

Writing, religion and revolt in Bahia

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The impact of writing on culture is discussed, especially the psychosocial consequences of literacy as a "technology of the intellect." The role played by writing is described (a) in a slave revolt in nineteenth-century Brazil and, (b) in a preliterate African culture (the LoDiga) and its religious myths. Writing was a crucial factor in the planning of the revolt and writing tends to turn a religion of inheritance into a religion of conversion. But in view of the diversity of functions it served in these cultures, literacy, as an all-encompassing descriptive term, is unsatisfactory. We need to devote attention to the uses of texts within a culture.

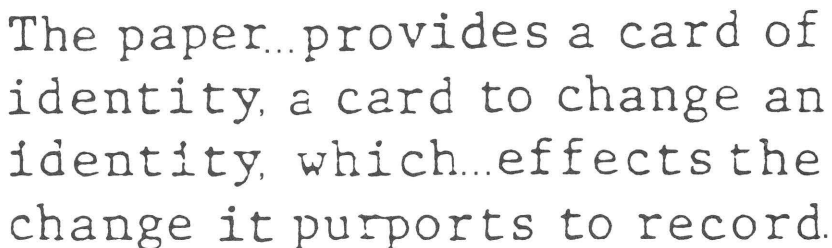
The greatest forced migration of peoples in the history of the world followed upon Columbus' discovery of the New World. Already on his second voyage in 1495, he brought two African slaves from the Iberian peninsula (Rout 1976: 22). Following the drying up of the supply of white slaves from the Near East as the result of the Turkish conquest of Constantinople, there had been an increased flow into Europe from the western coast of Africa.

Slaves for the New World were first imported from Spain into Hispaniola in 1502 to help produce the newly-introduced sugar crop (Mintz 1985). But the main shippers of slaves directly from Africa were the Portuguese who took them to Cartagena on the Caribbean shore of Columbia where they were then sold to the Spanish col-

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onists. They came largely from the Guinea coast of West Africa, the preferred supply for Spain, while those from Angola went mostly to the Portugese colony of Brazil. The day before embarkation Angolan slaves wre usually assembled in a nearby church, sometimes in the main square of the port, in order to be baptized. As far as the ecclesiastical authorities were concerned, it was essential that this sacrament be performed, since the missionizing aspect of the slave trade was often seen, at least by the Church, as the most compelling reason for its existence. "As a prelude to the perfunctory ceremony to follow, the priest walked among the rows of captives, assigning a Christian name to each and handing him a paper with his name written on it lest he forget it" (Bowser 1974:47). Indeed, according to Koster (1816:198) the Angolan slaves in Brazil bore the mark of the royal crown on their breasts which "denotes that they have undergone the ceremony of baptism".

The renaming of slaves, who were by definition kinless persons, non-persons, was nothing new. I have known individuals of slave origin in the Gonja town of Salaga in northern Ghana who had been given names like "I am here", supposedly an answer to the question 'Where are you?'. Such new names served to cut the individuals off from their kinsfolk, their society, from humanity itself and at the



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same time emphasized their servile status. In the case of the Portuguese slaves from Angola, the Catholic Church not merely legitimized but sacralized enslavement by the bestowal of a new name, a *Christian* name as we still say in English, that effected an enforced conversion. Free Africans were now Christians and slaves.

However the renaming was not in itself sufficient, the new name had to be written down and handed to the individual. To the magic of the spoken word was added the hocus-pocus of the written one, which supposedly transformed the religious status of someone whose social life had already been totally overturned by purchase or by the sword. To think about this act is to realise its terrifying authoritarianism. The paper is intended to convey information to the slave's purchaser in the New World. But at the same time it provides a card of identity, a card to change an identity, which at one level effects the change it purports to record.

There are countless other examples of the use of writing for what can be called magical purposes, the burning of paper money before Chinese altars, the Buddhist wheels turning the pages of prayer books, the stuffing of messages into the Temple walls in Jerusalem, the drinking of the ink in which Qu'ranic verses have been written on wooden tablets, the Egyptian letters to gods and to forefathers and, to bring it nearer home, notes to Father Christmas; such uses were central to magico-religious performances. All these cases obviously occur when religions are written and except for the Egyptian example, written in an alphabetic script; they were religions with sacred texts and at the same time religions of conversion. These facts were not accidentally associated.

In this paper I want to argue for a positive relationship between the presence of writing and particular features of the religious system. Like McLuhan I have been interested in the social and cognitive consequences of changes in the means and mode of communication. I have written of writing as the technology of the intellect and this has been taken by some critics (e.g., Street 1985) to mean that, firstly, I am only dealing with writing in the limited sense of the graphic technique, and secondly, that I see this as 'determining' some aspects of cultural life, that is, as the only relevant factor. To many of those interested in culture, technology stands at the opposite pole. To think of it as influencing, let alone determining, culture is a kind of blasphemy.

My own background taught me differently. Like McLuhan I read English at Cambridge when it was dominated by the figure of F.R. Leavis. Like many of those interested in literary culture at that time, I never regarded it as being uninfluenced by technological factors.

Was it T.S. Eliot who spoke of the rhythms of Victorian poetry having been influenced by the coming of the steam-engine? Q.D. Leavis (1932) examined the way the reading public for the eighteenth century novel had been effected by the advent of the printing press. Watt took up a similar theme in his book on the rise of the novel (1957), while he and I (1963) attempted to look very broadly at the various ways alphabetic writing had influenced human cultures. In doing so we were interested not simply in graphic techniques but in what was stored in the written tradition. Nor did we consider literacy even in this large sense as the sole factor in any situation. We did not subscribe to single factor determinism of a technological or any other kind. Above all we did not subscribe to the belief in 'instant literacy' embodied in some psychological experiments. On the other hand the analysis of the interaction between 'culture' and 'technology' was central to our endeavour.

I want to illustrate this interaction by looking at writing and religion. But since speculation in this field can easily take leave of the empirical, I begin by returning to the concrete situation of African slaves in the New World and later look at this against the background of African oral religions in the Old.

In the nineteenth century, as today, blacks comprised more than one half of the population of those tropical countries of South America with access to the Atlantic seaboard. Originating in Africa, they were brought over as slaves, mainly to work on the sugar estates.¹ The trade itself started soon after the beginning of the colonial period and it continued until the middle of the nineteenth century, although owing to the frequency of manumission and of 'miscegenation' in comparison with North America, at least after 1830, a significant proportion of that population consisted of freed men and women.² But if manumission lessened the pressure to escape (Sharp 1976:146-7), it also stimulated the import of new slaves for the labour force. So did the prospect of abolition. After the beginning of the British-inspired campaign to end the slave trade, the numbers im-

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ported into Brazil increased steadily from 130,000 a decade in the eighteenth century to 387,000 between 1840-1850. Indeed Brazil was estimated to have a population of 3,817,000 in 1817-18 of which 2,515,000 were *preto* (black) and *pardo* (mulatto); of these 585,000 (only 15% black) were free (Kent 1970: 335).

Protests against slavery by slaves themselves often took the form of escape, with the runaways establishing usually shortlived maroon communities (*palenques* or *quilambos*) in defended villages in inaccessible places — and occasionally longer lasting ones as in the well-known case of the Black Republic of Palmares containing over five thousand escaped slaves and enduring for nearly 70 years (1630-1697) (Genovese 1981; Price 1973; Friedmann and Cross 1979; Schwartz 1970:315; Kent 1970:337-8). Flight, writes Bowser of Peru, was the most common form of protest (1974:330). But revolts of freedmen as well as of slaves occurred and were facilitated by the fact that even slaves were often allowed to carry arms and were sometimes used to control other slaves.³ According to Freyre (1946:358) these slave forces were developed in the course of family feuds among the ruling class, but they defended not only the Great House but the whole country against the Dutch and the entire class against runaway slaves. It is the series of uprisings that took place in the rich sugar-growing province of Bahia, both in the city of San Salvador itself and in the surrounding countryside between 1807 and 1835, which are the focus of the present study.

Of these the revolt of 1835 was the most serious, giving rise to fears of another massacre of Saint Domingue (later Haiti), with the blacks murdering the whites and taking possession of the country. This they might well have done in Bahia as they formed seven-eighths of the town's population of 125,000, for it was a centre for the importation of slaves until the middle of the nineteenth century. Although such revolts drew the attention of white Brazilians to the danger of adding to the black population, the need for labour (especially for coffee plantations after 1835), the reluctance of the dominant class to participate in manual work and the constant emancipation of slaves (often with the help of black Catholic fraternities and systems of rotating credit) meant a continual demand for new recruits.⁴ Many of these later imports were of Yoruba origin (Nagôs as they were known in most of South America). Their language (from Anago) became the *lingua franca* of Bahian Africans from the turn of the century until the 1860s, and it was freed men and mulattos from this group who, drafted into trade and crafts rather than the plantations, played a leading role in the events of 1835.⁵ Yoruba slaves continued to be shipped from Whydah, the main port of Dahomey, long after the suppression of the trade by England and France (Verger 1964), and it was partly to watch this traffic that a British Consul was

posted to Bahia, although the town also accommodated many English merchants at the time.

What immediately impressed observers was the careful planning behind the rising. The first report of the British Consul, J. Parkinson, was sent to the Duke of Wellington on the following day (26 January 1835). He spoke of the role of the Nagô blacks, "who comprise the chief part of the slave population of the city". He went on to say that it "was widely extended and combined with far greater ability than is usual in such affairs".

Incendiary fires were lit in several parts of the city. Simultaneous attacks were made on the guard at the palace, the cavalry quarters and at the barracks of the artillery, cacadores, and national and municipal troops.

Three days later Parkinson wrote again with more information. The revolt had been planned for daybreak "when household slaves are despatched for water and their masters and mistresses are engaged in Church devotions" (the 25th was a Sunday). Most of the *brancos* were in the suburb of Bomfim on an annual pilgrimage to the church of Nossa Senhora da Guia where they were particularly vulnerable to attack (Kent 1970:350-351). According to one commentator, the great opportunity of the rebels was lost owing to impetuosity, the rising started three hours too early, losing the advantage of coordinated timing. In fact the authorities had been warned by two Yoruba women, ex-slaves, who announced before 10 pm on the 24th that an insurrection was about to take place. As a result of this information the soldiers forced an entry into a building owned by two of the participants, the ex-slaves Belchior and Caspar. This house was one of two meeting places, each with its own Muslim religious instructor, here the Nupe Luiz Sanim; the other group from the Victoria quarter consisted mainly of slaves working for Englishmen; they met in a 'straw' house where there was a religious school under the supervision of one Thomas, a slave. When the soldiers attacked the first centre, they surprised some 60 armed blacks who overpowered them and directed their attack against the main centres of Brazilian power. At that time this was the army barracks, but today in West Africa the radio station, that centre of communication, is usually one of the first targets in any coup.

Writing in 1900 Nina Rodrigues described the role of Islam in Bahia at that period, having been brought there by captured Hausa and later by other Muslims (Tapa, that is, Nupe as well as Yoruba).⁶ He connected these uprisings with the famous 'Jihād, 'holy war', against the infidel in Northern Nigeria proclaimed by Uthman dan Fodio in 1804 which led to the conquest of the Hausa, the Nupe and of north-

ern Yoruba and to the present dominance of the Fulani ruling elite. For these slaves, he notes, were not uncivilized natives but members of warrior cultures who knew how to read and write the Arabic script. Indeed, according to Freyre the standard of literacy of the Muslim population was greater than that of most of the white colonists — “some of them illiterate, most of them semi-literate”, almost none being capable of signing their names. They did not easily take on the role of simple cultivators nor accept forced baptism into the Christian faith. One should add that in the first half of the nineteenth century, unlike many other slave societies, there was continual communication with Africa back and forth across the Atlantic, in which Brazil played a dominant role. Not only did each slave shipment brings news of the homeland, but blacks were involved in the trade itself, established ‘Brazilian’ settlements along the Guinea coast and free Africans even made the voyage to America. Contact with the world of Islam was maintained in a minor way just as Yoruba cults, especially after the end of the slave trade, were reinforced by visits and by consultations between the two continents.⁷

In Bahia many slaves were employed as palanquin bearers, often by strangers, and especially by the English whose servants were suspected of complicity during the major revolt of 1835. These Protestant masters were presumably less concerned with the commitment of their charges to the Catholic faith and may have encouraged incipient signs of literate activity. Certainly two participants took refuge in the house of the British Vice-Consul, who happened to be the Consul’s son-in-law, and were ‘instantly surrendered’. But in other instances the merchants claimed ‘British privilege’ for the runaways, who “were pertinaciously harboured . . . in defiance of law civil and military”. The local whites resented this assumption of privilege and openly charged the British, whose activities were regarded with great hostility (Rodrigues 1965), “with inciting their own slaves to insurrection and preparing them to emulate the horrors of San Domingo”.⁸

Rodrigues’ analysis of the 1835 revolt was based mainly on the report of the Chief of Police, later Governor, Francisco Gonçalves Martins who explained how the rebellion “had been planned over a longer period, in utmost secrecy and in a way that was not to be expected from brutish and ignorant beings. In general, all knew how to write

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and read in unknown characters resembling the Arabic used by the Hausa which now appears to have spread to the Yorubas [who had largely replaced the Hausa whom they had joined in previous revolts]. They had some educated people who gave lessons and tried to organise the insurrection in which freed Africans [that is, blacks born in Africa] and even some rich ones, were involved". He found many books which they claimed were religious precepts drawn from the Qu'ran. Certainly religion had a part in this revolt, even at the level of the leaders telling "these poor people that these papers could protect them from death".⁹

Of the writings referred to by Rodrigues some have apparently been lost. What we have seem to be mainly religious (Monteil 1967; Reichert 1967; Reichert and Abdelghani 1966). However, we do have a resumé of other materials made by a Hausa named Albino and written in Arabic characters (Rodrigues 1976:105-6; Verger 1968: 341). According to this source, some of these papers contained instructions to the insurgents coming from the Victoria quarter to seize the country, kill all the whites and then to go to a meeting place where they would be joined by people from the interior.¹⁰ Other papers were designed to protect the rebels from the bullets of police and soldiers. One, signed by a Mala Abubakar, that is, by a mallam or learned man, was a kind of proclamation, exhorting the people to unite and asserting that nothing would harm them on the way. We may contrast this mode of gathering a group together with the 'drumbeats' and 'nocturnal ritual gatherings' used in the revolt in Saint-Dominique in August 1781 (Parry and Sherlock 1963:163). The author, Mallam Abubakar, may have been the Imam, that is, the religious leader, at the time of the revolt, although this was apparently unknown to the police and only told to Rodrigues much later by the contemporary Imam; nevertheless the mallam was later expelled to Africa (Verger 1968:349) along with many others. Another letter was sent from one Allei to Adao, slave of an Englishmen, saying he would arrive at 4 am and Adao should not leave without him, a message presumably referring to the planned attack at daybreak. Finally the searches revealed an ABC and writing boards used for teaching the written language.

Documents had also been discovered after the projected revolt of 1807, which started as a result of an attempt to suppress the nearby

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quilombes by breaking off their relationship with the town. This earlier rising was definitely attributed to the Hausa (Kent 1969: 343), though some Mandinka were also arrested (p. 349). The same group appears to have been involved in the revolts of 1808, 1809 and 1814. However those of 1826 and 1830 were mainly Yoruba (though Dahomeans are also mentioned) and the 1809 rising was blamed on the Yoruba secret society called *Ogboni*, which Kent saw as one possible reason why it was undetected (p. 349); that made it a unique case for in the other instances someone always succumbed to the rewards that were being offered by the authorities.

In the discussions of the later revolt we find references to the role of Muslim schools, to marabouts or alufas (Rodrigues 1976:54) and to Limano (Imam); more recently, from 1900, we encounter descriptions of the observance of the annual Muslim fast (p. 68), of mosques, of grisgris, of washing the writing from tablets and drinking it. No one can doubt the importance of Islam in nineteenth-century Brazil, despite the fact that after the revolt of 1835 an effort was made to deport all freed blacks who could read and write back to Africa, a truly draconian measure aimed at depriving the blacks of their literate members, a move which hit the Muslim community hard.¹¹ A ban was placed on 'unorthodox cults'; subversives and undesirables were expelled to West Africa, 400 in all, while slaves received 100 lashes. Some of those who could, went voluntarily, some 800 passports being issued between October and December 1837. This return of the learned (and the watchfulness of the police) seems to have taken the heart out of further revolt. In any case Islam was partly driven underground, although groups such as Candomble that attempted to combine Catholicism and Islam or Yoruba cults were allowed to flourish.

There certainly appears to have been a falling off in commitment to Islam after 1835, partly because of suppression, partly because of syncretic adjustment. Nevertheless, a tradition of Islam continued as we see clearly from Étienne's study of the revolt. For his general knowledge of the 'sect', — and he used the term to define what he considered to be a special Brazilian version of Islam — was derived from Muslims he talked to at the beginning of the twentieth century, including Imam Hassoumanou, Imam of all Brazil, resident in Bahia. He observed a continuing 'fanaticism', a hatred towards whites and Christians. While they could not read Arabic and used a Portuguese translation of the Qu'ran and Yoruba as a *lingua franca*, the structure of the community was fully Islamic, with an *imam*, *muezzin* and *alkali*. They regretted they had no mosque,¹² but observed prayers, the five pillars of Islam, used a lunar calendar for the festivals, avoided pork, fermented drink and animal blood, and consumed the ink with which *surahs* had been written on boards (known as *wala uassa*).

The strength of Islam in Bahia at the time of the revolt had been considerable. "The atmosphere that preceded the movement of '35 in Bahia was one of intense religious ardour among the slaves. In Mata-Porcos Lane on the Preça slopes at St. Francis' Cross, in the very shadow of the Catholic churches and monasteries . . ." writes Freyre, "slaves who were schooled in the Koran preached the religion of the Prophet, setting it over against the religion of Christ that was followed by their masters, up above in the Big Houses. They propagandized [*sic*] against the Catholic Mass, saying that it was the same as worshipping a stick of wood; and to the Christian rosary with its cross of Our Lord they opposed their own. . . ." ¹³

While Islam had later to go underground for a while, Freyre notes its continuing influence on Brazilian Christianity, with its "prayer-papers, to deliver the body from death" (1946:316). The position taken by some blacks and coloureds towards Protestantism may be related to these earlier anti-Catholic prejudices. Moreover various rituals seem to smack of Islam, such as a feast of the dead in Penedo, with its long prayers and fasting, its abstinence from alcohol, the lunar calendar, the long white tunics and the sacrifice of a sheep.

In his observations of African practices in Pernambuco (sects he calls them) Freyre notes how people remove their shoes at ceremonies, avoid treading on an old mat, cross their legs, pass round coloured cloths while dancing and drink the ink washed off writing boards (1946:31). In this way the Catholicism of the Big Houses was "Enriched with Musulman influences" (p. 318).

Some 800 blacks took part in the uprising, in which 14 lost their lives. 326 persons were arrested, including 26 women; 286 participated in the nine-year trial, 120 of them free blacks. Of the leaders (all African born), 7 were free, 4 slaves; 10 were Yoruba, 1 Hausa and 1 Nupe. Of the 160 slaves accused, 50 were employed by strangers, 45 of them by the English, ¹⁴ 52 were domestic servants, 37 palanquin bearers and 33 street traders and store clerks. A number of them appear to have formed a club to learn the Qu'ran including Jose, a Yoruba who was found with papers, and Jaôa, another Yoruba employed by an Englishman who had not only papers but guns. Many of the slaves in Bahia appear to have been *negros de ganho* who worked independently but turned over an agreed percentage of their weekly earning to their masters (Kent 1970:340). Aruna (Haruna, a Yoruba with a Muslim name) sold water; another Sule (Suleman, though Victoria was his Christian name) sold cloth. ¹⁵ Licutan, a Yoruba slave known as Pacifico, was one of the leaders and could read and write; the Hausa Dandara sold tobacco. The Yoruba Luiz and Gaspar were tailors, as was Jose from the Congo; Ahora, a freed Yoruba, carried lime; Dada was a smith; Namomin, a Yoruba, worked with a butcher.

All had entered various trades, none were plantation hands. Sanim (the Nupe leader also known as Luiz) organised a kind of *esusu*, a friendly society, providing rotating credit collecting the contributions of its members (for the Yoruba, see Eades 1980:77) in order to buy their freedom and purchase clothes; the purchase of freedom was common enough throughout Latin America, the provision of loans being one of the functions of the black fraternities (*irmandade* or *confraria*), the most important of which was Our Lady of the Rosary, founded by the Dominicans and established in Portugal in the fifteenth century for the defence, conversion and control of slaves.¹⁶ The fraternity, whose officers had to be freed blacks, and its scribe, a white of noble birth, was also concerned with participation in processions, with providing proper burials and with representing its members in lawsuits against their masters.

The variety of documents obtained in the search shows that we are not simply dealing with writing for magical charms, nor even for religious uses alone. In the first place, the fact that writing was employed in the uprising to make secret arrangements by means of letters, suggests that the superior planning was partly related to literacy. Secondly, the magical power of the word (and the book) as manifest in the use of *surahs* (verses) of the Qu'ran sewn into leather pouches on coats, was directed to secular aims, being thought to protect the wearer from the enemy's weapons. Indeed in Northern Nigeria at this period, the leather pouches, like the quilted kapok coats of the horsemen (as shown in the illustration to Denham 1966:471) helped to deflect the arrows of enemy archers. Such protective medicines against firearms were not the exclusive possession of Islam (Genovese 1981:47). They were sold, for example, by Akan obeah men in Jamaica in 1760 (Schuler 1976:383) and by the LoDagaa in northern Ghana in 1900 (Goody 1956). I do not mean to suggest these were all derivative from Islam. But belief in the efficacy of these *madingas*, known in West Africa as *safi*, against the bullets of the white man, also found in the 1807 revolt (Rodrigues 1946), was not simply a matter of magical power or material protection but of religious faith. A somewhat similar use of writing was found in the

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practice whereby an individual is made to drink the ink washed off the wooden tablets on which *surahs* of the Qu'ran had been written. Rodrigues quotes Binger's reference to the practice in Timbuctu, but it also occurred widely in North Africa, and throughout the Muslim world, as well as among the Ancient Hebrews as a kind of ordeal.

Thirdly, the written religion of Islam appears to have provided some kind of ideological backing to the revolt. Although an obvious feature of the protests of African slaves, the notion of 'Death to the Whites' is very characteristic of many recent uprisings in West Africa (e.g., Goody 1982) where the word *nasala* for 'white' is derived from the Arabic form of Nazarene, Christian. Ethnic and even racial definitions were again dominated by religious ones.

Fourthly, writing may in fact have helped people to gain their freedom because of the contribution it enabled them to make to the work of their masters (often semi-independent work), and then to remain free once they had done so. Somewhat later, about 1848, the French Consul at Bahia, Francis de Castelnau, tried to question a Muslim called Mohammad-Abdullad Filani who had been living there for some thirty years and had liberated himself by his work as a carpenter. He could read and write not only in his own language but in Portuguese. According to de Castelnau he remained "very intolerant and fanatic", even trying to convert the Consul to Islam. When the Frenchman offered him money to come and work, he turned round to another black and declared that he did not want to serve a Christian dog. This man of seventy, a marabout, claimed to have even made the voyage to Mecca. He was born in Kano and was taken prisoner at Katsina by the Hausa during the Fulani wars. In his discussions he returned constantly to the faith of Mohammad, which was the basis of all, and the only thing in this world worthy of occupying a man's time (Vergier 1968:327-8).

It is amazing to consider that Mohammad-Abdullad had been to Mecca and back, then to the New World, while the Imam, Abubakhr, travelled, again as a result of his faith, from Nigeria to Brazil and back again. However, Africans in Brazil, whether Muslims or not, did not lose contact with their former homeland; the Yoruba continuing to import religious rituals for personal use, kola nuts, cowries, soap, striped indigo cloth and palm oil. Moreover, down to the end of the nineteenth century Hausa and Yoruba freedmen from Bahia were repatriated to Africa, founding Porto Seguro in Ardra. When a delegation of Quakers visited Rio in 1852, it was received by a commission of freedmen from the province of Minas, seventy of whom had been repatriated to Benin. They presented the English visitors with documents written in Arabic (Chandler and Burgess 1853; Freyre 1946: 318).

The words of Mohammad-Abullad run counter to widely held notions about the syncretism of African religions, about adaptation to the forms of Christianity or of slave society. In West Africa and elsewhere Islam was constantly making compromises with local beliefs; this was one of the ostensible causes of the Fulani-Hausa wars, for the family of Uthman dan Fodio was highly literate and aimed at introducing a purer version of Islam, going back to the Book (Last 1967). But here we find a statement of a man convinced of his particular faith, a firm follower of the movements of reform generated by the Fulani, and unwilling to compromise that faith in any way. As Rodrigues notes, the revolt was defined in religious rather than tribal terms; Muslims participated regardless of ethnic grouping, although the latter affiliations were still of considerable importance. The strength of these insurrections has been attributed to the religious organisation, to the propaganda and to the teaching of Islam. In planning, execution and defeat, religion sustained the morale of the rebels. "The moral greatness that certain insurgents showed in the face of danger and death, was the real key to these insurrections which had nothing to do with the despair of slavery", for the richer ones took part and non-Muslims were excluded (Verger 1968:349-350).

The British representative at Rio also praised "the personal boldness which they displayed"; indeed this and the "extensive system of combination" that preceded the rising were seen to give "just cause of alarm", and he notes that "the intelligence of this revolt has spread more uneasiness in Rio de Janeiro, than any other public disturbance which has occurred for many years".¹⁷ At the same time Fox considered the black insurgents not to have had "any definite object in view, beyond burning and plundering, and murdering at random; or not to have any distinct notion of freeing themselves from slavery". On this subject his opinion ran directly counter to that of the local Chief of Police, later to be Governor.¹⁸

According to Genovese, throughout the Americas "Muslim slaves earned a reputation for being especially rebellious" (1979:29). While African cults provided an ideological rallying point for some revolts (Obeahmen, Myalmen, Vodún priests, Nānigos), Muslims led the great uprisings in Saint-Dominique and in Surinam, despite their numerical insignificance. Macendal, leader of the most importantly early resistance movement in Saint-Domingue, has been described as a Muslim, while Boukman, leader of the rising that sparked off the great revolt itself, was a Vodún priest (Genovese 1979:86). And presumably Islam was involved in the early rising of the Wolofs on Hispaniola in 1522; the Spanish forbade the importation of Wolofs to America in 1532 because of their reputation for insubordination and rebelliousness. Mulatto slaves became the next targets, their entry

being forbidden in 1543 because many were suspected of Moorish ancestry and therefore of exposure to Islam. Berber and Moorish slaves had already been excluded in 1506 because of possible Islamic faith, although as in the other cases such laws were mostly ineffective (Bowser 1974:148, 360).

In his general account of slave revolts in the Americas Genovese (1979) proposes a progression from rebellion to revolution, a pattern of protest similar to that discussed for other parts of the world (e.g., Gluckman 1955). This shift he sees as roughly corresponding to the transition from seigneurialism to capitalism. In the early period, he argues, revolts were basically forms of withdrawal from society, restorationist in character, attempting to relocate African village life in the colonial setting. The change came with the bourgeois-democratic influence of the French Revolution and its cries of Liberty, Equality and Brotherhood, reaching its high point with the overthrow of the whites in Haiti in 1791, after which nothing was the same.

This periodisation of slave revolts seems over-determined, if only because it does not allow for the role of another literate creed, Islam. Moreover, slavery was to disappear for a variety of reasons (one of which, as in Brazil, was certainly rebellion), while liberty was no less an aim of the early movements of protest. It is true that the cries of liberty and equality were raised by a nationalist political movement in Bahia in 1798 under the possible influence of the French Revolution (Kent 1969:336-7). But well before this, in 1692, "Death to the whites and long live liberty" had been the battle cry of a *mocambo* in the Bahia captaincy. Like most such communities, this settlement was situated near to the towns and farms on which it depended. In active communication with the town, often through taverns, the runaways lived not by agriculture but parasitically by highway theft, cattle rustling, raiding and extortion (Schwartz 1970:322). While some African villages may have had a similar mode of livelihood, it was certainly not the norm and the reaction here seems to have been less a matter of the restoration of rural life than of escape and survival. Above all, the African-derived religion of Islam also provided an ideology that focussed the resistance to domination by Christian whites.

The creed of the French Revolution displayed a characteristic feature of written creeds; it was (like the Declaration of Rights) universalistic, generalized, indeed over-generalized. For the Girondins, for Napoleon, and to some extent for Toussaint himself, all men were to be equal, free, brothers — ideals that inevitably had to compromise with the reality of circumstances, certainly after victory had been achieved. But the written creed was important in providing an explicit ideology for getting rid of a social order that did not measure up

to the wishes of the oppressed. Islam played a similar role, even if its creed was directed as much to the other world as to this. Individual leaders of revolts were often literate despite the fact that even in the nineteenth century the bulk of participants were not.

Of the major uprisings in the United States, that of Gabriel Prosser in 1800, Denmark Vesey in 1822 and Nat Turner in 1831, all the leaders "had learned to read and write and had special talents and privileges" (Genovese 1979:44). Significantly, after all these revolts there were "restrictions on literacy, preaching, manumission, and much else" (p. 113). The main leader of the Haitian struggle, Toussaint Louverture, had read and been much influenced by the work of the abolitionist Abbé Raynal, *Philosophical and Political History of the Establishments and Commerce of the Europeans in the Two Indies* (1st Fr. ed. 1775), (James 1938:16). But if literacy made its mark in revolts inspired by European declarations, it also played its part in quite a different tradition, that of Islam which rejected the rule of those who did not follow a different book, the Qu'ran, whether in West Africa or Brazil. And the results of its commitment of literacy was particularly marked in the Bahia revolt of 1835.

I want to try and generalize from these observations and ask how far the effects of Islam were due not to Islam in itself, but to the fact that it was a religion of the Book. For written religions, taken as a whole, have some general characteristics that make them differ from the generality of oral religions, and these in turn have a bearing upon the role of Islam in Bahia.

First, however, I want to refer to another aspect of this situation. There is always a problem in talking about societies with and without writing in terms of the oral and literate traditions because any society with writing obviously uses both channels and there are differences between individuals and between subgroups in their competence and performance in one or the other; indeed some individuals may never use the written channel at all and these we speak of as illiterates. But their position, their activities, their knowledge, will differ in significant respects from those of members of truly non-literate societies, since they will be defined (and will define themselves) in opposition to the dominant literate mode. Nor is this simply a question of self-definition in the general sense beloved by social scientists. The oral tradition of popular culture is influenced not simply by juxtaposition, but in content, conceptually, by the written tradition. Of course this is a matter of degree. The practices of some Indians, in Brazil and in Mexico, were altered very early on by the insistence of the regular clergy, especially the Jesuits, on obedience to European-derived marriage and other restrictions which transformed their lives. Others were influenced very little. But the point I

want to make is internal to the slave community in Bahia where in the early part of the last century the *orixas* (*oriã*, the Yoruba for 'gods') seem to come out as of secondary importance, at least in a political context, with their practitioners standing in certain opposition, even subordination, to the leaders of the Hausa, Nupe, and Yoruba Muslims. The consequences, both for Catholic syncretism and for the later dominance of the *orixas*, of sending away most of the literate Muslims, is an interesting question of cultural history. Did one rise as the other fell? Rise in a more adaptationist, less literate, mould? As Prince (1972) has argued, with Islam and 'unorthodox cults' being forced underground, the time for eclecticism was at hand. Indeed, syncretism appears to have had the encouragement of the authorities.

In looking at the specific features of written religions that may have influenced the situation in Bahia, let us recall that when we speak of an oral tradition, we do so with reference to a population boundary, whether it be tribe or nation. Asante religion, Ojibway religion, is what that particular group practices at a particular place and time.

Written religions, on the other hand, are defined in relation to a text: while not all are religions of the book in the sense of the alphabetic religions of the Middle East, they all have texts to which reference is made. Consequently we define the religion in non-ethnic terms, that is, as Christian or Hindu, the religion is by definition capable of crossing tribal or national boundaries and hence of recruiting adherents, as in the Bahia revolt, on a non-tribal basis — of overcoming, in this respect, the tribal divisions which the Brazilian owners and the slaves themselves had attempted to preserve.

But because written religions, especially alphabetic ones, cross tribal boundaries while oral ones do not, that does not mean to imply that the latter are fixed and static while the former are infinitely malleable. Rather the opposite. The fact that we speak of Asante, or of say LoDagaa religion, does not mean that this set of practices and beliefs is the same today as it was yesterday, much less the day before that.

I have argued that quite the opposite is true, that because African

when we speak of an oral tradition, we do so with reference to a population boundary...

religions are closely linked to matters of health and well-being, they are inevitably open-ended if only because they are constantly faced with the problem of the God that failed, the unsuccessful cure, the promise made but unfulfilled. The closer the entailment of religious activity with the affairs of daily life, that is, the greater the contextualisation, the more often the problem will arise. Consequently, truth is, I argue, not fixed as if residing in a fixed text, but involves a constant search, a seeking, after new solutions to old problems.

Only by some such a hypothesis can I explain the changing face of, say, LoDagaa religion. While it has its fixed points in the shape of the heavens (High God, the mystical aspect of sky), the earth (the mystical aspect of the land and soil) and the ancestors (the mystical aspect of the land and soil) and the ancestors (the mystical aspect of humanity), there is an intermediary area in which lesser gods or shrines have a rather high degree of turn-over. Some rise in popularity, others fall, like other recipients of votive offerings. Nor are such new gods always of internal creation. In the area of Northern Ghana in which I lived several so-called medicine shrines had spread far and wide throughout West Africa. While the extent and rapidity of the spread was partly due to new modes of transport and the more active networks of personal communication, the phenomenon itself was not new. Movement had always occurred.

The turn-over of, say, adherence to Nana Brukung (that is, outside the 'home' area of Shiare in the Togo hills of West Africa) was high (Pollock 1979). Clients and client groups come and go, and some establish the shrine in their own locality; indeed the very cult is incorporated into Afro-Brazilian religion today. It is in a sense like the upsurge and downturn of people attending the church of a specific saint, as with the contemporary importance of the Church of São Judeus Thaddeus in São Paolo (another cult that crossed the Atlantic), but by migration the cult activities get incorporated in the cosmological, classificatory, and sacrificial systems of other groups, changing in subtle ways the nature of these cultures. Nor can we argue that this change is superficial even if limited. The notion that what changes is surface structure, what continues is profound, deep, is an idea to which anthropologists and others subscribe, especially in the America of themes and Ruth Benedict; it has many more recent

written religions cross.....

rebirths, but embodies a tautology which distracts from intellectual enquiry by assuming what needs to be proven. I do not assert that it is always false; I do maintain it may be profoundly mistaken (or if you prefer, the truth-value is of truth by definition).

Religion — especially in that area dealing with health and well being; the invocation of the Bagre myth of the LoDagaa lists farming, hoe, chicken raising, hunting, childbirth — involves an active search, not only among existing agencies, by means of the diviner (who is supposed to seek the truth, *vilmiong*, but may be lying) but also for other agencies, new shrines, revealed by the Beings of the Wild, the “fairies”. Life is a quest, a *journey*. The Myth of the Bagre traces the journey of one of the first two men in the course of which humanity acquires culture, not fire in fact, but the way to make iron hoes and arrows, then farming and fighting, copulation and cooking and, importantly, at length, the making of beer.

It is interesting that in the recitation of the Bagre the High God and the Beings of the Wild play the dominant roles, to the virtual exclusion of the Ancestors (whom, of course, the first men had to do without) and of medicine shrines, indeed, even the Earth itself. So that if one were to write down this recitation and look upon it as an inclusive statement of LoDagaa religion or cosmology, as might happen in the early stages of literacy, one would be greatly deceived. Deceived in the sense that a large number of other ritual activities, very central, are excluded, especially those to do with the Earth shrine and the Ancestors who are not really incorporated in the overall ‘mythology’, and who are perhaps more action (deed) oriented than verbally oriented. That is not altogether the right way of putting it. They receive endless prayers and supplications, but they are not placed in a narrative context nor in a structured, pantheonic relationship with other agencies. Indeed regular pantheons are rare in West African religions, outside Dahomey and Yoruba, and the fixing of such a frame is another general tendency of writing.

There is another deception involved in transcribing the myth. By writing down a version of the Bagre, one crystallizes a particular recitation, creating text from utterance. The use of a particular version for analysis is no worry if one is comforted by the thought,

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encouraged by the absence of any other transcriptions or anthropologists, that all possible versions are identical (the fallacy of the single case). Or that all possible versions are simply transformations of basic themes, principles, structures (which is a fallacy of post-facto analysis). The reproduction of long utterances along these lines may occur under certain circumstances but my own evidence shows that we have to allow for syntagmatic change in important elements in the structure. That is, unless structure is defined in a tautologous way by what is common to a set, the Lowest Common Denominator of elementary arithmetic, it must be allowed that writing transforms one of many possible performances into a fixed text.

When a version is written down a fixed text is created which has to be taken into account in future performances or exegesis. The notion of a fixed text presents some difficulty to certain of my colleagues (Parry 1984; Juller 1984). It is not that the text is incapable of different interpretations — that is only too obvious. But as we saw with the Fulani jihad, under a very wide range of circumstances it remains a continuing source of interpretation that may conflict with current 'compromises' or assertions. Reference to the fixed text lay behind the ideological inspiration of the Fulani movement, whose leaders were learned men, writers as well as readers, just as it had lain behind that other great Back to the Book movement, Protestantism. Protestantism crystallized around another significant change in the means of production — printing — which made the text directly available, if not to all, at least to a very much greater number of people than was possible in any manuscript culture. Manuscript cultures had encouraged the continuing importance of the spoken word, especially the spoken version of the written word, of reading aloud and recitation. And it encouraged the internalisation of the written word that we find so well illustrated in the mnemonic techniques of the Arabic school and the swallowing of the word by washing the written text off the tablet and drinking it.

The fixing of a text necessarily involves the selection, the accidental selection, of one version at one time and one place. Looked at in a long-range perspective, the definitive shift of literate forms puts an end to the creative aspects of long oral recitations, though creativity may be more limited with other genres. But even in mixed situations, problems arise. The Bagre that I recorded and published has for at least some of the schooled population become the authorized version; the text, as against the utterance, is orthodox. I may have made an error in the transcription, but if I did, all other versions are 'wrong' because mine is earlier; my text takes the preserve previously held by the men of old. In this context at least the notion of a wrong version takes on different meanings.

The main point to which I wanted to draw attention, however, has to do with content. If my view of LoDagaa religion rested upon a written version of the Bagre, it would turn out to be much more *theocentric* than is the total picture. I would be pushing more towards, if not a *monotheistic* picture of the universe, at least one which emphasized God's role.

In suggesting why this should be so, I am on difficult ground. But it is precisely because the myth is one dealing with the *Creation* of the world, or rather culture, it tends to emphasize the unique source of the unique act. If the myth had been more concerned with healing, then perhaps the emphasis would have been rather on the plurality of the Saints rather than the uniqueness of God. And Saints, like ancestors, are by definition non-scriptural, or rather post-scriptural. If we go back to the book, we eliminate them (though by so doing we create a gap in our understanding of the world, but that line of argument would lead us elsewhere). My argument does suggest, however, one kind of particular explanation of the tendency of written religions to emphasize the uniqueness of the godhead.

In practice Islam, like Christianity, treads a tightrope between the concept of the One God and the recognition of other agencies, such as the *jinn*, the equivalent of the Beings of the Wild. But since the *jinn* are not scriptural, they get swept aside from time to time by reform movements of the Fulani kind that necessarily adopt the so-called intolerance encountered by de Castelnau in his interview with Mohammed — Abdullad at Bahia in 1848, or Étienne fifty years later.

Intolerance is connected with universalism. Not all literate religions are necessarily so universalistic, but they have tendencies in that direction if only because their commandments tend to get phrased in decontextualised, that is universalistic, ways. The establishment of the Universal Church necessarily excludes other views, for religion is no longer defined politically but theologically, in fact scripturally, by writing. It can usually be spread independently of political institutions, although political support, however temporary, often helps. And it emerges in opposition ('Thou shalt have no other gods but me'), hence giving birth to a boundary between Jew and Gentile (even if both are Jews in another sense), but more strongly between Christian and pagan (also 'gentiles' in the early letters of Jesuit fathers from Brazil), or between Muslim and infidel (*kaffir*). The latter terms are often ones of abuse, with animal implications such as Christian dog, or kaffir son-of-a-bitch, pagan swine, making it perhaps easier to kill them (despise them, spit upon them, stone them) if they refuse to be converted.

The corollary of what I have been saying is that in oral cultures religious beliefs and practices often seem to have a generative capacity that stands out in contrast to the relative fixity of scriptural religions. Whatever local adjustments are required, they are made in terms of spirit cults; even Hinduism displays solid identities, with a unitary pantheon and an iconography that can be recognized when it turns up in Indonesia and in Indo-China.

To return finally to Brazil, there are two other points that are related to the means of communication and the Bahia revolt. The first has to do with the problem of conversion. You cannot convert to an oral religion — you become a member of the political system and subscribe. Conversion implies a different definition of religion, commitment to a fixed text (beliefs or rituals) and it involves giving up one set of practices and beliefs in favour of another. Hence Islam was able to cross-cut ethnic affiliations.

Secondly, the existence of conversion, of supra-tribal recruitment, means that the religion must break out of its local bonds; it must (to use terms that will link-up with other psychosocial aspects of the implications of literacy) become partly decontextualised and partly universalised. Now, while these are pre-conditions for the spread of a multi-tribal religion, they are also part of the implications of literacy itself. That is to say, moral injunctions and jural norms tend in writing to get phrased in a more generalised way than when these injunctions or norms form part of action situations. We find statement such as “thou shalt not kill” rather than “thou shall not kill anyone (a) except those who are themselves killers (Law of Talio) (b) except other Jews (c) except in times of war, etc.” Such generalised norms in one sense create the notion of the brotherhood of man by making it explicit. But the presence of these (literate) ideals also raise problems, since in practice, in context, compromise is forced upon the community. The result is an increased measure of cognitive dissonance, of conflict between ideal and ‘reality’, which gives rise to dissent groups consisting of those who take the generalised norm (e.g., against killing) more *literally* (to the letter) than others.

I have tried to point out some of the general tendencies of written religions that seemed relevant to a set of revolts in nineteenth-

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century Brazil. Those revolts themselves provide a contrast with West Africa where the percentage of slaves in some states was probably as great as in Brazil (that is, some 50%) but where, although fear was expressed about slave risings, these were few and far between, for reasons I have elsewhere tried to elaborate. But to these we must add that they did not, unlike earlier Christians, have a book to guide, sustain and stimulate them. Like the non-Muslim slaves in Brazil, residual tribal affiliation led to greater disunity, which was then exploited by the masters who encouraged personal dependence and religious collegiality (we are all Muslims or Christians now). This cultural pattern was altered by the influence of writing, both in terms of the short-term influence of the technology and the long-term influence of what is stored and developed.

I have taken a specific example of the role of writing in a language, scarcely understood, during a revolt of blacks in nineteenth-century Brazil, the comparative success of which has been attributed to writing and to a written religion. Its very success resulted in the despatch of many of those able to read and write back to the Africa from which they came, since as elsewhere the authorities feared underdogs who were literate.

Using as an implicit contrast the religion of an oral society, the LoDagaa, I pointed out some general features of written religions that would have helped the recruitment of insurgents from a number of tribes, for written religions tend to be differently defined by reference to fixed texts, not politically but theologically. For such texts may fix not only ritual and myth but also beliefs and moral injunctions. That is to say, the morality is not one that cannot be embodied in a particular place and time but has inevitably to be partially decontextualised and universalised, and then recontextualised in a particular situation, like the text when it is read or recited. These characteristics, often remarked upon in literacy studies, are attributes not only of written religions but of written communication itself, for writing employs only a single channel (instead of the many involved in speech) and is usually aimed at a wider, distant and impersonal audience.

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alised.

1. The first slaves came to Brazil in 1549, a batch of 120 from Guinea and São Thomé, to work on the sugar plantations. Of course blacks arrived in the New World at an earlier date, even in the conquest itself.
2. In mid-nineteenth-century Brazil 40-60% of the coloured population were free, rising to 74% in the 1872 census. The comparative figure for Cuga in 1861 was 35% and of the U.S. 11% in 1860 (Klein 1969:36-7).
3. Runaway slaves fought against the Dutch in the Northeast under the command of the free black, Henrique Dias (Klein 1969:31).
4. Among the Yoruba in Brazil these 'guilds' were known as *cantos*; members pooled resources to buy freedom, with the first to secure it contributing to the pool until the last number was free (Kent 1970:340; Pierson 1939:530).
5. Fox (Rio de Janeiro) to the Duke of Wellington, 11 December 1835 (FO 13/117, PRO, London), for the population estimates. In 1807 the census of Salvador showed 28% white, 20% mulatto and 52% black (Russell-Wood 1982:48).
6. Muslims were known to the Yoruba as 'Male', presumably from Mali, Malle, Mande, from whence Islamic practices spread (cf. Hausa, *Wangara*, Gonja, *N'sau*). Kent however claims it is from Mallam, which structures his whole interpretation (1970:356); the Malés rebelled because their marginal religious position left them no room for adjustment. Russell-Wood (1982:180) states that the leader of one Malinke group, known as Males in Brazil, was called *lemané* (i.e., *imam*) and presided over marriage ceremonies. According to Johnston (1910:94) a "considerable aggregation of slaves grew up in Bahia in the first quarter of the nineteenth century who styled themselves *Musulmi*".
7. On the contact between Africa and Brazil see especially the works of Verger and of Carneiro da Cunha. Pierson (1939:528) remarks that early in the eighteenth century and natives of the Guinea coast referred to the outside world as 'Bahia'. He also suggests that it was proximity to West Africa that led to the greater preservation of African cultural forms and to the development of nagô as a common language.
8. Parkinson to Wellington, FO 13/ 21, Bahia, 29 January 1835.
9. See also the translation by Pattee (Ramos 1956:48-49). A similar conclusion to that of Martins and Rodrigues was reached by Étienne; Kent's rejection of the thesis (1970: 346 ff.) seems rather unconvincing.
10. See also Kent's comments on these papers (1970:353). He suspects all talk not only of a Jihād but of the general influence of Islam; it was Rodrigues and Etienne, he claims, who invented the idea that one of the participants, Pedro Luna, was the Almamy (*imam*).
11. According to Kent (1970:354) nine of the participants were repatriated. "The repatriation of Africans from Brazil was not uncommon . . . , nor was it rare for Africans of the upper caste to come to Brazil to be educated, especially in Bahia" writes Rodrigues (1965:126), although the case to which he refers is the second wife of the famous Afro-Brazilian trader, "Xaxá" Souza, the daughter of the king of Dohomey. It has to be remembered that Brazil was closely linked to Africa until some time between 1850 and 1858, when "the tradition of three centuries of ethnic-cultural contacts was broken" (Rodrigues 1965:193). Exile was the fate of other slaves involved in escape or revolt. Some Yoruba slaves from Brazil were sent to Sierra Leone and interestingly it was the Muslims among them who kept their own language (Banton 1959).
12. In fact Rodrigues writes of a mosque at roughly the same time but presumably it was not in Bahia.
13. The references are to Rodrigues (1976), Querino, M. (1933) and Étienne (1909).
14. The figure is from Verger. According to Kent, a total of 234 reached the final stage. Of these the Nagôs, Hausa, Nupe, Ewe and Kanuri accounted for 213; the total included 14 women. The figures I have given are from Prince (1972).

15. On the wide range of work available to freedmen in the nineteenth century, see Klein 1969.
16. The fraternity was founded in 1460. Black slaves came to Lisbon from the north coast of Mauritania in 1441; by the 1450s the annual figure was 7-800 and by 1551 approximately 10% of the population of Lisbon consisted of blacks. Corporations of artisans were founded in the twelfth century, and these led to confraternities (Saint-Léon 1941; Monti 1927).
17. Fox to Wellington, Rio, 11 February 1835 (FO 13/117).
18. The Chief of Police was often a lawyer and hence might set his sights in further directions of a political kind.
19. I am heavily indebted to Professor Manuela Carneiro da Cunha of the University of São Paulo for discussion, references and the use of the library, as well as to John Iliffe in Cambridge. My interest in the role of literacy among African slaves was stimulated by the work of E. Genovese and I. Wilks and in Brazil, which I visited by courtesy of the British Council and the Department of Psychology of the University of Pernambuco, by various colleagues and friends in Recife, Campinas, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The last part of the paper is a brief summary of my discussion of religion in *The Logic of Writing and the Organisation of Society* (Cambridge, 1986).

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