

Review of Olson, David R. and Nancy Torrance (eds.). 2001. *The Making of Literate Societies*. Oxford: Blackwell. xiv + 349pp. Hb.: £.00 / \$. ISBN: 0 631 22742 3. Pb.: £.00 / \$. ISBN: 0 631 22743 1.

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This edited volume originates in a 1997 workshop aimed at exploring the role of literacy in social development sponsored by the German Foundation for International Development (DSE). Against the daunting backdrop of decades of failed international attempts at achieving mass literacy in the poor South, a large group of literacy specialists gathered to discuss and agree on policy recommendations on this perennial problem. Co-edited by two leading literacy specialists, both based in Toronto, this voluminous tome brings together contributions from both Western and Third World specialists (but with the conspicuous absence of US scholars). Contributors come from a variety of professional backgrounds, including sociology, educational psychology, development studies, policy-making and, in three cases, anthropology.

Most chapters subscribe to the 'ideological' or practice-centred approach to literacy, that is, to the idea that literacy is embedded in sociocultural practices that are culturally and historically specific. However, one or two chapters seek to reconcile this approach with the 'autonomous' theory of literacy associated with Jack Goody's earlier work, i.e. the notion that literacy is a socio-cognitive technology with specific affordances that has profoundly transformed the world's more advanced societies. The majority of contributors ask, therefore, an instrumentalist question: not what literacy does *to* societies but rather what societies do *with* literacy. They also wish to move away from an earlier focus of literacy campaigns on improving individuals' literacy skills towards a notion of *societal literacy* – the idea that unless developing countries create (with outside assistance) strong social, institutional and economic environments that are saturated with literacy, most individuals will not find it worthwhile to invest their time and energies on learning to read and write with fluency.

The book is divided into two main sections. The first section is devoted to historical case studies of literate societies such as Ancient Greece, early modern Germany and contemporary Japan. The second section presents empirical case studies from developing countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The sheer richness of these case studies is the book's major asset. Thus, in Chapter 4, Rosalind Thomas explores the relationship between orality and literacy in Ancient Greece, particularly in Athens. Eschewing simplistic causal accounts of writing furthering Athenian democracy, Thomas points out that alongside the increased use of writing for judicial trials and other democratic processes, it was also used for written curses and other forms of 'popular literacy' that in some cases worked against the democratic order. Literacy was, in many respects, an extension of Athens' vibrant oral culture. It was by no means superordinate to orality. For instance, in legal contracts, eyewitnesses were trusted more than 'the bare written record' (p. 72). Other wonderfully rich case studies include Utz Maas' discussion of the spread of literacy in early modern Germany (Chapter 6), Sonja Fagerberg-Diallo's account of a vernacular literacy

movement in Senegal (Chapter 9), and Luis Enrique López's study of bilingual education in the Andes (Chapter 11).

Whilst portraying a familiar postcolonial world 'order' of failed states with highly literate elites and illiterate masses, this book's second section also provides some grounds for moderate optimism in the form of *social movements*. For instance, the Pulaar (Fula, Fulani) grassroots movement in Senegal aims at reinvigorating this Sahel-wide lingua franca through literacy classes and publications. Villagers are reported as having a sense of ownership over the learning and teaching process. They also feel empowered and 're-connected' with their own cultural heritage. Similar findings are reported from Bolivia (Chapter 11) where the Guarani literacy movement is both helping to revive a dormant national public sphere as well as fostering an ethnic revival in a country where the prestige language is, of course, Spanish. Poignantly, one of the unexpected consequences of this 'Guaranisation' was the newly found ability of monolingual Guarani grandparents to 'regain the grandchildren they had been quietly resigned to losing' (p. 217). Such has been the success of this grassroots movement that educationalists in neighbouring Paraguay – where Guarani is spoken by a majority of the population – are seeking to learn from their experience now that democratic rule has been reintroduced in Paraguay.

In sum, *The Making of Literate Societies* is a superb reference book on the relationship between literacy and social development. Its comparative dimension and empirical richness will interest all social anthropologists, sociologists, policy-makers and development specialists working on issues of social change, inequality, literacy and media.