

ORAL SOCIETY AND ITS LANGUAGE

Spoken language was long thought to be mankind's earliest means of communication, with visual and gestural languages appearing only later. "And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field;..." (Genesis II, 20). Today, with the most diverse hypotheses in circulation, the only point on which all scholars agree—in this case, a negative one—is that the question of the origins of language remains to be answered; this has little importance for the present study, and we will not dwell on the problem of origins.

However, the recalling of some positions of theories—connected rather more with the philosophical concepts of a period than with an analysis of data that are no doubt irremediably lost—raises questions about the intrinsic characteristics of social communication in ancient traditional societies.

Many legends of ancient peoples have been collected, legends that attribute to the gods the gift of spoken language. "A power superior to that of man established the names of things in the beginning," Plato has Socrates say in *Cratylus*. We find identical mystical explanations all over the world. In a *magical* or sacred mode, they testify to a keen consciousness of the essential role of

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social communication. Furthermore, mystical explanations are found again when the first writing appears.

Pythagoras, Plato and the Stoics considered language as “*natural*,” as the fruit of an inborn necessity, while Democritus, Aristotle and the Epicureans tended to make it the object of a “contract”—we do not know how such an agreement could have come about without language.

Closer to us, a hypothesis that began with Darwin and was more thoroughly developed by the work of Marcel Jousse, among others, proposes that in the beginning language was only the mouth unconsciously mimicking manual gestures. Other theories look to man’s reproduction of the sounds of nature. To further complicate the matter, we must remember that at present it is not even certain that spoken language came before cave paintings and engravings that were intended to transmit a message or perpetuate an event.

We will examine in succession the three characteristics that the preceding paragraphs suggest to us: natural language as opposed to an agreed-upon (and artificial) language; magic signs opposed to rational signs; and the respective roles of the auditive, visual and tactile in communication in oral societies.

NATURAL — “CONVENTIONAL”

According to a tempting theory (one that loses its effectiveness when it is summarized) Western civilizations were characterized by their will to dominate and transform nature. Asiatic civilizations, instead, adopted an attitude of disengagement, or even flight, from nature, while the civilizations of black Africa had a basic tendency to integrate with nature, to live within it; Roger Bastide calls it “the participation of man and his group in the cosmos, the invasion of things, vegetal life and animals by people, the subject by the object, a feeling of identity between the living and the world.”

To be sure, we can recognize several elements in African social communication that seem to fit this theory. For example, in Africa transmission of messages by drum relies on tonal structure

and rhythm and not on agreed-upon codes, as has been observed in Melanesia. African gestures, also, even though they may on occasion be ritualized, have never been systematically codified, as have those of the North American Indians; this is a fact that shows the same tendency.

However, the exception must not be made the rule. The sound code used by certain Melanesian groups, and the gestural conventions of a limited number of Indian tribes, remain special examples. On the other hand, there are numerous points of similarity or analogy among all the early civilizations, wherever they arose. Vocabulary, ornament, dance and proverbs reveal many common traits at the level of social relationships alone. Now, it is there, in the entire group of oral societies and in limiting ourselves to the manifestations of social communication that we see a proximity, a liaison, a deep intimacy with nature.

Here we will give particular attention to graphic manifestations, by pointing out the independence—more or less recognized today—of the sign systems of ancient traditional societies and the first attempts at writing (in the strictest sense of the word) in later societies.

With regard to the lines in figurative drawing used for communication, we could speak of “pictography”—“a series of drawings (pictograms) of actions or objects free from any phoneticism,” according to Leroi-Gourhan. To this term, that has been incorrectly used and has become somewhat ambiguous, we prefer the term *mythography*, which Todorov has defined as “a system in which graphic notation does not refer to verbal language but forms an independent symbolic relationship.” He writes, “In no case is a relationship with spoken language necessary. Even more, it is very often impossible. Sentences and words are linguistic units; mythography is a semiotic system.”

Mythography thus includes pictography, perhaps its most important constituent, but it also includes all other sign systems whose characters are fixed on to some material object and may or may not be figurative; for example, marks or notches. It also includes representation by objects, notation by knots, in a word, all sign systems that are outside the graphic system of spoken language—outside logography.

If some authors have referred to writing in this case—since

there are marks—they have immediately attached the qualifiers *autonomous* or *synthetic* to the term, emphasizing that the mark here has a global meaning. The term *proto-writing* has also been used. Marcel Cohen says, “It may be read in any language and within the language, with any words; it may be understood and have an effect without the use of words.”

Does mythography show in a characteristic way a “proximity to nature” in oral societies? Let us look at a few examples.

The *stick-messages* used in Australia are sticks carried by a messenger. J. Vendryes tells us, “Covered with notches, they serve to convey information, orders, sometimes a series of very complicated orders, but the uninitiated would not be able to interpret them. The messenger’s stick without the messenger is incomprehensible. The stick indicates the number and the succession of the ideas, but the ideas themselves are not there.”

The *knotted strings* found in Melanesia, Africa and America, among them the famous *kipu* of Peru: by combining the colors of the strings and the thickness and position of the knots, by tying the strings to each other according to certain conventions, ideas and sequences are produced.¹

Finally, let us keep in mind the example of the Kuna Indians of Panama where, at a burial, the singer accompanying the funeral procession may use a skin covered with painted pictograms as a memory aid.

Beyond appearances, all these signs are closely linked to spontaneous, “natural” expression. If in their forms and organization the Kuna designs are very close to concrete representation, the notches of the stick-messages and the assemblies of the *kipu*—if only at the level of the sensory rhythm they employ—are still very far from logical, abstract thinking-out. What Van Gennep has written concerning mnemotechnical and mnemonic means fits our purpose well and follows the same line. He says that mnemonic faculties operate automatically, when the individual, consciously or unconsciously, exercises within his organism the

¹ It has not been established that the *kipu* were used to transmit messages; Incan functionaries used them especially for making calculations and taking the census. Some authors suggest the possibility of alphabetical combinations in the *kipu*, but Vendryes’ opinion is that this is certainly a later attempt to adapt the *kipu* to the European alphabet.

gestural phrases with which he will act out his mental choreography semiologically. On the other hand, mnemotechnical processes reveal a conscious intervention of the reciter, who uses certain artifices intended to favor the initial release or the original sequence of the gestural phrases and to keep the recitatives of a recitation in their original order. These signals serve in the recitation of genealogies, poems, magic formulas, and so on, but also provide more prosaic reminders.

However, one might object with reason that inasmuch as they are only stimulants for individual or even collective memory, all these signs have little or nothing to do—unless indirectly—with social communication: they are only *signals* that provoke a certain reaction and have no meaning.

Symbolic marks, on the other hand, make up languages (understood here in the behaviorist acceptance of systems of families of signs used for communication) or, at least, embryos of autonomous languages. On the one hand, the mark and the pictogram here have their own symbolic meaning. If at times they call upon the combining possibilities of oral language, they do not necessarily refer to this latter. On the other hand, they are meaningful symbols or signs of communication.

The present school of the ethnology of symbols, of which Geneviève Calame-Griaule is a brilliant representative, sees traditional man as located in a world after his own image, in which all elements are in rapport with a certain vision he has of himself and his problems. Man seeks his reflection in all the mirrors of an anthropomorphous universe in which each blade of grass, each gnat, is the bearer of a “word.” This is what the Dogon call “world words,” symbols.²

Maurice Houis in his *Linguistic Anthropology of Black Africa* prefers to speak of *mediate signs*, which he opposes to immediate signs. In the “immediate” sign the relationship to the referent is established as a consequence of an experience in which not only the observation of the perceived objective is involved but also the concept that the interested persons and their society have of a phenomenon. The author takes as an example the crowing of a

² *La parole chez les Dogons*, p. 27. The word “symbol” is used here in a meaning near the one given in the theory of structural linguistics.

rooster, that in Upper Volta is a bad omen if it occurs at certain times of night. There is no doubt that the rooster is only the relay of a Power outside of man, but the sign is the correlative of the referent and the human receptor remains passive: he can only receive the information. On the contrary, when the relationship to the referent does not arise from an observation pure and simple or from an interpreted observation, we are in the presence of “mediate” signs. Before a meal is begun, a libation of a small amount of food or drink is put on the ground: a conventional sign of respectful invitation to the ancestors to partake of the agape.

If the sign—mediate or symbolic—has a part in it of conventional elaboration its degree of abstraction or artifice and the distance from the “natural” vary considerably from one society to another and this, following our thesis, clearly separates oral societies from those using the written word.

The analysis of verbal language emphasizes the concrete nature of the repertoire and its utilization. In the primitive oral style, the basic element is neither the word nor the syllable but the non-dissociated groups having an intelligible meaning; in complexes that prefer images, comparisons, synthetic or elliptical phrases, the *rhythmic* element, to which written language will forever remain deaf, plays an essential role, as the remarkable studies of Jousse prove. From the point of view of vocabulary, the scarcity of abstract words and the wealth of concrete words in ancient traditional languages has often been pointed out. For example, words abound expressing the idea of carrying or walking, or characterizing different kinds of rain or wind.

But it is not only an analysis of the spoken language that emphasizes the concrete dimension of the codes and practices of traditional social communication. The analysis of African ornament, painting or dance would provide an unending inventory of signs (symbols) that are “near to the natural”: a close rapport with the imitation of animal behavior, sexual references, liaison with natural elements—earth, water, air, fire—by means of forms, gestures and colors. It would be incorrect to “think that the *sum* of African symbols constitutes a sort of code, arbitrarily set up for the needs of an abstruse esthetic. The symbolic is language. As such, it expresses the reality of the universe conceived as a humanized

world, as a life in which the destiny of man and that of things mutually unfold.”³

Objects and groups of objects may also serve as examples. Though not in wide use,⁴ the *couvercle à proverbe* offers a very clear example of mark-symbol near to immediate tangible realities. The message sent by the Scythians to Darius is well known: a bird, a mouse, a frog and five arrows. This communication through things meant, “If you do not escape into the air like a bird, underground like a mouse, into water like a frog, our arrows will kill you.” The offering of a white kola nut, a broken arrow, exchanged rings, a torn photograph are as many analogous examples scattered throughout time and space. An analysis remains to be made of the differences, in number or quality, in these groups and objects, between early and later civilizations.

Examples of pictogram-symbols are plentiful. Among many others, let us mention this one, found among the Alaskan Eskimos. When an Eskimo leaves his house, he draws a message on the door illustrating the direction he has taken and the purpose for which he left. The discussion on the nature of these drawings was opened at the beginning of the study of cave painting and engraving.

Cave drawings offer many cases of signs that went beyond their religious justification or an interest in decoration and evolved towards signs of communication. Abbé Breuil wrote a detailed work on these signs found in the Iberian peninsula.⁵ On the whole, Breuil wrote, these signs reflect a stage of progressive transformation of figures into ideographic symbols or very simple signs. Starting with analogous elements, some 2,700 years before our era a parallel transformation in China ended in the writing of that country. But in Spain, as in the great majority of oral societies, these graphics were not writing, since the groups of symbols lack the organization and complexity needed to increase the graphics

³ Mveng, *L'art et l'Afrique Noire*, p. 70.

⁴ This has been found only in the Mayombe and at Kabinda. It is used by a woman who, having some complaint against her husband, chooses among her carved wood pot lids one that, presented at table in the presence of friends, allows her to state her complaint publicly.

⁵ Breuil, *Les Peintures rupestres schématiques de la péninsule Ibérique*, 4 vols.

expressing not only physical reality, simple or derived, but also moral and abstract reality.

The earliest marks are certainly series of engravings on bone or rock, having the form of points or lines, different from figurative reality, in which Leroi-Gourhan sees the proof of the oldest expressions of rhythm: here, however, it is a question of rhythmic figures undoubtedly of an incantatory or declamatory nature, or perhaps used for accounts, that we have associated with the signal rather than with the sign properly called.

In addition, if Leroi-Gourhan writes, "It is a point on which we now have absolute certainty; graphism began not with the naive representation of the real but with the abstract,"⁶ it does not contradict our hypothesis, or better, it does not concern it. The author places his analysis more than 30,000 years before our era and avers that "graphism does not begin with a somewhat servile and photographic expression of the real but becomes organized with signs that seem to have expressed rhythms first and not forms."⁷ This is why "the most ancient figures known do not represent hunting, dying animals or touching family scenes; they are graphic joints without descriptive ligaments, supports for an oral context that is irremediably lost."⁸

However, what appears with the birth of an agrarian economy is a double current, one part realistic representation, the other going deeper into abstraction, but we soon see symbolic expression "follow a trajectory that, beginning with the abstract, progressively exhibits conventions of form and movement, to attain, at the end of the curve, realism."⁹

Finally, let us note that if realism at the beginning of graphism is an idea to be discarded, the abstract as a source of graphic expression must in its turn be viewed relatively, to the extent that it is fundamentally tied to rhythm, an element that is very far away from an "arbitrary agreement"—a meaning we have given to the qualifier abstract and that Leroi-Gourhan, in opposing it to the figurative, uses in a different way. This underlies our discussion of the degrees of abstraction.

⁶ André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le Geste et la Parole*, Vol. I, p. 263.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

Another question arises and stands out in the light of this first analysis of the graphic sign: is there a true *representation* or is there *creation*?

The many studies dealing with the so-called primitive mentality agree that in these societies an awareness of the rational value of a graphic sign has not yet appeared. On the whole, there is not representation here, but creation. Vendryes writes, "On the one hand, the representation is not dissociated from the object itself; the image of the object is the object. On the other hand, its use is an act involving the universe, visible and invisible."

This statement invites us to consider for a moment the ties linking a large number of manifestations of social communication to magic which, as Malinovski notes, is in many respects the most important and the most mysterious aspect of the pragmatic attitude of "primitive" man toward reality.

The originality and the importance of this liaison will be more apparent when we see the profound and slow transformation occurring in mentality with the appearance and development of writing. However, this is a suitable moment to show that this magic dimension in social communication—and one that may be observed in all other sectors of traditional life—does not affect only the graphic sign but also all mythography (in the broad sense of the language of drawn lines, with the exception of writing), gestures and speech.

In the domain of the graphic, the number of drawings has often been put into relationship with magical practices, especially those of putting spells on game animals to assure their abundance and to make them easy to capture. Our purpose, however, is not to look for the uses of graphic signs in magic—they are not lacking—but to stress the magical aspect, at times secondary or underlying, in the use of signs in communication. Scar patterns, for example, serve as a unifying factor to the group, composed of the living and the dead, the latter having efficacious powers; the clan mark may be their "benediction". Inversely, it is dangerous to draw certain objects because their mere reflection or evocation gives them a maleficent life.

All mythography has magical power and consequently restrictive

laws: the wearing of certain masks and ornaments in Africa cannot be inspired by a simple desire for esthetics or bodily decoration. Art in such societies, and especially African art, is "utilitarian" in the sense that it is submissive to the demands of the function of the object. The function must also be understood with exactitude.¹⁰ Styles, motifs and lines owe very little to anatomical functions, but in their expressionism they are an interior manifestation addressing not only the feelings or the imagination but also the intelligence through different symbols that invest objects with supernatural elements. Thus art and religion are tightly joined in an expression that locates man in a cosmos that he does not yet try to define by logical reasoning. The entire system of social communication is contained in this global view; to ignore it would be to deny all possibility of understanding one of the essential dimensions of traditional social communication.

The observation of other sign systems leads to identical conclusions. As little known and little studied as is the language of gestures, there are still numerous references dispersed throughout the non-scientific writings of travelers, as well as many ethonographic monographs alluding to the belief in the good or evil power of such or such a gesture, mime or posture. In the Bambara, the position assumed for speaking has a great deal of importance.¹¹ As a rule, important orders as well as solemn pronouncements leading to decisions are given in a sitting position, one that gives weight and stability to the words, while those delivered in a standing position are considered vain and superficial. The crouched position indicates the brief and ephemeral nature of the conversation, whereas prostration, elbows on the ground, hands joined, is the obvious sign of submission.

But it is without a doubt the dances, their multiple figures and rhythms that deserve special mention here. In the case of certain initiation dances there appears a close bond with the imitation of the behavior of the animal, a creature better adapted than man

¹⁰ The danger of extrapolation from a foreign cultural context is always present: when the *Nyimi*, the chief of the Kuba, has the head of a ram drawn on his drum, does it mean, as Achten suggests (*Over de geschiedenis der Bakuba, "Congo,"* 1929, Vol. I, No. 2, p. 203) that he is the head of his people as the ram is the head of the flock?

¹¹ Zahan, *La Dialectique du verbe chez les Bambara*, p. 28.

for contacts with the invisible, which is a good example of the rapport we wish to emphasize.

Finally, as far as spoken language is concerned—let us also point out the magic of sounds connected with tom-toms and drums—we refer to the many taboos censoring expression but even more to the incantations imposed by a strict ritual. Carothers has studied the idea of the *power of words*, a belief typical of unlettered societies according to which thought and conduct are influenced by the magical impact of words and the power they possess to implacably impose their content.¹² The word well said at the right moment may even be equivalent to the act itself.

If, as Malinovski says, “We find magic the occupations in which danger plays an important role,” and, to quote McLuhan, “if terror is the normal state in all oral society, in which nothing is indifferent,” the magical nature (going beyond practices and characterizing an entire mentality) that influences many manifestations of social communication could suggest the idea of the terrifying power in which these societies hold social communication in general.

But we must go further. If an oral society considers verbalization—even interior verbalization—as an efficacious social action,¹³ a creation and not a representation, is it true, as Carothers claims, that it is by becoming visible, that is, written, that the word passes into a world that is relatively indifferent to the one who sees it, a world in which the magical power of words no longer exists? If we accept this idea, do we not forget that magic is also present in the visual systems of pictography and mythography, even though they will never cover more than limited sectors of experience whereas verbal language aims at totality?

¹² Carothers, *Psychiatry*, Nov. 1959.

¹³ A reading of the following passage from *Journal d'un Curé de campagne*, by G. Bernanos is not without interest for someone who today seeks to find bridges to yesterday: “No one knows in advance what may, in the long run, come from a bad thought. Our hidden faults poison the air that others breathe, and such a crime, the germ of which some wretched person carries unknowingly, would never have borne fruit without this principle of corruption (...) I believe that if God should give us a clear idea of the solidarity that binds us together in good or evil, we could no longer live.”

It now remains for us to examine McLuhan's statement according to which traditional civilizations give a preponderant place to the sense of hearing, which comes back to examining the correctness of the qualifier that makes oral civilizations out of societies without writing.

That we feel some reticence, indeed suspicion, vis-à-vis McLuhan's theses, dissimulated as Cazeneuve says under a mass of digressions, daring suggestions, humorous remarks, literary or parascientific research, is only natural. But when André Leroi-Gourhan refers back to Gregory of Nyssa, who at the end of the fourth century wrote, "Hands have taken on themselves the heavy and painful burden of nourishment and have liberated the mouth for the service of the word," and notes that before writing the hand was used primarily for making things and the face primarily for language, while after writing appeared we see the equilibrium re-established, we are forced to raise questions.¹⁴

We have encountered many manifestations of visual communication in traditional village life. We are not thinking of the gestural language of the Indians, which is not widespread, but of ornaments, gestures, attitudes, movements, scarification, tattooing, painting and especially dance. In the traditional court of justice, it can happen that a judge, desiring to communicate in a solemn manner, begins to dance. Is this not similar to David's dancing before the Ark, as the Bible relates?

We are also thinking of graphic expression that "gives back to language the dimension of the inexpressible, the possibility of multiplying the dimensions of the act in immediately accessible *visual* symbols," writes Leroi-Gourhan. It will also be noticed that however complete the apparatus of linguistic reference, officially and socially accredited, it may still be insufficient in certain cases and be less rich than other systems. A symbolism that is relatively interpreted is psychologically more significant than the words used. The sign "white kola nut offered to a guest" may inform

¹⁴ When Leroi-Gourhan speaks of the face in language, we may note that there is speech (auditive) and mime (visual). Darwin was more clear on the same subject. He said that gestures require the use of the hands, whereas words leave the hands free for other occupations. In addition, words can reach the interlocutor even when there is little or no visibility.

the guest of the well-meaning attitude toward him more than a welcoming speech. Imitation or manifest behavior, social suggestion, are in themselves informal communications that verbal language will not necessarily need to articulate, many of these communications being impossible to put into words. They are no less important, and someone who is not intuitively familiar with them will be disconcerted by the meaning of certain forms of behavior, even though he is thoroughly *au courant* with their exterior forms and the verbal symbols that accompany them.

May we then, at the level of communication, admit with Carothers that unlettered rural peoples live mainly in a universe of sounds? Whereas in Western Europe man must learn to ignore sounds, adopting the principle, "seeing is believing," for rural Africa reality lies rather in what is said or heard. Are our remarks on the quantitative and qualitative importance of visual communication really such as to call for a reinvestigation of the basically oral nature widely attributed to the societies we are studying?

We propose the following, which are subject to more thorough analysis. First, there is a need to restudy the "profound indifference of unlettered people to the visual values in the organization of perception and experience," as claimed by McLuhan. The author's thought is not lacking, however, in ambiguities, if not contradictions. Attempting to build a theory of cultural change beginning with change in sensory relationships that come from the different exteriorizations of our senses, McLuhan sees rather, in a first stage (the one we are interested in here) a natural, oral and gestural communication (tactile and visual) involving *all the senses* while with the appearance of writing a civilization and body of knowledge will be formed based on *only one sense*, that of sight.

This is obviously quite another thing from the initial subject of the universe of sound McLuhan and Carothers spoke of and is not in contradiction with our second proposition, that in spite of their importance and their extension, mythography and other visual, gestural and tactile systems of communication could never have the fundamental role of spoken language in traditional societies. The latter, the only one having a totalizing aim, is also the only one to have, in fact, furnished a rich combinatory possibility—a limited number of sounds produces a

high number of words: these in their turn produce an infinite number of sentences (Todorov)—an opening not only to the symbolic elaboration of communication but also to thought and knowledge.

This power proper to the spoken word thus justifies the appellation of oral civilization, this time understood positively and no longer reprovingly, as a civilization without writing.

NON-DISTINCTIVE UNITY

If, starting from the elements we have attempted to single out up to this point, we wish to study the social relationships in oral societies and their different manifestations in social communication, it is very important that we never lose sight of the predilection for the global, the spirit of unity or of deep union, the absence of rational categories that characterize the life *in toto* of these societies.

Is it a mental incapacity for abstract distinctions or a desire for empirical syncretism? Let us rather say a sense of the complexity of the world that refuses precision and analysis and indissolubly joins, as a living and indivisible whole, the cosmic, the social and the corporeal. This liaison does not derive from utilitarian pragmatism any more than it is indebted to participatory religious beliefs alone. Here again the involvement is total, and any attempt at dissociation is dangerous.

This attitude, or mentality, may explain at least in part the arrestation of graphic expression at the mythographic level, language here taking as a basic element neither the word nor the syllable but non-dissociated groups with an intelligible meaning. It also allows us to understand the association, cosubstantial in a way, of the name of a person and the idea with which he is associated, identical to the integration of music and words—to the point at times of being indistinguishable from the spoken word¹⁵—to the dance, and to the ceremony in which he takes part.

Our purpose here is to look for the consequences of this *solid-*

¹⁵ The “balaphone,” a xylophone with gourd resonators used in Africa and especially by the *Sara* of Chad, is carefully conceived to emit artificially blurred sounds. For the musicologist C. Duvelle, in *Musique nègre d’Afrique*, this is due

arity, in the broadest sense of the word, on the general concept of social relationships and on the role of the communications that establish them. Stated inversely, the problem would thus be to see if and how human exchanges give evidence, in the reality of communication, of this fundamental attitude.

In this sense, a first finding coming from a careful analysis of oral societies shows if not their incapacity at least their resistance to the idea of man as an individual, apart from the rest of the world.

Following that, we will note in social life a great poverty of, and a collective distrust in, individualizing relationships, very often considered as socially deviant.

In a context in which the philosophy of cosmological solidarity and the law of clan solidarity are the most powerful retardants to any attempt at emancipation of the individual, and in which private interest cannot be exercised unless it coincides with the general interest, we find no pertinent example of the use of social communication to create or develop, even indirectly or secondarily, the single personality.

On the contrary we note, in a manifest way in literature, the absence or, in any case, a very strict channeling of individual emotion. For a man in these societies, Louis-Vincent Thomas tells us, "to be moved emotionally is to participate in the activity of forces that animate the universe, in a close communion with the members of the group and through the mediation of the word that unleashes the forces: emotion as game in ludic activity (fables, legends); emotion as initiation in the grasping of primordial truths (myth); sacred emotion (sacrificial words)." At the same time, all latitude left to individual affectivity may affect the stability of the society, and if, as we have seen, verbalization, even interior, is an efficacious social action in an oral society, we understand with Carothers that "if personal and individual thoughts arise outside of strictly practical and utilitarian references, they must be feared and stifled, in oneself as well as in others."

It may be objected that the practice of the palaver seems to

to a desire to avoid putting the musical instrument into opposition with man (especially with the human voice); giving the impression of a masked and distorted voice, but a voice just the same.

authorize the free expression of personal ideas, as would be the case, in the opinion of some, with the “free assemblies” that have multiplied since the events of 1968. Actually, the limits to free expression are quickly felt in these assemblies, especially when the political organization is hierarchical. The case of the Luba society is a good example: not just any individual may express himself in a Luba assembly; whoever wishes to speak must present himself giving the name of the founding ancestor of his *tshifuku* (which we translate very imperfectly by “class”). If he is a member of a senior *tshifuku* he will be allowed to speak, if he is not, his intervention will always be considered as an insult to the elders.

The inequality of the voices makes it so that it is not rare that the agreement closing a deliberative assembly is reached thanks to a social pressure that is sufficiently strong to allow opposition to be ignored. Unanimity motivated by respect for the established order may thus be only apparent, in the eyes of an observer who is a member of a senior *tshifuku* he will be allowed to speak, if may appear as arbitrary, restrictive and repressive.

The fact that opposition is denied will have great importance only when traditions begin to disintegrate and basic choices, put in the form of alternatives, must be made. For the moment, the “democracy by stages” that a number of palavers testify creates on the one hand an impression of liberty of whose limits, generally, everyone is aware and no one refuses; on the other hand, this situation assures a feeling of security in social stability. Influential people, concerned with preserving their prestige and the confidence of the community, are rarely able to remain outside the predicted behavior.

With regard to prestige, we note on certain occasions and in certain manifestations of social communication the concern of the individual to occupy a distinguished position in the eyes of his fellow citizens, in addition to that conferred—and more often refused—by the social organization. We are thinking, for example, of the use of mottoes, formulas of self-praise, that may well appear as a cultural expression authorizing the satisfaction of the need for self-affirmation, but it must be immediately noted that such formulas are effective because they unite the individual to different social levels and to the past of his group—genealogy

has a very important place here. In the same way, certain ornaments or painting may well be used to attract attention, just as a talent for oratory allows one to stand out from the others; but the margin of singularization remains so narrow that it presents no danger to attachment to the group.

These few examples at the level of practices of social communication suffice to show the voluntary indifference of the first traditional societies to individual development.

A GROUP COMMUNICATION

If social communication in oral societies integrates the past and the future with the present, it above all permits life in the present. Setting aside and repressing individualistic impulses and temptations, it becomes part of the framework of a communal and collective life.

It is an indispensable element of the *material life* of the group as a source of information and stimulation. We see it as such in the oral transmission of techniques, in the cries and chants that accompany the collective work in the fields, on the river and in the forest, in those daily signal-gestures and reflex-sounds that, as automatic communication, recall that of animals.

Social communication also insures the cohesion and the life of the group in its *organization* and its *economic, social and political functions*. The chant in chorus merges the individual with the group, inserts him into its structures by sex and age, makes him an actor in all the manifestations of the collectivity. This is the reason that the teaching and practice of singing occupy such an important place during initiations. But it is music, dance, scarification, ornament, painting, ceremonial, the language and its expressions that define not only the structures proper to the community but also its rites, myths and beliefs, thus creating an immediate and profound "we." There is a true technique of reinforcement of the community and an initiatic system of education.

Social communication also fills a basic function on the *psycho-social and psycho-pathological level*. On a deeper level of interpretation, does not the mask appear as having the duty to drive away fear of the unknown by making it concrete, by making visible

the spirit that animates it, in whose good graces man must be? The dance, so often an acted-out presentation of social conflicts and always cosmic and communal rhythm, brings about a true social hygiene. Gluckmann supports the hypothesis that certain obscene songs or certain costumed rituals are so many expressions of conflicts having in view catharsis and integration into these groups in which social order is not questioned. But is not that one of the objects of the everyday palaver when it exposes in a public place interpersonal tensions, brings into play affinities and antipathies and finally outlines the procedure for a common action—the supreme rule of social cohesion being translated here by an evident concern to convince rather than to force.

There are numerous manifestations that establish a collective climate of active participation, an ambiance propitious to the cohesion of the group, that create a larger permeability of the individual to the values of the community. We could thus speak of a unifying vocation *on the cultural level*, in the broad sense, of social communication. One example among many others, the tale that according to N'Sougan Agblemagnon “by the choice of its themes, by the particular manner in which its plot is organized, expresses an essential characteristic of the people or the society that uses it; it may be the reflection, the definition, the expression, the criticism, the justification of real social cadres. It is the translation of certain social arrangements, social behavior, significant social reactions, social situations acted out and not just imagined.”

Overall, however, it is in the symbols that act as vehicles for the social communication that the members of these societies feel their unity, perceive their common interests; and it is this attachment that gives cohesion and stability to their society. Whether they are in the form of myths, fiction, dogma, rites, rules, situations or persons, these symbols—much more considered as values—are only effective because they are ceaselessly rendered living and lived by the circulation, sharing and activation that social communication assumes as its basic role.

This very rapid survey of what has seemed to us to be the principal functions of social communication in the early civilizations (which does not at all mean that they are not found in other historical eras) well shows the priority these societies give to the group.

These functions exercised in closed groups are located especially at an intragroupal level. However, in a reduced geographical area, good neighbor relationships and those of conflict are established between villages, lineages, at times even between more extended groups or regions. These intergroup exchanges, which become concrete in various forms of social communication, among other things, again emphasize the affirmation of the group, its search of protection and possible expansion.

If language appears as an obvious sign of belonging to a group, this characteristic has a bearing not only on large groups but also—although less manifest—at the level of restricted groups that have recourse, in certain circumstances, to an expression that marks the desire to exclude strangers: secret language, formulas sent out by drum, esoteric gestures, thus are an affirmation of the originality and the closed nature of the group.

More distinct and more conscious is here, however, the recourse to tattooing as a distinctive mark of the social group. If it fills a function at the interior of the group, among others by giving the civil status of the bearer, it allows much more, at the time of voluntary or fortuitous encounters, to immediately and easily determine the duties of reciprocal assistance or non-assistance and to prevent endogamic unions, forbidden in the great majority of societies.

But war, with its entourage of tattooing, dances, songs, tom-tom messages, invectives, directed against the outsiders, is still often a condition for interior peace and cohesion. The closer and more powerful the neighbors are, the more risk there is that hostility will be intense, internal organization strong and discipline intensified.

We thus see how, positively, oral societies center their social communications on the group as such after having seen how, negatively, they refuse them all distinctive action on the individual level.

But here our conclusions stop for the moment. Oral man, “group man”? If our findings have seemed to go in this direction, it is important to point out at once that they have been circumscribed within the framework of *one* concrete group that we could rapidly and temporarily qualify as tribal: a primary group, primordial and restricted.

It is clear that the passage to the *group type* needs on the one

hand a theoretical reflection on the notion of “groupality” and on the other, a broadening of the empirical field of analysis. Later stages of our research will furnish us with the occasion.