

**A Review of:**  
*On the Theoretical Foundation of Orality and Literacy*  
**and**  
*Communication, Community and Communion*  
**Papers by Professor Emevwo Biakolo. Former**  
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**Abstract**

*This is a review of the papers of Professor Emevwo Biakolo, former Dean at the School of Media and Communication, Pan Atlantic University Lagos. This review attempts to critically analyze the position of the author with respect to his assessment of Walter Ong's postulations on orality and literacy. There is always an attempt to relate oral traditions with modernity as perceived by the author in light of communication, community and communion. There is an interrogation of foundational works by the author of this papers and this interrogation generates new areas of discourse and further interrogations which this review highlights. There is also a weighing of civilization stemming from difference in spatiality. Knowledge gaps have been identified by the author of the reviewed papers.*

**Keywords: Orality, Literacy, communication, community and communion.**

In his work 'On the Theoretical Foundation of Orality and Literacy', the author critically examines the works of Walter Ong in his 1982 publication which not only brought popularity to the subject but marked a significant stage in the study of oral tradition and its relationship to other traditions of communication. He notes that the fundamental submissions made by Ong as regards the differences between the concepts had earlier been entrenched in works of Ong in "The Presence of the Word" (1977) and "Interfaces of the Word" (1977). To this end, the author believes that the submissions in the later work do not depict new ideas as we have been made to believe in the last decade and half.

Consequently, the author attempts to establish the origin of the concepts by assessing the cultural difference inherent in other forms of media and modes of communication. He traces the origin of the terms to the works of Ong, Havelock, Parry and Lord along the lines of Homeric poetry in the use of oral methods of composition. He notes that the oral poet used some methodology which involved different elements in his transition to attain literacy. These findings were majorly through the work of some other scholars and predominantly that of Havelock.

In addition, in a bid to further strengthen his evaluation of the origin of the concepts, the author again examines the work of Havelock in trying to ascertain the origin of western literacy which is often attributed to the Greeks. He argues that the strength of the alphabets and their combination led to the foundation of linguistic speech. He pitches his tent with Havelock in the opinion that if modern literacy was never discovered, other forms of civilization would not have been discovered.

Furthermore, to give clarity to the arguments, the author assesses the distinctions made by Walter Ong by relating the workings of the human sensorium to the philosophical concepts of time and space. He highlights the salient points of Ong's analysis by bringing to the fore the major differences which are the evanescent nature of utterances and writing which has to do with the spatialization of sound and its transformation from time to space.

However, the author is not carried away by Ong's analysis of the consequences of the characteristics of the differences. He is more concerned about the categorization of time and space. He queries the thought that sound is oriented to time just because it cannot be arrested by time. Rather, he opines that sound cannot be oriented to time because it cannot capture it and that it speedily progresses through time.

More so, he also questions the idea of objects being arrested or not because of the continuous processes inherent in the experience of sensory objects. The author is of the opinion that the object is arrested only as a result of its repeated presence. In the same line of thought, he points out that sound is repeated to the auditors if they do not go away.

He remarks that the issues with time and space have been central to philosophical debates since the era of Newton and Leibnitz. He however shows some contradictions in Ong's work because Ong sometimes speaks of time in chronometric terms and at other times in a kind of philosophical absolution which is not Newtonian, but physicalist.

Also, he refers to misunderstanding caused by the marked difference between the auditory faculty and other parts of the human sensorium. He specifies that the other faculties are connected to material objects in space. On the other hand sounds sources are more distant because we have no physical contacts with them and this is why sound is immaterial.

Again, the author contests Ong's claim that oral cultures do not possess fixed texts and that they organize and transmit knowledge and information in a unique way. He is of the view that innovation and invention are the basis of writing cultures. Also he differs with Ong and Havelock's argument that when an oral culture acquires writing in a deep way it takes upon itself a force capable of changing its state of being and development. He is of the opinion that the influence of technology affects the very consciousness of the members of the society and affects all of aspects of its culture.

Similarly, he questions the authenticity of the claim that the alphabet is the secret of Greek civilization knowing very well, from scholars such as Gelb, that the Greeks borrowed signs from contemporary Semitic syllabic systems of writing of the Phoenicians. The signs are Semitic in origin. The author states that the alphabet could not have been responsible for Greek scientific and technological achievements. He maintains the tempo of this argument by concluding that the Greek state was democratic and this led to these achievements not literacy. The author is obviously not satisfied with historical claims which can mislead.

Again, he notes that Plato's fourth century claim in his treaty about the permanent alteration of Greek consciousness from an oral form to a literate one. He points out that Greek speculation in the areas of philosophy and mathematics existed even before literacy. This is the identification of new knowledge.

In addition, the author goes a step further to question Plato's true origin by questioning his portrayal of the true Greek consciousness. He seems to draw strength from logic while questioning ideas put forward by Havelock and Ong which he deems unachievable because he notes that, as Street rightly points out, anyone trapped in his own literate mentality cannot possess oral consciousness.

Furthermore, he once more questions Ong's methods at arriving at a conclusion in his work the "Interfaces of the Word" because many of the hitherto deemed oral cultures have evolved over time. This is as a result of the dynamism in culture. Even the most literate society in our present times has trappings of orality. He creates new knowledge by adding that none of the features described by Ong are totally absent from our literate societies.

Consequently, he points out the flaws in the principles applied by Ong which are not logically admissible or impossible. By so doing he has succeeded in creating new knowledge on the faulty foundational principle of Ong's work. Society cannot base its shape and direction on a single item which is technological. To buttress his point he quotes Ruth Finnegan's passage. He observes that differentiating factors established by Ong are not so different from those of the early anthropologists such as Levy-Bruhl and Levi Strauss. Having established this connection; he makes conscious efforts to establish relationships between the works of Scott-Little, Levi-Strauss, Durkheim and Mauss to give some weight to his argument about some of

the issues with Ong's work. He goes further to highlight his discovery that Ong's thoughts are those of the early anthropologists re-worked.

In relating African thought and western science, the author carries out a comparative analysis of the approaches involved. He assesses the works of Horton and relates them to those of Ong and goes further to criticize Horton's understanding of traditional thought. The author questions science based on the data or premises selected and what makes them acceptable. He queries those who make rules and the adequacy of the rules.

In the same vein, he wonders why there is no comparison between traditional religious thought and modern western religious thought, or known traditional religious thought and science. Here, the author again queries the methodology employed by Horton in arriving at his conclusions. He emphasizes the need for appropriation of rules for testing and evaluating claims. This is an important concern raised by the author, so that claims from various researches can be validated.

The author also links the spoken and written languages and tries to show their similarities and differences. He introduces language and communication. In order to do this, he takes a critical look at the works of Tannen, Hildyard and Olson, Ong, Goody and Obiechina. He points out that the idea of an essential African oral tradition is mythical and diminishes our understanding of African literature. Nevertheless, he turns to the works of Okpewho, Ong and Finnegan to conclude that oral poetry does not need to occur in tradition bound contexts implied by some scholars. The author continually fills knowledge gaps created by previous research works in these areas.

In addition, in his Inaugural lecture, on "Communication, Community and Communion" he attempts to draw a relationship between the concepts of Orality, literacy, communication, community and communion. The author examines the context in which issues of orality and literacy can be embedded in modern day communication trends.

Again he notes the role of communication presently as a tool to achieve development communication, and also highlights the entertainment function of communication which has in no small measure served as a means of social and cultural cohesion and unity. He however refers to the dominant paradigm which has always been the idealized view of the western society. Here he notes that this paradigm is being threatened by other models. He uses the works of Durkheim, Darwin, Frazer and Morgan to introduce the concepts of communion and communication.

In order to examine communion and communication the author brings in ethics as the systems of norms and values that help to create communion in a society. He adds that the cultural life of a community cannot be separated from its ethical life. What readily comes to mind here is that orality and literacy are the basis for these concepts to function.

Again, the author makes us understand that there must be communion and communication for us to have a community. To give clarity to the concept of communication, he takes pains to explain the rudiments of communication using Lasswell's model. He examines the role of

culture and community in communication and relates human communication to include being and consciousness. These are some of the issues queried in Ong's work.

The author is concerned about the compression of communication to mean only the media, he states that communication is broader than it seems. To him, most human actions are communication. I strongly agree with this point because all aspects of human existence and culture carry a message.

Relatively, he acknowledges the New Media and points out that the only thing new about it is the use of technology. The marked difference here from the era of Ong and his contemporaries, is the creation of an accessible public sphere by the internet. But, these liberties originally belonged to the oral form which Ong had so generously worked on.

One can clearly state and agree with Havelock, that without modern literacy which formed the platform on which modern day communication is built, we will not have science, literature, philosophy and technological advancement.

Conclusively, looking at the argument of the early Philosophers, gaps identified by the author of the papers one is stimulated to say that the arguments put forward by the author have been very strong.

Although, the author seems to have constantly queried the foundational works of Walter Ong and successfully bridged the knowledge gaps he identified, without the works we probably will not have anything to build on today. All other concepts mentioned in these papers took their origins from these works.

Today, we are in the technological age and communication has taken on new forms. It is said that the only thing constant in life is change. Modern day communication is so different from what it used to be and will keep on evolving. It is our responsibility to ensure that in spite of the rapid evolution of the concept we still maintain communication, community and communion. According to Biakolo (2010) only moral excellence can produce communion in the community. Only morally upright communicators must engage in the moral struggle for what Aristotle calls the nobility of their character; they must also struggle to ensure that the content of communication is morally healthy. Only in this wise can communication lead to communion in a community. In my opinion, advancements in audio visual technology, sound engineering and the abundance of digital translators have diminished the evanescent nature of orality since sound can now be recorded and stored for future use. The power of video which combines sound and movements have helped to bring to the fore the traditions and communication styles of African communities who hitherto relied heavily on oral tradition. This depicts the evolutionary nature of communication and supports the earlier notion by the author that literacy alone cannot lead to technological advancement, but rather a combination of factors, such as political stability, communication technology and social behavior.

### **Bibliography**

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