which Forde (1968) describes for us in his work: *Efik Traders of Old Calabar, containing the Diary of Antera Duke, an Efik Slave-Trading Chief of the Eighteen Century*, a translation in good English of an original text which disappeared in a German bombing of Edinburgh during the Second World War. All that remains is a copy of excerpts from the original text in pidgin and Latin alphabet, — and the translation by Wilkie, corrected by Forde with the aid of Simmons. The period covered is that of 1785-1788. Forde notes that the Efik understood very early:

the value of written archives, and especially for transactions, and some of them learned to write in English on the boats as they were waiting. Several narratives published at the beginning of the 19th century refer to accounting works and to diaries kept by the rich Efik at this time. Adams notes that as early as the 18th century, the sons of some tradesmen went to England, and the Efik had established schools in their cities to "instruct the young people of prominent families in the art of writing". Robertson cites passages of a journal written by a chief, Eyo Honesty, at the beginning of the 19th century...Unfortunately, few, if any, of these written documents have survived or have been studied seriously (viii-ix).

So what remains of Antera Duke's Journal must stand for a large set of documents written in English and pidgin, covering two or three centuries. Note the absence in this otherwise well informed work of any reference to a system of writing, Nsibidi, which was known however to most authors in the bibliography cited on the Efik.

One of the literatures that had the most influence on oral African literatures is that in the Arabic language. The model is still the language of the Koran, the distich, and the verse (Blachère: 1959). The Arab-Berber culture furnished genres, metrics, and a critical and descriptive language. We have presented and analyzed elsewhere (1986) a series of books written in local languages and in Arabic, with the help of the 'ajami writing, and described the so-called Koranic system of education, retraced the cultural relations between Muslim Spain, Morocco and certain cultures of the West African Savanna. Goody (1971b), from a completely different perspective, tries to define "The Impact of Islamic Writing on the Oral Cultures of West Africa". Many Africanists reject his theses. As a talented ethnologist, he can appear to many as an individual case since his standpoint sets him apart from his colleagues who study primitive peoples, therefore peoples without writing. West African societies

that know writing are characterized by a literacy that is restricted in use and limited in its extent. They are consequently divided into literate and non-literate elements (455)...writing had its own prestige as a technological device, there was nothing shaming about being unable to read or write (456).

It is with this idea that he joins us in one of our principal conclusions as to literacy in West Africa. His originality lies in his recognition of the presence of writing, but if this ethnologist of a new school admits the existence of literacy, he has chosen to limit its importance. This could be the explanation for his choosing magic-religious practices instead of, for example, medicine. We can contrast this scientific be-

havior with that of Zahan who studies the cosmology (1951) of the Bambara but also their writing (1950) and their medicine (1957). Goody's insistence on magic (primitive and more of an ethnological object) and the religious (more of a sociological phenomenon) signals the epistemological break and the difficulty arising from the deontological boundary between ethnology and sociology. Using magic and religion only, he proposes to evaluate the influence of Arabic writing on the tribes or on illiterates in literate societies. Medicine, however, would have provided him with a powerful argument for his thesis, which is the decisive influence of the Arabs, themselves inheritors of the Hellenic and Oriental traditions. His argument testifies for a world that is disappearing and with it the ethnology, which accompanied colonization, ushering in sociological and multidisciplinary thought. An African anthropological discourse is done with. The Continent is now opened up to all the sciences. It may be said that Africa becomes a science. Goody innovates inadvertently, thus when he criticizes Bâ, Dieterlen and Griaule for having omitted the possible impact of the book trade since the High Middle Ages and the travels of the literate and their ideas and knowledge between the Mediterranean world and West Africa. A moderate diffusionist, he prefers to date this impact back to the beginning of the Muslim proselytism in Africa. He accuses French ethnology of working with supposedly isolated human groups. His research contributes, therefore, to the decolonization of ethnology and of our ways of perceiving Africa. These decaying presuppositions of ethnology, the progress of iconoclasm and the blacklisting of symbolic thought in the West remind us of the equally pernicious for the relations of the West and Africa stereotyped pejorative perceptions of the Middle Ages which Jacques Legoff's school corrects so eloquently.

To judge the importance and the influence of this literature in African languages, we have and will have at our disposal more and more documents from inventoried and itemized libraries and studies of manuscripts. Paden & Soja (1970) evaluate the importance of these:

Studies in West Africa which are concerned in part with earlier themes of trade and state-building have revealed a rich Arabic and Hausa literature closely related to Islamic issues in history. Indeed, in this area, the "data explosion" of source material is particularly noticeable. The Institute of African Studies of Ghana estimates that there are at least 20,000 extant manuscripts [1970] useful to the study of Ghanaian history, of which only 500 have thus far been cataloged. The Fulani Jihad of the early nineteenth century in northern Nigeria produced a large body of contemporary documents, of which at least 300 are currently available to scholars. (174)

These estimates are only valid for northern Ghana and Nigeria. The study of texts by Arab-Berber geographers at the University of Dakar led to archeological research in the south Mauritanian region of the dead cities. Thus Denise & Serge Robert, & Jean Devisse (1970) report the results of several digs conducted on a site in Tagdaost. Having analyzed these medieval texts dealing with trade between Morocco and south Mauritania, they undertook to verify the information in these documents on the archeological site of Tagdaost. This dead city was perhaps the most advanced bridgehead of the Muslim trade and of Arab-Berber religious proselytism in Black Africa (Battestini: 1986). These written sources allow us to understand the cultural life in the Savanna and the Sahel from the 10th to the 17th centuries, where writing was the sacrosanct background. The digs confirmed the great development of caravan traffic between Black Africa and Morocco. Awdaghost was a Berber city, close to the capital of the Ghanaian empire, one of those where, according to Ibn Batuttah, the largest volume of trade was in books.

It would be surprising if the former French Savanna and Sahel didn't have just as many of these mallam libraries as the former English colonies. The rarity of equivalent inventories on the "French" side suggests the influence of a different language policy. Wilks, Levtzion & Haight (1986) publish and study the chronicle of the Gonja as a model of methodic historiography. Diaby (1972a) mentions some of the Sudanese manuscripts extant in various Parisian libraries and points out (1972b) that Timbuktu is the city most richly endowed with sociological and historical documents on West Africa, of which he gives an inventory. Diallo, M'Backé, Trifkovic & Barry (1966) compiled the IFAN catalog of manuscripts at the University of Dakar, comprising the Vieillard, Gaden, Brévié, Figant, Shayr Moussa Kamara and Crémier collections. They are in Arabic, Fulfulde and Voltaic languages. Diawara (no date) called for a return to the sources of Soninke history, especially of the schools of oral traditions of the *geseru* (Kingi, Soroma in Mali) from the 16th century to the middle of the 19th century. Birkell (1920-1921) pointed out that many Arabic-Malagasy manuscripts have been conserved in Paris, some dating from 1732. They can be useful, among other things, for understanding the economy of phonetic change in a Malagasy language, for writing historical monographs on Madagascar, essays on the literature that they are witness to. These texts are written by *Sorabe* on an *antemoro* (= great writing) paper, in use since at least the 16th century, and of local fabrication. It is made out of a complex technology using the *liber* of a local tree, *havoha*, of the fig-tree family. The stylus were made out of a bamboo, *voooloo*, and the book was a codex kept in a finely wickered case. Books are about local

medicine recipes and pharmacopeia, astrology, theology, and botany. (*L'Aventure des écritures, matières et formes*, 96-7, fig. 80 a and b).

Biersteker & Plane (1989) have compiled an inventory of Swahili manuscripts and describe the study of Swahili literature. The number of bibliographical references astonishes even the believer. The first texts date apparently from around 1800. The authors do not mention the Arabic manuscripts that preceded and certainly influenced them from the very first contacts on the eastern coast with the Arabs in the seventh century. Consequently, the two cultural phenomena of the adoption of a modified Arabic script for Swahili (Williamson: 1947) and the idea of composing literary works appear as a spontaneous manifestation. The authors' priority was the collection of texts alone and their description; critical approaches can now follow. For this language and this script alone, in view of the number of manuscripts discovered and to be discovered and the extent of the Swahili geographical zone, it would seem ridiculous to perpetuate the stereotype of an Africa ignorant of writing, of literature. Brenner (1985), who studies religious discourse in Africa and about Africa, limits himself to purely oral texts that he communicates to us in writing. Amharic script is not limited to ordinary uses (mail, posters, advertising, press) nor to liturgical uses (the tradition of Ge'ez), but there also exists a literature of fiction in Amharic script (*Contemporary Amharic Creative Literature, A Guide*: 1982). Cheikh Nefzawi (1962), a North African, codifies for his prince the erotological knowledge of the Islamized world which some since have repeated in modified form by word of mouth. Between the oral that ossifies in writing and writing orally transmitted and individually transformed, should we see a hierarchy? We would be tempted to answer negatively. What is important is that here or there texts are circulating, modeling actions, feelings, ideas, generating new ones, opening up to other behaviors, creating this textual movement which acts on the social fabric and can be called culture and, beyond, texture.

An example, borrowed from the American Indians, proposes a model of literacy for Africa. It was associated briefly with the history of Vai writing. After adopting the Sequoya script, the Cherokees rapidly integrated certain methods of the culture of the European invader, such as a written civil code, in 1808 (Kephart: 1986). In less than 12 years, they divided their nation into judicial districts with, at their head, appointed judges. Two years later, they created the Cherokee Supreme Court. Towards 1827, they adopted a written constitution. This accelerated development was made possible by the Sequoya alphabet for the Cherokee language. In two years, a newspaper, written in this system, *The Cherokee Phoenix*, was widely distributed and most adult Cherokees knew how to read and write. This rapid and functional literacy

was totally lived and experienced as a cultural "native soil". The tragedy which later befell the Cherokee nation may be seen as a result of the European invader's incapacity to question his own references and logic in his perception of the American Indians, "savage, primitive", thus necessarily without writing, laws, literature, or history.

Samb (1972) shows that literatures inspired by Islam, often in 'ajami, may be seen (even restricting ourselves to Senegal) as a non-trivial contribution to knowledge of Black African Arabic-language literature. He studies the writings (poems, prayers, etc.) in Arabic of Senegalese authors, and presents the different literary schools existing in Senegal: Thiès, Touba, Tivaouane, and others.

Specialists in African literature in imported languages (French, English, Portuguese, Spanish) are only infrequently and secondarily interested in the influences that local past or contemporary literary substrata may have exercised on the genres, themes, styles of contemporary literatures. Gérard (1990) offers a collection of texts, some of which are almost thirty years old, and mentions the existence of "50 written African literatures". It is clearly better documented for central, eastern, and southern Africa. His contribution to African literary studies seems to place him with Jahn (1965; 1966)¹ and some others along a line which has attempted to create an African "literary history" of comparative and diffusionist inspiration. When he puts on his critic's hat, his approach is external. A specialist in written African literatures, Gérard can be credited with having transmitted more and better than others the existence of African literatures prior to colonization or "relatively" independent of it. Furthermore, he has raised the question of the representativeness, and thus of the legitimacy, of African literatures in imported languages, written by westernized authors, for a public largely comprised of non-Africans and for many years published outside Africa, thus responding to imperatives external to Africa. It seems regrettable that a critic of Gérard's stature could have written in 1981 of his census of African literatures:

First historical evidence: in the greater part of Black Africa (Ethiopia and some Islamized regions being the exception) the European colonizers introduced writing. It only began to spread among the populations toward the time of independence, that is, toward the middle of the 20th century. Formerly, verbal creation, which is essential to literature, was accomplished orally [sic] (168).

¹A *bibliography of Neo-African Literature from Africa, America and The Caribbean*, Düsseldorf-Köln: Andre Deutsch; *A History of Neo-African Literature, Writing in Two Continents*, London: Faber & Faber.

Anyone could have noted that verbal creation is accomplished orally, but it is difficult to understand how an Africanist of his reputation can see as an exception "some Islamized regions" when they cover two-thirds of the Continent, and when Mazrui estimates the population at more than 300 million, thus more than half the population of Africa. It is an undisputed fact that Islam, a religion of the book, converts by obligatory contact with the written and this compendium of knowledge of all sorts, the Koran. If numerous Islamized scholars became writers in 'ajami or in Arabic, rare are those who made literary production their profession. There are, however, in Fulfulde (Lacroix: 1965; Seydou: 1973) and perhaps in Yoruba (Gates: 1988) specialized languages with non-trivial vocabularies of literary criticism. Lacroix's two volumes on Fulfulde poetry of the Adamawa, written in Arabic and in the Fulfulde 'ajami of the region, command respect and admiration for the quality of the information presented in the introduction, the detailed notes, the elegance of the translations, the exactness of the phonetic notations. The poems are grouped by themes, with no recourse to external criticism, comparisons with other literatures or foreign criteria. Seydou offers a panorama of Fulfulde literature.

Fulani culture is remarkable in that it is simultaneously expressed through an oral literature and a written literature of equal vitality, both of which —taking into account their respective characteristics— deserve the name of literature: a balance so rarely maintained in civilizations with writing that a misleading reflex has occurred, commonly assimilating the term of literature with the production of written works. Now, for many cultures, despite the etymology of the very term literature, one is justified in speaking of oral literature... Oral literature remaining the prerogative of masters of the word such as the *griots*, and the written becoming the privilege of masters of thought such as marabouts and doctors of law. The distinction between Fulfulde oral and written literature is thus not simply a matter of presentation (178).

For some time, Africanists had tended to reserve the term *oraliture* for the literature that Seydou calls oral, before inventing the term *oraliture*, endowed with a semantic potential skillfully suggestive of palimpsest. Alone this text of an eminent specialist of the Fulani world should persuade us to erase from ethnological or other discourse the expression "peoples without writing" which the text denounces implicitly with its panorama of an African literature belonging to numerous African countries of the Sahel and the Savanna. The Fulani were nomads in these areas over a territory one and a half times the size of Europe. One of the genres of this literature is an oral or written

"heraldry" in free verse, well known in France as *blason* in the 17th century.

Some of these manuscripts in African languages are first valuable as historical documents, others tend to be only literary, religious or technical (medicine, grammar, rhetoric, astrology, geomancy); yet all are literary to some degree. It is, however, sometimes arduous to classify a work as religious, didactic or literary, as in the case of Nasir (1977). The dichotomy of literary and scientific discourse has only existed in the West since the 19th century. These manuscripts are often, moreover, works of art. Leroy (1974) studies Coptic and Arabic illustrated manuscripts. The numerous illustrations each include an image and an accompanying text, often in these two writings. One cannot help admiring the literary skill of the translations, but to this pleasure we also add the quality of the image and of the original calligraphy in the confluence of these two ancient African traditions. We have mentioned for their historical interest the *Tarikh-el-Fettach* and the *Tarikh-es-Sudan*. Less known is the *Tedzkiret-en-Nisian*. Ly (1972) hides under a modest title one of the critical texts on the *Tarikh-el-Fettach*. Among other things, he informs us that there were two principal authors, of the same name, Mahmoud Kati, grandfather and grandson. He suggests the necessity of a critical edition and the establishing of a single text from the three main copies known and from a fragment. Ly evaluates the historical information of the manuscripts and shows that it is of very unequal value, some of the authors having been eyewitnesses of the events, others having known about them only by oral tradition a century or later. He gives a good example of source-criticism on a text written to be read in public, long a criterion of quality for all literary works. Flaubert read aloud his drafts of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* to his friends and struck out what they did not like to hear. These two manuscripts of a historical character are never praised for their literary qualities, but just cited as the only written documents of history produced by Black Africa, whereas there are numerous others, the inventory of which is expanding from year to year. The *Northern History Research Scheme* of the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria, periodically publishes reports on the collection and the restoration of northern Nigerian manuscripts (1975, 1977, 1981, and 1987). This is a good example, but for too long unique in Africa, of a sustained effort of more than ten years with the goal of preserving a corpus of texts which constitutes one of the most important assets of Nigeria's written literary heritage. When we know of the existence of numerous private libraries in Ghana, Nigeria, and Mauritania and of manuscript collections in the libraries of former colonial powers, it is difficult to understand the little interest shown by researchers and by national and in-

ternational groups. Except the texts inspired by Islam, there are others, like these 84 texts in Mum script in the Fouban Museum (Cameroon), cataloged before World War II, missing today. General disdain or ignorance, colonial secretiveness, later speculation and corruption, termites, fire and other natural calamities, have all contributed to the elimination of the last documents proving the existence of authentic written African literatures. It will be even easier, thus, to deny their existence and to lessen interest in them when most of them have disappeared. However, salvage operations, by UNESCO (despite shortage of funds and lack of interest on the part of governments) and even by rich Arab OPEC countries, are succeeding in preserving some of this African written heritage.

Vicky (1993) mentions Arabic manuscripts and the Palmer Fund of the National Museum of Jos in Nigeria, in a brief article on one of the world centers for the acquisition, study and conservation of the so-called Arabic manuscripts of West Africa, which has negotiated the purchase of an important part of the Islamic library of the late Lévi-Provençal. In 1958, this collection began the Islamic Library in Jos. The Arabic manuscripts of West Africa are now essential to research in archaeology and ethnology. The knowledge of the past of the Muslim regions of northern Nigeria benefited from the library originated in that of Bivar, who had understood the interest of these manuscripts which had survived in private collections. He collected more of them than we shall ever know of, which describe sites and events unknown to the foreign-language literatures. Others are of ethnographic interest, describing the customs and beliefs of African peoples, such as the *Nur al-Albab* by Othman dan Fodio on the practices of the Hausa "pagans" (Muhammad El-Hadj: 1974-1977). Vicky signals also that numerous manuscripts are in danger: paper acidity, termites, damage caused by fire and water, negligence. Still more have been destroyed, lost, or sold throughout the world. In August 1958, Bivar visited Surame in Sokoto province and, with the collaboration of mallam Nagwa-Matoré, was able to save many manuscripts from a fire which had destroyed 300 of them, and 25 precious Korans, all of them belonging to a single private collection. Bivar was the second, after Leo Africanus (1510), to have drawn attention to the regular book trade between the cities and villages of the Savanna and Sahel, as well as across the Sahara, thanks to which the scholars of the republics of Ghana and Mali, worthy successors to their former imperial models, are nowadays able to procure Arabic manuscripts and export them against the rules of the Antiquities Ordinance, Archives Ordinance or other official texts attempting to protect the cultural heritage. A catalog was created in 1965 that needs updating. There are 2000 manuscripts in Jos, 438 of which are volumes in

Arabic. In the Palmer Collection, there are also Arabic manuscripts but most are in very bad condition and should be microfilmed. Vicky considers these manuscripts unlikely to make the societies that produced them the object of any other sciences than "archeology and ethnology". He calls "private collections" sets of books that others would consider libraries, but this specialist in librarianship does not recognize in the mud houses of Africa the kind of building to which he is accustomed. These written documents have only an implicit interest for historians. Vicky cannot be familiar with, for example, the historical works on the kingdom of Tahert (Lewicki: 1962), on that of Sinnàr (Spaulding & Salim: 1989), and on the kingdom inherited by El Hadj Omar's successors, by Hanson & Robinson (1991). Sometimes, however, these manuscripts are only of slight literary value. Thus the chronicle of *Mawlay al'Qasim B. Mawlay Sulayman* (1982), while it is an important historical source for the history of Western Sudan in the 18th century, and a sequel to *Tadhkirat-al-Nisyan* (or *Tedzkiret-en-Nisian*), which itself is a continuation of the *Tarikh-es-Sudan* and *Tarikh-el-Fettach*, is only a concise list of important events in the eyes of its authors (The four works cover the period from the 15th to the end of the 18th centuries). This very concise chronicle takes up only 19 pages in photographic reproduction. The text is done in calligraphy of the so-called Maghribi script. It mentions only the "serious" events of the second half of the 18th century: deaths, wars, inflation, change in power, internal quarrels or conflicts with the city of Jenne. Not a word on libraries, literature, the scholarly activity of the Sankore mosque. Let us note that at the time of the writing of this manuscript, the descendants of the Moroccan invaders (today markasi) had controlled Timbuktu for two centuries and that this intellectual center was spreading its knowledge to all West Africa. This knowledge was consequently Africanized and not renewed, being cut off from Marrakech, one of its origins. In contrast there is a beautiful mythical-religious text, edited by Sow (Mombéyâ: 1971), in which he offers, in beautiful poetic language, a short version of the Koran, reviewed and corrected by Mombéyâ, written in Fulfulde with numerous Arabisms. Let us mention again the collection of writings of Shehu Othman dan Fodio, rearranged by Muhammad El-Hadj (1974-1977) in a plea for the dating of works and for their chronology. Othman dan Fodio began to write at the age of 20, around 1774, and had produced more than 100 books at the time of his death in 1817. Many of these manuscripts are difficult to date precisely, but Muhammad El-Hadj suggests at least establishing a periodisation because it is crucial to locate the movement of thought of this great religious man.

We also find this sort of manuscript in Madagascar, as Munthe (1973) indicates, and at the Mauritanian Institute for Scientific Research (Stewart, ed.: 1990). Hanson & Robinson (1991), on the model of Spaulding & Salim (1989) but with a more important critical apparatus (maps, index, bibliography) and especially the reproduction of analyzed documents, composes the history of a Muslim kingdom from these manuscript documents. El Hadj Omar's son, Ahmad Al-Kabir, succeeded him, but only reigned over a part of his father's empire, about a third of the size of France. His father's importance for the history of West Africa is shown by the bibliography of his own writings and those composed in Africa and abroad. The principal aim of this text is to assemble local historical documents from after the death of El Hadj Omar, with analyses and a substantial commentary. The thematic choice is political and nothing, or almost nothing, is said of non-governmental texts. The concern of El Hadj Omar, which is also that of Samory, to educate his people in the Islamic religion led him to surround himself with literate disciples. It is they and others who wrote his first biographies. They did so "in Arabic or in Fulfulde written with the help of the Arabic alphabet" (27). Other accounts of his life were commissioned by those who succeeded him, such as his son Ahmad Al-Kabir. Omar created a secretariat in the Masina, but its archives were destroyed at the time of the rebellions. Itinerant archives reduced in numbers and probably excluding heavier volumes replaced them. The Chancellery texts show contact between Segu, Kaarta, the valley of the Senegal and Morocco at the end of the 19th century (20). Oral communication remained important in the courts of Segu and Nioro for the exchange of information and interpretation. Certain episodes, such as the conflicts which pitted Omar's sons against one other, were never written down, and certainly not by the principal guardians of the tradition of Omar. Interaction between the written and oral modes of communication was intense. The texts were often recited, and corrected according to the reactions of the audience (21). Masters and students could devote themselves to the service of the faith and become warriors at the call of their political and religious leaders (33). The Tijani literate assumed an important role in the conduct of local religious, intellectual and political affairs, exerting influence over the young Ahmad Al-Kabir. In tandem with their Sahara and Morocco brothers, they could give local events the justification that suited them, knowing that the Tijaniya Muslim world was preoccupied with events in their part of Africa (47). The written forms are of unequal value. We find refined Arabic in the purest Maghribi script alongside difficult scripts with diacritical marks added for vocalization and peppered with local names and words; and, of course, texts in 'ajami.

These African works are generally of undeniable sociological interest, considering the absence of studies by professional sociologists. Osofisan (1984) raises the problems facing the author turned sociologist.

Literature is routinely regarded as both product and producer of culture...but this statement...masks the fundamental tensions implicit in the very fact of literary praxis. The sense of wonder at the sight of letters in the preliterate society, which Achebe's Isaac Okonkwo communicates in *No Longer At Ease*, is also, crucially, a sense of risk, of the menace of loosening cosmos...in Africa, the leap to the typographical age is still too recent, so incomplete, that the birth throes of literature are no more than a signal event.

The overwhelming evidence, observed from practices prevalent in traditional societies all over the world, as well as in the "post-literate" electronic age, is still that the popular, spontaneous articulation of the cultural matter is not through literature, but rather —to use the striking term of Pio Zirimu —*orature*. Among the vast masses of the people, in every age and society, the first impulse, when it comes to cultural communication, is towards orature — not the alphabets of the printed page.

Unless we understand this primary fact, we shall not be able to grasp fully obstacles that its development encounters in the countries of the Third World. To change to a completely new medium of letters, is to disrupt a whole social order, with profound implications...

Kotei [writes]

Transition [from the oral to the written] is difficult because printed words lack those non-verbal forms of expression, such as gesture, inflexion and facial expression, which give added meaning to language.

Secondly, oral language is largely one of implicit meaning.

The conclusion from all this is obvious: namely, that the first obstacle to the development of literature in our country is that literature everywhere must develop against an antagonism which it itself embodies, that is, its literariness, the fact of its being written and therefore being, by that very fact, contradictory to the normal process of cultural articulation.

The second obstacle is the normally gregarious nature of humanity which, in art, expresses itself in a spontaneous desire of the audience to participate in the very process of creation...creation and consumption of literature are necessarily atomistic. In Nigeria...the level of literacy is still held by all experts to be abysmally feeble (1731).

A flawless argument, but one which is based on a Eurocentric interpretation of the situation of literature in Nigeria. Osofisan considers only Nigerian literature in English, perpetuating frames of reference

overtaken by history, yet perpetuated by the educational system in which Osofisan participates, which is condemned in its current methods and contents by logic and international authorities.² Compare his attitude with Ouologuem's, who has renounced his westernization and become a Sufi marabout in Mali, or Ngugi wa Thiongo's, who henceforth refuses to write in any other language but the African languages of his country. There exist numerous systems of writing in Nigeria which are not at all beholden to English: the 'ajami of most of the Muslim peoples, Arabic script, Nsibidi, Oheri Okaimé, the scripts of Oshitelu and Ejagham. Hausa and Fulani literatures are largely known, and the collection, translation and study of the manuscripts have been progressing recently. Without exaggerating the quantitative importance of these local literatures, they can no longer be left out of Africanist discourse. The recent English-language literature to which Osofisan refers here concerns only a more or less westernized minority in Nigeria, and it is in the process of extinction by exile, retirement, rebirth of the teaching of African languages and cultures, lowering of the rate of schooling due to a rapidly increasing demography, weakening of the level of instruction, paucity of books and scholastic materials. Readers and critics of this African literature are beginning to question the legitimacy and representativeness of those "African" works so glorified during the decolonization movement, notably by the West, its main audience, happy to prove the efficacy of the European systems of assimilation. This observation is not intended to prejudice a literature that we were among the very first³ to show as bearing comparison with any other.

The Association for the Study of African Literatures (APELA) brings together experts in this literature from France and elsewhere. In 1991 it published an interesting collection of analyses on the theme of "African Literatures and History". In the Introduction, the President of APELA, in good faith writes:

literature and history: their links...are obvious...but less easy to discern than it might appear...The debate is...more interesting in Black Africa than elsewhere, since, on this continent without writing (except for Ethiopia) before the arrival of European explorers, history was only conserved thanks to the oral tradition...entrusted to the griots' memory (7).

²Anthony Brench, lecturer at the University of Ibadan, the same as Osofisan's, has calculated that the cost of sending a Nigerian student to the university for a single year was equal to the total income of two Yoruba peasant families for a generation.

³See the collection "Classiques du Monde: Littérature africaine" (Fernand Nathan), 10 titles published in the '60s by Monique and Simon Battestini, with the support of Roger Mercier.

The mind boggles, for this is an Africanist particularly well known for his benevolence towards Africans. The debate of the 70s at the University of Dakar has thus not been heard by all. However, in this same volume, Bertoncini writes of an African literature, Swahili, written in 'ajami. Lilyan Kesteloot cites incidentally the Sudanese *Tariks*, history books written in the 17th and 18th centuries. She might have referred to the Fulani written poetry and *jantol*, to the history books, love stories, etiquette books written in Mum language and script by Njoya, to the writings of Othman dan Fodio, Mohammadu Na Birnin Gwari, Ibrahim Malado, Shehu Na Salga, Tierno Mouhammadou-Samba Mombéyâ, Aliyu dan Sidi, etc. and to the collections of Arabic manuscripts of the IFAN library and of the library of the University of Ibadan, to the manuscripts seized by the French at the time of the capture of Segu in 1891 (Vajda: 1950; Sarr: 1972). In Senegal alone, the list is long of poetic writings where references to historical events are mixed with poetry, in the works of the Murids and the Tijani, Bamba, Cheikh Hadi Touré, Abdoul Aziz Sy, Cheikh Ahmed Tidjane Sy. Thanks to Gérard (1981) we have a useful, but incomplete summary table of this literature.

Gates (1986) generally defines *writing* as literature and its critical discourse, but in his title: *Race, Writing, and Difference* and in his Introduction "Writing "Race" and the Difference", he makes the word *writing* represent the graphic process by which humanity conserves *reason*.

In putting the introduction of writing in Africa to the credit of the colonial system, one should exercise considerable caution.

Gates reminds us:

Blacks and other peoples of color were not capable of writing.

Writing, many Europeans argued, stood alone among the fine arts as the most salient repository of "genius", the visible sign of reason itself. In this subordinate role, however, writing, although secondary to reason, is nevertheless the *medium* of reason's expression. We *know* reason by its writing, by its representations. Such representations could assume spoken or written form. And while several superb scholars give priority to the *spoken* as the privileged of the pair, most Europeans privileged *writing* —in their writings about Africans, at least— as the principal measure of the African's humanity, their capacity for progress, their very place in the great chain of being.

The direct correlation between economic and political alienation, on the one hand, and racial alienation on the other, is epitomized in the following statute of South Carolina in 1740 that attempted to make it almost impossible for black slaves to learn how to read:

And whereas the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attending with great inconveniences; Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or who shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write; every such person or persons shall, for every offense, forfeith the sum of one hundred pounds current money.

Learning to read and write, then, was not only difficult, it was illegal.

As early as 1705, a Dutch explorer, William Bosman, had shown the relation of writing to economic and racial alienation with the help of a myth that some Africans he had "discovered" had told him:

According to his account, the blacks tell us, that in the beginning God created Black as well as White men; thereby...giving the Blacks the first Election, who chose Gold, and left the Knowledge of Letters to the White. God granted their Request, but being incensed at their avarice, resolved that the Whites should forever be their masters, and they obliged to wait on them as their slaves.

Bosman's fabrication, of course, was a claim of origins designated to sanction through mythology a political order created by Europeans. But it was Hume, writing midway through the eighteenth century, who gave to Bosman's myth the sanction of the Enlightenment philosophical reasoning.

In a major essay, "Of National Characters" (1748), Hume discusses the "Characteristics" of the most important divisions of human beings. In a footnote added in 1753 to his original text (the margins of his discourse), Hume posited with all the authority of philosophy the fundamental identity of complexion, character, and intellectual capacity:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five of different kinds) to be naturally inferior to whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, *no arts, nor sciences*...Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if *nature* had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are Negroe slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none discovered any symptoms of ingenuity...In Jamaica indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning [Francis Williams, the Cambridge educated poet who wrote poems in Latin]; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.

Hume's opinion on the subject, as we might suspect, became prescriptive.

In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), Kant elaborates on Hume's essay in section 4, entitled "Of National Characteristics, So Far as They Depend upon the Distinct Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime". Kant first claims that "so fundamental is the difference between [the white and black] races of man...it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color".

Kant was one of the earliest major European philosophers to conflate color with intelligence, a determining relation he posits with the surety of an ill-informed dictator.⁴ His judgment:

Father Labat reports that a Negro carpenter, whom he reproached for haughty treatment towards his wives, answered "You whites are indeed fools, for first you make great concessions to your wives, and afterward you complain when they drive you mad". And it might be that there was something in this that perhaps deserved to be considered; but, in short, this fellow was *quite black* from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.

The correlation of "black" and "stupid" Kant posits as if it were self-evident.

Then Hegel, echoing Hume and Kant, claimed that Africans had no history because they had developed no systems of writing and had not mastered the art of writing in European languages. In judging civilizations, Hegel's strictures with respect to the absence of written history presume a crucial role for *memory*, a collective, cultural memory. Metaphors of the childlike nature of the slaves, of the masked, puppetlike personality of the black, all share this assumption about the absence of memory. Mary Langdon, in her novel *Ida May: A Story of Things Actual and Possible* (1854), writes that:

They are mere children...You seldom hear them say much about anything that's past, if they only get enough to eat and drink at the present moment. Without writing, no *repeatable* sign of the workings of reason, of mind, could exist. Without memory or mind, no history could exist. Without history, no humanity, as defined consistently from Vico to Hegel, could exist (9-11).

⁴Kant went as far as claiming that the philosopher, far from being an artist playing with reason was the legislator of Human Reason (*Critique de La Raison Pure*, Paris; Presses Universitaires de France, 1962).

Ramsaran (1970), going beyond the descriptive and bibliographical repertory that we would expect, makes room for orality, which was not yet called *orature*, but also for a comparison of African iconography and literature. Images, whether mental or given in material representation, form the basis of artistic creation. He reminds us that some speak of the "myth in its strict meaning" as of a "verbal iconography". He quotes Robert Graves saying that the

True myth may be defined as the reduction to narrative shorthand, of ritual mime performed on public festivals, and in many cases recorded pictorially on temple walls, vases, seals, bowls, mirrors, chests, shields, tapestries, and the like.... Whether tapestries and the like have a predominantly anthropological and historical or psycho-archetypal foundation, one thing is evident, namely, that there is a two-way traffic between the verbal icon and the concrete image (54).

And an acquaintance with African iconography enhances the intellectual pleasure derived from the *spoken* and *written* word. Hence the relevance of iconography to the study of African literature. *Black Orpheus* is one of the very few journals in the African field that, in its publication of literature and art, recognizes this truth (55).

A deeply serious and radical thought on the use of African languages in African oral and written literature composed by Africans for Africans is that of Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986). One of the most important authors along with Wole Soyinka in so-called Anglophone Africa, he has renounced publishing in English. Yet under the title of "Decolonization of the Mind" Ngugi does not say anything about the writing of these African languages. The decolonization of mentalities seems to have to be a preliminary to any claim to a profound decolonization of individual perception and behavior as well as of societal transformation. Let us add that it is not perhaps a coincidence that the 1986 Nobel Prize for Literature honored Wole Soyinka, a writer whose command of the English language eclipses that of many British writers, rather than Ngugi who prefers African languages to the inherited language of colonization. The Swedish jury wants to read what it crowns.

African novels of the '60s, in French, were compared to the late 19th century French literature, as for example, Zola's *Germinal* and Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood*. But the African writer was part of a different semiosis, and most rightly refused the comparison, with few exceptions explained as influences (Kafka and Camara Laye). The use of the French language, the country of publication and of the readers, the western education of the writer, leading to question her or his right to speak in the people's name, a people massively ignorant of French. There is more. One may oppose Sembène's stand against marabouts and

Ouologuem's return to his *Father's House*. The latter, after two French doctorates, and the prestige of his *Bound to Violence*, retired to a remote and poor Malian village, as a Sufi proselyte. One may dream here of a reversal of the current African brain drain, of a revival of forgotten African values, when Brenner (1985), with some others, shows esteem for an Africa which with a long heritage from classical antiquity and civilizations of the East. Between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, there is a twilight zone largely ignored by Africanist discourse or insufficiently studied.

Knowing this part of Africa quite well, we may be allowed a personal remark. The populations of these regions are partly responsible for this silence about them because they view with little interest (if not disdain or amusement) the agitation of worlds different from their own.

In her novel *Une si longue lettre* (1989), Mariama Bâ, a Muslim educated at the Women's Teacher Training College at Rufisque, has no qualms in praising, through her character Ramatoulaye, what is written in the French language with its phonocentric alphabet and the power of books to link generations and make for progress.

In a philosophical narrative Cheikh Hamidou Kane (1961) shows the duality of the Muslim Tokoror of Senegal in the process of assimilation by French culture, and particularly by Marxist ideology. When a "progressive" friend asks him to define how he has been "conquered" by the Europeans, his hero Samba Diallo responds:

— I'm not really sure. Perhaps it's their alphabet. It was the first blow aimed at the country of the Diallobé. I have long been fascinated by these signs and these sounds which make up the structure and music of their language. When I learned to manipulate them to form words, to manipulate the words to give birth to *parole*, I was deliriously happy. As soon as I knew how to write, I started to flood my father with letters that I would write him and give him with my own hands in order to experience my new knowledge, and to verify as I watched him closely as he read that with my new tool I could transmit my thoughts to him without opening my mouth. I had interrupted my studies with the master of the Diallobé at the very moment when he was finally going to initiate me to the rational understanding of that which, until then, I had only recited, in rapt wonderment, I must confess. With the other school, suddenly I was entering a universe where everything was, from the very first, marvelous understanding and total communion.

— The master of the Diallobé had taken his good time. Since he wanted to teach you about God, he thought he had all the time until his death.

— That's just it, Adele. but they...but they intervened and undertook to make me over in their image. Progressively they wrenched me out of the heart of things and accustomed me to keeping a distance from the world. She cuddled up closer to him.

- I hate them, she said...
- You mustn't hate them (172-3).

The transition from the primary learning mode, based on memorization, to the rational, interpretive, critical mode of text now memorized, corresponds more or less to entrance into secondary school in France. The Koranic school is something like the primary school of the higher medersa similar to a secondary school, as in Morocco. Kane, a philosopher and jurist, offers us here a moving testimony on an essential stage in koranic teaching (compare with Santerre: 1973). By a reflexive and critical study of law, grammar and poetry in Arabic or in Tokoror and 'ajami, his hero could have become the new master of the Diallobé. With writing, he might have acquired structures of thought, modes of reflection many hundred years old in this part of Africa, different from those that he (and Kane) acquired in France, but neither superior nor inferior to them. For many, Muslim teaching is the only one in Africa that could do as well as that inherited from colonization in modernizing traditional society. Brown & Hiskett (1975) should be consulted on its value, its practices, its homogeneity in Africa and in the world, but especially on its differences and similarities with the imported systems, and with the ancient, native forms of education.

Fulani country includes Savanna and Sahel from Dakar to Djibouti, a band of grass highlands, about 8,000 kilometers from east to west and 1,000 to 1,500 kilometers from north to south, inhabited by about 6 million Fulani. Their civilization fascinates everyone who approaches them, while other Africans often hate them. They disdain the agitation of the world and those who cause it. Botte (1990) shows that the stratification of Fulani society in Futa Jalon is essentially based on the merit and value that knowledge of written religious literature confers. The analysis of honorable religious titles and of the cursus of studies shows a Fulani aristocratic literate social structure based on intellectual debate and conflict of schools of thought and cultural revolutions. Even if the intellectual quest is mostly religious, the texts may be grammar, rhetoric, astronomy, poetry, Koranic hermeneutics and exegesis, theology, numerology. Botte mentions that Hecquart (1885) had already noticed that "all the Fulani know how to read and write". From 1954 to 1958, we lived in Yambering, Pellal and Dalaba, in Futa Jalon, and we can confirm that all the free Fulani knew how to read and also many of their non-Fulani allies. Servants, however, and women, were rarely the beneficiaries of this local education. There were exceptions, but they only confirmed the general trend.

The nostalgia for lost systems of writing is often expressed through growing nationalism or political and cultural demands. Very rare are

mentions of these systems in literary texts. Farès (1982) inscribes in a poetic prose text, in the guise of an illustration or reference, or even with no apparent logical link with the text, Arabic cryptic signs, Kabyle symbols inscribed on pottery, a sign of Tanit, complete or partial tables of Phoenician, Libyc, Arabic, Tifinagh, Iberic, Etruscan, Numidic and Arabic systems of writing, inserted in the French text. Some are given in comparative columns. The whole expresses with force and confusion a painful pride, a torn cultural identity, a fundamental chaos in the midst of which sometimes shine some ancient points of reference. Here and now, in a world of multiple meanings without hierarchy or priority, this text shows these writings of yesterday and elsewhere as fragments of past meaning. They provide for a moment a bit of warmth that helps to cope with the essential non-sense of the foreign context. Maryse Condé, in her celebrated work *Ségou* (Segu), places a similar signal, a sign of the Bambara script, at the head of each chapter, written in French. Souleymane Cissé did the same for his film *Finyé* (The Wind). A special issue of *Research in African Literatures* (spring 1992, 23:1) focuses on "The language Question". The first page of each chapter is illustrated with a symbol or a sign, borrowed from African systems of writing, of which a list of which is given with some explanations, pp.237-8.

Printed literatures in imported languages reveal a pronounced taste for metaphor, image, proverbs, the poetic, the irrational, the mysterious, myth, and especially for verbal power rather than for narration itself. African literature in French, as we too often forget, is only African by the integration of ways of thinking, acting, and feeling borrowed from the current African context. These modes, in this literature, implicit or explicit, construct a behavioral whole, which, even though fictional, faithfully documents local mentalities and unconscious forms. The recent reorientation of the human sciences, which tend to integrate data formerly excluded as not serious, accompanies the rereading of the pre-Socratic philosophers, the attentive examination of knowledge and practices of human groups formerly considered inferior, extolling the *Génie du paganisme* (Augé: 1982) and the return to the *Temps des tribus* (Maffessoli: 1988).

Some will remember Butor's "Egyptian syndrome" (Calle-Gruber: 1994), who wrote about "erasure" (l'effacement) to open the game of repeated palimpsests for the reader. Robbe-Grillet similarly published a narrative titled *Les gommes* (The Erasers). Other contemporary French authors deal with the theme of African writing in their novels. The concept of novelistic writing has evolved since the fifties in Europe, but whether they stem or not from the New Novel, these authors want to

renew literary writing to the point of bringing its very conception into question.

Le Clézio seems to have been initiated into the existence of African writings older than or unrelated to colonization by Jeffreys, a specialist in Mum writing.

In *Onitsha* (Le Clézio: 1992), Geoffroy wants to retrace the origin of the symbols of an antique migration of the people of the kingdom of Meroë, led by a Queen Arsinoë, which may have ended in the south of Nigeria. Meroitic writing and culture are recognizable to him in engraved and painted symbols, and in the religious and cultural practices of the Ibo of southeastern Nigeria.

The novel is dedicated to Jeffreys. In the novel, the character Geoffroy feeds a diffusionist myth into his quest, that of the ancient origin of the culture and writings of the Cross River region in a migration which began in ancient Meroë (-500 +350). This kingdom of Upper Nubia occupied the Nile Valley, from the first cataract to Sennâr, a territory about the size of France. It was one of the economic and cultural links between East and West. Meroë had no Queen Arsinoë, but Egypt had several. Arsinoë is the name of the capital of Fayoum, between the Nile and Lake Moeris. It was also called Crocodilopolis and now Medinet-el-Fayoum. Another Arsinoë City, this one in Greece, also called Marion or Methana, is perhaps the birthplace of the Greek colonists who, under Ptolemeus, colonized Fayoum. These associations, the link and the ambiguity, are not foreign to Le Clézio's writing. We can recognize here the first attempts at synthesis of the history of Africa, often starting from hypothetical "proofs" and reasoning.⁵ Geoffroy's intellectual activity is hardly condemnable, it is simply dated. Its interest resides in the constantly renewed assembling of coherent, plausible and realistic structures. Dream is generally defined as an *other-construct* of real elements and of fantastical articulations of these elements. Geoffroy perceives, in groups of heterogeneous signs, similarities that he constructs as identities, or as proofs of consecutive and consequent relations (Battestini: 1994d).

Meroitic writing has not yet been deciphered, even if we know the phonetic value of the letters of this alphabet. There is no attested relationship between this script and the writings of the Cross River region, but Geoffroy and Jeffreys read into them the proof of a vast an-

⁵See, for example, Basil Davidson, *Old Africa Rediscovered*, London: Gollancz, 1959, and all the works which take up Davidson's generous conjectures to contest them or to elaborate on them. The undertaking of a Geoffroy/Jeffreys is to place in the context of an attempt at rehabilitation of peoples of the African continent by a "science" which is philological, historical, comparativist, diffusionist, in which imagination and creativity often play an important role.

cient migration of peoples from Meroë and their culture to this part of Black Africa where Sudanese and Bantu Africa stem from, and where Geoffroy will die in a delirium in which all his ancient legends fuse together. Le Clézio constructs the landscapes and historical circumstances of his novels by blending his personal memories of real places, events and people he has met with stories he has been told. This material realism serves to add plausibility to the fictional inner lives of his characters, his veritable interest.⁶ In Geoffroy's case, the numerous systems of African writing of the Cross River region and of the Grasslands, indeed real, help him to build "fabulous" diffusionist structures (Brée: 1990). Geoffroy's hallucinations, pseudo-historical constructions reminiscent of the first wild speculations on the Egyptian hieroglyphics, are combined with this realism. Geoffroy's perception of the similarity between some signs and symbols, excited and comforted by the desire to authenticate the myth he has created for himself, exacerbated by the fever which drains him, produces by selection in the cultural milieu a phantasmagorical reading of the real, characteristic of the interrogation if not the philosophic beliefs of Le Clézio.

In *Désert* (1980) Le Clézio referred to Tifinagh, without naming it. In the desert, Lalla sees on some rocks geometric signs, which she does not understand. She thinks that they are magical signs, but she is not afraid of them (95). In Marseilles, she sees graffiti on walls that she perceives as "incomprehensible, partly-erased" drawings or tags (300), cut off from all attempts at communication. At the end of the work, Hawa is going to leave for her desert, and because she has become a famous model, a product full of imagery,

there are now people who recognize her in the street, girls who give her one of her pictures so she can autograph it. But since Hawa doesn't know how to write, she draws the sign of her tribe, the one which is

⁶We need to explore, in Le Clézio's works, his marginality in relation to French thought. He claims to be reborn each time in Nigeria, Mexico, Thailand and New Mexico (US). He proclaims his rediscovery of the world during his four years with the Embera Indians of Panama. Le Clézio, a cultural crossbreed, a lover of nature, belongs to the contemporary philosophical trend of the "natural contract" (Michel Serres), the will to adopt the modes of thought, action and feeling of the greatest number of cultures (See "Racism and History" by Lévi-Strauss). Le Clézio's contribution, like the new perception of the conquest of *The West as America* (Truettner, W.H. s/dir. 1991. *The West as America, Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press) and of "primitive thought" (Maybury-Lewis, D. 1992. *Millennium, Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World*. New York: Viking & Penguin Group), is part of a universal ongoing revision of our perceptions and frames of reference and logic, an enterprise characterized by the pedagogic will of intellectuals to integrate alterity among the priorities of our multiple humanity.

marked on camel and goatskins, and which looks a little bit like a heart (353).

Michel Tournier, in *La Goutte d'Or*, tells us the story of a young Moroccan. Photographed by a French tourist, Idriss sets off to find his picture in France. He won't find it, but all the possible pictures of him will be taken and he recognizes himself in none of them. Nor does he understand the myths and other images that the West has made of his culture. His self-respect decreases after each of his experiences. One day he meets a master of Arabic calligraphy, and learning the art of drawing and writing liberates him from his obsession with inaccurate pictures. The message is clear in this conflict between visual representation and calligraphed writing. In this text Tournier is led to investigate this art, several hundred years old in North Africa. He notes, with exactness bordering on the obsessive, the recipe for producing the ink and the calami. He names the different reeds and describes how they are cut according to the downstroke and upstroke desired, and the manner of holding and using the pen. The accord between Idriss's rhythm of life and the curls of the script, his breathing and gestures, fills him with joy. The filling of blanks and a keen sense of symmetry give Idriss a sense of authentic liberation, that which comes from constraints freely accepted (231-4).

Tournier next gives "the legend of the fair queen" which teaches wisdom and calligraphy. He sets up a comparison with the image, turned towards the past, invading the Western world:

The image is indeed the opium of the West. The sign is the spirit, the image is matter. Calligraphy is the algebra of the soul drawn by the most spiritualized organ of the body, its right hand (235).

The Western world, fascinated by the audiovisual media, using the ball-point pen, reading less and less, is moving away imperceptibly from the most solid rock of its foundation, writing, more precisely the so-called Latin alphabet. Western writing is now often associated with images (posters, cartoons, illustrated works, school books, newspapers and magazines, subtitles of films, exhibitions of photographs), where image or symbol are not simply substituted for the text. Many westerners only know books from their film versions. Television and cinema create more readers than the competence of booksellers or newspaper critics. Writers work for cinema or television, or become filmmakers. Prévert had fun writing poetry but lived on his film dialogues. Pagnol is universally known thanks to the cinema. With Le Clézio and Tournier, it seems that western writers are mourning the coming disappearance of the notion of Belles-Lettres in the West. In a significant

role reversal, Africa, formerly the continent of "peoples without writing", is now divided into two continents of writing. The one conserves the technical skills required to produce the ancestral writing and the symbolic with all their powers of esthetics and imagination; the other adopts the Latin alphabet, with the Westernization and the iconoclasy that went with colonization and modernity. The first could be studied by the semiology of writing, focusing on the expression of the message. The writing of the latter will be better studied by semiology focusing on the textualization of the object. Only the second will be integrational, as Harris shows (1993, 370).

African systems of signs and symbols, so long ignored, are finding credit anew with some contemporary authors more interested in writing itself than in telling stories. Africa progressively adopts avatars of the Latin alphabet and eschews images, myths, symbols as mutterings of the past, as limitations on economic development and integration into a world in the process of homogenization. Mudimbé (1991), also leaning on the notion of text, shows that it is possible to overcome our limitations in our knowledge of the Other. Europe, on the other hand, is reintroducing image and sound, and is fascinated by African sign systems, their images, their imaginative power, their esthetic, whether or not associated with African art.

Original Islam condemned the representation of the human face lest it diverted attention from the text which it regarded as the source of all knowledge and basis of all questioning; whereas the king of Thebes in ancient Egypt rejected the writing that Thot offered him, which was then borrowed by the Phoenicians and the Greeks for the benefit of the West.

Now, image and text are combined to inscribe ever more numerous, brief, disjointed and performing messages, the specular efforts of a culture that is integrating divergences and inventing itself apace, as it deconstructs and universalizes itself. The two cultures that yesterday were believed to be opposites are penetrating each other, and their isotopes are becoming blurred. The theory of productive writing will no more be able to ignore image and symbol than the resulting text that conditions it.

The Egyptian Thot is the God of writing, of knowledge and wisdom. He suggested to the Greeks that they endow themselves with Hermes, god of writing and structured exchanges: hence our doctors' caduceus, symbol of Mercury the Roman avatar of Thot and Hermes, not to forget Eshu of the Yoruba pantheon.

Writing, in the fullest sense, is the visible side of the text, in the broad sense of reality of thought and experience. Between these two planes, the field of investigation and modelization of the semiotics of

writing is taking shape: the world of texture. From the study of the writing of text, as praxis, and of logical relations within and without the text, fixed in the writing, liberated and multiplied in reading, will necessarily develop the reflections that are to lead to the construction of the general theory of writing and of text.

Conclusion

Towards a Theory of Writing and Text

A number of contributing factors led to erase from African texture symbol, writing and text, or at least to minimize their significance as original semiotic system of often greatly rewarding richness: the growth of a certain iconoclasy in the West, its age-old fetishistic preference for alphabet and literature, its mythical belief that writing was born in privileged loci, and the consequent ascendancy of historicism in writing studies, the essentialist stereotypes of Africanist science and especially of the earlier colonial-bound ethnology, abettor and victim of imported categories and logic.

The West claims it has achieved a higher, complex form of rationalization through writing and deems the African symbol capable only of stimulating the imagination. The Latin alphabet may have helped towards rationalization, but it has killed imagery, reduced individual creative imagination or enclosed it in the confines of art, urban and road signs landscape, advertising and the media.

One may think that the sign has a definite material function, that of unfolding the potentialities of multiple meaning. The *raison d'être* of symbol is to provide for the constant adventurous renewal of mystery. Writing, in its restricted sense, unambiguously expresses an essential, constituted and fixed way of thinking, but also invites interpretation, challenge and criticism. Writing in the wider semiotic sense additionally requires an open interpretative science for the text, its product, yet restricted by knowledge of its texture. This double movement is in line with Bachelard's thinking, for whom progress demands partial negation and an open mind.

Integrational semiotics, as suggested by Harris (1993), posits as unsatisfactory the analysis of the message-script relationship. On the contrary, the study of the signs within social life, shows evidently the *raison d'être* of the message. But Harris ends on the necessity to interrogate the text to explain writing. This is where we started.

The word, better written than said, has no meaning in itself. An articulated whole of graphs or sounds is meaningful inasmuch as it conserves traces of all the meanings it has never included but that have previously been given to us to know. The word, spoken or written, exists in our memory, in our mind, before it is realized. With its modes of articulation, it is thought before it means. It belongs to the order of articulations of thought or the logos, which Jung saw as an internal alphabet.

To us it is an articulated and immaterial system of "principles". Around the word there are the rules, the game of its transformations, of those of its associations within the general framework of each human's and human group's psychology, experience, history and culture. Such an ensemble of living forms, dynamically overlapping and paradoxically free, exists in all societies and for all individuals. We propose to name it *texture*. Others say it is a language structure without a content, but the connotations of this phrase blot out or fail to account for Penelope's tirelessly renewed weaving. Each texture is also a discursive self-sufficient universe, provided it does not betray its own coherence. The purposeful whole of its mental symbols, when logically articulated according to their internal causality, presupposes that each is endowed with culture-related associative semantic properties.

Etymologically the text is a set of "woven ideas" forming a "coherent whole", a synchronic representative corpus of the texture. The production of a text is made from a limited inventory of selected signs and symbols, proper to one culture, serving as scaffolding during its construction. The action that uses signs, selected and reorganized, to manufacture the text aims at testifying or contesting *texture*. From this point of view, the text becomes, against the usual senses of "structure or appearance" or "disposition of the constituent parts" of a fabric, an autonomous dynamic entity, the living productive organism, of internal oriented relations. Neel (1988) deconstructs Derrida's deconstruction and innovates when he relates writing and composition, pleading for a return to the teaching of intention-loaded form.

Textual Semiotics, now being constituted, may roughly be divided into four main groups of activities. First let us posit the kindred areas at both ends of its field of investigation: on the one hand phonology, morphology, and syntax; on the other, the various kinds of hermeneutics and literary criticism. If, for some, there exists a Textual Linguistics (2) comprising syntactic and semantic approaches to texts, for many Textual or Literary Semiotics begins with the study of what lies beyond the sentence (1) and is limited to the text. Textual Semiotics (2) claims to be pragmatistic. Besides looking for the text's modes and levels of communication and functioning, it cares for its reception. We owe Rifaterre the notion of the "arch-reader", which, hand in hand with the receiving public, putting aside all fetishistic subservience to the intentions of the author of genius, seeks to canalize all efforts to understand and interpret the action itself of reading the text. Hence a third semiotic approach, in which the text's elements and structure are related to non-linguistic signs in its environment (3) existing both at its production and reception. The last approach (4) works on tokens and icons rather than on symbols. Of greatest import to us, it relates the linguistic to the

cultural text, tends to explain the one through its homeomorphism with the other, being in this respect close to the psycho-sociological approaches to literature. The out-of-text situation is material, of course; but as a substance-situation it is segmented and organized, and capable of linguistic expression. All told, a texture has been superimposed on it. This texture is constantly undone, retaining however traces of what it rejects in order to rewrite itself: it is intertextual and productive. One should notice here that Raymond Roussel chose Africa to stage-manage his "textual work", making it an "unparalleled" theater, underlining once more the strangeness of the writing developed before the "first impression" by its conjuring up a space that is irreducibly other, in which the text-process is played (Kristeva: 1969, 237).

In the short run, each text tends to modify the texture, without deconstructing it. Yet, society precedes and conditions the text, which must needs find its place in preexisting frameworks. In the act of reading, the text transforms the reader, and post-war fiction writing has taught us that the least explicit transforms most. Writing tends to fix in the project, to corpsify the bodying of thought and the dynamic of experience. It follows that text analysis, in revealing its intertextuality and its productivity, is a signifying practice close to an experience of the texture, during text writing and reading, which constructs parts of the unwritten text by means of evocation and in conformity with the cultural text. The action of writing is therefore a production of texture tending towards restoring the cultural text, the impossible probability of the text. Writing, like speech, is given to us as a set of tool signs enabling us to compose all texts possible within a given texture.

Africa offers itself to us as a science and as a critique of the constituted Africanist Sciences in particular and of science in general. Africanist discourse, with its contradictions, appears to us to be marked by diverse perceptions from outside Africa. Hence putting Africa on a stage, it tends to produce, albeit unintentionally, as many ideological portraits as it has subjects on which to make statements. Being constructed on appreciations which, at least implicitly, distinguish between Us and Them, right and wrong, better and worse, it lends support to a scale of values. To Ethics we owe this concept, which could be quite revealing as to the constitution of these sciences and their blindness. The "class ethos" forces the discourse of science into a normative interpretation of the world and its order.

We must transcend the impossible dialogue between Derrida and Bourdieu. The first, a philosopher, wants to subvert concepts, and even affects and percepts. The second works on functions. Our own questioning of the Africanist discourse, being anthropological, was not so much a quest for functions, which we know to be often invented, as of recurrent

logical articulations and aporiae, and hence of ideological impulses, of the kind that reveal a dimension of the history-bound European metaphysic.

How can we think out the experience named continuum? Such a construction permeates our private experience, integrates our deep being and modifies our perceptions of the world. Continuity is our intuitive signifier of the solidity and permanence of things. It is an extended self-rolled up artefact. Each moment of our life is perceived as a synchrony, analogous to those which we have experienced before and announcing those that are coming. The continuous axis of history is made up of a large number of arbitrary "loci", articulated according to the needs of a fictitious logic resulting from a construction that pre-dates its choice and the choice of a reference locus or moment on that axis.

A loci-studded continuum functions at each point retrospectively (cause-effect) and prospectively (consequence). Each locus is justified a posteriori by an ideology, which decides on origins and directions, if not on destinations. This matching of successive loci makes for chronological rather than logical discourse.

In the last resort, continuum stems straight out of the historian's method and "Logic" (i.e. chronology), whose discourse aims at constructing, on a chaotic substance-situation's foundation, a fictitious "reality", made of a created chain of collected facts, objects and actions.

The time order which long presided over the study of writing is coupled with a space order that distinguishes types of relations which are "neither logical nor temporal, but marked by similarity or dissimilarity" (Ducrot & Todorov: 1972, 378); the successive contiguous pairs are like or unlike each other. However, two distant loci will be all the more unlike as they are more separate in time. Continuum finds its consistency in its creation, but other logical organizations preceded it in the order of meaning, such as the desire for order, often stronger than that for internal functional logic. Braudel did suggest that with the same past events one could always rewrite new coherent histories, each as justified in right as all the others and creating configurations that do not encroach on reality. The arbitrary choice of loci and occasional fictitious links build up ingenious configurations of continuous and structured text quanta, through a "logic" that Todorov termed perspectivism. These often acquire a dogmatic value of truth. We would tend to value the perennial free exercise of critical rewriting of history. Each continuum, unique and necessary, cannot be if not provisional and arbitrary. Temporality and spatiality are two forms of discursive logic, which have regrettably occulted the order of logic itself.

Logic, for instance, studies the properties of the mind, including forms of exclusion and implication and their concatenations. It differs

from the time and space orders in their approaches to their objects. Whenever a meaning is created (not given) in manifest and intelligible forms and relations, Logic looks within their forms and relations of their objects for their organizational and functional principles.

Historical discourse tends to blot out the possible institution of any different paradigm. A system without discrete units is said to be continuous. Each locus of historical discourse has a meaning in itself because it has been chosen among others as best integrating the finalities of the discourse whose meaning is in the pre-conceived one-way chain. This meaning will then be oriented according to a non-discrete thesis, continuum or system that will satisfy so long as it does not institute itself as necessary and exclusively sufficient. Writing is a phenomenon with histories attached. Each of these histories invents a single trajectory, and these rarely meet and cross-fertilize one another. The house of Africanist research, seen from inside, appears to have many dwellings. Nowhere does one find a synthesis and the student spies only rival co-teries. Partitioned in often-watertight disciplines that are maintained in their purity by strong personalities, it is now on the brink of opening itself to attempts at generalization. Its natural fault will guarantee depth and concentration. But comparison, collection and synthesis have long been perceived as ways to dispersion and debilitation of knowledge. Panorama and survey are to detailed analysis what levity is to serious study. Such horizontal modes of investigation have long been inadvisable because of compartmentalization in research institutes, universities and in the selective processes of publishing houses. In French scientific discourse, this is still apt to produce mutually unintelligible sub-languages.

Since the 1950s, the human sciences, literary and linguistic studies, and even the so-called hard sciences have constantly sought to renew and diversify their perceptions and methodologies and to offer new conceptual models. Semiotics questions itself, feeds on and questions other sciences. Its main activity is research per se and making models for others rather than for itself. Dogmatic, institutionalized theory gives way to the concept of necessary but provisional theory. By and by, multi- if not interdisciplinarity finds a place in teaching, colloquia, and anthologies bring together voices hitherto isolated. Wherever it remains, conservation now has to jostle with concertation, contestation and verification. The young disciple who dares to negotiate one of his master's ideas is no longer regarded as unruly or iconoclastic. Development projects in Africa are based more and more on interdisciplinary research, and economic analysis, thanks to the computer, offers a luxuriance of basic data on all facets of the most complex realities.

In the midst of this revival, where the boundaries of scientific disciplines become blurred and they prefer to blend rather than disappear, thereby occasionally recovering their lost youth, we believe there is room for a new, responsible, dynamic, eccentric and inclusive theory of writing. It will not replace another since there are none, but shift the almost exclusive historical perspective, which has served to justify the Latin alphabet. It will take responsibility for its assumptions, when for example it refuses to see primitives among its contemporaries, or obsolete systems in Chinese and Japanese scripts. Dynamic will it become, as soon as it agrees to reconsider its definitions, its modes of classification, explanation and comprehension; each time its foundations are renewed, enlarged and multiplied, its methodology and discourse will change. The present apparently historic finalization of the study of writing will then give way to a new, all-embracing, overarching, non-hierarchic look on **all** the manifestations of writing seen as valid representatives of universal processes. The historical perspective will of course remain, along with the new approaches to writing. But the new poetics of writing and text that we contemplate will want to explain the one through the other, *per se* but also in their rapport with each other and their environment. A Linguistic study of speech models inspires or inflects the theories of literature, narration studies, and discourse analyses (Jakobson: 1960; Barthes: 1962, 1966; J. Cohen: 1966; Coquet: 1972; Chapman: 1973; Ihwe: 1975; Culler: 1975, 1981; Marin: 1975; Courtès: 1976; Bakhtin: 1978; Riffaterre: 1979; Stankiewicz: 1984; Lafont: 1984). The boundaries of writing and speech that had once been useful for the development of linguistic sciences, literary and discourse studies are now melting away in the face of a need, widely felt in our time, to use the one and the other in order to discern the powers, ways and means and quests of symbolic imagination. Writing and speech, image and text are now manufacturing together a new rhetoric on the electronic screen; yesterday's consumer (reader, listener, spectator) is now invited to play his part in the production of a new type of writing-text-image-speech-music in which, having mastered the tools, he can immediately stage, communicate and store his own thoughts.

Thus our project, which is strategically polemic and programmatic, points at all that has been said or written on African writing, including our own work, invites to a revision of the concepts of writing and text, and pleads for the creation of a science of writing and text, combining deductive and inductive approaches. A critical study of histories of writing and the Africanist sciences requires a new scrutiny of these sciences, of their logical origins, methods and finalities, of their value and their range; but, to avoid imposition of Western paradigms on African data, they will learn about face and discover theories from

data. The absence of African data in the corpus of these sciences is enough to refute the theory of knowledge that ignores them. Asking about knowledge, its origins, its methods and finalities is to summon epistemology. It would have been vain to attempt an exhaustive scrutiny of most of the Africanist library on knowledge, including writing, symbols and texts, to submit it to a systematic criticism, and to investigate cognate areas belonging to the provinces of ontology, anthropology and ethics. Instead, we focused on a large and therefore representative sample of the Africanist discourse on the life of all types of writings and texts within their societies.

Thot, the Egyptian god of writing and exchange, of the chain of reasoning and the thread of conjectures, furnished the space in which texture moves, grasping and articulating signs in each text and on its epistemological shores. We owe Thot a taste for the game and the advantages of giving ourselves rules. Thought in action generates self-questioning thought as it goes along establishing itself. Propp and Jolles looked for forms, morphologies or compositions, structured entities of thought-in-becoming, snatched awhile in writing, constantly reinvented by successive readings. Before creating the writing of sounds, man wrote sets of ideas, and before these, concepts and their articulations. The emergence of writing, which came later than existing texture, gave birth to the text, which for a while concealed the luxuriation of thought as it reduced it to univocality. In the last resort, there is only intertextuality perpetually changing, whose text is a synchronic section. The modes of conceptualization and realization of the African texture, although identical with those of other human continents, have made it possible to bring to western consciousness, which negated them, the living show of writing, of the text and texture, strangely masked for a while by the desiccation of the Latin alphabet.

Latin alphabet and hermeneutics being necessary betrayals of the initial design, it became then imperative that our perspectives on writing be, a brief moment, cut adrift from the West and hoisted on a so far neglected Continent. Both are mere snapshots of a vast unforeseeable ever moving throng, the one of the various ways and developments of writing, the other of the history and diversity of interpretation. In this perspective, semiotics may appear as the sum of all hermeneutics in the act of consuming the joy of self-questioning in order to privilege the pleasure that accompanies the infinite perfecting of the process of interpretation. From the range of texts constituted by us into an Africanist discourse on writing in the semiotic sense, and from our various researches, emerges a double motion of semantic demands and critical reflections, which issues on, through a new mode of conceptual analysis,

to an authentic theory of the production of text conceived as one of the forms of symbolic thought.

The king of Thebes refuses Thot's genius because it endangers the stability of the order over which he presides. Thot's proposed texture is a revolution: it provides a cipher whose main characteristic is to enable the intellection of all ciphers, like itself arbitrary and provisional but palimpsest to all the others, finding their meanings in the traces they retain of all those which they are not or are no longer.

A probably provisional order of a new type seems to be emerging all around us. It consists apparently of the co-existence, without hierarchy or intolerance, of all existing, past, unpredictable and imprescriptible orders. Concepts of a dominant culture and sub-cultures are becoming absurd, as well as the idea of a perfect order to be universally imposed. The individual, in this world, is to be reborn to the necessity, a while forgotten, of constantly readapting to a world he or she zigzags through and learns again to handle. He or she will survive only in two ways: either he or she will maintain or institute dogmatic or other forms of resistance against a changing world he or she perceives as aggressing his or her identity and culture; OR sharpening her or his critical wits and heightening his or her capacity to analyze and synthesize, he or she will at last really look at the Other and see differences -- at a time when writing and text are being reduced to an electronic chip, and made of virtual or even "real-virtual" images -- as informative and formative surprises, to be savored as dainty morsels for the mind, constantly creating desire and need for novelty, with an amused propensity to make the best of them.

The Greek world adopted only one aspect of the Egyptian writings, its phonographic technique that reduced writing to the indirect notation of thought, via the sounds of language, but simultaneously pursued its ample movement of speculative verbal discourse.

Egyptian writing was named *medou-neter*, i.e. it carried Principles (in the sense of Plato's Ideas). Egypt used two close and yet distinct concepts. *Medou-neter* denoted the elements of writing as written signs, as well as semantic units and logical articulations. Each of these domains could be perceived as finite (*neter-aà*) or as extensive and boundless (*neter-our*), but only those who learned the unwritten basic principles could make sense of the latter.

Thought, here and now, can recapture its ancient way, now that pictography is returning and that signs and pictures rule everywhere in our cities. It strives to forge ever better concepts; now that alterity is arising as the reason for our being in flux and science can no longer ignore the assumptions and consequences it creates or induces for nature, the individual and mankind.

A moment essential to the paradigm of our experimental statement on writing and text, the now integrated, and therefore useless, African data and groundwork can be abandoned through eidetic reduction, and may the general theory of writing as generative of text be formulated.

Les Roblins, June 30, 2000

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Professor of French and African Studies at Georgetown University, Simon Battestini, trained as a linguist and semiotician, conducted research and taught in Africa (1951-1983) and in America (1983-1998). All of his publications are inspired by discourse analysis. In 1964 he created, with others, the field of African literary studies. He is currently preparing, with a team of experts, the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of African Writing and Text*.

ISBN 1-894508-06-8



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