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## PROVISION, ACQUISITION AND CULTURE: LITERACY RESEARCH IN SOUTH AFRICA

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**Abstract** — It is hard to overdramatise the impact of recent political changes in South Africa: The seemingly relentless slide into racial polarisation and civil war that was South Africa's expected future has been unexpectedly checked, and a new government is committed to unpicking the social tapestry of half a century of Afrikaner-dominated ethnic minority rule, itself preceded by white domination that goes back into times of British colonial rule. It would seem trite to point out that these happenings have profoundly affected thought and action inside the country. An effect that concerns this paper has been the recent foregrounding and discursive construction of the 'social problem of widespread illiteracy' in South Africa.

### THE 'PROBLEM OF ADULT ILLITERACY'

Until recently 'adult illiteracy' did not attract much institutional attention. The state ran a poorly resourced and largely ignored night school service; there was a smattering of classes run by a few of the larger industrial and mining concerns; and a handful of donor-funded literacy projects scattered around the country, with a few thousand adult learners between them. Altogether there were probably substantially less than 100,000 people, largely Black adults, attending literacy classes in dispersed fashion, with almost no tradition of research attached to this work (National Education Policy Investigation, 1993). The political settlement that was initiated in 1990 and culminated in the African National Congress' leadership of a 'Government of National Unity' has however shifted the discourse and institutional interest in literacy substantially. The new government came to power with broad local and international legitimacy but inherits a depressed economy, massive unemployment and widespread demand for housing, health and education. The key terms of consensual socio-political discourse under these conditions became reconstruction, development and redress. The focus on **reconstruction** signalled the successful completion of the struggle against the apartheid state and the task of consensually putting together a democratic state and a dynamic civil society. **Development** signalled the work of nurturing

economic growth as well as meeting social needs. The Reconstruction and Development Plan of the government takes up these concerns, aiming to reorder government spending so that money is directed to 'urban and rural development, human resource development, democratisation and institutional reform and economic restructuring' (RDP White Paper 1994, p. 12). The discourse of redress contextualise this work by reference to the effects of unequal resourcing of the apartheid years, and draws attention in these terms to the claims of those considered to have been worst off in the apartheid years — the rural poor and the marginal urban groups, including people without work and people living in shacks. In these terms adult literacy provision is constructed as significant, in terms of the redress discourse, as providing 'second chance' compensation for large numbers of people who had little or no schooling. In terms of the development discourse it is seen as a key block in a revised Education and Training system that aims to deliver a highly skilled workforce.

This form of discourse on 'the problem of adult illiteracy' is repeated in a number of recent policy documents from the African National Congress (ANC), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and by policy research bodies such as the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD). A key piece of research which summarised these trends was the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) of 1993 into Adult

**Basic Education.** All of these, in one sense or another have called for a large intervention by way of literacy campaigns or programmes, based on the argument of strategic need. For example, a recent African National Congress-commissioned (and therefore influential) study says:

'It is estimated that about 15 million Black adults (over one third of the population) are illiterate and have had little or no education. This is a direct consequence of the (racial) inequalities in the provision of education and training . . . The lack of access to basic education, including literacy and numeracy has consigned millions of our people to silence and marginalisation from effective and meaningful participation in social and economic development.'

The study calls for the rapid setting up of a large-scale basic adult education delivery system, national in scale and scope and targeted at "the most disadvantaged sectors of society educationally, socially and economically such as the poorest regions in the country, women in rural areas, squatter settlements, farm and domestic workers, unemployed women in urban areas and youth wanting a second chance . . . (as well as) sectors or groups . . . such as workers in employment sectors which are strategically vital; participants in public works programmes, retrenched workers needing training, participants in small enterprise projects, rural development projects, health education programmes and nation-building programmes.

(Centre for Education Policy Development, pp. 1, 21)

### PROBLEMS WITH CONSTRUCTING ADULT ILLITERACY AS A PROBLEM

Assumptions about the marginalising effects of adult illiteracy are commonplace enough to seem almost obviously true, as do assumptions about the solutions to such problems by way of adult literacy programmes. In this light, then, it is something of an anomaly, for which apartheid repression surely cannot shoulder all the blame, that the take-up of adult literacy classes in the past has always been very low and the drop-out rates high. In a basket of the most common developmental demands made by poor communities, adult literacy provision has always been low down on the list in comparison to demands for work, housing, health provision and schooling for children. The expectation that part-time adult education classes for adults can deliver the skills and social benefits usually identified with schooling is almost certainly a serious misconception. Also, the figure of 15 million illiterates quoted above has to be treated as seriously misleading. Undoubtedly, many people who are classified

as illiterate here have developed ways to cope with the forms of literacy they are required to use in their daily lives — either through quite narrow learned skills (reading street signs/product labels, etcetera) or through 'borrowing' reading and writing skills from others when they need them; the assumption that 'illiterates' are marginalised by their illiteracy and unable to participate in the political discourses of the new democracy is not a story that would appeal to many youths who left school in the 1980s to fight the anti-apartheid struggle and who see Nelson Mandela as having come to power through their efforts. The point here is that the assumption of large demand for literacy provision and plans for large-scale work are being made in the context of almost no grounded research. What experience there is of literacy work with adults in South Africa (Hutton, 1992; Prinsloo and Hutton, 1990) has been very small scale, characterised by serious problems with recruitment and retention of learners. Nonetheless, there is preliminary evidence, based on numerous conversations with people (Kell, 1994; Mpoyiya and Prinsloo, 1994; China and Robbins, 1994; McEwan, 1994), that there is a demand for literacy provision by certain groups of people in specific circumstances. The broad policy planning underway has done little to identify these, however, nor to find what the specifics of people's interest and requirement are.

With this concern then — that the construction of need in terms of adult literacy provision might not be the same on the part of providers and the intended recipients — this paper undertakes a brief review of the very thin vein of historical literacy research in South Africa. I examine two studies of adult literacy provision in South Africa, the two most significant examples of this type of research, and contrast them with two recent studies in culture and history. While these latter studies do not have literacy as their primary focus, they highlight shortcomings in the first two studies. I then suggest how these insights might be applied to contemporary research in adult literacy.

It is interesting to note in introducing this review of historical studies of literacy in South Africa that such research has largely shared a common focus, on orthodoxy as to what should be looked at:

(1) Writings that have literacy as their main

concern have been mostly about *literacy provision*, or lack thereof, rather than an exploration of the social effects of its acquisition, use or lack thereof;

(2) Within these terms, writings on adult literacy have focused almost exclusively on the *providers of literacy*, on their trials and tribulations, triumphs and failures as well as their struggles for dominance over each other. Not much has been said about the recipients of literacy provision efforts, with only minor exception.

The paper then looks at recent research in social history, which despite not having literacy as its central focus, shows the possibilities of alternative views of literacy and adults-learning-literacy which foregrounds the 'recipients' rather than the providers. The importance of taking on this more nuanced and reflexive understanding of literacy and its social effects is argued for in the paper, with implications for policy development, research and provision in adult literacy.

#### HISTORIES OF THE ADULT NIGHT SCHOOL MOVEMENT

The only two brief historical literacy studies to have received any notice have both been studies in adult literacy provision and are both reviews of non-state oppositional efforts. They both assume the value of adult literacy classes rather than making a case. Adrienne Bird's study of the history of night schools has achieved some authority, despite its thinness of detail, helped by the fact that it is the only original attempt at an overview of the history of adult literary work in South Africa (Bird, 1980). The story she tells is, first, that of the struggle of a social movement in the face of repression and neglect by a reactionary state, and secondly, that of vanguardist competition between (mostly white) socialists and liberals for the hearts and minds of the Black masses. Whether adult literacy provision is an appropriate site for these struggles is not examined in her account, nor is there any detailed sense of how these efforts were received. (While she gives a brief overview in her paper of the very limited modern efforts at adult literacy provision, I concentrate on her more substantial account of literacy work from the turn of the century up to the 1960s.)

#### THE COMMUNIST PARTY NIGHT SCHOOLS

Bird gives considerable space in her review to the relatively minor and short-lived efforts of the Communist Party night schools of the 1920s and 30s. Suggesting that these were the first adult literacy classes in South Africa, she finds her mention of them in Edward Roux's *Time Longer than Rope* (Roux, 1947). Drawing substantially on brief references in Roux but also on previously undocumented archive material, her account of the Party night schools gives the impression that they were the most fragile and briefest of movements, but Bird gives them credit for being radical and directly oppositional, as compared to the 'liberal' tradition of later decades that copied the style, curricula and methods of children's schooling.

The Communist Party night school was started by the white communists Sidney Bunting, David Jones and later Edward Roux who were ahead of the Party in working with Black workers when it was still committed to organising only white workers (Bird, 1980, p. 65). Bird hails the first mention of adult night school classes in South Africa with this dramatic quote from Roux's book:

Bunting and Jones continued to have difficulties, not only with the police, but also with their fellow members of the International Socialist League, many of whom doubted the wisdom of this direct approach to the Black workers. But the two transients were not discouraged . . . Jones started night classes for Africans, teaching them to read and write. He got them to write on their slates: "Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains and a world to win." But few natives actually joined the League, they felt uncomfortable and shy at white meetings.

(Bird, 1980, p. 66)

The Party activists persevered, however, and in the late 1920s, Roux reports, the Party school in Johannesburg boasted 80 regulars, some of whom became leaders and organisers in the CP and the Industrial and Commercial Union. Among people who attended the night school was Moses Kotane, later to become general secretary of the CP and an executive member of the African National Congress. Bird does not show, though, how the night schools might have been formative or influential in his career. The CP night schools faded away during the 1930s, she claims, as a result of upheavals in the Party and the decline of its mass support.

On reflection, Bird's suggestion that the Party night schools were the first of substance

in South Africa and represented something of a significant tradition in opposition to the liberal night schools makes the mistake of following too closely the model of review of adult education from the United Kingdom, where the radical and liberal traditions had substantially more purchase. Following the then-current tradition in marxist historiography of focusing on processes of class formation to the exclusion of cultural dynamics which escape this focus, she neglects to give due weight to the much more substantial and older tradition of missionary-run adult education classes in South Africa (see below).

### THE MAYIBUYE NIGHT SCHOOLS

Bird also traces, more critically, the 'liberal' African College, started by a group of students from the University of the Witwatersrand, and the Mayibuye Night Schools that followed. The night schools were started in the late 1940s on a wave of anti-fascism produced by South African soldiers' connection with the Allied war effort. The schools were modeled on conventional schooling, teaching literacy in a manner closer to school teaching, and received the support, first of the Transvaal Teachers Association, then municipal subsidy and were on the brink of further state subsidy when the Nationalist Party came to power and proceeded to take total control of all Black education and to block all efforts at oppositional adult education. The crisis for the night schools came in 1957 in the form of Government Notice 1414 entitled Regulations for Night Schools and Continuation Classes for Bantu pupils in European Areas (Bird, 1980, p. 75). The controls, including compulsory registration and a number of other constraints, caused many night schools to close and others to carry on with loss of teachers and without subsidy. In 1955 the movement had centres in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth and East London, with an estimated 10,000 people attending night school. By 1962, it was reported that there were only 2218 students left in night schools and continuation classes. While this story has interest, the adult learners in Bird's account seldom get beyond being numbers to be weighed up in assessing success or failure. The dynamics of their participation in these night schools has not yet been written.

### THE CAPE NIGHT SCHOOL MOVEMENT

The only other study of adult literacy work of these times is Daphne Wilson's *Against the Odds: The Struggle of the Cape African Night Schools, 1945–1967* (Wilson, 1991). In Wilson's account, though written and researched two decades later, it is the teachers and administrators who are the heroes of her narrative and the people attending classes remain remarkably insubstantial. Hers is the story of a volunteer movement that echoes similar efforts elsewhere in the world, a small band of dedicated teachers working tirelessly in the face of the indifference of the larger society. It is the story of the teachers rather than the learners. In summing up the effects of the night schools, which claimed over 500 students in regular attendance at fourteen schools at their peak, she sketches the adult learners as follows:

Illiterate, poverty-stricken migrants, cut off from family life and confused in a new urban worker society found a warm, responsive environment in the night schools. Here they learnt to read and write their own language and write letters home, to speak, read and write the new language used in their daily working lives and to develop greater fluency in language skills. As they progressed, they learnt to comprehend an ever-widening range of written and spoken thought, to read newspapers and to take part in a range of community activities that could also extend to church, trade unions and politics. Sometimes, if lucky, through their new learning, they earned slightly better wages and found slightly better jobs.

(Wilson, 1991, p. 89)

Encapsulated in this thumbnail sketch are all the standard perceptions of learners on the part of literacy providers and teachers that have characterised literacy work in South Africa ever since. The picture, while not uncompassionate or inaccurate as far as it goes, has a view of the average learner as an isolated, culturally blank dependent. The perception of the learners is from that of teachers confident in the worth and value of the cultural resources they hold and are prepared to share. The effect of this 'gaze' is to prevent any substantial understanding of the learners, their motivations for attending the classes or the extent of their taking on the literacy and accompanying cultural values of the teachers. To what extent **did** the classes constitute the softer side of the grand narrative of European conquest and expansion? This question hangs unanswered.

Wilson's account is enthusiastic about the

effect on teachers, however. She quotes a night school report of the 1950s:

Almost without exception this is the first time our members have come into close contact with non-Europeans and the spirit of mutual friendship and co-operation has resulted in a wonderful atmosphere of harmony and goodwill, and has gone a long way towards removing the prejudices and suspicions which have existed on both sides.

(Wilson, 1991, p. 33)

Amongst the night school teachers were a diverse range of radicals and liberals, working as young student volunteers mostly from the University of Cape Town, some of whom went on to become well known figures in politics, commerce, law and journalism, including Neville Alexander, a political activist, now an academic at the University of Cape Town who landed up on Robben Island for treason against the apartheid state, and Rick Turner, a radical academic who was influential in the formation of the independent Black trade union movement and was assassinated in the early 1970s, presumably by agents of the state. Their work in the night schools must have contributed something to the shaping of their political and working identities.

While the night schools attracted a range of teachers and administrators whose politics and commitments varied widely, the basic rule of the schools was: No politics to be taught in the classrooms. As Harry Brodie, UCT law student of the 1940s, co-founder and later manager of the Night Schools Association, told Wilson in interview:

There were some teachers who were 'socialists', and others 'communists'. I think Bennie Turok, a communist (and a student contemporary) was a teacher. But there were also many, like myself, who believed in a free enterprise society. The politics of the teachers never seemed to come into the picture at all, perhaps because the non-politics line was laid down so firmly from the start that 'activists' didn't feel strong enough to 'make waves'.

(Wilson, 1991, p. 67)

So the emphasis was on the transference of supposedly neutral skills, but with more popular appeal than the radicals, if the relative numbers attracted are any indication. There is little concern, however, with how Black adults 'took hold' of literacy in Wilson's account, of the wider processes of cultural dislocation, adjustment and construction that were going on.

## MISSIONARIES AND THE 'TAKING HOLD' OF LITERACY

In both Bird's and Wilson's accounts, adult literacy work is presented as a primarily secular activity, with either a radical or a liberal slant. A huge gap in their account is the role of church and missionaries in South Africa in literacy generally, and in adult literacy specifically. Adult educators, in recent times from secular traditions like those reviewed by Bird, have often been perplexed or amused at the extent to which night school learners have expressed a wish to read the Bible as a primary motivator for attending classes. As such, they have not given due account to the discursive embedding of literacy and learning within a Christian orientation to the world that decades of missionary schooling and proselytizing has produced in South Africa. Two very recent studies, with divergent primary foci and very different locations, underline just how important the role of Christian churches and missionaries in particular have been in establishing the moral base for literacy and learning (Harries, 1994; Hofmeyr, 1993). Both accounts are far more sensitive, too, to the complicated cultural effects of literacy acquisition. The following account summarises with selective detail from both, to illustrate what might be possible in future literacy research. The discussion deliberately goes wider than a restricted focus on questions of literacy exclusively, to demonstrate the rewards to be got from a procedure that attempts to take account of cultural complexity and indeterminacy.

Neither study, in fact, has literacy as major concern. Harries' study of Mozambican migrant laborers working in South Africa at the turn of the century, *Work, Culture and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860-1910* provides a compelling account of the day-to-day life of the migrants as they travelled to work and adjusted to their changed circumstances. The study departs from earlier social histories of the poor and working class in South Africa in its concern with the cultural complexity and creativity that is brought to bear in the harsh conditions of early South African industry. Harries criticises earlier work of radical cultural historians such as the noted work of Charles van Onselen (1976) and Frederick Johnstone (1976), despite their dif-

ferences in other respects, as 'treating workers who arrived on the mines as cultural cyphers or blank slates on whom the experience of work left a common inscription. Alternatively they saw human beings produce, like chemicals, a fixed and common reaction in response to certain stimuli . . . by portraying culture in terms of response rather than initiative, [they] subordinated the workers' lived experiences to the rhythms of capital accumulation' (Harries, 1994, p. xiv). He thus objects to a production-centred or socio-economic understanding of class formation, and focuses on the creative development of cultural resources by migrants in their working as well as their home environments. As much as possible he draws from their own accounts, developing a narrative that resonates with the lives of ordinary people. Culture, identity and interpretation are central themes in the book, with a particular concern with the new identities constructed by migrant workers, distanced both from the rural identities of their origins as well as from the identities proffered them by their bosses. He shows that the identity that Black immigrants created for themselves was not merely that of a fractured, racially defined working class. Their attitudes to work, leisure, clothes, religion and alcohol, amongst others, marked their construction of their own world, but within the constraints of colonial society and in an environment where the life of a Black worker, according to a 1911 commentary on life in Kimberley, had 'about the same value as that of a tiresome fly' (Harries, 1994, p. 59). These cultural productions included procedures of initiation (welcoming or 'hazing' new arrivees on the Kimberley diamond mines and some apprenticing of young migrants to older, powerful men through homosexual relationships on the Witwatersrand), communal drinking and gift-giving, singing, dancing, playing of music and such practices as adopting a European name, a practice which seems to have started on the Diamond fields. Harries argues that 'these men took on these new forms of address as a mark of their passage through life, these names signified membership of a new and stridently assertive community. By extending their system of naming, Black workers appropriated the other's (white officials, traders, miners) system, and by turning it into their own, ordered their lives on the mines' (Harries, 1994, p. 60). Similarly, he discusses the innovative and, to white miners, eccentric

appropriation of European garments. As initiates to European forms of dress, many Black workers were unrestricted in the manner in which they assembled their clothes, and they dressed to impress their peers rather than employers. Unfamiliar with the co-ordinated rigours that made up the clothing code of white people, their 'eccentric dress' had its own specific logic and designation. 'Like their European names, it was a visible marker of their passage into a new community; their clothing distinguished them from both inexperienced, novice miners and their employers, advertised their wealth and experience, and proclaimed their new status'. As Black immigrants established their own norms and expectations, they accepted the control and surveillance of peers whose local knowledge counteracted employers' attempts to impose their cultural hegemony (Harries, 1994). All these examples are those of cultural appropriation, of 'taking hold', rather than submitting to, despite the power and influence of the dominant colonial, industrial order. In this sense they accord with the studies of groups of people 'taking hold' of literacy in Brian Street's edited collection of *Cross Cultural Approaches to Literacy* (Street, 1993).

In similar vein, Harries discusses the almost simultaneous taking on of Christianity and literacy on the part of significant numbers of migrant miners, both on the Kimberley diamond fields before the turn of the century and later on the Johannesburg gold mines, though he can only hint at the cultural dynamics of literacy appropriation in his broader focus. He reminds us that it was the missionaries who were the major purveyors of literacy in South Africa. Well before the 1900s they had assembled a grid of orthographies and dictionaries to cover the numerous strands of what linguists had only recently determined as the Bantu language group. The process of 'standardizing' and 'codifying' these linguistic forms had created bounded languages linked to the missionaries and their converts, and it was largely through these vernacular languages, he argues, that 'the migrants were introduced to the knowledge that accompanied the European vision of the world' (Harries, 1994, p. 63).

Contrary to a common perception that missionary work in education and proselytizing focused on the rural areas where most Black South Africans lived, Harries argues that first Kimberley and later Johannesburg were re-

garded as the most important mission centres in the country. He suggests that the migrants, separated from the tight controls of their home communities, were seen to be more accessible as well as able to exercise greater individual choice over their religious and other beliefs; and also more susceptible to conversion. They then carried home with them the influence of the religious teachings, however limited, and 'laid the seeds of belief in rural areas where missionaries intended to raise the fruits of Christianity' (Harries, 1994, p. 63).

But he suggests that it was the attraction of literacy and the power associated with it that brought many people into the catechism and literacy classes:

Literacy allowed the worker to fit more easily into the expanded and complex society on the Witwatersrand, and it provided him with a new sense of power. The ability to read enabled him to comprehend the printed words that made up his work ticket, the various passes controlling his movement, and the sign-posted instructions that regulated his life. Letter-writing enabled the migrant to respond swiftly to appeals for help from home, and it provided a conduit for the information and knowledge that brought home and work into a single geographic space. On the Witwatersrand the imagined community created by a standard vernacular literacy was made tangible as, confronted by competing ethnic groups, membership of a bonded linguistic group became a cornerstone of the workers' sense of security and belonging. Blacks who acquired a basic literacy and a rudimentary knowledge of arithmetic could occupy leadership positions in the local church and find relatively well-paid jobs as clerks, translators or letter-writers. An ability to read in the vernacular, and particularly in English, gave the miner access to worlds that were both spiritual and secular, while a familiarity with the symbols and codes of whites allowed him a certain upward mobility. The literate worker could become a dormitory scribe, writing dictated letters for one shilling or move into domestic service, clerical posts, or other forms of service beyond the mine. (Harries, 1994, p. 215)

Significantly, though, these literacy skills have value in a context where the large mass of migrant workers do not pursue the acquisition of these skills.

#### *Examples of literacy teaching*

Harries contends that the missionaries saw schooling as an essential element of evangelism and encouraged the establishment of literacy groups run by workers. As a result small literacy groups proliferated in the worker compounds and nearby mission halls of the Kimberley diamond fields and on the

Witwatersrand gold mines. Most worked under the guidance of church elders, but many were run by the migrant workers. He finds a number of examples of night schools, e.g. 'thirty young men had started a school in the Meyer and Charlton compound . . . At one of the Randfontein compounds on the far West Rand, a young miner from Bilene had started classes for twenty of his work mates . . . at the Clydesdale Collieries, a Shangaan named Daniel witnessed to 400 men and taught night classes . . . in the De Beers compound the church served as a school during the week' (Harries, 1994, p. 216). There are no further details on these schools unfortunately.

The mining houses often aided the missionaries in their efforts: 'By 1892 the Methodists held school classes four times in a week in the De Beers West End compound and received substantial grants from the company . . . De Beers bought books printed in Bantu languages in Cape Town and sold them in the compounds' (Harries, 1994, p. 76). In 1908, reports Harries, some thirtytwo thousand Bibles, almost three quarters of which were in vernacular languages, were sold to Blacks by the Christian Literature Depot in President street. Cities like Johannesburg became centres of literacy, where migrants from the rural areas were able to join church libraries and buy spelling books, primers and a variety of religious magazines and prayer books. The books used in the night schools included Bibles, New Testaments, prayer books, hymn books and readers. While the books and teaching were often in the vernacular, the content reflected little else from the migrant miners' own world: 'Everything Thonga, except the language, seems to have been carefully barred from these books', in the words of one of Harries' Mozambican sources (Harries, 1994, p. 216).

The aspects of knowledge that came with reading were selected, reassembled and dispersed by individuals in various ways, Harries argues. Some accepted the evolutionist world view of the missionaries, the categorizations of civilized/educated, advanced and primitive, Christian and heathen. But the rise of syncretist religions and the rapid numerical overtaking of the established churches tells a more dispersed story. As with other aspects of culture, religious belief was a product of struggle:

. . . for people caught between . . . two systems of belief, a bricolage of religious beliefs and practices

provided a compromise (with the alien morality proposed by the European Christianity), a way of entering into a new and unfamiliar society without fully embracing it. Church dissidents used powerful medicines, charms, prayers and other rituals, and found a demonology in the Bible that accorded with popular beliefs but contradicted their employers' definitions of religiosity and and scientism.

(Harries, 1994, p. 219)

The Zionist churches that emerged in Johannesburg at the beginning of the century, under the influence of the American apostolic movement, were far more syncretist in their approach and incorporated many aspects of popular religion such as a belief in healing, speaking in tongues, rites of purification, passage and protection, and a sturdy symbolism that appealed to oral societies. But they also propagated a gradual acceptance of the morality and ethics of industrial society.

Harries argues that the churches provided Blacks with an avenue for leadership, responsibility and respect in the colonial world. Through the church, miners acquired a literacy and a world view that enabled them to organize and mobilize themselves in new ways. Dissident churches were able to create an important space, a cultural airlock in which Blacks had some control over their destiny.

Many migrants returned home with an element of literacy and a familiarity with European concepts of ethnicity, race and religion, some with a proselytizing zeal. They formed night schools for adults and day schools for children, the popularity of European education paralleled by a growth in the popularity of Christianity.

Literacy was not to take hold back home, however, to the extent that Christianity did:

That there were no colporteurs wandering between villages, or books in the Banyon shops, indicates that reading lost much of its attraction in rural areas cut off from the literate world of the coloniser.

(Harries, 1994, p. 177)

Literacy had power here, all the same:

'In the rural areas many chiefs and commoners attributed supernatural powers to the written world. Writing was believed to be a source of the authority of the colonial conquerors; it was understood that a literate individual, merely by sending 'the paper that speaks' to whites 'would receive everything he asks for'; writing was also associated with the 'medicine of knowledge'.

(Harries, 1994, p. 217)

Hofmeyr's *We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told* (1993) echoes, complements and

extends Harries accounts of people from the rural areas 'taking hold' of literacy in innovative ways. She focuses on historical narrative in a South African Chiefdom called Valtyn in the Northern Transvaal, close to Potgietersrus. The first part of the study focuses on the gender specificities involved in historical narratives (previously a male domain in her study) on the one hand and on (fictional) storytelling on the other (a female domain). The second part of the book explores reasons for the disappearance in this century of male historical story telling. It is here that she looks at the impact of 19th century literacy, missionary work and bureaucratic colonial government. While she attempts to understand the cultural change that she finds in her study in terms of the effects of a 'literate culture' impacting on an 'oral culture', and refers to them as 'these two technologies of the intellect', she finds that their interaction is 'jagged, unpredictable and uneven' (Hofmeyr, 1993, p. 12). She suggests, for example, that in the initial confrontation of orality and literacy, it is in fact the former which transforms the latter, so that, for example, Lutheranism, instead of being a religion of the printed word, becomes a religion of the image and the spoken word. Similarly a bureaucratic colonial government is forced to resort to rule through personal audience, oral message and public meeting. She finds, though, that particularly in a context of colonial coercion, literate government and colonial schooling do have major transformative effects over time, for example, writing down and recontextualising oral literary forms and thus changing their meanings and significance. The later part of her study examines the impact of colonisation on cultural narratives, focusing on accounts of a Boer siege and how the form and content of accounts change. If there is an analytical problem in her account, it is that she overuses the terms 'orality' and 'literacy' so that they are required to represent complicated cultural differences between groups of people. Many of these differences, as she shows in her own account, are the outcome of dispersed and complex cultural processes, not just effects of literacy or orality. So, for example, she identifies colonial administration as regarding the countryside, in primarily 'literate' terms, as a blank sheet upon which they were to write their authority. The administrative imaginings which produce this attitude are too complex,



however, to be scanned as simply the effects of literate government, as Benedict Anderson has shown (Anderson, 1991). Rather they are the product of attitudes that have developed over time to population, administration and space; an outcome of the political deployment of such tools as censuses and maps, rather than effects of the tools themselves. Hofmeyr herself shows that the different constructions of the church services of the missionaries on the one hand and the people of Valtyn on the other are not simply the differences between a primary literate culture and an oral one, but involve conflicting constructions of the body, carnival and disgust, reflecting very different social histories.

Hofmeyr is most interesting, for the purposes of this paper, in her account of the clash over literacy between dominant and subordinate groups amongst Sotho and Ndebele people in the region. As she summarizes it:

In much of the Northern Transvaal today there is a deep-seated ethnic stereotype which portrays the Ndebele as 'hard-headed', poorly educated country bumpkins. By contrast, the Sotho are seen as go-ahead and well educated. While this view has much to do with the minority position of Ndebele communities in the officially designated 'North Sotho' homeland, Lebowa, the stereotype also arises out of the historical circumstances in which Northern Transvaal Ndebele communities confronted the initial agents of literacy and education — Boers and missionaries. In the case of Valtyn, this history included a series of violent confrontations with the Boer polity followed by the arrival of the Berlin Mission Society which pursued all its business in Sotho, the language of commoners. Largely because its first exposure to writing was deeply associated with Boer violence, the chiefdom, or at least the royal lineage, resisted the notion of literacy from an early date.

(Hofmeyr, 1993, p. 42)

The fact that missionary education was undertaken in the language of the lowly simply strengthened the feeling against literacy. With the advent of formal education at the turn of the century, this resistance to literacy kept many people away from schools and the skills for social advancement which they offered. As 'late starters', many Ndebele found themselves marginalised and marooned, a position that in turn promoted the growth of the stereotype. However, she argues, to 'read' the stereotype as betokening simply exclusion and powerlessness is to grasp only half the story. Considered historically, the Ndebele resistance to literacy, at one stage, represented significant forms of power and initiative. Thus the history

of literacy and orality in Valtyn can be seen as paradoxical.

Hofmeyr explores the political and material realities that make the mission station an important site of social discourse and transaction, drawing people into its sphere of influence. It offered the opportunity for trade and barter, employment, health facilities, carnivalesque spectacle and new fashions', which she says, 'amounted to a type of subcultural style' (Hofmeyr, 1993, p. 48).

Amongst commoners, she argues, the mission and its schools were a source of attraction as a context where chiefly authority over them was weaker. She also notes the interest in learning, but interprets it differently from the missionaries: '... there was one thing which almost everyone who came to the mission station professed a desire for and that was 'to learn' (Hofmeyr, 1993, p. 49). Not surprisingly, as literate Christians the missionaries inevitably deciphered this phrase as a wish to become fully literate and possibly to become converted. But she argues for a disaggregated concept of literacy: 'Literacy, however, does not have the uniformity or monolithic quality that literates often associate with it. On the most simple level, reading and writing, for example, do not automatically go together, and each can be disaggregated into a range of subsidiary skills and activities. Furthermore, as residents of the chiefdom had no need for literacy in their everyday lives, they lacked the inducement that dragoons large number of people towards a more comprehensive degree of functional literacy' (Hofmeyr, 1993, p. 49). In such a situation, she argues, literacy was entirely voluntary, and so, hardly surprisingly, people 'customised' their literacy requirements in ways that seem unusual from the perspective of 'the hopelessly literate'. Some just wanted to learn new oral forms of hymns and prayers, others to read catechism or Bible or Sesotho primers. Missionaries often misread any interest in literacy as a sign of religious feeling and a commitment to the values of the missionary world, she says. For a long time, the missionaries were simply unable to implement their understanding of literacy as congregants and visitors to the mission continued their selective appropriation of the written word. As regards church services, these were appropriated by popular taste which helped to dictate the form and style of holy worship and other mission

activities. 'These almost invariably relied on orality, performance, festival, spectacle and image, or, in other words, the central resources of African cultures' (Hofmeyr, 1993, p. 50). She elaborates on this argument as follows:

In bringing their everyday cultural resources to bear on the literate edifice of Christianity, people were not simply trying to make a relatively strange religion hospitable. They were also trying to protect a way of life and a system of representation. Coming from societies dominated by the politics of performance, most people were accustomed to carnivalesque cultural activities in which the body played a central part . . . Missionaries, by contrast, came from a world where the repression of this culture of physical carnival was recent enough to have left a climate of distaste and disgust for things of the body. In Europe this carnival world had been repressed by the forces of the industrial revolution and religious reformation and, some would argue, by the spread of printed prose which supplanted carnival as a form of leisure. Hardly surprisingly, then, in their work, missionaries strove to institute the quiet, apparent incorporeality of text above the robust, physical displays of oral performance . . . the missionaries were doing more than simply bringing in primers and printed Bibles. They were equally repudiating a wider system based on the culture of the social body. It was largely this culture that people defended, if only through the force of habit. Part of this defense had to do with asserting the dignity of the body and its various performances against the attacks of mission disgust. Another part of the defense was to give body to what the missionaries decorporealised, and, like their medieval counterparts who faced growing literacy, to reimmerge the book and the text into the corporeal stream of carnival and spectacle.

(Hofmeyr, 1993, p. 50)

In this climate, she says, the content of written documents often become irrelevant. Instead, what mattered was the book as a concrete object, and from a relatively early date many citizens of the chiefdom considered books to have ritual powers which people often attempted to borrow by simply handling them. This claim gets support in Harries' study as well as in a number of other accounts.

## RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

While the missionaries have largely receded in social impact, literacy acquisition both in and out of schooling is similarly not a one-way cultural process. Despite being about cultural dynamics that go back nearly a hundred years, the studies of Harries and Hofmeyr provide important markers for the work of constructing a research agenda in South Africa.

Such studies are exemplars of a research

approach which can shed new light on literacy practices in South Africa. The studies are not about literacy as such — certainly not about the pedagogical concerns of literacy provision — but they are about the social uses and social valuations of a variety of cultural practices which incorporate literacy. They therefore suggest a way to study literacy in use that gives a potentially richer view than the provider perspective of the Bird and Wilson studies. The value of going outside the narrow confines of adult education and literacy research has been shown, and the importance of doing so can be argued for. The lack of cultural analysis in both the Bird and Wilson examples can be seen to be mirrored in the policy and curriculum construction that is underway in South Africa within the ambit of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. Assumptions of cultural deficit and undersocialisation are implicit in much of the literacy work currently taking place within a provider discourse, and these deficit notions need to be questioned. Attempts at national curriculum construction, even those that aim to draw from state-of-the-art understanding of development and development strategies start from analyses of what people need to know — to be responsible citizens, critical consumers, flexibly-skilled workers, eco-friendly community members — rather than grounded, detailed, diversified understandings of where people already are and where they want to go. Similarly, the assumptions being made in policy documents that literacy acquisition (including basic education) is a straightforward skill-acquisition process which can be delivered in a carefully programmed way to large numbers of people in a short space of time, with roughly uniform or predictable outcomes, need to be seriously re-examined.

There are several problems here that research needs to concern itself with. At the heart of the constructions of all the major participants in the literacy policy-making that was mentioned at the beginning of this paper is a symbolic construction of the relationship between reading and writing and various social transactions and resources — whether individual mobility and access to social power, or the securing of political rights and personal empowerment. These symbolic conceptions are most likely based on the perceived and imagined effects of formal schooling. Adult literacy provision is conflated in its effects as

a surrogate of schooling. These misreadings of the social effects of literacy are not unlike those of the Valtyn missionaries. Assumptions that investment in literacy training will produce directly proportional and measurable results in terms of improved literacy capacity (and the accompanying schooled or middle-class behaviour) need to be revised. We need to develop our understandings of why supposedly illiterate people do not make use of available provision in the way and for the purposes intended, as well as develop understandings of which resources, including adult literacy, can be best used by different groups.

Following the trend of this argument, a group of colleagues at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Western Cape have been working since early 1994 on a programme of research into 'the social uses of literacy'. In site-based research of literacy and cultural constructions in industrial workplace settings and other workplaces, urban squatter settlements, rural villages and small towns the team has found ways that people use, engage with and do without literacy that are not anticipated in the plans for large-scale provision. A colleague's study has examined how drivers in the burgeoning and exploding taxi industry in South Africa cope without conventional training in literacy skills, and why some traffic officials regard the 'illiterate' drivers as the safest in an industry with a very high accident rate. They have found some people keen and interested to take up opportunities for study amongst impoverished residents of Marconi Beam squatter camp and Khayelitsha, but they also found a range of anti-schooling ideologies which led people to reject the night schools, especially amongst older men from the Transkei, whose construction of masculine identity saw the practices of schooling as being for women and young boys who had not been to initiation school and learnt to be men, and among youths who saw themselves as having left school to fight the anti-apartheid struggle and now had no wish to return to learning. For some, alternative routes to social wealth have been found through informal sector work and through robbery and gang membership. A study of the understanding, deployment and effects of literacy in a squatter settlement has argued that the literacy taught in the local night school does not impact on people's literacy practices outside the night school but

constitutes a separate and insulated discursive practice, which the author calls 'night school literacy' (Kell, 1994). The answers that are coming out of this research are not about provision, in the first place. But they show dramatically how the provision of adult literacy in South Africa can be enhanced by taking greater account of the cultural dynamics of the acquisition, deployment and social effects of literacy practices, in their variety and complexity. This research direction is a recent one, but signals an important direction for further work in literacy research in South Africa.

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