

The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics

Oral and written culture in Africa and beyond

Karin Barber



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THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF TEXTS, PERSONS AND PUBLICS

What can texts – both written and oral – tell us about the societies that produce them? How are texts constituted in different cultures, and how do they shape societies and individuals? How can we understand the people who compose them? Drawing on examples from all over the world, this original survey sets out to answer these questions, by exploring textuality from a variety of angles. Topics covered include the importance of genre, the ways in which oral genres transcend the here-and-now, and the complex relationship between texts and the material world. It considers the ways in which personhood is evoked, both in oral poetry and in written diaries and letters, discusses the audience's role in creating the meaning of texts, and shows textual creativity to be a universal human capacity expressed in myriad forms. Engaging and thought-provoking, this book will be welcomed by anyone interested in anthropology, literature and cultural studies.

Karin Barber is Professor of African Cultural Anthropology at the University of Birmingham. Her most recent publications include *Africa's Hidden Histories* (2006) and *The Generation of Plays* (2000).

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KARIN BARBER

University of Birmingham



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Preface and acknowledgements

Although this book is short, it was hard to write, and I deleted more pages than I kept.

My first degree was in English, and this was at a time when New Criticism reigned supreme in British universities. I was trained in what I now think was one of the most exacting disciplines possible. Eyeball to eyeball with the “words on the page”, there was no escape into historical generalities, biographical details, or private personal emotions. We had to look at what was before us, and through an intensely concentrated exercise of attention we had to account for what we found. At its best, this approach showed a scrupulous respect for the otherness of textual forms which, as it turned out, was an oddly appropriate starting point for an anthropology of texts. At the time, though, I felt the need for more history and more social context. And as a returned volunteer from a pre-university year in Uganda, I was also interested in texts outside the English canon. I wanted to know about oral traditions, popular genres, writing in African languages.

So, with a view to doing research on African popular verbal arts, I went on to take a postgraduate course in social anthropology. It was called a “conversion course”, and conversion it certainly was – root and branch. This was long before the “literary turn” in anthropology. My literary background was no asset, and I was enjoined to “think like a scientist”. A new world opened to me: a world in which the apparently unlimited

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inventiveness and variability of human communities is seen not just in their “arts”, but in their social organisation, their interaction with the environment, their cosmologies and the details of their everyday lives. But in the British social anthropology of the time, verbal texts were rarely the focus of research. My project ever since has been to bring the two sides of my education together.

In a way this book reflects my tentative and piecemeal discoveries about how texts can be constituted and interpreted, evaluated and held to have meaning, in cultures far from the purview of New Criticism. I have described in an earlier book my initial puzzlement and discomfort with Yoruba praise poetry, which seemed to lack all the qualities I loved in the poetry I had studied before (coherence, stillness, completion, clarity). The fragmented, protean, allusive forms of *oríkì* baffled and almost repelled me at first. Every phrase led out to hinterlands of explanation. Every component of the shapeless, baggy text opened up into other narratives, other formulations, quotations from other texts. The text appeared to have no centre and no boundaries. But gradually the power and fascination of *oríkì* made itself felt. Subsequent study showed me that praise poetry genres across Africa work in a similar fashion – but with differences; and that African textual forms of all kinds – oral, manuscript and print – make up a field with consonances and divergences, shared and separate histories, echoes and singularities, which have never been adequately appreciated.

I have tried to go on from there to think about what it is, more generally, that students of anthropology, history and literature need to ask in order to get a sense of how textual meaning is produced in other cultures – and what it is we can understand about those societies and cultures by so doing. My focus is on the emergent, the popular and the everyday, the creativity of obscure people and the extraordinary things people everywhere seem to do with words.

This book is intended to open up, in exploratory fashion, a range of questions about texts. It is not intended to be comprehensive or even

systematic. Inevitably, experts in each of the fields I have touched on will immediately detect great deficiencies in my reading and thinking. They will be right to reproach me. But I will be happy if my readers can nonetheless find something stimulating or productive to react to or to take further in their own work. Despite the change in intellectual climate since my student days, there is still room for a bigger and more concerted discussion about the production and interpretation of verbal texts, and their social significance, in the cultures we study.

Writing this book was made possible by a two-year British Academy Research Readership, which I gratefully acknowledge. I am deeply indebted to two of my editors, Michael Lambek and Jonathan Spencer, who provided good-humoured but extremely searching commentaries on the first draft and vital encouragement when I got stuck with the second. Their contributions went far beyond normal editorial obligations, and led me into ideas and material I would not otherwise have known about – to my great pleasure and benefit. I would also like to thank Ruth Finnegan, who read the whole of my final manuscript at short notice and provided characteristically perceptive, clear-eyed advice. Rosalind Thomas and Lynne Brydon, from different perspectives, offered valuable advice and comments on parts of the book. And Paulo Farias, my companion in everything, has influenced every detail of this book, both by his attentive and illuminating readings and by his own creative intellectual work.

ONE



Anthropology and text

“Where there is no text, there is no object of study, and no object of thought either.”

(Bakhtin 1986: 103).

Encounter with texts

A text is a tissue of words. The term comes from the Latin *texere*, meaning literally to weave, join together, plait or braid; and therefore, to construct, fabricate, build or compose (Greetham 1999: 26). That is what this book is about: the universal human work of weaving or fabricating with words. People put words together to make a mark, to leave a trace. They do this orally as well as in writing. Though many people think of “text” as referring exclusively to written words, writing is not what confers textuality. Rather, what does is the quality of being joined together and given a recognisable existence as a form. The oral rhapsodes of ancient Greece were “song-stitchers”¹ who sewed together floating formulas to construct a remarkable, attention-worthy form. This material image suggests that people thought of their compositions not as evanescent breath, but as something with a presence: something that could be apprehended and evaluated. In some situations the oral text may even be seen as the *only* thing that outlasts death and time, and testifies to the reality of past achievements:

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What would remain of great exploits if we did not have our musicians?
With their rich memories and vivid songs they keep them alive for ever.
What great deed would survive without those songs?
Who would ever remember Sunjata Keita's extraordinary courage
if it were not for Jeli Jakuma, his talented musician and faithful companion?
Who would remember great Babemba's supreme sacrifice
in the blood-drenched ruins of Sikasso?
What would remain of men's actions
when they vanish and their bodies turn to dust?
Nothing but obscure oblivion, oblivion like ashes
Cold, dead ashes after a forest fire.
For man's memory is brief.
Not even the most glorious exploits would survive time
without the undying devotion of singers and musicians.
They immortalise them and keep them alive through the ages.

This is a poetic text from the West African Sahel, sung by a bard to the accompaniment of xylophones and drums, in the closing shots of Med Hondo's film *Sarraounia*. Most people would probably have no problem with classifying it as "oral literature". But literature is a value-laden and historically-specific term. Not all the texts to be discussed in this book correspond to familiar western definitions of literature, and the societies that produce them rarely have a concept that could easily be translated by the term. Text is a more neutral and more encompassing term: text, in the sense in which I am using it in this book, is utterance (oral or written) that is woven together in order to attract attention and to outlast the moment.

What, then, does it mean to understand a text? And what can we understand *from* texts – about social relations, ideas and values in the cultures that produce them? Anthropology has always had an intuition, sometimes an uneasy one, that verbal texts have the capacity to shed light, in a way nothing else can, on the inner life of societies. Locally-produced texts, composed and transmitted according to people's own conventions, in their own language, encapsulating their own concerns, do seem to speak as if from "within".

Words are not the only form of representation or expression. People establish and convey meaning through clothing, dance, music, gesture, and through complex rituals which often defy verbal exegesis. And verbal texts are often inseparable from these other kinds of meaning-making, so that to tear a poem away from its music or from the dance that it is part of is to remove its point. Older anthropology has been criticised for being too word-centred, not sufficiently attentive to sensory, tactile, aural, gestural and visual communication, and there is some truth in this. But all the same, we cannot by-pass language or the texts which are precipitates of language. Language is far and away the most complex, exact and ambitious system of meaning-making devised by human beings. All other activities are, as it were, “bathed by, suspended in, and cannot be entirely segregated or divorced from the element of speech” (Volosinov 1973: 15).² And texts are the hot spots of language: concentrations of linguistic productivity, forms of language that have been marked out to command heightened attention – and sometimes to stimulate intense excitement, provoke admiration and desire, or be the mainstay of memory.

Texts are constructed to be detachable from the flow of conversation, so that they can be repeated, quoted and commented upon – they are forms of language, that is, which, whether written or oral, are accorded a kind of independent and privileged existence. At the same time, however, all texts, including written ones, are forms of action, speech acts embedded in the context of their emission and reception. This double existence – both as context-dependent speech act and as autonomous entity “out there” in social space – is at the heart of the questions we are addressing: what are texts? what are they constituted to do? how do they exist? how can they be interpreted? what can they tell us about society and culture, and what can anthropology in turn tell us about textual production and interpretation?

Texts are social facts. Texts are used to do things: they are forms of action. A Luba chief is not a chief until his status is ratified by the performance of *kasàlà* praises in his honour: “It’s the *kasàlà* that confirms the

chief. If you become a chief without someone chanting *kasàlà* for you, you are not a chief at all. Even if you are a hero, you are not a hero. You have to be sung for” (Mufuta 1969: 110, my translation). If a Dinka youth seeking a favour from his father couches his request in poetry, he greatly increases his chances of a favourable response, for poetry is understood to have extraordinary persuasive power (Deng 1973). In Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s novel *In Evil Hour*, a village community is thrown into turmoil by the secret distribution, by persons unknown, of written lampoons slandering fellow-citizens; here the power of the text is the particular combination of permanence, prominence and anonymity made possible by writing.

Texts are one of the things societies produce, and one of the things people do. As such, they are interesting in the same way that kinship, ritual and agriculture are interesting, as forms of social behaviour widely distributed and generally central to people’s communal experience. Wendy James has put creativity at the centre of her “new portrait of anthropology” (James 2003). Along with dance, song and bodily ceremony, textual productions are at the core of human efforts to create form, which James sees as the most central human impulse. With texts, people perform what you might call (using an old Elizabethan term) acts of “instauration”, that is, “institution, founding, establishment” but also “restoration, renovation, renewal” (OED). People innovatively establish social forms and attentively maintain them; both the establishment and the maintenance are creative, emergent and continuous. Texts, in this view, are instances of instauration which are central to human experience.

As well as being social facts, however, texts are commentaries upon, and interpretations of, social facts. They are part of social reality but they also take up an attitude to social reality. They may criticise social forms or confirm and consolidate them: in both cases, they are *reflexive*. They are part of the apparatus by which human communities take stock of their own creations. Textual traditions can be seen as a community’s ethnography of itself – as has been observed by scholars working on texts as far

apart as a Flaubert novella (Bourdieu 1996) and a popular play in Zaire (Fabian 1990). If you look closely at *how* texts are reflexive, you will get a sense of how a society or community understands itself. Their reflexivity is not confined to commentary on other social institutions. Texts, very often, reflect upon themselves. In this way they offer a unique insight into their own operations as acts of cultural instauration. Dance, ritual and music cannot do this; only linguistic texts, which inhabit the same medium as their own exegesis, can be reflexive in this way. And it is a peculiarly interesting way, as we shall see. For verbal textual genres are often set up hand-in-glove with explicit, elaborated genres of exegesis and interpretation. They are set up *to be* interpreted: as a challenge, a puzzle or a demand. And the means to interpret them – the repertoires of arguments, analyses, explanations, expansions and inter-textual linkages – are themselves a tradition, and one that can be just as important and revealing as the textual tradition itself, with which it is symbiotically linked. The exegesis is part of the process by which the text is established; and because it is explicitly analytical and interpretative, it has the capacity to reveal something of the inner processes of instauration.

Giambattista Vico, the great eighteenth-century philosopher, laid down the basis of a major tradition in the human sciences with his observation that we can only truly know what we, as humans, have created. We know the natural world externally, from observation and induction; but we know our own history and culture internally because we made it.³ We understand it as the product of intentional activity: that is, characterised by a human orientation to other humans. Intentional forms allow an intuitive, interior relation of understanding: “what men have made, other men, because their minds are those of men, can always, in principle, ‘enter into’” (Berlin, glossing Vico, 1976: 27). “Intentional” in this sense does not refer to a person’s aims or motives: it refers to the quality of being made by humans for a purpose which other humans can grasp. This distinction between human and natural science became the foundation of a tradition of human science running through Wilhelm Dilthey

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and Hans-Georg Gadamer into historiography, and through Max Weber into modern sociology, represented for example by Anthony Giddens and Peter Winch. If it is true that we have a special understanding of intentional forms, then verbal texts should be given pride of place amongst them: because verbal texts are not only created in order to be understood by other human minds, but are created out of language, that specially human invention.

There is no doubt that when we meet certain kinds of texts – many kinds, in fact – there is a sense of *encounter* with something other and almost beyond comprehension, yet at the same time curiously close.

A spring day at the edge of the world
On the edge of the world once more the day slants.
The oriole cries, as though it were its own tears
Which damp even the topmost blossoms on the tree.

(Graham 1965: 156)

This ninth-century Chinese poem by Li Shang-yin seems to create a kind of stillness around it. Despite the layers upon layers of impediments – difficulties of translation, unfamiliar cultural assumptions, different poetic conventions – it seems to speak clearly across the centuries that separate us from it. It commands a rapt, perfect attention in which the listening mind waits and attunes itself to intimations of alterity. It is as if we were in tune with something beyond ourselves, something extremely far away with which we nonetheless experience a relationship of interiority.

Anthropologists have always been sensitive to this quality of encounter in verbal texts in the cultures they study. It seems to me to be no accident that Michelle Rosaldo, in her great ethnography of the emotions among the Ilongot of the Philippines, resorts quite spontaneously to Ilongot songs as she approaches the heart of her exposition. At the time that Michelle and Renato Rosaldo worked among them in the 1960s and 1970s, the Ilongot were still active headhunters. Michelle Rosaldo posed to herself the most difficult of questions: how could people for whom,

in other ways, she felt such sympathy and admiration build their sense of masculine achievement around the beheading of innocent victims? In her exploration of Ilongot conceptions of the emotions and of the process of maturation, she begins to make us see how it might be that young men could feel incomplete, unrealised, until they had killed and tossed away the head of a victim. But her insights were not gained from direct questions. Both she and her Ilongot friends maintained a tactful silence on the subject of headhunting for nearly two years; when she eventually felt she was sufficiently trusted to risk asking someone why they did it, her companion replied dully "It is our custom". It is only in the songs composed by young men that she got a glimpse of what the emotions and aspirations surrounding headhunting might be like. Four years before he killed for the first time, one young man composed a song evoking the sorrow, heaviness and "fogginess" of the unfulfilled would-be head-hunter:

Oh dear, boy, you are as a fog, and all things wait
 dear child, for the moment when you will say the head-
 hunting spells;
 warm your thoughts for the thing you desire, that you
 may, like an airplane, fly to the spirit that you will dismember
 go right on with your plans to kill!

Ah, it is fine for you grown ones to be quiet while
 your shoot here your child is all astir;
 oh, if only he had, like you old ones, chipped off the
 red blossoms of the fire tree, and returned home from
 his travels a killer,
 looking like flowering feathery grass

(Rosaldo 1980: 141)

The poignant, pitiful tone, the vivid evocation of the desired state of accomplishment and the longing for fulfilment are intended to awaken sympathy among thoughtful elders (Rosaldo 1984: 139). They are affecting, and one has the sense of *almost* understanding; yet, at the same time,

the poem reminds one what a gulf this comprehension has to cross. In texts like these, sympathy and distance seem to coexist in one moment.

What this song does *not* do, though, is offer direct access to a particular young man's innermost thoughts. It is true that it is an example of *pipiyan piya*, "true songs", produced to express desire or emotion, rather than to fulfil a practical function as do other genres like lullabies, pollarding songs and magical invocations. But *pipiyan piya* are an established genre, and *as* a genre they have specific conventions and draw on specific resources including "stock phrases, tunes, and themes" (Rosaldo 1980: 267fn1). One of the conventions is "a sort of objectification, in which the singer speaks of himself or herself sometimes in the first, sometimes in the second, person ('oh, poor bachelor . . .') and adopts a tone associated with 'exclamations of pity' (*dimet*) – such as 'oh dear' (*qan'in, ngu'dek*) – which appears again to dissociate the song and singer from the self addressed in the song" (Rosaldo 1980: 268fn2). Thus the text is formed according to public, recognised conventions based upon a speech genre so well established that it has a name (*dimet*). These conventions produce a kind of split between the speaking "I" and the spoken-to "I", as if the singer-composer were both inside and outside himself. It is in and through the mode established by this genre that the singer-composer develops his sorrowful, reflective form of self-address – and it could well be that the form induced the emotions as much as the emotions gave rise to the form. This is even without broaching the larger question, to which Rosaldo devotes a wealth of discussion, of the Ilongot conception of the mind and emotions and what it might therefore be to "speak your thoughts". So to interpret even apparently intimate expressions like this song of sorrow, we need to understand the text as a form with its own mode of existence.

In general, the sense of encounter with texts is perhaps not so much because you are meeting another consciousness, as because you are meeting a form that commands heightened attention. What makes them texts rather than passing discourse is also what makes them the focus

of interpretative activity. They are constituted to make the listener or the reader take note. Such texts seem close to you because they demand and stimulate an intensified awareness; they seem remote because, even if they are understood as personal expressions, their form – the very form that attracts attention and awareness – is a product of conventions, constructed through artifice.

The “intentional” approach certainly does not claim that through studying biographical, literary or historical texts we can experience vicariously what it was like to be a person of another era or culture. Vico himself stressed the extraordinary otherness of the past and of alien cultures, the difficulty of reconstructing what might have been the meaning of their intentional activities and products. What we can do is not intuit another individual’s consciousness, but form a sense of the repertoire, the ideational resources, what was conceptually available to people of a given time and place: in short, *what they could have been taken to mean* by their texts: a perspective that has been brilliantly articulated in the work of Quentin Skinner. Texts and other cultural products are not “windows” onto something else, some pure state of subjectivity or consciousness which we can access *through* them: they are, rather, themselves the terrain to be studied. It is the repertoire, the conceptual materials and the ways they are used that we can seek to explore as anthropologists.

Vico was interested in the way that human creative activities exceed any individual’s private and self-interested aims. By creating institutions, people entered into ordered interaction with others and thus changed themselves. He gave the name “Providence” to those things that are created as the outcome of interaction, and which go beyond any individual’s conscious project, highlighting his belief that the outcome is benign.⁴ In modern terms, we could say that in the institutionally structured activities of individuals we see “the working of wider social processes – processes which, because they are genuinely social, the product of *joint action* between people, individuals cannot account for, and of which they thus remain largely ignorant” (Shotter 1981: 273). The “moral worlds”

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thus constituted are intentional, in the sense of being oriented towards human comprehension, but unintended, in the sense that no individual could plan, envisage or control them.

Verbal texts are representatives of supra-individual creativity *par excellence*. A text is dialogic and relational. It presents itself to an interlocutor: and not usually to a single addressee, but to an implied “audience”. By being constituted to be “out there”, it signals its nature as something which exceeds the specific aims of any individual speaker or writer. It is composed in relation to other texts, sharing formal templates with them and drawing in myriad ways upon their textual resources, to the point where it could be described as “a tissue of quotations” (Barthes 1977: 146). A text is wholly intentional, but is never confined to the singular intention of a solo originator.

What kind of attention do texts command? This is a question that requires a comparative, empirical answer rather than a philosophical pronouncement. In A. S. Byatt’s *The Virgin in the Garden*, Stephanie Potter is introducing a sixth-form class to Keats’s poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. Sitting in the chilly classroom, she empties her mind of distracting thoughts and focuses wholly on the poem itself: “She required . . . that her mind at least should be clear of the curious clutter of mnemonics that represented the poem at ordinary times, when the attention was not concentrated upon it . . . The ideal was to come to it with a mind momentarily open and empty, as though for the first time . . . She sat there, looking into inner emptiness, waiting for the thing to rise into form and saw nothing, nothing and then involuntarily flying specks and airy clumps of froth or foam on a strongly running grey sea . . . Not relevant, her judgment said, the other poem, damn it, the foam of perilous seas . . .” Finally, after having read the poem aloud to them twice, she turns to the class: “‘Well,’ she said to the girls, ‘well, what do you *see*?’” (Byatt 1978: 77–8). Here is an evocative description of one kind of attention to text, and one way of teaching it. Note the need for a clear, quiet, mental space; the interiority and privacy of the experience (despite the fact that the girls

are asked to describe it); the sense that the poem is a presence that has to be delicately, cautiously apprehended; a respect for its otherness (she reads it “quietly, as expressionless as possible”, so that the girls will not “pounce, or tear, or manipulate” the words); the sense that the tuning-in process can go wrong, so that she gets “the other poem, damn it” (she calls up Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”⁵ instead of the Grecian urn); and the predominantly visual response – the poem apprehended above all as a complex of pure images.

This approach to reading a poem may be idiosyncratic, but it comes at a specific historical moment in a particular tradition of literary criticism, after the study of English had become established as a discipline and works of literature were being constituted as objects of aesthetic contemplation and analysis, and characterised as bearers of particular kinds of humanising and civilisational value. New Criticism insisted on the autonomy of the text, treated as a delicate, complex mechanism, and advocated an exclusive focus on “the words on the page”, as distinct from the author’s biography or psychology or the philosophy of the age in which the work was written.⁶ Other textual traditions encourage quite different kinds of attention. Medieval English devotional poems were often created not to be contemplated but to be inhabited, so that the reader/reciter occupied the position of the “I” in the text and endorsed or uttered by proxy the sentiments it articulated (Burrow 1982: 61). Readers of cybertext narratives inhabit the text in another sense, entering a multidimensional field of linked segments and navigating through them in any direction, at will. “Stories written in hypertext generally have more than one entry point, many internal branches, and no clear ending . . . hypertext narratives are intricate, many-threaded webs” (Murray 1997: 56). The cyber-writer’s role is to create an environment, which the “reader” explores to construct one out of many possible narratives.

There are textual traditions where words and visual images are interrelated and in tension with each other, reflecting one upon the other to constitute a complex totality – for example in the ninth-century Byzantine

religious manuscripts studied by Brubaker (1999) or the seventeenth-century Chinese picture book discussed by Burkus-Chasson (2005). For the Anglo-Saxons, reading a text meant solving a riddle for the benefit of the unlettered, and thereby imparting advice (Howe 1993); in the island of Tidore in eastern Indonesia, where the Muslim population mostly did not know Arabic, reading the Qur'an meant converting written symbols to recited sounds, from which the recurrence of significant, recognisable names could be plucked as sources of enlightenment (Baker 1993).

In oral as well as written traditions there is a whole category of texts which are valued and attended to not because of their fullness of meaning but because their meaning is unknown or only partially decipherable. Rwandan dynastic poetic texts – to be discussed further in the next chapter – were constituted like crossword puzzles, in which the meaning was deliberately concealed behind layers of “veiling” or stepwise moves, through puns and associations, away from the word or concept that the listener must retrieve (Kagame 1969). A personal, totalising and visual apprehension of such a poem in the manner of Stephanie Potter would be highly inappropriate if not impossible. In the context of rituals performed by the Gnaou of New Guinea, the “great song”, which took all night to perform, was made of archaic, foreign and largely incomprehensible words, like a stylised and distorted but still recognisable representation of real language. “It is a feat of devoted memory to perform such a song” (Lewis 1980: 61), and the attention brought to bear on it involved a highly active and creative process of supplementation: “. . . they would pick among the sounds, here and there, such correspondences as would sustain their interpretation of what that verse was about” (ibid.: 60). What made this text valuable, it seems, was textuality itself. Its obscurity constituted it as a focus of attention, and one could suggest that “the positive alerting peculiar aspect of ritual which calls to us for attention as it does to the performers”, in Gilbert Lewis’s arresting phrase, was a characteristic also of the verbal text that lay at the heart of the ritual (ibid.: 20).

What kind of attention people bring to bear on a text depends in the first instance on the history of its material form and the specific skills and practices associated with producing and receiving it. The ethnography of textual production and the ethnography of reading go hand in hand (Chartier 1995; Boyarin 1993). And this opens out into the wider question of the varying ways in which people have conceptualised the nature and effectuality of words and texts.

The assumptions underlying New Criticism's approach, which belong so much to their cultural and historical moment, are often unthinkingly generalised in attempts at comparative or cross-cultural reading. People coming from a background in European literature may be tempted to assume (and often have done so) that every culture has a category corresponding to "literature"; that all "literature" is characterised by unity, fictivity, poetic language, or a particular quality of the imagination; and that attending to these qualities is the way to get the point of the text. But one of the aims of the anthropology of texts is to open up to view the sheer range of ways in which texts can be constituted and apprehended, the range of relationships they can establish between speaker/writer and hearer/reader, and the ways in which they can be valued and held to have meaning.

A central contention of this book is that if a verbal text is to "tell us" anything about a society, social experience, or cultural values, this can only be *through* its specific textuality, its specific way of being a text – not by by-passing it. Some social scientists have had a tendency to look for indigenous texts that most closely resemble ethnographies; many historians for those that seem most likely to yield nuggets of fact about the past. Both therefore tend to go for narratives, preferably narratives about real people or set in contemporary, everyday reality and enriched with descriptions of local customs. They tend to go for texts that seem nearest to being transparent accounts of real personal experience, such as autobiographies. Jan Vansina's pioneering reclamation of oral traditions for historical reconstruction was immensely important and beneficial

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in opening up a whole branch of historiography in cultures that had previously been thought to have no history (Vansina 1965). But the less fortunate side of his great work was the presumption that the conventions of genres and the complex and stylised uses of language in the traditions he documented were so many obstructions to the retrieval of historical information. They were identified only to be stripped away leaving an unobstructed view of some (usually quite dubious) historical fact. But it may be precisely in its textuality – that is, in the way it is set up *as* a text – that its significance resides. Fentress and Wickham suggest that historians might learn more from the changes in the *form* taken by social memory than from the putatively historical content, for “the process of transmission and diffusion of oral tradition is itself historical” (Fentress and Wickham 1992: 85; cf Barber 1991c).

Anthropologists seeking to apprehend from verbal texts the nature of local experience and outlook have even more reason to attend to form. Michelle Rosaldo resorted to quoting Ilongot songs because there was no other way – no other genre of discourse or form of expression – in which Ilongot people could evoke with such precision that particular complex of ideas about headhunting. That, indeed, is what those texts are for. That is why cultures produce texts, commanding the resources of language, rhythm, and often music to say what otherwise could not be said. Only by attending to the conventions of texts and to their specific, distinctive ways of creating form in language can we understand what texts are made to do and say.

Anthropology’s take on texts

Most British social anthropologists in the formative years of structural-functionalism did not write much about the verbal genres of the peoples they worked with. This was in sharp contrast with American cultural anthropology – which from the days of Boas onwards was deeply involved in the collection and interpretation of indigenous texts, especially in

Native American ethnography (see Briggs and Bauman 1999). Casting their eyes over the history of British social anthropology, some Americanists have seen a sad, stark opposition between their own dialogic, human-oriented, interpretative approach, which recognises individual creativity and subjecthood, and the rigid rule-bound normative approach of the British, which stripped social forms down to their bones, imposed a deluded scientific objectivity, and denied the expressive capacities, agency and creativity of their subjects (see, for example, Valentine and Darnell 1999).

The truth, however, is that texts have always been central to the practice of both traditions – but in almost opposite ways. While Americanist cultural anthropology wore its texts on its sleeve, so to speak, British social anthropology was engaged in a passionate clandestine affair. During the high days of structural functionalism, British anthropologists tended to cite texts only in footnotes or when they were needed to corroborate a point based on other evidence. But the urgent need for texts, their subterranean existence as sources and supports for ethnographic inquiry, was everywhere evident.

Malinowski was constantly collecting “native texts”. He gave a prominent place in his ethnographic method to the creation of a “*corpus inscriptionum*”, made up of “a collection of ethnographic statements, characteristic narratives, typical utterances, items of folk-lore and magical formulae” (Malinowski 1984 [1922]: 24), some of which he wrote down on dictation, others of which he scribbled down on the hoof. These, he thought, would serve as “documents of native mentality”, helping the ethnographer to “grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world” (ibid.: 25).⁷ In *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* he went further, devoting a substantial amount of space to texts of the Trobriand spells designed to promote growth and secure prosperity. His student Raymond Firth adopted the same method: “I made a practice of jotting down verbatim on the spot scraps of what I overheard, conversations between people, comments on behaviour, observations made

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during the progress of work, and the like” (1936: 6), and like Malinowski he treated local verbal genres as important social data, devoting a whole chapter of *We the Tikopia* to funeral dirges. But neither Malinowski nor Firth paid much attention to these texts *as* texts, constituted in the context of a field of genres; Malinowski was interested in magical spells as a kind of linguistic technology, and Firth presented songs and dirges as evidence on the emotional dimension of social relations. And most other British social anthropologists kept their “texts” much further out of sight. In her report on the economic position of women in the Cameroon Grassfields, Phyllis Kaberry, another Malinowski student, made frequent references to what she called “the Lamnso texts”, but only cited fragments of these, in translation, when she needed them as evidence. This was a widespread practice, and not only among professional anthropologists. Smith and Dale – a missionary and a military captain – in the preface to *The Ila-speaking peoples of Northern Rhodesia*, published in 1920, say

We aimed at securing a large collection of native texts. The Ba-ila had no written literature; when we knew them first their language had never been reduced to writing; and so we had to obtain these texts in one of two ways – either by writing them ourselves from dictation or, in later years, by employing the assistance of young men trained in mission schools (Smith and Dale 1920: xi).

As with Malinowski, such “texts” seem to have included all kinds of genres and materials: in this case, proverbs, folktales, family histories, praise names, factual descriptions of customs, narratives of recent events, even gossip with the researchers. What made them “texts” was simply that Smith and Dale decided to pick them out and write them down, for later translation and study. The texts themselves, though signalled at the outset, hardly ever resurface in the book except in passing references where corroboration for an ethnographic point is needed – and even then, they are often stripped of provenance so that they function as neutral evidence rather than as a historically and contextually bound utterance.

They are used as nuggets of ethnographic information rather than as cultural forms deserving study in their own right.

Early issues of the IAI's journal *Africa* (founded in 1928) included articles presenting folkloric, historical and descriptive texts in indigenous languages, with translations into English and commentaries. These were intended primarily as specimens for linguistic analysis. But in ethnographic monographs, the dominant tendency remained, until well into the 1970s, to keep the "texts", which clearly formed an important data bank, well hidden. Sometimes meticulously recorded monologues and conversations resurfaced decades later, as was the case with Evans-Pritchard's wonderful book *Man and Woman among the Azande*, published nearly forty years after *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, and offering extraordinary records of long, live conversations, some with EP himself, some between Zande men and women (overheard? reported to him? he doesn't explain), including young men propositioning girls, husbands placating their in-laws and even two lesbians plotting to pull the wool over their husbands' eyes.⁸

In British social anthropology, then, in its formative structural-functionalist phase, locally-generated texts were by and large treated as a methodological means to an end, part of the field worker's toolkit for gathering data on the ideational aspects of social structure, rather than as a dimension of social life worthy of investigation in its own right. And up till today, despite a general shift towards language, experience and cultural forms, British social anthropology seems somewhat wary of dealing head-on with indigenous verbal texts, greatly preferring to deal with ritual or material culture, or with the textuality of the ethnographer's own writing.

American cultural anthropology, by contrast, placed the discussion of indigenous texts at the centre of both its method and its theory. Especially in the ethnography of Native Americans whose cultures had been blighted and in some cases virtually obliterated by white American conquest, texts functioned as the principal mode of cultural salvage. Surviving members