Communication: the writing revolution

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CHAPTER 2.

Communication: The Writing Revolution

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Image 2.1 San Rock Art, Cederberg Mountains, South Africa

Introduction

In 2018 in a cave at the southern tip of the African continent, scientists identified an object which changed our understanding of the development of human communication. Scientists discovered a 73,000-year-old stone, which had been 'decorated' with clear and straight lines, drawn with an ochre crayon. This object presents the first known form of intelligible communication by homo sapiens to date.* It shows us how our desire to leave a mark goes back to the earliest stages of human evolution. Moreover, it provides evidence that we can trace not only human evolution to Africa, but also the origins of human communication technologies. Indeed, in the

* Christopher S. Henshilwood, Francesco D'Errico, Karen L. Van Niekerk, Laure Dayet, Alain Queffelec and Luca Pollarolo, 'An abstract drawing from the 73,000-year-old levels at Blombos Cave, South Africa', *Nature*, Vol. 562 (2018) pp. 115-118.

yellow and orange rocks of the semi-arid rocky terrain of Southern Africa, countless red pigmented symbols appear on hidden and sheltered rock walls. They preserve these ancient expressive statements, transmitting information across thousands of years about the flora and fauna, which once marked the landscape. Moreover, they bear testament to the human communities who eked out an existence at the southern tip of the African continent. Such rock art has an incredible appeal to archeologists and historians, as they are beautiful and delicate primary sources of a 'prehistoric' era, as well as testimony to humanity's primordial and profound urge for meaningful communication.

The study of history is intimately connected to the study of communication, as historians are first and foremost interested in the recorded past, in the history of who we are and where we came from, and how we have narrated and recorded that process. Yet in studying the history of communication there is a tendency to focus on communication as a tool, and as such give more weight to understanding its changing speed, latency and scope rather than looking at how innovation has changed the nature and culture of communication itself. Chronological overviews, provided in history textbooks, of the major breakthroughs in the history of communication usually list technological advancements in modes of writing that have increased the magnitude of this mode of transmittance, such as the invention of writing (c. 3400 BCE); the invention of the printing press (woodblock printing c. 200 CE; Gutenberg 1440 CE); the invention of the telegraph (1844) and the invention of the internet (c. 1970 CE), and these are presented as pivotal turning points in the history of human civilization. However, there is an anachronistic element in this modern obsession of historians with written forms of communication, as it hinders our understanding of previous societies and civilizations who, for the most part of human history, despite the ability to write, were predominantly oral cultures.

Recent paleoanthropological and archeological research into the origins of meaningful communication in human societies has recognized how developments of visual symbolic communication (rock art) often developed in close collaboration with the development of acoustic expressions.

2.a Concept Definition

Meaningful Communication

The deliberate act of transferring information through a verbal (speech or writing) or non-verbal (such as drawing, movement, objects) medium.

It appears that many ancient rock art sites were either located in naturally sonorous landscapes or in caves with high levels of resonance and reverberations*, suggesting

* Margarita Diaz-Andreu and Tommaso Mattioli, 'Rock Art, Music and Acoustics: A Global Overview', in: Bruno David and Ian J. McNiven (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology and Anthropology of Rock Art* (Oxford:

that the performance of acoustic sounds was equally important for early human societies to transmit information as the more tangible signs left on the rock walls. Moreover, evidence of the abundance and importance of these non-textual or non-tangible forms of communication can also be clearly seen in these ancient rock art drawings themselves. The rock painting shown in image 2.1 depicts human figures who seem to dance, and where there is dancing there is music and/or singing, an integrated and complex form of human communication. Several historians, notably Global Historians William McNeill & John R. McNeill, have argued that more collaborative acts of communication, such as singing and dancing, were fundamental for the evolution of human civilizations.* This idea was already expressed in the mid-nineteenth century by the 'father of evolution' himself, Charles Darwin, who speculated in his book *The Descent of Man*, that "We must suppose that the rhythms and cadences of oratory are derived from previously developed musical powers. We can thus understand how it is that music, dancing, song, and poetry are such very ancient arts. We may go even further than this, and [...] believe that musical sounds afforded one of the bases for the development of language" (1871).** One can easily imagine how call and response singing techniques, found in many folk music across the globe, or the focus and collaboration required for keeping rhythm and time during exertive synchronized movements such as group dances, are what strengthened the bonds between kinsmen, villagers and even larger social groups.

The wish to communicate and the evolution of tangible and intangible communication modes is what has shaped the progress of our species as social animals. To be able to converse and make ourselves intelligible to one another is what has helped us collaborate and cement social cohesion. Thus, in understanding the rise of human civilizations, we need to simultaneously look at the development of communication and the reasons why certain more 'primary', such as non-written, modes of communication continued to be used. It is after all not only the story of the past that should interest us but also how the story is told and how we came to use certain communicative ways to shape and narrate those stories that bind us.

The history of Africa provides a logical starting point in this search for the meaning of modes of communication and its connection to the development of human civilizations, as the region is seen as 'the cradle of human kind' as well as part of what is known as the 'fertile crescent' where most of the earliest civilizations and written scripts developed. This chapter will look at different cultures of communication and how they have shaped the development of several key civilizations in the history of Africa, notably Ancient Egypt and the Sahelian Empire of Mali, as well as our modern understanding of these historical states. Both

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Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 503-528.

* William McNeill and J.R. McNeill, *The Human Web. A Birds Eye View of World History* (New York: Norton, 2003), p. 13.

** Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and in Relation to Sex* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1872), p. 572.

these ancient societies provide an interesting case study in which written language had evolved to a very high level, yet, oral communication remained central in the day-to-day activities of these societies, not unlike our modern societies today. The main argument of this chapter is that the oral recounting of history forms a long standing pattern in human societies and forms an important entry point in the understanding of human connections and the human relationship to history.

Historiography

Storytellers, Oral Literature & the Revolution of Writing

Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of transmitting complex information. Stories to make sense of the natural world, to transmit experiences and skills, and stories about social groups and their ancestry. These oral traditions about our ancestral heritage are the earliest forms of history, the practice of narrating past events and providing meaning and significance for those people and events that came before.

2.1 The Study of History

Oral History

The study of history through orally transmitted sources. Historians distinguish between sources which are part of an oral tradition and the field of Oral Literature, such as epic poetry or folklore, and oral sources which recount only a one generational/individual memory of certain historical events. Such life stories and interviews are recorded after the historical events have occurred, and as such provide a testimony of both the past and the present. At the same time, they offer historians evidence of otherwise undocumented events or perspectives.

Early 'historians' were thus master storytellers. They were charged with preserving the living and distant memories of a people. At the same time, such stories about the past were used to justify certain societal structures and values. What binds us as a group? What are the cultural norms which we adhere to? What justifies the authority of those in power? As these genesis traditions, normative narratives or stories about royal lineages were both lengthy and important and memory strategies were used to make sure the storytellers could remember crucial information and faithfully transmit this. Such strategies were mostly stylistic adaptations, such as formulaic composition, alliteration and ring composition.* As such, these ancient stories about the past became forms of literature, oral literature, in which fact and

* Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 1960/2000). John Miles Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition. History and Methodology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

myth became entangled. Examples of this can be found in some of the earliest known oral traditions, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh (written down c. 2100 BCE) and already mentioned in the introductory chapter; the Indian Rig Veda (c. 1500-1200 BCE) or the Egyptian Tale of Two Brothers (c. 1200 to 1194 BCE) and the Iliad and Odyssey (fall of Troy c. 1260–1180 BCE; publication of the Epic c.800–700 BCE).

The emergence of writing provided new ways to record and share information. Many linguistic historians expect that the early written languages, which emerged independently in different locations across the world, developed predominantly out of a need for counting and calculating. For example, the earliest known form of writing, the Sumerian cuneiform (see also chapter 1), seemed to have developed predominantly from accounting systems more than 5000 years ago.* Writing thus initially served the purpose of recording numbers in a very meticulous and indisputable way, which made long distance trade or tax collections, especially through third parties, easier and more reliable. These archaic scripts like cuneiform or Egyptian hieroglyphs (see image 2.2) were thus not immediately used for recording authoritative texts on religion or philosophy, as is often imagined, but were rather used for more mundane but nonetheless important purposes like recording ownership or values of goods.** Nevertheless, the revolution that written languages caused was the change in thinking about recording and disseminating information.

This orality-literacy shift was one of the most profound cognitive revolutions in human history, as it changed the way we think and remember. In practice, it meant, among other things, that expressions of thought went from, for example being predominantly participatory, as communication was mostly uttered in the presence of other people, to becoming more internalized and 'distanced' with regards to time, space and community. This change caused expressions of information to become more eternalized but at the same time also disconnected from immediate feedback.*** The Greek philosopher Plato warned that writing "weakens and destroys memory".**** And several Griots, professional storytellers and keepers of African history, have pointed out that whereas "other peoples use writing to record the past, [...] this invention has killed the faculty of memory among them. They do not feel the past anymore, for writing lacks the warmth of the human voice".***** This 'revolution' was, however, one of slow pace, as writing did not take over all aspects of significant communication, nor immediately erode the status and authority of the spoken word. Indeed, Plato also noted, referring to

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* Denise Schmandt-Besserat, *How Writing Came About* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

** Toby Wilkinson emphasises the importance of writing for the economic management for early pharaohs, in his work *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt. The History of a Civilization from 3000 BC to Cleopatra* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 55.

*** Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982/2005)

**** Plato's dialogue Phaedrus 274c-277a.

***** Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaté cited in: D. T. Niane and Djeli Mamoudou Kouyaté, *Sundiata. An Epic of Old Mali* (London: Pearson, 2006).

Socrates words, that "he who [...] believes that anything in writing will be clear and certain, would be an utterly simple person".*

Image 2.2 Proto-Hieroglyphs

Herodotus, by many still considered as the 'father of history' in the Western tradition, used oral sources throughout his work, and prided himself on having first account oral testimonies to give his work more credibility. He was as such practicing a field of history that we today would call 'Oral History'. Moreover, several scholars have suggested that Herodotus's famous work *The Histories* (c. 430 BCE) was in fact composed as an oral performance for the purpose of public lectures, and only later written down in book form.** This shows that in the late Iron Age, written transmissions of historical information were certainly not deemed more reliable than oral communication. Similarly, Sima Qian (145 BCE – 86 CE), the Chinese 'father of history' equally attached tremendous value to oral sources such as proverbs, folk tales and poems which he collected during his travels throughout China and used for writing his all-encompassing history of China and masterpiece *Shi Ji* (Historical Records).*** In the same fashion, the North-African historian Ibn Khaldun (1332 CE –1406 CE) based much of his writing on information received through oral traditions and interviews. In his celebrated collection of books called the *Kitāb al-'ibar* (Book of Lessons), Khaldun demonstrates one of the first recorded instances of historicist thinking when he argues for understanding the past as strange and different from

* Plato's dialogue Phaedrus 274c-277a.

** William A. Johnson, 'Oral Performance and the Composition of Herodotus' "Histories", *Journal of Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (1994) pp. 229-254.

*** Yang Li-Wen, 'Oral History in China', *Oral History*, Vol. 15, No.1 (1987), pp. 22-25.

the present. He warns historians of too eagerly believing historical narratives that are rooted in the present, stating that (oral) narratives of, for example, royal genealogies are: "For a pedigree [...] something imaginary and devoid of reality. Its usefulness consists only in the resulting connection and close contact".* At the same time, for Khaldun this source critique applied to both oral as well as written sources. He saw no difficulty in accepting oral accounts as primary sources, under the condition that the author would be committed to apply source critique in analyzing these sources. As such, written and oral accounts were considered to be equally valuable.

Historism, Written Communication & the Concept of Civilization

Despite the continuing importance of oral traditions, the emergence of writing has become intertwined with our modern understanding of the rise of civilizations (for definition, see chapter 1). Most textbook definitions of civilization integrate a reference to written language, and as such become normative devices through which our perception of previous oral cultures is negatively influenced. In fact, definitions of civilization are in more ways normative and problematic, as they are often presented as clear and static binary opposites such as civilized and uncivilized; cultured vs. uncultured; urban vs. rural; sedentary vs. nomadic; state vs. stateless, etc. Scholars have pointed out that many of these dichotomies, for instance the division between democratically or autocratically organized societies or the urban-rural dichotomy, are problematic as they assume, for example, that only democratic city dwellers are civilized and in effect more autocratic rural societies are not. This divisionism is not a modern phenomenon; ancient societies were similarly keen on mirroring themselves to others who they usually regarded as lesser developed. In the process, they elevated their own society to the highest level of civilization. Think of the dichotomy of Greek vs. Barbarian, or Chinese vs. the Sìyí 四夷.

For early historians the focus on writing became dominant in thinking and writing about what constitutes a civilization. Writing became associated with a higher level of thinking. Early western scholars distinguished between 'prelogical' or magical vs. 'logical' cultures or civilizations, instead of distinguishing simply between predominantly oral vs. literate societies.** This negative assessment of 'non-literate' societies became more dominant with the professionalization of the historical discipline in the nineteenth century, and the development of methodological doctrines such as the Rankean school of Historicism (see chapter 1). Since then, the historical discipline has come to focus predominantly on the recorded (written) human past. All human history that could only be reconstructed based on non-written evidence became classified as 'prehistoric' and became the

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* Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah an Introduction to History*, trans Franz Rosenthal, 3 volumes (New York: Pantheon, 1958), l 265. Cited in: Ralph A. Austen and Jan Jansen, 'History, Oral Transmission and Structure in Ibn Khaldun's Chronology of Mali Rulers', *History of Africa*, Vol. 23 (1996), pp. 17-28, p. 17.

** Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 29, 59.

field of archeologists and (paleo)anthropologists. Oral sources were left out of the professional study of history for a considerable amount of time, and this meant in practice that those societies that had preserved the story of their past through oral communication were neglected and ultimately seen to be 'people without history'*.

It was this legacy, among others, that led to the devaluation of oral cultures and in particular of African History. Some western historians of the nineteenth century went so far as to dismiss the African origins of early civilizations such as Ancient Egypt. The German philosopher Hegel for example infamously wrote:

> "[Africa] is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it-that is in its northern part-belong to the Asiatic or European World. Carthage displayed there an important transitionary phase of civilization; but, as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit".**

Such obvious biased and dismissive interpretations of non-Western and non-'literate' histories cast a long shadow on the field of African history, as well as on the interpretation of what it meant to be 'civilized'.

The Cultural Turn and the Rediscovery of Oral Sources

In the later decades of the twentieth century, a shift occurred within the historical discipline and other fields in the Humanities that placed culture and the ordinary lives of people at the center of investigation as well as moving from a more positivist epistemology that aimed to understand and study the past in a completely neutral and objective manner, to a post-modern understanding of knowledge production and scientific enquiry.

2.2 The Study of History

Epistemology

The approach to knowledge and how to arrive at it, taking into account its foundations, methods, and validity.

2.b Concept Definition

Culture

The ideas and practices that award meaning to activities in human societies.

* Eric Wolff, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

** G.F.W. Hegel, *Philosophy of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1892) p. 99.

Exemplary for this focus on culture as well as attention for discourse and meaning, is the work by communication specialists Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan. These scholars highlighted how not only was the content of the message important, but also that the chosen medium through which a message is communicated is equally part of that message and worthy of study.* Additionally, both scholars argued that the technologies used for communication changed the nature of communication and changed our cultures. Several (modern) cultures retain, what Ong calls, a 'secondary orality residue' as opposed to a primary orality found in non-literature societies. This persistence of oral communication is seen as more deliberate and self-conscious**, and continues to thrive as sound. In particular, the human voice presents such a powerful and experiential acuteness and connectedness that almost all literate societies still favor oral communications. Even today in our highly literate societies, we prefer hearing human voices over mere textual communication as becomes evident from the continuing success of radio, podcasts and vlogs.

Emancipatory movements in the twentieth century had their effect on the historical profession, as newly independent countries in, among others, Africa sought to retell their own histories from a postcolonial perspective. The study of oral sources, which were seen as untainted and authentic African voices as opposed to the colonial narratives in the written conventional accounts of colonial archives, became more popular. Several historians as well as anthropologists paved the way for contemporary historians by developing methodologies for the use of oral traditions as well as creating collections of transcribed traditions for future researchers. The Malian historian Hampâté Bâ gave voice to the tremendous fervor that was felt by these historians during the last decades of the twentieth century to save and collect as much information before it would be lost to 'modern life' when he stated that "Every time an old man dies in Africa, it is as if a library has burnt down" ("En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle").***

Communication in African History

Ancient Egypt

Ancient Egypt is probably one of the most enigmatic of all early human civilizations. From its beginnings in the third millennium BCE until its final collapse under Roman occupation in 641 CE, this mighty civilization persisted for over 4000 years and during this long stretch of time it had a tremendous influence on all its neighbors, ranging

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* Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1964).

** Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (2005), 133.

*** Amadou Hampaté Bâ, *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul: Mémoires, 1900-1991* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1992).

from the ancient Greeks, Assyrians, the Berbers and the Nubian Kingdom. Several African scholars, notably the Senegalese historian Cheick Anta Diop, have argued that ancient Egyptians were ethnically sub-Saharan African, and their civilization the quintessence and archetype of all African cultures that followed, and, as such, was what Ancient Greek and Roman civilization is for most Western cultures.* This claim is, however, disputed by other African scholars for being too Nilocentric, as well as by contemporary scholars of genetics and archeology who have concluded that due to numerous large scale migrations and imperial conquests ancient Egypt can be rather defined as a multiethnic, multilinguistic Afro-Asiatic state.**

From a geographical and topographical point of view there is of course no denying that Ancient Egypt was a civilization situated in Africa and thus an African civilization. Scholars agree that Ancient Egypt's power and wealth was largely based on the life-giving might of the river Nile. The Egyptian control over water supplies and hydration of agricultural lands through basin irrigation was perhaps not as complex as the water engineering projects of the Indus Valley or Mesopotamia, the two other major early civilizations, but the reliability, sheer volume and might of the Nile made Egypt the most durable civilization the world has ever seen. With the annual flooding of the Nile, predominantly caused by monsoon rainfalls in the mountains of Ethiopia, the river left fertile mud behind on its banks, stretching sometimes a hundred meters inland, transforming an otherwise arid desert land into a lush green strip stretching down all the way from the Great Lakes in Central Africa and the Ethiopian highlands towards the Nile Delta in 'Lower Egypt' on the Mediterranean coast, with an incredible length of 6,650 km. So important was the Nile to Egyptian civilization, that the calendar was based on its seasonal tides. There were three seasons, *Akhet*, the period of flooding; *Peret*, the sowing season; and *Shemu*, the harvest season.

Thanks to these annual inundations, Ancient Egypt featured two important elements of an advanced and complex social organization, namely a steady food supply and technological innovations. But it also had several other distinct features which historians have associated with 'civilizations', such as a clear, and often times hierarchical, social structure; a system of government and an organized religious system.

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* Cheick Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974).

** See for a detailed discussion on ethnicity in ancient Egypt, for example: Juan Carlos Moreno García, 'Ethnicity in Ancient Egypt: An Introduction to Key Issues', *Journal of Egyptian History*, Vol. 11, No. 1-2 (2018), pp. 1-17.

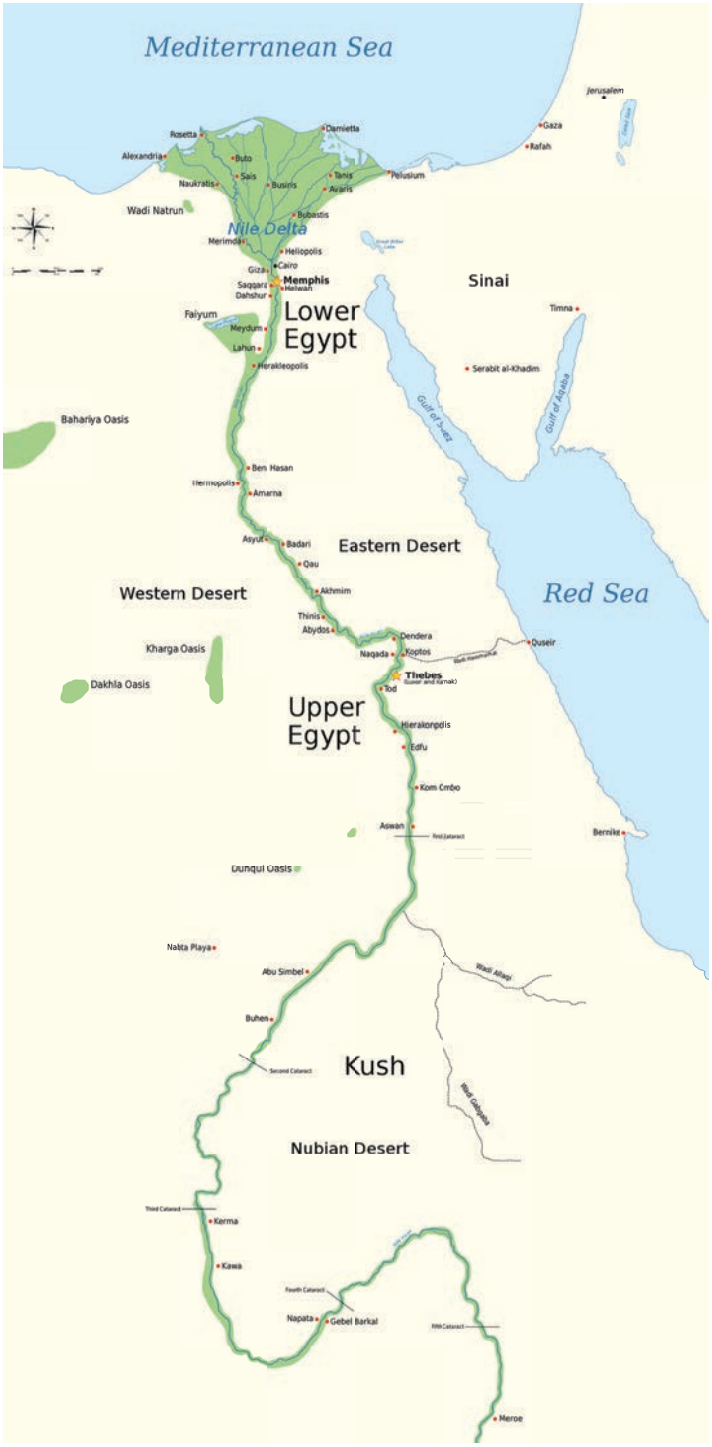

Image 2.3 Map of Ancient Egypt

In addition, ancient Egypt of course also featured that other typical but by no means conditional element of what constitutes a classic 'civilization', the development of writing. The origins of the Hieroglyphic script dates back to the fourth millennium BCE, and scholars assume it developed out of a need for tax administration. Small labels with pictorial information on them (see image 2.2) have been discovered by archeologists, who assume these labels were used for keeping track of paid tax *in natura*, and the pictorial symbols referred to both the products stored and the regions from which they came. These proto-writing symbols developed into the more complex script of Hieroglyphs.

The expansion of a writing culture and corpus of literary texts in ancient Egypt developed through the practice of writing down so-called 'mortuary texts', being chants and ritual procedures for funerals, as *aide-mémoire*.* These written texts never replaced the oral performances, but over time developed into the dominant authority on which scribes and priests came to rely. Scribes (see image 2.4) were the professional class of skilled workers charged with decorating temple walls and recording and copying moral and religious texts as well as tax collections.

Image 2.4 Seated Scribe, New Kingdom, 1391-1353 BCE

* Antonio J. Morales, 'Text-building and Transmission of Pyramid Texts in the Third Millennium BCE: Iteration, Objectification, and Change', *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* Vol. 15, No. 2 (2015), pp. 169-201.

The image of the scribes represents the well-known Egyptian hankering for immortality. The drive to preserve the body through mummification, to preserve a faithful image of an individual through visual art and to preserve the memory of an individual by a written record of his or her name and deeds, showed the Egyptian quest for and obsession with a state of permanence and eternity in the present and in the afterlife.

In modern imagination scribes are often represented as the bearers of high Egyptian civilization, but there is a debate among Egyptologists whether scribes should indeed be seen as part of the elite of Egyptian society. For example, Chloé Ragazolli has noted that as opposed to seeing them as the absolute elite and part of the aristocracy, this class of skilled workers formed an intermediary elite, as they held the key to a body of knowledge that sustained and legitimized the Egyptian state.* As the legitimacy of the Pharaoh, who was deemed a divine ruler, depended on the preservation and continuation of religious rites, which in turn had become increasingly dependent on writing, scribes played an essential role in maintaining the socio-political status-quo. This made them relatively powerful people within Egyptian society. Alternatively, Massimiliano Pinarello has argued that our modern perception of literacy being the prime marker of social distinction is a misconception and based on an anachronistic appraisal of Egyptian culture.** Scribes were first and foremost artisans, charged with a specific purpose, and as such part of the 'middle class' that consisted of free men (as opposed to the enslaved) who worked in the fields, in construction or as artists such as architects and painters. At the same time, literacy was essential for certain top offices in the state bureaucracy and the best way to ensure access to and close contact with those in power.*** Yet, scribes worked in very diverse positions with different levels of social status, ranging from bookkeepers for traders, administrative clerks in the army to priests copying sacred texts in temples.**** Seeing scribes as being part of a noble 'upper class' because of their literacy comes from the same misconception of seeing literate societies as the epitome of civilization and thus illiterate cultures and illiterate people as being less civilized and lower ranked.

The slightly conscious shift from depending on oral traditions to trusting in the written word echoes, among others, from the pages of the Old Testament shared by Jews and Christians, in which the prophet Isaiah is cited to have said: "Go now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness" (Isaiah 30:8). At the same time, this trust in the everlasting

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* Chloé Ragazolli, *Scribes. Les artisans du texte de l'Égypte ancienne. 1550-1000* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2019).

** Massimiliano S. Pinarello, *An Archaeological Discussion of Writing Practice. Deconstruction of the Ancient Egyptian Scribe* (London: Golden House, 2016).

*** Penelope Wilson, *Sacred Signs. Hieroglyphs in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 96. Wilkinson, *Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt*, 56.

**** Wilson, *Sacred Signs*, p. 96-97.

witness of the written record often went hand in hand with a trust in the ability of storytellers to keep the memory of individuals and their deeds alive, as becomes apparent from an inscription on papyrus rolls of Coptic funeral texts dating back to the second and third century CE. "A man has perished, and his corpse has become dust. [...] But writings cause him to be remembered in the mouth of the storyteller."* It is a mistake to think that ancient Egypt was predominantly a literate society. Egyptologists have pointed out that the level of literacy was relatively low, with the lowest estimates of only around 1% of society during the Old Kingdom (c. 2700–2200 BCE) and perhaps as high as 20-30% among skilled workers in the New Kingdom (c. 1570–1069 BCE), meaning that ancient Egyptian civilization remained for the most part an oral society.** Moreover, it would also be a mistake to assume that the oral traditions which continued to exist parallel to the emerging written traditions were somehow less civilized and only performed and appreciated by 'lower classes'. The orality-literary shift was gradual and did not mean a sudden and complete rejection of the more primary forms of communication, instead for most of the history of ancient Egypt literacy aided and strengthened oral traditions and vice versa.

The story of the origins of Hieroglyphs and Hieratic, a more cursive script deriving from the pictorial Hieroglyphs, and the development of literacy in ancient Egypt shows that writing did not enable the rise of complex culture, nor feature a necessity or perquisite for a society to be deemed 'civilized'; rather, it was mostly a practical adaptation and consequence of a more complex social governing structure and seems to have first and foremost been developed to aid a growing bureaucracy and increasingly integrate religious rites. In a way, the invention of writing became a 'memory trap' as societies steadily became dependent on written sources as their main storage system of information. This meant that those who had trained themselves in working with this new technology, such as scribes, eventually gained an upper hand in steering and regulating knowledge accumulation.

The Empire of Mali

What the Mediterranean sea was for several ancient civilizations such as Egypt and Greece, the Sahara proved to be, as a sea of sand and the highway of trade, for the Sahelian civilizations bordering on its shores. The word Sahel derives from the Arab word Sāḥil (ساحل) which means coast, and sums up what this region of savannah grasslands just beneath the Sahara was for the peoples living there.

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* Cited in: Daniel Viktor Takacs, "Performing Eternally: Visible Signs of Oral Tradition in Ancient Egypt", in Zuzanna Augustyniak and Hanna Rubinkowska-Aniot (eds), 'The Artistic Traditions of Non-European Cultures Series, Vol. 6', *The Art, The Oral and the Written Intertwined in African Cultures*, special journal issue (2018), pp. 13-34, p. 18.

** John Baines, *Visual and Written Culture in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 67.

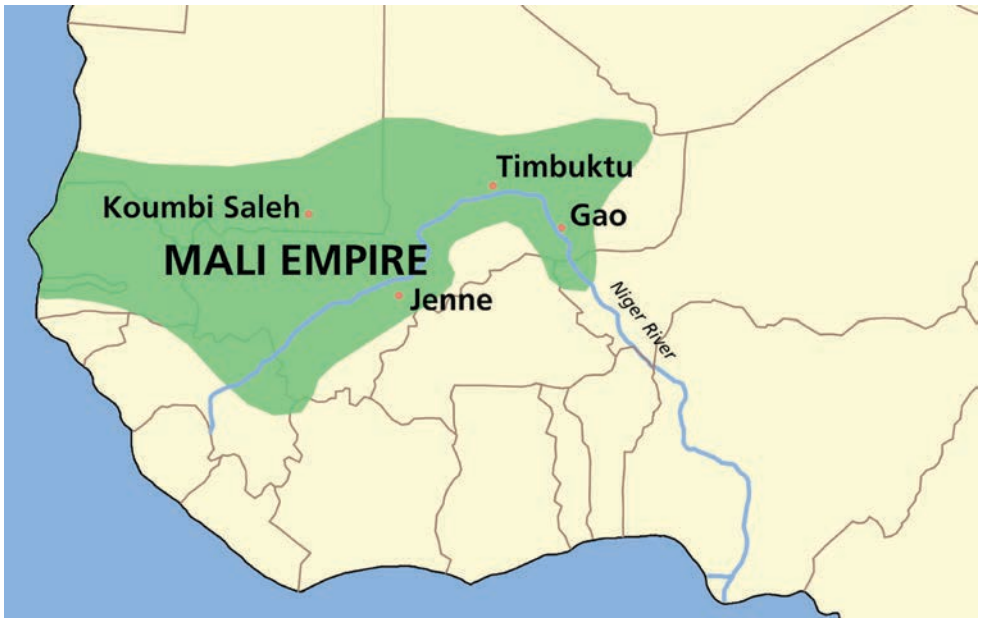

Image 2.5 Empires of Western Sudan

We often think of deserts as natural barriers, but with the domestication of the dromedary camel in the Arabian peninsula around 3000 and 2500 BCE and its subsequent spread across North Africa and the Sahel, movement across the desert became much easier and frequent. Similar also to the role of the Nile in Ancient Egypt, the river Niger functioned as the lifeline for societies in the western Sudan. Many important trading and governing cities such as Timbuktu, Djenné and Gao were along the banks of this more than four thousand kilometer long river flowing East from the Guinean highlands to the West into the Niger Delta at the Atlantic Ocean. With the exception of the inner-Delta in Mali, this river did not provide the same level of fertile silt deposits like the Nile, making farming along its banks more challenging. Yet, it was a very easily navigable river which enabled trade up and down the river with large canoes. The people of the Sahel were situated at the crossroads of trading networks that linked Sub-Saharan Africa to the rest of the then known world, and allowed them to become the intermediaries of trade between the societies in equatorial Africa and North Africa. Three consecutive empires flourished and dominated the area, the Ghana Empire (c. 300 until c. 1100 CE), the Mali Empire (c. 1235 to 1670 CE) and the Songhai Empire (1375-1591 CE).

Apart from being the middlemen for trade in salt from the North and among others kola nuts, ivory and enslaved from the South, the tremendous power and wealth of these Sahelian civilizations rested on the large gold deposits in the region. In Equatorial Africa, gold deposits were mostly found underground, and were thus very labor intensive to obtain, yet in the Sahel gold could be found in the river

sediments of the Niger and could be sifted out of the river beds quite easily. Early descriptions by Arab scholars note the incredible wealth of gold that attracted and lured foreign travelers to the region. For example, the eighth century Arab scholar Ibrahim al-Fazari called (ancient) Ghana "the land of gold".*

The decline of Ancient Ghana in the early twelfth century allowed the Keita dynasty of the Mandinka people to rise to power. Information about the origins of the Mali Empire has come to us through the oral tradition known as the Sundiata Keita. This is the key primary source for this chapter and consists of a great epic story of the founding father of the Mali Empire. It narrates the life events of the courageous 'Lion King' Sundiata of the Western Sudan who faced betrayal, exile and unexpected friendship in neighboring kingdoms which helped the young prince to reclaim his throne.

The Sundiata Keita

[...] *"We are now coming to the great moments in the life of Sundiata. The exile will end and another sun will arise. It is the sun of Sundiata. Griots know the history of kings and kingdoms and that is why they are the best counsellors of kings. Every king wants to have a singer to perpetuate his memory, for it is the griot who rescues the memories of kings from oblivion, as men have short memories".***

The Epic of Sundiata is an example of how most of the civilizations south of the Sahara narrated and preserved their history orally. The keepers of history and knowledge were Griots or Jali or Djeli (the term used by the Mande people), a class of bards and storytellers who were charged with remembering and reciting the genealogies of the royal blood lines and the oral literature of their people. Like the early 'singer of tales' of Homeric Greece or Ancient Egypt, West African Griots used memory strategies and musical aids to recount the lengthy stories about the past. As such, Griots were next to great storytellers also artists, excelling in the playing of instruments such as the *N'goni* and *Kora* (see image 2.6), types of harp-lutes, and the *Bafalon*, a wooden xylophone.

What makes the persistence of the Griots as the King's official keepers of history throughout the twelfth century up until the end of the Mali Empire intriguing, is that the Malian Empire had come to adopt writing and even came to be known as one of the leading centers of learning in the world at the time thanks to the reputation of the famous library and University of Timbuktu.

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* N. Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (1981). Cited in: David C. Conrad, *Empires of Medieval West Africa: Ghana, Mali and Songhay* (New York: Chelsea House, 2010) p. 15.

** Niane and Mamoudou Kouyaté, *Sundiata. An Epic of Old Mali*, p. 40-42.

Image 2.6 Kora Playing Griots, Sénégal, 1900 – Colonies Françaises, Sénégal, Soudan Français

Through trade contacts and conquest, Islam had spread to North Africa in the late seventh and eighth century, and progressively reached the West African courts through contact with the merchant classes from the tenth to the fifteenth century. With Islam, the Arabic language and especially Arabic script came to be adopted in the Mali Empire. The rich kings of Mali sought to exhibit their wealth as well as new found devoutness through the patronage of (religious) scholarship. The Malian Emperor Mansa Musa (c. 1280 – c. 1337 CE) (see image 2.7), said to have been the richest man in history, became one of the main patrons of scholarship by financing the Sankoré Madrassah (school of religious learning) in the early fourteenth century, which together with the Djinguereber Madrasah built in 1327 and the Sidi Yahya Madrasah completed in 1440 CE, became part of the University of Timbuktu. The city flourished as the seat of Islamic learning in West Africa. Its Arabophone scholars used Ajami, African languages in Arabic script, to produce great texts of literature and science, thereby promoting African languages as languages of science.* At its height, in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, the university town boasted 25,000 students.**

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* Ousmane Oumar Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

** Timbuktu, Unesco. https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/119

One of the reasons for the continuing importance of oral traditions was that paper remained a very expensive and scarce item in West Africa. Whereas the technique of making plant-based paper, which had been invented in China around the first millennium CE, had rapidly spread to the Islamic world, the technique had not spread to the Muslim communities in the Sahel. They came to be dependent on paper as well as (animal skin) parchment imports from production centers in Spain and North Africa. This greatly reduced the reliance of the West African societies on paper and as such on writing. As opposed to other great Islamic centers of power in for instance West Asia, the Empire of Mali did not use paper for the bureaucratic governance of its territory. The use of paper became almost exclusively designated for theological and philosophical scholarly work, such as copying religious texts, in the newly established university.* Additionally, as initially only the urban merchant classes and some of the nobility had converted to Islam and the majority of the West African population, certainly those living outside the urban centers, retained their animist beliefs, there was less need for a wide adoption of writing for the purpose of studying Koranic texts. Moreover, in contrast to for example the ancient Egyptian state, the state administration of the Mali empire was very decentralized, allowing local rulers to effectively govern smaller units of people depending on oral communication, which also reduced the necessity for the state to be dependent on a written bureaucracy.

Interestingly, those religious scholars studying and working at the Madrassahs were also expected to memorize large tracts of texts and be able to recite the Quran by heart. As such, literary traditions did not replace oral traditions nor orality in science and theology. Senegalese historian Ousmane Kane argues that the ability to memorize texts by rote became a marker of scholarly excellence, a tradition that not only existed in the Sahel but throughout the Islamic world**, as indeed becomes apparent from these following verses:

Idha lam takun hafizan wa'iyan	If retentive memory is not what you possess,
Fa-jam'uka li l-kutubi la yanfa'u	Your collection of books is quite useless,
A-tantuqu bi- l-jahli fi majlisin,	Would you dare, in company, nonsense say,
Wa-'ilmuka fil-bayti mustawda'u?	When your learning at home is stored away?***

Griots, who were as highly regarded as the literate scholars in university, formed the intermediaries between the converted and largely literate urban populations and the rural and largely illiterate population, bridging the two cultures through their oral literature. More so, Griots often functioned as mediators in conflict situations

* Jonathan M. Bloom, 'Paper in Sudanic Africa', in: Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne (eds) *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town: HSRC, 2008) p. 45-48, 51-52.

** Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu,* p. 11.

*** Ibn Najjar, cited in: Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, p. 11.

as their knowledge of local histories was seen to ensure wisdom and mutual understanding.* The diverging roles of Griots and the university scholars shows the different expectations of the role and place of history in West African society, as well as an alternative to the orality-literary shift. As opposed to largely literate societies who came to write down their people's histories and as such became dependent on recorded knowledge, distant and disconnected from the lived experiences of society, the Griots sought to preserve the living memories of their people.

Image 2.7 Mansa Musa, Emperor of Mali. Catalan World Map (1375)

The praise poetry and epic stories that make up the historical narratives in the repertoire of the Griots, and the fusion of art and history that it entails, indicates that Griots and their audiences see the purpose of history mainly in its significance for the present as moral lessons and as a continuing dialogue with society to ensure acceptance and relevance for these historical narratives, as opposed to a rigorous pursuit of factual knowledge alone. As such, the persistence of Griots reminds us

* Barbara Hoffman, 'The Roles of the Griot in the Future of Mali: A Twenty-First-Century Institutionalization of a Thirteenth-Century Traditional Institution', *African Studies Review*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2017) pp. 101-122.

of one of the reasons why we as a human species started telling each other history stories in the first place a hundred thousand years ago or more.

After the destruction of the university library and the looting of many precious manuscripts by an Moroccan army in 1591, which also ended the reign of the last of the Sahelian Empires, the Songhai, local scholars who had avoided forced exile to Morocco, dedicated themselves to saving the remaining manuscripts by hiding them in their homes and under the desert sand and kept them safe throughout the following tumultuous centuries of political upheaval, colonization and the struggles for independence. Together with the oral traditions, which were much harder to eradicate or censor, these written manuscripts and oral literature continued to safeguard the accumulated knowledge on West African history.

Conclusion

The intrinsic need to communicate has led human kind to find ever more effective ways to connect and transmit and share information, from the development of language to the invention of writing and the emergence of scribes, scholars, and scientific societies who professionalized the processes of accumulating knowledge. The rise to some relative power of the first scribes in Ancient Egypt and later the scholars in Madrassahs of the Kingdom of Mali, showed that in the evolutionary trajectory of 'knowledge sharing', the written scripts had enabled human societies to increase their ability of obtaining and sharing knowledge, making the spread of religion or state bureaucracy over larger areas easier; those that had mastered the technique of writing became more important figures in society. However, the ability to communicate orally and to remember large amounts of information without the aid of the written word, remained a crucial feature of what it meant to be 'learned' and perhaps even 'civilized'. This 'secondary' or 'enduring orality' which was clearly visible in both Ancient Egypt and West African society, as well as other civilizations across the world from South-East Asia (think of the oral tradition of the Vedas) to Latin America (for example the Aztec who combined oral traditions with pictorial communication), highlights that new communication technologies never fully replace the old, but merely change the nature of the old techniques. Perhaps we are entering an age in which the new scribes of our modern society are those computer programmers who can read and write algorithms, and as such presently hold the key to the next level of 'knowledge sharing'. However, we can be assured that forms of orality will remain with us, no matter the technological advancements.

Guiding Questions

1. What did the orality-literacy shift entail?
2. How would you link the concepts of communication and 'civilization', and what are the problems scholars encounter when trying to conceptualize and describe 'civilization'?
3. How did the emergence of a class of scribes reflect the impact of writing on Egyptian civilization?
4. Why did orality continue to play an important role in the social fabric of the Mali Empire?
5. How is the double role of oral traditions, with factual historical information on the one hand and moral lessons on the other, visible in the oral epic of Sundiata Keita?

Guide to Further Reading

- Allon, Niv and Hana Navratilova (eds), *Ancient Egyptian Scribes. A Cultural Exploration* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017). To understand what life was like as a scribe in ancient Egypt is the central focus in this book. Scribes were administrators or guardians of the state's religious and cultural textual traditions. The authors of this book also seek to find out what the scribe's position in society meant for ancient Egyptian ideas on meritocracy and literacy in an otherwise very traditional and hierarchical society.
- Diop, Cheick Anta, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974). This much debated and revolutionary book called into question the then dominant ideas on the supposed lack of African influences on Ancient Egyptian civilization. Diop argued that Ancient Egyptians were not only culturally influenced by sub-Saharan Africans, but were, in fact, of Sub-Saharan ethnic decent. Ironically, in his attempt to rectify the bias in Western science of seeing Egyptians as predominantly white, Diop falls into the trap of racial or ethnic essentialism himself as he insists there is one identifiable homogenous African population dominating ancient Egypt. Nevertheless, the book is considered today as a paradigm shifting publication, highlighting Africa's central place in the history of human civilizational development.
- Kane, Ousmane Oumar, *Beyond Timbuktu. An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2016). In this masterfully written book, Kane argues that the great scholarly centers in West Africa, such as in Timbuktu and Djenné, not only influenced West African intellectual traditions but also the wider Islamic scholarly world. As such the book challenges the ideas that Africa did not have a scholarly tradition before colonization, and that connections between West Africa and other centers of Islamic learning were solid and long-standing.
- Okpewho, Isidore, *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). As a novelist and poet as well as literary scholar, Isidore Okpewho was one of the scholars who pioneered the field of Oral Tradition and Oral Literature

in literary studies. In this book he asserted that epic poetry as genre existed in Africa, breaking with the then dominant and Eurocentric conventions on what epic poetry entailed.

- Ong, Walter, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982/2012). This book has already become a modern classic in communication studies, as it innovatively opened up the field to consider how changes in communication media affected how individuals, as well societies as a whole, think about and value information and information sharing.
- Schmandt-Besserat, Denise, *How Writing Came About* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996). This book argues that writing evolved out of the need for accurate accounting, and thus evolved in symbioses with mathematics. As such the author illuminated how early scripts, such as the cuneiform script, were the cultural evolutionary consequence of humanity's shift from a hunter-gatherer life to a sedentary farming society.
- Vansina, Jan, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1985). Part of the UNESCO History of Africa editorial board, Vansina's scholarly work engages with questions about how to decolonize the sources and narratives of African History. This revolutionary book greatly aided this ambition, influencing generations of historians to consider and use alternative sources such as Oral Traditions.