

FROM ORALITY TO LITERACY AND TO ORALITY AGAIN:

A Story of Story

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It must be a streak of madness in me to presume to stand here before people who have dedicated a fair portion of their young, and middle-aged or not so middle-aged talents and energies to thinking and teaching about reading, and the practice of literacy, in or out of school.

But if you bear with me, I will talk a little on a number of issues that relate in some way to the matter of reading and literacy, issues that point to the societies of the Pacific islands before literacy, to the presence of the word (to use Walter Ong's term)¹ in these societies from European contact down to this moment. Please do not expect coherence in what I have to say for the field I wish to explore is as vast as the ocean that is all about us, but consider what I say as utterances, like the waves reaching out to you, some even, some frayed, some broken, and some even dissipating.

It might help us all perhaps if I explain my title for a start. I've named this talk "From Orality to Literacy and to Orality Again: A Story of Story". If we took that title to refer simply to the progress of the technologizing of the word², i.e. from a time when people organized all their speech acts, verbal communication, word-arts - songs, chants, riddles, proverbs, anecdotes, jokes, and all manner of story - in visual, oral-aural codes without hieroglyph or inscription or any form of writing at all; through the time when the technology of writing was invented and widely used as a way of organizing and exchanging thought and the passing on of information and the creation of literature; through the invention and use of the printing press, i.e. through all the development in the visualisation of the word; through the marvels of radio, the wireless, the electronic media when the word and audience seemed to function as if we were back in the original state of orality; then it would not be so mysterious, even if the whole process

recounts a history of wonderful inventions.

That story has been very well told by a number of people already.³

But I'm interested in portions of that story, and especially in certain attitudes that go with asserting the greatness of inventions and what great good they will bring to people.

My particular focus is people and how relatively new technologies, like reading and writing, do empower them to take their place in a progressive globalizing environment; as well as, and particularly so, how these very empowering tools can impoverish, undermine some of the humanity that cultures without writing had developed over centuries.⁴

I realise of course that any change involves losing something. But it is quite another thing to imply through our educational or imperialist or globalizing programmes that the old culture has really nothing to offer, except maybe a couple of stories and rituals that we could salvage to remind us in moments of success, or in moments of failure, that we had a past. I will touch on this issue of salvaging stories and rituals at the end.

If you called out and said, "Hey, what are you really trying to say?" I could of course reply and say, "Do I have to say anything? Lots of people give papers at conferences but say nothing, really".

But this is what I would really like you to hear. It seems to me that the way to go forward in any satisfying literacy education programme would be to give our past due recognition through a literacy that engages oral energies in its linguistic and cultural contexts while using available electronic technology to enhance the process, not diminish it.

There you have the idea of the cycle implied in the title of this talk. The tag at the end of the title, "A Story of Story", focuses the issues over time in a kind of narrative, a story.

Story is of course a complex affair in itself. Especially when it is used as an analogous concept, applicable to a multitude of accounts we compose of events

that relate to our manifold lives and at multiple levels. "Jumpy Mouse"⁵ (or any of the many stories we know or those we have heard in the last two days), for example, is a story, which also has stories relating to its presences. I'm not referring to its variants only, but also to their manner of coming into being. And so for any story that you care to name.

Implied in what I have been saying is the very important nexus between story in its ephemeral coming into being in the world of sound (i.e. in the telling and in its presence in the oral culture) and its chirographic or typographic presence⁶ in the literate culture. It is the process that transmits story from one presence to the other that I want us also to meditate upon. It is a crucial issue in the context of our popular will to literacy. The way we bring about this shift determines where we stand as imperialists or globalizing agents, or as true educators of the people.

The spoken word and the written word

At the end of one of the dialogues of Plato, called *Phaedrus*, Socrates discusses with Phaedrus the comparative merits of speech and writing as vehicles for the communication of truth. Socrates introduces this discussion with a story:

They say that there dwelt at Naucratis in Egypt one of the old gods of that country, to whom the bird they call Ibis was sacred, and the name of the god himself was Theuth. Among his inventions were number and calculation and geometry and astronomy, not to speak of various kinds of draughts and dice, and, above all, writing. The king of the whole country at that time was Thamus, who lived in the great city of Upper Egypt which the Greeks call Egyptian Thebes; the name they give to Thamus is Ammon. To him came Theuth and exhibited his inventions, claiming that they ought to be [made] known to the Egyptians in general. Thamus inquired into the use of each of them, and as Theuth went through them expressed approval or disapproval, according as he judged Theuth's claims to be well or ill founded. It would take too long to go through all that Thamus is reported to have said for and

against each of Theuth's inventions. But when it came to writing, Theuth declared: 'Here is an accomplishment, my lord the king, which will improve both the wisdom and the memory of the Egyptians. I have discovered a sure receipt for memory and wisdom.' 'Theuth, my paragon of inventors,' replied the king, 'the discoverer of an art is not the best judge of the good or harm which will accrue to those who practise it. So it is in this case; you who are the father of writing, have out of fondness for your offspring attributed to it quite the opposite of its real function. Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on writing to bring things to remembrance by external signs instead of on their own internal resources. What you have discovered is a receipt for recollection, not for memory. And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality: they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant. And because they are filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom they will be a burden to society.'

I cite this story for a number of reasons: I like the story, and feel it is saying something true, that in the pursuit of an integrated education for people, the oral word educates more profoundly. We all know this. It's happening in our lives. But it's something we take for granted, and perhaps at times deny. I suppose an oral education does not often seem important to some of us, but that may be because we have lost our masters and mistresses of the oral word. It's not for nothing that our first classrooms in these islands were referred to as 'valeniwilivola', reading rooms, reading houses, and, by extension, or literally, libraries. I'm not implying in any way that our present literacy education programmes applaud book learning as the only goal. In fact we tend to mistrust people with only book learning. Somehow we sense that they lack life, lack participation in our lifeworld. And it is in this lifeworld that we experience the real word, the spoken word, the word as sound.

And this was how literacy was conceived in those days. It was connected with

speech, oratory. Poor reading performance meant in large part poor oratorical performance. Reading had to be aloud, had to be sound-conscious. The practice did not just happen here; it was happening in the USA and elsewhere as well.⁸ Silent reading had yet to come. So when I just now said that *valeniwilivola* meant 'library' I was not likening it to our present libraries, which, like our very own USP library is a house of silence, except when young lovers choose to conduct their regular courtship sessions in it.

Sound literacy did not just happen a long time ago. It survives and lives on. When I went to school my teacher encouraged us to read aloud, and to read as if we were speaking. Years later, in the village, I read a whole book aloud. In fact I owe part of my sensitivity to language to that teacher's advice. And when I read a statement that says, "[T]he ability to write is closely connected with the ability to hear in one's imagination what a written text would sound like when read aloud"⁹, I get confirmed in my conviction.

The moment our *valeniwilivola*, as agent of the new education, came into being was the moment also for our word makers to anticipate their own eclipse. Into eclipse went the long compositions, songs, stories. Memory, it seems, did become shorter. The use of story as creator of language and meaning, the function of composers to keep purifying the 'dialect of the tribe' and to lead the mind to aftersight and prophecy¹⁰ were all gone into the *valeniwilivola*. And it's a mighty task to try to revitalise, reconstruct, recreate these vital parts of our lives, our language communities, our cultures, our heritage in our present classrooms. And I suppose as products of our present classrooms we know exactly what we are and what we can really do, and maybe what we cannot really do.

From orality to literacy. We have made progress. No doubt about that at all. But let me say something else regarding Socrates and the story he tells, and regarding Plato, who wrote the dialogue. Plato was writing at the time when Greece had attained a high level of literacy. He made Socrates assert the superiority of the spoken over the written word. He chose, moreover, to write in dialogue form, i.e. in a form which imitates speech. His philosophical dialectic had to be in this form. For him and for the body politic, however, it was goodbye forever to the oral culture and some of its irrational elements and products such as poets, the *rhapsodists*, and their poetry. I suspect there's

something of Plato in the attitudes behind some of our literacy programmes whose purveyors fear what is not strictly rational and not clearly moral, moralising, moralistic. There is no room here of course for literature as such. There is no room here for the much misunderstood thing called *fiction*. You mustn't expose children to fiction.

Plato's attitude, reflected here, became explicit in his *Politics*. Yet in the dialogue we got our story from, the *Phaedrus*, Plato, it seems, was going through a process of coming to terms with the "presence of the word" in the pursuit of wisdom. And he was undertaking this at a point in time when literacy and orality were influencing each other as channels of communicating thought and teaching, moral and political.

We may also sense, here in these islands, a kindred situation, even if only partly so. The alphabet we have come to adopt has only been with us now for the last 150 years or so, and its effective and widespread presence is much shorter than that. But what a presence! It has become so much yearned for, worked for, laboured at, used to browbeat with, and so much more for the possessor, a sign of accomplishment, that we have come to regard the written word as the real word. Without a mastery of it there is no possible adventure.

Dr Tupeni Baba tells of how his father taught him the alphabet. He was six, a big boy and going to school. He also liked spearfishing, which meant adventure and discovery. And his village was on this little bay towards the north-eastern point of Vanua Levu.

His father had fashioned bushknife handles from the buttresses of the great chestnut tree. He wrote the alphabet on one of these handles, handed it to his son and said "Son, you shall not go spearfishing beyond these two points of the bay until you have learnt off your alphabet front to back and back to front."

Tupeni says he's never learned anything as fast as he did that alphabet written on a piece of the great chestnut tree.¹¹

We may recall other methods of learning the alphabet, like singing or chanting it, front to back and back to front.

But that's how important this mastery of the chirographic art had become. It would open up worlds, access worlds beyond the small bay. At least that was the promise.

One hundred and ten years before, a printing press landed on Lakeba in the Lau islands to the south east. The missionaries had begun part of their work, the programmed assault of the oral culture and its manifold articulateness and orientations. And one effective instrument was this printing press. And this is how the missionaries themselves described that machine at that productive auspicious moment:

Great was the astonishment and delight of the people as they saw the marvels of the Mission press. The Heathen at once declared it to be a god. And mightier far than their mightiest and most revered deities was that engine at which they wondered. In the midst of the barbarous people it stood, a fit representative of the high culture and triumphant skill of the land whence it came; and, blessed by the prayers of multitudes across the seas, and of the faithful ones who directed its might, that mission press began, with silent power, its great and infallible work, which was destined to deliver beautiful Fiji from its old and galling bonds, to cleanse away its filthy stains of crime, to confer upon its many homes the blessings of civilization, and enrich its many hearts with the wealth of the Gospel of Jesus.¹²

The new story, the new myth, the new ideology, had arrived. This historical moment is also the emblematic moment. It might even be appropriate to regard it as the sacramental moment that brought into being a new integrated system, of belief, of culture, of validation, of noetic packaging. There was nothing neutral at all in the presence of a printing press, just as there is nothing at all neutral in the technology of writing. They assume a totally new way of organizing knowledge and of communicating it. They are culture bound in earnest, in other words.

The primary oral culture (to use Walter Ong's phrase again)¹³, before the coming of this new system, was also an integrated system with its own way of

organizing and communicating knowledge, information, values. The oral word had been tuned and cadenced to a high level of subtlety both for practical, social, religious, ceremonial, and for aesthetic purposes.

This total communicative achievement had to be belittled so that the literate order could enter. If you didn't know your alphabet, did not know how to write or could not read, then you were dumb, no matter how skilled you were in your own verbal world. The chirographic, the typographic arts required that you be born again, crawl, and toddle, and toddle for a very long while.

How much information and what quality of discourse you could make these arts communicate was another matter. Your brain, your psyche even, had to be reconfigured. Word became silent, visual, but it was access to the world that brought the technology.

An encounter with literacy

It would be interesting to witness the moment when individuals confronted written communication for the very first time, even just to bring home the fact that orality is a phenomenon essentially different from that of literacy. Or to discover what motivated people to literacy, and their perception of the art.

There is a dramatic moment depicting this encounter in William Mariner's account of the Tonga Islands as recorded by John Martin.

It is about thirty years before the printing press got to work in Lakeba, Fiji. Mariner had written a letter in English "with a solution of gunpowder and a little mucilage for ink, on some paper which one of the natives had had a long time in his possession."¹⁴ He had meant this letter for any ship captain that landed in Tonga, advising European ships to prefer Ha'apai to the island of Tongatapu for taking on supplies of food and water:

advising, at the same time, not to suffer many of the natives to be on board at once, lest they should meet with the same fate as the Port au Prince; but, if possible, to make some chiefs prisoners, and keep them as hostages, till Mr Mariner and his

*companions were delivered up.*¹⁵

The letter had been given to one of the chiefs to keep and deliver when the opportunity arose. But a traitor, a Hawaiian, told Finau, the powerful warrior king, about this letter. Finau had the letter sent for. And here I read from Dr Martin's book:

*When it was put into his hands, he looked at it on all sides; but not being able to make any thing of it, he gave it to Jeremiah Higgins, who was at hand, and ordered him to say what it meant. Mr Mariner was not present. Higgins took the letter, and translating part of it into the Tonga language, judiciously represented it to be merely a request to any English captain that might arrive to interfere with Finow for the liberty of Mr Mariner and his countrymen; stating, that they had been kindly treated by the natives, but, nevertheless, wished to return, if possible to their native country. This was not indeed the true substance of the letter, but it was what was least likely to give offence; and the chief accordingly remarked, that it was very natural for these poor fellows to wish to go back to their native country and friends.*¹⁶

If you'll bear with me I'll quote at length from this fascinating account of 'curiosity and astonishment' at this marvellous invention of the chirographic art:

This mode of communicating sentiments was an inexplicable puzzle to Finow; he took the letter again and examined it, but it afforded him no information. He considered the matter a little within himself; but his thoughts reflected no light upon the subject. At length he sent for Mr Mariner, and desired him to write down something; the latter asked what he would choose to have written; he replied, put down me; he accordingly wrote 'Feenow' (spelling it after the strict English orthography); the chief then sent for another Englishman who had not been present, and commanded Mr Mariner to turn his back and look the other way, he gave the man the paper, and desired him to tell what that was: he accordingly pronounced aloud the name of the king, upon which Finow snatched the paper from his hand, and with

astonishment, looked at it, turned it round and examined it in all directions; at length he exclaimed 'This is neither like myself, nor anybody else! where are my legs? how do you know it to be I?' and then, without stopping for an attempt at an explanation, he impatiently ordered Mr Mariner to write something else, and thus employed him for three or four hours in putting down the names of different persons, places, and things, and making the other man read them. This afforded extraordinary diversion to Finow, and to all the women and men present, particularly as he now and then whispered a little love anecdote, which was strictly written down, and audibly read by the other, not a little to the confusion of one or other of the ladies present. It was all taken in good humour, however, for curiosity and astonishment were the prevailing passions. How their names and circumstances could be communicated through so mysterious a channel, was altogether past their comprehension. Finow had long ago formed his opinion of books and papers, and this as much resembled witchcraft as anything he had ever seen or heard of. Mr Mariner in vain attempted to explain. He had yet too slender a knowledge of their language to make himself clearly understood: and, indeed, it would not have been an easy matter to have explained the composition of elementary sounds, and of arbitrary signs expressive of them, to a people whose minds were already formed to other modes of thinking, and whose language had few expressions but what concerned the ordinary affairs of life.¹ Finow, at length, thought he had got a notion of it, and explained to those about him that it was very possible to put down a mark or sign of something that had been seen both by the writer and reader, and which should be mutually understood by them; but Mr Mariner immediately informed him, that he could write down anything that he had never seen. The king directly whispered to him to put Toogoo Aho (the king of Tonga, whom he and Toobo Nuha had assassinated many years before Mr Mariner's arrival). This was accordingly done, and the other read it; when Finow was yet more astonished. He then desired him to write 'Tarky,' (the chief of the garrison of Bea, whom Mr Mariner and his companions had not yet seen; this chief was blind in one eye). When 'Tarky' was read, Finow inquired whether he was blind or not. This was putting writing to an unfair test! and Mr Mariner told him, that he had only written down

the sign standing for the sound of his name, and not for the description of his person. He was then ordered in a whisper to write, 'Tarky, blind in his left eye,' which was done, and read by the other man to the increased astonishment of every body. Mr Mariner then told him that, in several parts of the world, messages were sent to great distances through the same medium, and being folded and fastened up, the bearer could know nothing of the contents; and that the histories of whole nations were thus handed down to posterity, without spoiling by being kept (as he chose to express himself). Finow acknowledged this to be a most noble invention, but added, that it would not at all do for the Tonga Islands; that there would be nothing but disturbances and conspiracies, and he should not be sure of his life, perhaps, another month. He said, however, jocularly, that he should like to know it himself, and for all the women to know it, that he might make love with less risk of discovery, and not so much chance of incurring the vengeance of their husbands.¹⁸

I am sure there were tests and lessons of this sort in similar encounters between orality and literacy. And we can be sure, moreover, that similar emotions of wonder were expressed at 'the noble invention', at what it was capable of communicating, just as there would have been inaccurate perceptions of what it was capable of doing.

There was also the judgment made on the limitations of the indigenous language, and this by someone who acknowledges in the very same breath his own poor understanding of it. It was quite revealing also that he notes that the native mind had been formed by other modes of thinking. This would in itself be a great undertaking to explore in the context of an oral culture. And I suppose I am including all that when I mention orality, particularly primary orality.

There is also the implication of what Finau expects writing to do. He wanted writing to function as icon. When you wrote down 'Finau' it would have to be him. Writing should become him. Person, flesh, is to be made word. Finau expected that when Mariner wrote Takai's name, this would include the detail that Takai was blind in the left eye. Symbol in this mode of perception would be instantiation, not abstraction. The symbolised becomes/comes to be within

the symbol. This is in fact an important component of word in the oral culture. A person's name makes present the identity of that person, and by sounding the name you gain a certain control over that person. You have some power over the person. Something of this is also meant when people say that word is power. The uttered word is thing, that is living, energised, real, active.

The literate concept of word is not quite like that. Mariner had trouble trying to make Finau understand the written word as the symbol of what was sounded. Thus there is in this language I am using now an essential connection between symbol and sound. Indeed the Latin *verbum*, a word, already implies action. Note that the term verb comes directly from it. Now *verbum* itself derives from a root meaning *to speak*.¹⁹

Now I am not saying that writing always imitates speech or tries to. All I want to say is that writing has an intimate relatedness to sound. And I am hoping that when stories become written they can also have this relatedness, and can speak.

There is another important observation we can make on the Finau and writing account. This is the issue of the power of word. We can meditate on this on a number of levels. The first obvious one is on the level of what writing does with articulate sound, and this reverberates throughout the history of writing, the history of putting down oral utterances or performances in writing, the history of recording in writing, traditions, stories, songs, chants, speeches, histories, and so on. In many ways, for the literate with a past, all this constitutes much of what they know, these reproductions, re-presentations, editions, reconstructions, or "diminishments".²⁰

All these products, these hoards of words, accounts, etc. are not neutral however. Just because they have become the written word or the printed word does not mean they should rule over others that still belong in the oral world. To have them do so is to confuse instrument, the technology, and the word. Related to both instrument and word is the notion of quality. I mean the transcription of a story can be badly done. Low quality work went into its production. And stories too don't write themselves, just as no event can become a story by itself. It needs someone to tell of the event. And no one is neutral or objective. What is told, written, produced, is a complex result of

choices, inclusions and exclusions. There is needed a lively critical sense among literacy clients and purveyors.

The power of the written word in terms of its capacity and capabilities is undoubted. But in terms of what I've been hinting at already and in terms of what I'm going to hint at, that power is often regarded in an exaggerated way. In relation to speech it is not able to carry with any ease all that speech carries. It cannot with ease retell a story, rechant a chant, reproduce voice and tone, and cadence and all manner of gestures. The oral word that is modulated by a gesture has to become a different word or more words in the written version. If liveliness is a quality of the story, then the written has to keep pace or approach the context of interacting sounds and voices.

The popular will to literacy strives to make books available to as many as possible. To fulfil this goal there will sometimes be an indiscriminate supply produced and made available. There comes a time when we become more discriminating, when quality becomes important, not only in the look of the book, but also in the range and richness of the writing. If the word is not enriching, then children will shy away from words, go for the icons instead, or make do with a very limited word hoard, and lose interest in many things in human existence that are explored and explorable through words. They will no doubt be capable of what Finau wanted for himself and the ladies, and what the preacher wants them to read and memorise, or what advertisers want them to buy, but will not get to appreciate what major or any good writers explore, or get to sense the irony of losing the mastery of the verbal arts from their language communities. For if one has not discovered an interest in word from the traditional culture, then one would find it a little difficult to find it elsewhere. Unless there was a literacy programme that recognized the situation and was sensitive to the word.

And by a literate inadvertence children will be excluded. Finau thought that his people should not become literate for fear of the secret power writing would give them. It was a kind of censorship of the medium for the mass. But it was not an exclusion that was seriously meant, and not an exclusion that a literate inadvertence would generate. This is a more insidious cause for exclusion because it will deny the formative and even the performative identities and means of those subject to the literacy programme.

Focus and ambience of orality

Orality is of the order of our human lifeworld, closest to it for our survival, closest to it for our personal development, closest to it for maintaining the bonds that keep us human. And any technology should be there only to mediate and keep us together. We can only understand each other and be personally and mutually committed in oral interaction.

We may not always like to be that close, but when we feel that need then no amount of chirographic or typographic mediation can quite satisfy.

Walter Ong explains this linking of orality to the human lifeworld:

In the absence of elaborate analytic categories that depend on writing to structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience, oral cultures must conceptualise and verbalise all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings. A chirographic (writing) culture and even more a typographic (print) culture can distance and in a way denature even the human, itemising such things as the names of leaders and political divisions in an abstract, neutral list entirely devoid of a human action context.

I have been speaking of oral culture as if we still inhabited that zone of our existence without literacy. You will remember that the history of the "presence of word" has gone as far, if not beyond the electronic media zone. And here in the islands we have been introduced to, enmeshed in, fascinated by, hooked on, submerged under, most of those technologies of the word. And as I mentioned earlier we have arrived, thanks to these, at a "secondary orality" zone. We listen, we watch, somewhat as our people used to do before radio, before television, before satellites and computers. Yet our modes of thinking and of using language and valuating discourse are still very much sounded and cadenced and projected by the older habits of orality.

This may all be very well if we are aware of it. But it becomes the source of our confusions if we are not. The people who hear us, educate us, rule us, advise us, who come to enlighten us, read us as if we were texts configured wholly by the typographic culture. They expect us to behave, react the same way as they, with the common assumption that we are all human beings, and our cultural and linguistic specifications are merely contingent affairs, readily erasable for the imprint of the real word, the written and imperialist word.

I get a little worried also when some people tout and chant the word "multiculturalism" a little too loudly, and too often. While this sounds comforting, it can often mean that we don't have to do anything about it. Or, it may mean that no one should behave too conspicuously like themselves. Which comes down to the real position that by touting multiculturalism some people are saying let's just behave the behaviour that is common to us all. Erase the differences. Or keep your specificities to yourself.

And then we are all absolved of the need to understand each other. I've heard this stated particularly in the context of this university, for instance. We come here to learn. Let's get down to the business of learning, the pursuit of knowledge. This is no place for tracing tribal allegiances. And we forget, conveniently for most, perhaps, that our language and cultural specificities have formed and cadenced the way we think, feel, evaluate, learn.

Again we absolve ourselves from the task of really exploring the facts of our various selves, and being truly humanised in the process.

A burden for literacy

Literacy in our islands, and I know I am speaking to the people already facing the challenge, would have to strive to bear the burden of orality. What can I possibly mean by this apparent contradiction?

We know that orality truly speaks. It speaks with its own rhythms, inflections, cadences, silences, "the rise, the roll, the carol, the creation" (to use one of Hopkins' lines)²¹, its social and verbal complement (which sometimes takes the form of compliments, additions, echoing, reinforcing sounds of approval,

disgust, wonder) from an interacting audience, a participatory audience. The telling of a story, in other words, becomes a celebration.

Any oral performance, as a dance, for instance, shares this kind of celebratory presence. Word in these contexts of celebration could be very minimal, or copious, depending on whether we delimit word as text, or word as an inclusive, totalising presence. If the latter, then we say that word is this total communicative event, a complex narrative whole.

Now, this is a concrete fact, this communicative event. I can also project it to become the symbol of orality and all that it stands for in its cultural and linguistic contexts. And the question that I have often posed is : How do you textualize an event in its throbbing reality? And some of you may wonder whether it should be done at all. Why should you have to do it?

This of course introduces the whole question of recording, putting down stories, reducing stories, chants, songs, and so on, to written texts. (It's interesting that our language is honest here. Note "putting down", "reduce to writing"). And this is what I want to turn to briefly.

It is somewhat ironic that when the missionaries arrived in the Pacific they were keen, some of them, to record certain traditions of the people, certain stories, partly for helping them understand the people, partly for a collection of curiosities to amuse their public back home, and partly for preserving what they saw as rapidly disappearing.

The history of interest and work in this field shows no new way of approaching the traditional word arts of the people. We must be grateful, nevertheless, to those people who spent time recording the stories of the people, their poetry, dance chants and songs, and other genres of tradition. We wouldn't have texts to talk about if those few missionaries and colonial administrators, and, later, social scientists, anthropologists and sociologists, had not taken an interest in these verbal productions of the people.

And I have observed that same interest using the very same methods of textualising, by dictation, from recall, as a retell, or from written texts by teachers, or pupils and others who had become literate. It appears that the

model for textualization was the missionary model, or the little more improved models of the social scientists and colonial administrators. Their texts stand and appear as final, objective and neutral entities. They have no history, no parentage, no people, but plenty of authority.

The problem with all this, from the point of view of literate modelling, and literary production, is the erasure of orality from all the texts (well, there are exceptions, and some residual orality does infiltrate the written text). If we accept my use of orality as a totalising concept, then we can say that most of the texts that we have, and that we read from, and perpetuate as texts of stories from our cultural heritage, are incomplete. And they're not only incomplete, they misrepresent tradition, misrepresent an important art of the people. Where is the art of storytelling? It would appear that storytellers had no creativity at all, that all traditional stories were generated in common and retold in much the same form. And that form was really the form of the textualized version. Talk, as it were, had become mimetic of the typographic form. You had now to speak as if you were a stiff column of written text.

You can understand what I'm advocating, that our writing must bear the burden of orality. Our literacy must be configured by a creative orality.

This is a tall order because what must underlie our approach is a genuine concern to account for the arts of the people, the richness of their language, and the threat of the erasing of these by an inadvertent literacy programme. The mastery of the technology is one thing. That should be a liberating act. But it can happen that liberation becomes the other side of enslavement. You raise the lowly only to swell the numbers of those that become shackled to the globalizing forces. The goal of the one world is fine if that world belongs to us all and we all have reasonable access to it. But we know that the world does not really belong to us all; it really belongs to only a few.

If we believe that our traditions do have truly humanising agents, then it is our task to revitalise those agents, and we can make a start by working to understand them in their context. This is not an archaeological project, nor a museum display of past achievements, though these may be used. No, this is a programme of creative adaptations, a project that explores what we are heirs to, what would enrich and enhance the humanity of our lives, and which would

make us stand tall in the greater assembly of peoples.

It is now clear, at least that's the intention, that this interest in orality as a totalising and regenerative factor is at the same time an interest in orature which had been overlooked, unheard, by all manner of researchers, scholars, anthropologists, missionaries, colonial civil servants. To see this orature/literature becoming reinstated by a genuine interest in storytelling and other verbal art events should give us good heart that we are going the most satisfying way.

We have arrived at orality again, admittedly by a somewhat rough and tortuous passage, but the idea has arrived, nonetheless.

I wonder if I can end on a note that brings back Socrates and his assertion of the spoken word as superior to the written. This is the end of the second letter of John:

*There are several things I have to tell you, but I have thought it best not to trust them to paper and ink. I hope instead to visit you and talk to you personally, so that our joy may be complete.*²²

Notes

1. In his *The Presence of the Word*. (1967). New Haven and London: Yale University Press. It will be clear how indebted I am to Walter Ong throughout this paper.
2. This concept is also developed by Ong in his *The Presence of the Word*, and more specifically in *Orality and Literacy*. (1982). London: Methuen & Co Ltd.
3. For instance, Walter Ong himself, in the works already noted above, and in his subsequent exploration in *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology*. (1971). Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press; *Interfaces of the Word*. (1977). Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press; Marshall McLuhan (1962). *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto:

University of Toronto Press; Eric A. Havelock. (1986). *The Muse Learns to Write*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

4. That preliterate people have often been regarded as less than human is clear from the history of European contact. Little attention is given to the fact that people had humanised themselves and their world without the benefit of writing for millennia before the invention of script.

5. I name this story because I have enjoyed it so much, particularly the version as retold by Joel Rudinger, and his exploration of it in his article "Jumpy Mouse and the Ghosts Within Us", *The National Storytelling Journal*, (Winter 1987), pp 7-11, and the fact that the story comes from Amerindian legend. Hyemeyohsts Storm's *Seven Arrows* (Harper & Row, 1972), pp 68-85, has another version, which comes from the Plains Indian People. The appropriation of the story by the modern white American, as by others throughout the world, is surely a phenomenon worth reflecting on. Its original cultural context should also be of interest.

6. Walter Ong's influence again.

7. Plato, *Phaedrus & Letters VII and VIII*, Penguin Classics, pp 95-96.

8. As William Holmes McGuffey did for literacy in the mid-18th century United States with his Readers, McGuffey's *Rhetorical Guide*, or *Fifth Reader*. Father Ong comments: "As in Shakespeare's day and throughout earlier history in the West, literacy was still thought of in nineteenth century America as somehow serving the needs of oratory, for education in the classical tradition had never been education in the 'three R's'- which come from post-classical, post-Renaissance schools' training for commerce and domestic economy - but had been education for the oral performance of the man in public affairs. Little wonder that Charles Dickens' platform readings from his novels met with such wild success in McGuffey's America." "Literacy and Orality in our Times", *ADE Bulletin*, 58 (September, 1978), 1-7. Reprinted in Norman Simms (ed.) 1982. *Oral and Traditional Literatures*, Hamilton, N.Z.: Outrigger Publishers.

9. Joseph Collignon, "Why Leroy Can't Write." *College English*, 39 (1978) 852-859. Cited in Ong, "Literacy and Orality in our Times".

10. Cf T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding" II, *Four Quartets*.
11. Personal communication.
12. James Calvert. (1858). *Fiji and the Fijians*. Vol II, Mission History, 221-222.
13. In *The Presence of the Word*, and elsewhere.
14. John Martin. (1817). *Tonga Islands: William Mariner's Account*. 5th edition, Nuku'alofa: Vava'u Press Limited. (1991). p 91.
15. *Tonga Islands: William Mariner's Account*, Footnote, p 92.
16. *Tonga Islands*, p 92.
17. It is encouraging that Mariner recognised that there was a difference in the Tongan mind which, he says, had been formed by other ways of knowing and seeing, but he makes the common erroneous assessment that this limited their language and their expression. It never occurred to people who make these evaluative judgments that "natives" communicate with visitors on the competence level of the latter.
18. *Tonga Islands*, pp 92-94.
19. Cf. *The Gresham Comprehensive English Dictionary*, p 983. Also Ong: "[V]erbum, the general Latin term for word, is used... to designate the predicate rather than the subject (it gives us our term, verb). The verb is a word---that is, it is something spoken---in a more intense fashion than is a subject." *The Presence of the Word*. p 158.
20. With apologies to Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin*.
21. G.M. Hopkins, "To R.B."
22. 2 John "The Jerusalem Bible".