

## **Book review article on Jack Goody's the domestication of the Savage mind**

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Although there may be a level of abstraction at which similarities can be made to appear, there is also a level of specificity at which differences create a significant gap." (Katherine Hayles,)

The study of writing systems has had a long history within the discipline of anthropology, and opinions concerning its importance and the kind of problems it should address have shown diversity. This book tries to deal with the concept of literacy in various traditional societies, and how writing has influenced literacy. Before going any further it is important to understand what literacy means. As Goldfish suggested literacy is a tool, it is not just confined to reading and writing, there are various types of literacy, such as oracy speaking and understanding oral language, computer literacy, cultural literacy (ideas and ideals from past culture that defined and shaped today's society). It is a way through which we learn about the world and can participate in the society. Goody gives a contrast between literate and non literate societies where he emphasizes on alphabetic literacy, it further analysis the effect of writing on 'modes of thought' and major societal institutions. It is an anthropological account of changing ways of thinking in east and west; it tries to break away from superiority created by dichotomy between west's the domesticated or civilized ones and east's the savage or the barbaric. It explains the concept of literacy; taking in account understanding of sociology, psychology, linguistics, philosophy, history and others. The understanding of literacy and the different theories about literacy have changed and developed over time. There are four present learning theories that most people believe. They are constructivist, interactive, sociolinguistic, and reader response. It is the sociolinguistic theory with which we can compare Goody's work.

Sociolinguistic theories focus on the cultural dimension that affects literacy. It is a social activity, and is therefore created and changed by the culture. Vygotsky believes that language helps to organize thought, and children use language to communicate and share experiences as well as to learn. The fact that language is for social purposes is important to remember when teaching; exemplify that, and work it into different activities. Scaffolding is a belief of Vygotsky that uses parents and teachers as support mechanisms for students; enabling them to accomplish more difficult things that they would not be able to do without collaboration. Performing tasks that one can already do does not help to increase knowledge. Zone of proximal development is the range of tasks between the student's actual developmental level and their potential level. Vygotsky differentiates between scientific knowledge and everyday knowledge. He focuses on the role instructions in formal setting, in other words he talks about function of literacy in society.

Nineteenth century evolutionist seized upon the presence or absence of writing as a typological criteria which, when used to define different levels of cultural development, served handily to distinguish "civilization" from its antecedent stages<sup>1</sup>. Shortly before 1900 interest shifted to the history of writing itself, many theories were propounded which traced the evolution of graphic communication from its present state of development as alphabet. But it gradually stopped around 1950's and 60's as linguist depicted writing as mere representation of oral language without having its own body and soul. But it was not the end during the last decade, interest in systems of writing had started to accelerate. There were many reasons for the same but one the major reasons was Goody's persistent advocacy writing bearing directly on basic problems in anthropological theory.

*The domestication of Savage Mind* constitutes eight chapters, which deals with various aspects of alphabetical literacy and its affect on society at large. It also takes on major consequence of literacy on structure and operation of human mind. Firstly I will try to summarize the book and with will put forward arguments so as to analyze it closely.

For decades, anthropologists have tried to draw empirically valid distinction between 'primitive' and 'advanced' form of thought. The contrast has been phrased in many ways. It looks at how modes of thought have changed over the period of time and space. How binaries have been created which are rooted in we/they which is both ethnocentric and analytically confining. This kind of framework is either non developmental, a flaw that precludes the possibility of accounting for the historical emergence of 'advanced' form of thought from their presumably more rudimentary precursors. It has happened because the way sociologist and anthropologist have studied it that is through cultural relativism, which is non- evolutionary in nature. The

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<sup>1</sup> Maine 1873 and Tylor 1865

categories we tend to use to describe evolution are more or less unidirectional such as primitive and complex, traditional and modern and so on and so forth.

The author emphasizes on the study of general human mind and thought as he considers all other areas of studies being off shoot of the same. Things are being looked at from stand point of the investigator, rather than looking at similarities we focus on differences. What is needed, Goody argues, is a fresh approach to the problem- an approach that simultaneously eschews rigidly dualistic classification and posits mechanisms which have operated over the period of time to “transform the nature of cognitive process”. We try to state the nature of difference in very general term such as from myth to history, magic to science etc. Through this we tend to add value element that distorts the way we perceive the kind of development that has occurred. To this kind of differentiation Levi –Strauss comment that there is no reason to consider primitive man as less intelligent or not an intellectual as the difference lies not in the mental capacity but area of interest. But he also uses the dichotomy of savage and domesticated which has features similar to that of we – they.

Language analysis revealed that classification and taxonomy in primitive societies were highly complex as opposed to the view of Malinowski who said that interest of primitive people was based only on their needs. Whereas Strauss argued that it also satisfied the intellectual need. He rightly emphasis on scientific element in primitive societies and classification, the point here to be focused is that both have been derived from language. He further rejects the evolutionary implication of scientific thought and rather says that there are two strategic levels where nature is accessible to scientific enquiry one adapted to perception and imagination and other removed from it. But this approach again reinforced the existing dichotomies of primitive and advanced. Goody sets away from the notion of Strauss and says that these dichotomies are more relevant at particularistic level. Language and means of communication also play a pivotal role in development of thought. After language the next most important advance in this field lies in reduction speech to graphic forms, in development of writing. Writing enabled man to separate words, to manipulate their order and to develop syllogistic form of reasoning; these latter features are seen more specifically literate than oral. The difference in not much of thought or mind as that is of the mechanics of communication. Literacy is marked by abstractness and decontextualization of knowledge. Traditional societies are marked by oral tradition, which rapidly accepts or rejects the new element in body of knowledge. But such system makes it difficult to isolate a segment of human discourse and there in no way to revisit the exact version. The oral culture also fails to recognize the individual contribution and signature as it passed from one generation to another without being specific about the creator, as it is being changed over and over again.

Adoption of written modes of communication are intrinsic to development of wide ranging, more depersonalized and more abstract system of governance but it also means departure from face to face interaction. Written modes also individualize the content and form which is seen as feature of ‘advanced’ societies.

Goody criticizes what he calls as “great divide” model of intellectual differences, but also ends presenting one of his own. The casual mechanism in Goody’s model are changes in modes of communication, and none of these, he proposes, has had a deeper or more pervasive impact than the invention and dissemination of alphabetic writing. Goody contends that literacy produce something similar to cognitive revolution, a subtle but radical restructuring of the human mind that brought into being a totally new set of thinking capacities. These capacities were lacking among members of preliterate societies, and therefore the kinds of intellectual activities they engaged in were of a fundamentally different order than those performed by persons who are able to read and write. The latter possess what Goody describes as "intrinsically literate modes of thought"; the former do not.

Many other theorist such as Marshall Mc Luhan And Eric Havelock brought prominence to the theme of what is known as ‘orality and literacy’ in cultural debates. It is like debate between ear and eyes, as primitive societies were based on oral traditions and thus they were not able to look back as it was not preserved, changes were not recorded. But with gradual coming of writing, things got recorded, changes from past to present became clearer and it led us to favour dividing things into neat categories. Writing gives us freedom to engage in more critical analysis, thus leading to rationality, skepticism and logic. Goody regards these processes as cognitive processes thus implicitly implying that written language or literacy enhances thought process. Even Vygotsky means the same when he says “At a certain point these lines meet, whereupon thought becomes verbal and speech rational”<sup>2</sup> But Ruth Finnegan comments that ‘it is difficult to maintain any clear –cut distinction between those cultures which employ the written word and those who do not’<sup>3</sup>. it is something that Goody denies he says ‘general’ rather that radical differences still exist between literate and non- literate societies.

Goody’s claim that writing resulted in the development of new mental capabilities may be considered plausible if it meets two sets of conditions. First, Goody must show that the capabilities in question do indeed

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<sup>2</sup> Thought and Language by Vygotsky

<sup>3</sup> Biases of the ear and eye by Daniel Chandler

exist in literate societies. Second, he must demonstrate that these same capabilities are absent in preliterate groups. Then, and only then, is it reasonable to maintain that writing systems may have operated in the causal capacity that he describes. It is with respect to the second set of conditions that Goody's argument runs into trouble, and it is this problem, more than any other, that weakens his general thesis.

Goody shifts a bit from his exposition of considering literacy as means of evolving of cognitive processes when focus on making lists. He says "I do not see making tables, lists, formulae, as originating entirely with coming of writing, I would maintain that the shift from utterance to text led to significant from utterance to text led to significant developments of a sort that might loosely referred to as change in consciousness". Although categorizing and classifying things is considered a higher order mental process, but is it related to literacy or not is still a question.

The explicit formulation of category system ...is a function of reduction of classificatory terms to writing, and not simply writing that takes words out of their speech context and places them, so, abstracted, in a unilateral relationship with words deemed to be of a similar class i.e. is possessing some common features which may relate to concrete world outside. Thus Goody says list making list alters not the world but psyche as well.

Although graphic representation can be regarded as a tool, a facilitating device of extreme importance. "It encourages reflection upon and the organization of information, quiet apart from mnemotechnic function."<sup>4</sup>Through this argument Goody wants to say that written listing decontextualizes elements of speech, arranges, classify according to certain principles etc. thus it fosters cognitive growth and encourages abstract thinking. But no empirical evidences are there to support his assertion, and there is nothing on bases of which we can state that pre- literate societies lack these capabilities.

As we know in primitive societies there were folklore and folkmusic both require certain amount of classificatory skill as both have varied genres and music has highly complex notes and system of arrangement; if they were able to deal with it then literacy cannot be attributed for the same. This is where Goody's argument falters, consequently, his assertion that the practice of committing lists to written form precipitated a "change of consciousness" becomes implausible and, to this reader at least, somewhat mysterious. These criticisms apply to the whole of Goody's study. Throughout, he is unable to show that the cognitive consequences of literacy were distinct, either logically or empirically, from their cognitive antecedents. The "transformation" he says took place is never adequately documented, and therefore the possibility remains actively alive that the mental capabilities which he believes were "caused" by literacy are precisely those that made it possible in the first place. Goody is well aware that, in matters such as this, you can't have your cake and eat it too. Either one claims, as he does, that literacy produced a new set of cognitive capacities, or, alternatively, that equivalent capacities, fully present prior to the advent of writing, were channeled by it in new directions and later became elaborated, refined, and more specialized. The first position represents a strong claim for the effects of literacy on the human mind. The second position, which Goody explicitly rejects (I 8; 109), represents a weaker counterpart. Little ethnographic research has been conducted from either perspective, but the available findings, as interpreted by psychological anthropologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1973), have lead them to support the latter. They also found that schooling rather than literacy appeared to be cause of some significant changes in cognitive skills involved in logical functions of language.

There are people like Harvey Graff refers to the "<sup>5</sup> 'tyranny of conceptual dichotomies' - such as literate and illiterate, written and oral, print and script- in the study and interpretation of literacy. He declares none of these polar opposites usefully describes actual circumstances; all of them prelude contextual understanding". The interpretive alternatives to great divide theory have been suggested in form of 'continuity' theories which says literacy is an ongoing process, it is a dynamic interaction between various medias. Thought grew as the media expanded but the fundamental thoughts such as rationality, logic, generalization, abstraction, theorizing, intentionality, causal thinking was always there. Over the time it must have expanded due to continuous interaction with the society and it cannot be regarded as just the function of literacy alone. Vygotsky clearly put forwards an undisputable claim that thought development is determined by language. As he regards the nature of the development itself from biological to sociohistorical. Verbal thought is not an innate, natural form of behaviour but is determined by a historical-cultural process and has specific properties and laws that cannot be found in the natural forms of thought and speech. If go by this we can say that literacy does affect thought, but it does not mean that thought in pre literate society were rudimentary.

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<sup>4</sup> Goody pg 108-109

<sup>5</sup> Biases of the Ear an Eye- Daniel Chandler

### **References**

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