

Orality, Writing, and Texts

Poetry is the mother tongue of the human race as gardening is older than the field, painting than writing, singing than declaiming, parables than inferences, bartering than commerce . . .

—Bruce Chatwin, *Songlines*, quoting J. G. Hamann

For, in its severity, the law is at the same time writing. Writing is on the side of the law; the law lives in writing; and knowing that the one means that unfamiliarity with the other is no longer possible . . . writing directly bespeaks the power of the law, be it engraved in stone, painted on animal skins, or drawn on papyrus.

—Pierre Clastres, *Society against the State*

A diagnostic feature of the condition of barbarism is, for lowland elites, nonliteracy. Of all the civilizational stigmas that hill peoples bear, the general ignorance of writing and texts is the most prominent. Bringing preliterate peoples into the world of letters and formal schooling is, of course, a *raison d'être* of the developmental state.

But what if many peoples, on a long view, are not *preliterate*, but, to use Leo Alting von Geusau's term, *postliterate*?¹ What if, as a consequence of flight, of changes in social structure and subsistence routines, they left texts and writing behind? And what if, to raise the most radical possibility, there was an active or strategic dimension to this abandonment of the world of texts and literacy? The evidence for this last possibility is almost entirely circumstantial. For this reason, and perhaps due to a failure of nerve on my part, I have bracketed this discussion from the foregoing account of escape agriculture and escape social structure. The case for the "strategic" maintenance (if not creation) of nonliteracy, however, is cut from the same cloth. If swiddening and dispersal are subsistence strategies that impede appropriation; if social fragmentation and acephaly hinder state incorporation; then, by the same token, the absence of writing and texts provides a freedom of maneuver in history, genealogy, and legibility that frustrates state routines. If swiddening and egalitarian, mobile settlement represent elusive "jellyfish" economic and social forms, orality may be seen as a similarly fugitive jellyfish variant of culture. On this reading, orality may in many cases be a "positionality" vis-

à-vis state formation and state power. Just as agriculture and residence practices may oscillate over long periods to reflect a strategic positioning, so may literacy and texts be taken up, then set aside, then taken up again for similar reasons.

I have chosen to use the term *nonliteracy* or *orality*, in preference to *illiteracy*, to call attention to orality as a different and potentially positive medium of cultural life as opposed to a mere deficiency. The sort of “orality” we are speaking of is also to be distinguished from what some have called primary illiteracy: a situation in which a social field confronts literacy for the first time. Nonliterate peoples in the Southeast Asian massif, by contrast, have for more than two thousand years lived in contact with one or more states with small literate minorities, texts, and written records. They have had to position themselves vis-à-vis such states. Finally, it should go without saying that until very recently the literate elite of the valley states were a tiny minority of the total subject population. Even in the valley states, the vast majority of the population lived in an oral culture, inflected though it was by writing and texts.

Oral Histories of Writing

Knowing the stigma historically attached to their nonliteracy by lowland states and colonizers, most hill peoples have oral legends that “account for” why they do not write. What is rather surprising is the remarkable similarity of many of these legends, which are not confined to mainland Southeast Asia but may be found in the Malay world and, for that matter, in Europe. These stories converge around one theme: the people in question once did have writing but lost it through their own improvidence, or would have had it had they not been cheated of it by treachery. Such legends are, like ethnic identity itself, a strategic positioning vis-à-vis other groups. We have every reason to imagine that such legends, like ethnic identity, will be adjusted if the circumstances shift appreciably. That these legends often bear a family resemblance to one another is perhaps attributable more to the common strategic location of most stateless hill peoples in relation to the large valley kingdoms than to any cultural inertia.

One common account of how the Akha “lost” writing is fairly typical of the genre. Long ago they were, they claim, a valley-dwelling, rice-planting people incorporated in states. Having to flee the valleys owing, by most accounts, to Tai military superiority, they scattered in several directions. Along

the route of flight “they ate their books of buffalo-hide when they were hungry, and so lost their script.”² The Lahu, hill neighbors of the Akha along the Burma, Thai, and China border, tell of having lost their script when they ate the cakes on which their deity Gui-sha had inscribed their letters.³ The Wa tell a similar story. They also claim to have had writing, which was inscribed on an oxhide. When they became famished and had nothing else to eat, they devoured the oxhide and so lost their script. Another Wa story relates that, as the original people, they had a trickster genius, Glieh Neh, who sent all the men off to war while he stayed back and made love to all the women. Caught and condemned, Glieh Neh asked to be drowned in a coffin with all his musical instruments. Cast adrift, he played so beguilingly that all the downriver creatures helped set him free. In turn, he taught the lowlanders all his skills, including that of writing, and the Wa were left illiterate. Writing is, for the Wa, associated with the trickster figure; the word for writing is the same as the word for trading and implies deception and cheating.⁴ The Karen provide many variants of a legend claiming that three brothers (Karen, Burman, and Han or European) were each given scripts. While the Burman and the Han kept theirs, the Karen brother left his, written on a hide, atop a stump while swiddening, and it was eaten by wild (or domesticated) animals. Stories of this genre could be multiplied almost indefinitely; a fairly comprehensive survey of the variations on this theme for the Karenni groups alone is found in Jean-Marc Rastdorfer’s work on Kayah and Kayan identity.⁵ The Lahu, for their part, speak of once having known how to write their language and refer to a lost book. They, in fact, have been known to carry papers with hieroglyphic marks which they cannot read.⁶ The impression that such accounts are powerfully influenced by an implicit dialogue with more powerful groups associated with states and writing is reinforced by its occurrence outside the region as well.⁷

Stories of treachery are as common as those of carelessness. A single ethnic group may have both genres in its repertoire. Perhaps each variant is appropriate to particular audiences and situations. One Karen account of lost literacy blames the Burmese kings, who are said to have found and executed every literate Karen until there was no one left to teach the others. A Khmu (Lamet) legend in Laos associates the loss of writing with a fall into political subordination. Seven villages came together to swidden on the same mountain and swore to jointly oppose their Tai overlord. The oath was written on a buffalo rib, which was then solemnly buried on the mountaintop. Later, however, the rib was dug up and stolen, and “that day we lost the knowledge of

writing and we have since then suffered from the power of the *lam* [Tai overlord].”⁸ A Chin story, collected at the turn of the century, blames Burmese deceit for the group’s illiteracy. The Chin were, like other races, born from 101 eggs. As the last born, the Chin were most loved, but the earth was already apportioned, and they were given the remaining mountains and its animals. The Burmese guardian appointed over them cheated them of elephants (a royal symbol) and showed them the blank back side of a writing slate so that they never learned even a single letter.⁹ The White Hmong’s portfolio of literacy stories allows for both carelessness and treachery. In one account, the Hmong, in their flight from the Han, fell asleep and their horses ate up their texts, or they were mistakenly put in a stew and eaten. A second and more ominous account claims that the Han, in the course of driving the Hmong out of the valleys, took their texts and burned them all. The educated ones went to the mountains, and when they died, there was no more writing.¹⁰

For some groups, like the Hmong and Mien, the loss of writing seems closely associated with a general claim to a history as a lowland, state-bearing people. Before we were driven out of the lowlands, their story implicitly claims, we had kings, we planted irrigated rice, and we had writing; we had all those things we are now stigmatized for not having. The arrival of literacy and written scripts, by these lights, is nothing new; it is the recapturing of something lost or stolen. Little wonder that the arrival of missionaries with their bibles and scripts for vernacular tongues often seemed like a restoration of lost cultural property, all the more welcome because it was not Burmese or Han.

What are we to make of these legends of lost literacy? It is conceivable, providing once again that we take a very long historical view, that these legends embody a germ of historical truth. Tai, Hmong/Miao, and Yao/Mien, from what we can reconstruct of their migration histories, came from lowland settings and may well have once been padi-state peoples—even, in the case of many Tai groups, state-makers themselves.¹¹ Many other hill peoples were, in the distant and not so distant past, closely associated with, if not incorporated in, valley kingdoms with literate elites. Those who moved from such valleys to hill settings would, on this assumption, have plausibly included at least a small literate minority. The Hmong legend of the literate minority dying out might, then, contain a grain of truth, though it does not explain why this knowledge was not passed on. The Karen have been at one time or another closely associated with several literate padi-state traditions—Mon-Pegu, Tai-Nan Chao, Burman, and Thai: an association that would almost

certainly have fostered a small literate class. The Ganan, a now nonliterate people along the upper reaches of the Mu River, were almost surely part of the literate Pyu kingdom(s) before they fled to their redoubt in the hills. Like a great many other hill peoples, the Ganan and Hmong retain many of the cultural practices and beliefs of the lowland peoples with whom they were once associated. If, as I have argued, many, if not most, contemporary hill peoples have a “valley” past, then such cultural continuities should occasion no surprise. Why, then, in most cases, did they not also bring literacy and texts along with them?

The Narrowness of Literacy and Some Precedents for Its Loss

There is no place in any of the standard civilizational narratives for the loss or abandonment of literacy. The acquisition of literacy is envisaged as a one-way trip in just the same fashion as is the transition from shifting agriculture to wet-rice cultivation and from forest bands to villages, towns, and cities. And yet literacy in premodern societies was, under the best of circumstances, confined to a minuscule portion of the population, almost certainly less than 1 percent. It was the social property of scribes, accomplished religious figures, and a very thin stratum of scholar gentry in the case of the Han. To assert, in this context, that a whole society or people is literate is incorrect; in all premodern societies the vast majority of the population was illiterate and lived in an oral culture, inflected though it was by texts. To say that, demographically speaking, literacy hung by a thread would in many cases be no exaggeration. Not only was it confined to a tiny elite, but the social value of literacy, in turn, depended on a state bureaucracy, an organized clergy, and a social pyramid where literacy was a means of advancement and a mark of status. Any event that threatened these institutional structures threatened literacy itself.

Something very much like this institutional collapse seems to lie behind the four-century-long “Greek Dark Age,” lasting roughly from 1100 BCE (the time of the Trojan War) until 700. Before that Mycenaean Greeks, a small number of them at any rate, kept records in a difficult-to-learn syllabary script (Linear B) borrowed from the Minoans and used primarily for keeping palace administrative transactions and tax records. For reasons that are still not entirely clear—a Dorian invasion from the north, internal civil war, ecological crisis, famine—the palaces and towns of the Peloponnese were sacked, burned, and abandoned, leading to a collapse of long-distance trade, refugee

movements, and a general diaspora. The epoch is termed the Dark Age precisely because no written records survive, apparently because the knowledge of the Linear B script was abandoned in the chaos and dispersal of the time. The Homeric epics of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, oral tales passed from bard to bard and only later written down, are the only cultural artifacts to have survived the Dark Age. Around 750 BCE, under more peaceful conditions, the Greeks regained literacy, this time borrowing from the Phoenicians a genuine alphabet that allowed a graphic representation of the sounds made by actual speech. This episode is one of the clearest examples we have of literacy apparently lost and later regained.¹²

Another instance in which literacy appears to have been largely but not entirely lost is in the period following the collapse of the tattered vestiges of the Roman Empire around 600 CE. Literacy in Latin, which had previously been both expensive and necessary to a nonmilitary career in the Empire, was now of no particular value except perhaps as an ornament. The path to security and power for local elites now lay in military service to the local king. Literacy receded to the point that it was largely confined to the clergy even in areas of Gaul that had been quite Romanized previously. In distant Britain the veneer of a Roman culture and education evaporated altogether. It had been the Roman state, and its institutions that had maintained the context in which literacy was “an essential component of ‘eliteness,’” just as the Mycenaean social order had upheld the more restricted Linear B literacy in ancient Greece. When that institutional nexus crumbled, so did the social foundations of literacy.¹³

Assuming that many of the contemporary hill peoples were, at one time or another, living near or in lowland states with some degree of literacy, and assuming further, as seems reasonable, that a small fraction of their own elites became literate, say in Chinese, how might we account for a subsequent loss of literacy? Here again, the first thing to bear in mind is how very thin this literate stratum was in Han society, let alone among the peoples the Han state encountered as it expanded its reach. We may be talking about a mere handful of people. Second, those who were literate in the script of the lowland state would have almost certainly have been elites whose bicultural skills fitted them best to become allies and administrators of the lowland state and, if they so chose, to take the path of assimilation. If, then, as most historians suppose, large fractions of today’s minority peoples in the hills were earlier absorbed in the process of Han expansion, one would suppose that this literate minority would be more likely to stay behind and assimilate, inasmuch as they had the

most to gain by doing so. A people migrating or fleeing lowland centers of power would, on this assumption, have left most, perhaps all, of its literate minority behind. Speculating further, the few literates who migrated with those resisting and fleeing must have had an ambiguous status among their compatriots; skilled in the script of the state they were fleeing, they might be seen as helpful or, perhaps, as a potential fifth column. In the latter case, they may have elected to let their literacy lapse and not to instruct others.

Another potential explanation for the loss of literacy is that it was merely a logical consequence of the fragmentation, mobility, and dispersal of social structure entailed by migration to the hills. Leaving behind the lowland centers meant stripping down the complexity of social structure in the interest of mobility. In this context, literacy and texts were of no further use and died out as a practice, though not as a memory.¹⁴ As in the Roman case, so much of the practice of literacy was directly dependent on the existence of a particular state and its bureaucratic routines: knowledge of state documents, law codes, chronicles, record keeping in general, taxes and economic transactions, and, above all, the structure of officeholding and hierarchy linked to that state made literacy a sought-after prestige good. Once this structure was left behind, the social incentives driving the acquisition and transmission of literacy would have diminished precipitously.

On the Disadvantages of Writing and the Advantages of Orality

The argument thus far for the loss of literacy has hinged on the loss of literates and of the contexts that made their services valuable. A stronger case, I think, can be made for the positive advantages of moving to an oral culture. Such an argument rests essentially on the manifest advantages of flexibility and adaptation that an oral tradition has over a written tradition.

For the sake of this argument, I bracket those cases in which secret scripts and inscriptions are used for their magical efficacy.¹⁵ Magical writing is common throughout the region. Scripts and signs are deployed in much the same way as magic spells or incantations and are expected to “act on the world” as signs. Carried as talismans, tattooed on the body, and perhaps blessed by monks and shamans who vouch for their power to protect their bearer, such writings operate as powerful fetish objects. While they testify to the symbolic power of writing and merit analysis in their own right, they do not constitute literacy in the sense understood here. I also exclude those scripts found in the region which seem to be totally confined to their role

as aide-mémoire in the service of the oral culture. Thus the Yao/Mien in southern Hunan province are said to have had, from pre-Han times, a simple script designed to help them memorize laments that could then be embroidered on cloth. This sort of restricted literacy without permanent texts, literature, or documents, however fascinating as an appropriation of literacy in an essentially oral culture (as if Homer had a script to help him memorize and then recite difficult passages in the *Odyssey*), will also be bracketed in this discussion.¹⁶

The existence of special, restricted forms of writing is a salutary reminder that texts, in the broad sense of the term, can take many forms, of which books and documents are but two. All hierarchies, I would venture, that aspire to intergenerational durability produce, as a matter of course, “texts” that assert claims to authority and power. Such texts, before the advent of writing, might take the form of material objects: crowns, coats of arms, trophies, cloaks, headdresses, royal colors, fetish objects, heirlooms, steles, monuments, and so on. The state, as the most ambitious claimant of this kind, multiplies such texts as assertions of permanence. Early states combined the permanence of stone tablets with writing or pictograms as claims to lasting power.

The key disadvantage of monuments and written texts is precisely their relative permanence. Contingent though they are, they become, once erected or written down, a sort of social fossil that can be “dug up” at any time, unchanged. Any written text makes a certain kind of orthodoxy possible—whether that text is a legend of origin, an account of migrations, a genealogy, or a religious text such as the Bible or the Koran.¹⁷ No text, of course, has a perfectly transparent meaning, and if there are multiple contending texts, the room for interpretive maneuver is that much larger. Nonetheless, the text itself is a fixed point of departure; it makes some readings implausible if not impossible. Once there is a text as an indisputable point of reference, it provides the kind of yardstick from which deviations from the original can roughly be judged.¹⁸ This process is most striking when the text in question has been deemed authoritative. Let’s say a text asserts that X people originated from a particular place, fled from unjust taxes of a particular lowland king, followed a certain itinerary, worship particular tutelary spirits, and bury their dead in a certain way. The very existence of such texts has powerful consequences; it facilitates the development of an orthodox, standard account. That standard account can be learned directly from the text, and this fact privileges that class of literate scribes who can read the texts. Any subsequent

account, depending on its fit with that standard account, allows various degrees of heterodoxy to be inferred. By contrast, debates in oral cultures about whether such-and-such a spoken account is credible cannot be referred back to an authoritative, written text.

Such documents, furthermore, are, like all such documents, created in a particular historical context and reflect that context. They are “interested,” historically positioned texts. When they were created, they may well have served as a charter for an advantageous account of a group’s history. What happens when the situation changes substantially and the textual account becomes inconvenient? What if yesterday’s enemies have become today’s allies and vice versa? If the text is sufficiently polysemic, it can be reinterpreted to bring it into line. If not, it can be burned or abandoned, though in the case of monuments it might involve chiseling off certain names and recorded events!¹⁹ It is easy to see that, over time, a fixed account can become as much of a trap and impediment as an instrument of successful diplomacy.²⁰

For hill peoples and for stateless peoples generally, the world of writing and texts is also indelibly associated with states. Lowland padi states were centers of literacy not merely because they were cult centers for world religions but also because writing is a crucial technology of administration and statecraft. It is hard to conceive of a padi state without cadastral maps of taxable land, registration lists for corvée labor, receipts, record keeping, royal decrees, legal codes, specific agreements and contracts, and lists, lists, lists—in short, without writing.²¹ The elementary form of statecraft is the population list and household census: the basis for taxation and conscription. Of all the written texts recovered from the early Mesopotamian kingdom of Uruk, fully 85 percent were economic records.²² As Claude Lévi-Strauss notes, “Writing appears to be necessary for the centralized, stratified state to reproduce itself. Writing is a strange thing. . . . The one phenomenon which has invariably accompanied it is the formation of cities and empires: the integration into a political system, that is to say, of a considerable number of individuals into a hierarchy of castes and slaves. . . . It seems rather to favor the exploitation than the enlightenment of mankind.”²³

In a common Akha account of their wanderings (“roads”) as a people, they are described as having once been a rice-growing valley people who were sorely oppressed by Yi-Lolo rulers. The key figure in this part of the narrative is a King Jabiolang, whose great crime in their eyes was to have initiated a yearly census.²⁴ The idea of a census (*jajitjieu*) stands symbolically for the entire apparatus of state power. Early colonial history is rife with indigenous resistance to the first colonial census; peasants and tribesmen alike under-

stood perfectly well that a census was the necessary prelude to taxes and *corvée* labor.

A similar attitude toward writing and record keeping permeates the history of colonial peasant rebellions against the state. The first target of peasant wrath was often not so much the colonial officials themselves as the paper documents—land titles, tax lists, population records—through which the officials seemed to rule. Implicitly, it seemed to the insurgents that burning down the public records office promised, by itself, a kind of emancipation. Nor was the association of writing with state oppression confined to the colonial world. The radical wing in the English Civil War, exemplified by the Diggers and Levelers, regarded the Latin of the law and of the clergy as a deliberately mystifying technology designed to fleece them. Knowledge of letters was itself *prima facie* cause for suspicion.²⁵

Much of early state-making seems to have been a process of naming units that were once fluid or unnamed: villages, districts, lineages, tribes, chiefs, families, and fields. The process of naming, when joined to the administrative power of the state, can create entities that did not previously exist. For Han officials, one distinguishing characteristic of “barbarians” was that they did not have patronyms. Such stable names were, among the Han themselves, the result of a much earlier exercise in state-making. In this sense, the very units of identity and place, which then acquire a distinctive genealogy and history, are, in their official, stable form, a state effect linked to writing.

For many stateless, preliterate or postliterate peoples, the world of literacy and writing is not simply a reminder of their lack of power and knowledge and the stigma attached to it. It is, at the same time, a clear and present danger. The acquisition of writing, associated as it is with state power, could as easily be an avenue for disempowerment as for empowerment. To refuse or to abandon writing and literacy is one strategy among many for remaining out of reach of the state. It might seem far more prudent to rely instead upon “knowledges that resist bureaucratic codification.”²⁶

For stateless peoples wedged between powerful lowland states and for whom adaptability, mimicry, reinvention, and accommodation are therefore important survival skills, an oral, vernacular culture holds substantial attractions. In an oral culture, there cannot be a single authoritative genealogy or history that can serve as the gold standard of orthodoxy. In the case of two or more renditions, which one is given credence depends largely on the standing of the “bard” in question and on how closely the account conforms to the interests and tastes of the audience.

An oral tradition is, in most respects, inherently more democratic than

a written tradition for at least two reasons. First, the ability to read and write is typically less broadly distributed than the ability to tell stories.²⁷ Second, there is rarely any simple way to “adjudicate” among variant tellings of oral history; certainly there is no fixed, written text to which the variants can be compared for veracity. Oral communication, even by “official” bards, is by definition limited to the size of the face-to-face audience assembled to hear it. The spoken word, like language itself, is a collectivist activity inasmuch as “its conventions have to be shared by whole groups of societies of varying size before any of its ‘meanings’ become available to individuals within the society” at the moment of transmission.²⁸ From the moment a spoken text (a particular performance) is frozen in writing as preserved speech, it effaces most of the particularity of its origin—cadence, tone, pauses, accompanying music and dance, audience reaction, bodily and facial expression—any one of which might be essential to its original meaning.²⁹

In fact, in the case of oral histories and narratives, the concept of “the original” simply does not make any sense.³⁰ Oral culture exists and is sustained only through each unique performance at a particular time and place for an interested audience. These performances are, of course, far more than the transcript of the words spoken; each includes the setting, the gestures, and the expression of the performer(s), the audience reaction, and the nature of the occasion itself. Oral culture has therefore an inalterable presentness—if it was of no interest, if it served no purpose for its contemporary audience, it would cease to exist. A written record, in radical contrast, can persist more or less invisibly for a millennium and suddenly be dug up and consulted as an authority.

Thus oral traditions are to written traditions more or less what swidden agriculture is to irrigated wet-rice agriculture or what small, dispersed kin groups are to settled, concentrated societies. They are the “jellyfish,” shape-shifting, pliable form of custom, history, and law. They permit a certain “drift” in content and emphasis over time—a strategic and interested re-adjustment of, say, a group history in which certain events are now omitted and others given stronger emphasis, and still others “remembered.” Should a group with a common background split into two or more subgroups, each of which finds itself in a materially different setting, one imagines that their oral histories will diverge accordingly. As the different oral traditions drift imperceptibly apart, there can be no reference point—which a shared written text would provide—by which to gauge how far and in what ways each tradition had diverged from the once common account. Because oral traditions survive

only through retelling, they accumulate interpretations as they are transmitted. Each telling forcibly reflects current interests, current power relations, and current views of neighboring societies and kin groups. Barbara Andaya, writing of oral traditions in Sumatra (Jambi and Palembang), captures the process of adjustment and modification. "With the community's implicit agreement, details extraneous to the present slipped away from legend to be replaced by newly relevant elements that were incorporated as ancestral lore, thus rendering the past continually meaningful."³¹

Oral traditions are capable of impressive feats of faithful transmission over many generations if the group bearing the tradition so desires. We know enough about the bardic tradition through the pathbreaking studies of Serbian oral epics and, by extension, the Homeric epics to understand that rhyme, meter, and long apprenticeship can provide high fidelity in the oral transmission of very long passages.³² Among the Akha, a special caste of *phima*, teachers and reciters, has preserved quite elaborate recitations of long genealogies, the major events in Akha history, and customary law, which they sing on ceremonial occasions. The fact that widely separated groups of Akha with quite different dialects have preserved nearly identical oral texts is testimony to the efficacy of such techniques. More impressive still is the fact that the Akha and Hani, who split more than eight hundred years ago, have preserved oral texts with a high degree of mutual intelligibility.³³

I encountered an impressive contemporary example of detailed oral history in a PaO village two days' walk east of Kalaw in the Burmese Shan states. At the end of the evening meal, a few villagers asked an elderly man to chant the story of U Aung Tha, perhaps the most famous PaO politician after World War II. U Aung Tha was murdered near Taunggyi in 1948 by unknown assailants. The recitation, which I tape-recorded, lasted more than two hours. Far from being the heroic, swashbuckling epic that I had anticipated, it proved, on translation, to be a far more mundane and exceptionally detailed account of the last days of U Aung Tha. It resembled nothing so much as a meticulous police report detailing when Aung Tha arrived in the village, his companions and what they were wearing, the color of his jeep, whom he spoke to, when he bathed, when several men arrived to ask where they could find him, how they were dressed, the jeep they drove, what they said to Aung Tha's wife, where Aung Tha's body was found, what he was wearing, the identifying ring on his finger, the autopsy findings, and so on. At the end of the recitation, the singer admonished his listeners "to take the example of this true story in order to prevent loss or defect in everything." It

was as if every effort had been made, by scrupulously careful oral transmission over half a century, to preserve all the evidence and material facts intact in case a serious police investigation ever took place! I was also surprised to learn that this singer and others throughout PaO areas were paid to chant this story of U Aung Tha's murder at weddings and feasts. Despite being short on histrionics and long on factual detail, it was a popular and revered story.³⁴

Oral traditions, then, appear to provide, under certain circumstances, something of the word-for-word constancy of a fixed, written text, together with the potential flexibility of strategic adjustment and change. They can, as it were, have it both ways; they can claim to be precise ur-texts while in fact being substantially novel—and there is no easy way of evaluating this claim.

The reasons for strategic and opportunistic adaptation of oral traditions are manifold. Once it is fully appreciated that any account of custom, genealogy, or history is a situated, interested account, variation over time is the presumed norm. Among the Kachin, where the telling of tales is a matter for professional priests and bards, “every professional tale will occur in several different versions, each tending to uphold the claims of a different vested interest.” In the jostling among different Kachin lineages over relative ranking and competing aristocratic claims, each story of the origin of the Kachin, their history, and the spirits they worship takes on a coloring that is designed to promote the interests of a particular lineage. And, as Edmund Leach warns, “There is no ‘authentic version’ of Kachin tradition, there are merely a number of stories which concern more or less the same set of mythological characters and which make use of the same kinds of structural symbolism . . . but which differ from one another in crucial details according to who is telling the tale.”³⁵ What applies to the kin group or the lineage applies also to larger social units such as an ethnic group. As its situation changes over time, so do its interests, and thus so does its account of its history, customs, and even deities. One would expect that Karen groups living in different settings—adjacent now to the Mon, now to the Thai, now to the Burman or Shan—would develop oral traditions inflected by each of the settings in which they found themselves. To the extent that their precarious political position is subject to sudden and radical change, the pliability of an oral tradition would be a positive advantage. If, as Ronald Renard maintains, Karen culture can “turn on a dime” and is superbly adapted to travel and change, their oral traditions may be at least as useful to this end as shifting cultivation and physical mobility.³⁶

Far from being cynically manipulated, let alone manufactured out of

whole cloth, the drift of oral traditions is likely to occur by imperceptible degrees, by bards who do not see themselves as embroiderers of the truth. The drift is a case of selective emphasis and omission, as certain accounts seem more important or relevant to current conditions. Here the term *bricolage* applies, inasmuch as variant oral traditions often share the same basic elements, but their arrangement, the emphasis placed on one or another element, and their moral loading convey different meanings.³⁷ The recitation of genealogical histories by which many hill peoples establish links of alliance or enmity with others is a case in point. Any number of genealogical linkages could be made, so numerous are one's ancestors. A mere eight generations back, patrilineal reckoning yields 255 direct ancestors. Bilateral reckoning would double that to 510. Which of these lines of ancestry to omit, to trace, to emphasize is, in one sense, arbitrary. By one or another tracing, most Americans have Abraham Lincoln as an ancestor. They are just as likely to have John Wilkes Booth in their lineages but are less likely to seek out and emphasize that connection! Simply by strategic selection and emphasis of particular ancestors, it is possible to establish an actual genealogical connection that might help legitimate current alliances. Elaborate genealogies are, in this respect, a vast portfolio of possible connections, most of which remain in the shadows but could, if necessary, be summoned. The more turbulent the social environment, the more frequently groups fission and recombine, the greater the likelihood that more of the portfolio of shadow ancestors will come into play. The Berbers are said to be able to construct a genealogical warrant for virtually any alliance of convenience necessary to politics, grazing rights, or war.³⁸

A written genealogy, by contrast, freezes one variant of an evolving oral flux and, as it were, removes it from time, making it available in that form to future generations. The first written political record in Japan (712 CE) is a genealogical history of the great families that was pruned of "untruths," memorized, and then written out as the founding document of an official tradition. Its purpose was precisely to codify a selective and self-interested confection of many oral traditions and to decree it as a permanent sacred history.³⁹ Henceforth other variants would be considered heterodox. The creation of an official, dynastic genealogy has elsewhere been linked directly to the moment of political centralization. The rise to hegemony of one of the many petty kingdoms of Makassar was, in effect, solidified by the promulgation of a written genealogy "documenting" the quasi-divinity of the victorious ruling family.⁴⁰ Early written genealogies are nearly always devised to stabilize a claim to power that eluded such stabilization when it was asserted

only orally. Examining the first written genealogies in early historic Scotland, Margaret Nieke captures the difference between oral and written forms:

Within the traditions of an oral society . . . suitable genealogies could be created with relative ease by deliberate manipulation of the evidence, since there was little in the way of externally validating whatever claims were made. . . . Once recorded in documentary form, a genealogy could establish certain individuals and families as office bearers much more firmly than had ever been the case before. The fabrication of claims to challenge power and position of such individuals would then have necessitated access to those lists which did exist, as well as to the technology whereby alternative versions could be produced.⁴¹

One could say much the same about the portfolio of possible histories at a group's disposal as about their genealogical options. The possibilities for selection, emphasis, and omission are legion. Take, as a fairly banal example, U.S. relations with Great Britain. The fact that Americans fought two wars with Great Britain (the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812) is generally softpedaled in view of more recent alliances in the twentieth century's world wars and the cold war. Were the United States currently an enemy of the United Kingdom, one imagines that a different historical account would prevail.

The possibilities are, to be sure, as rich for written histories and genealogies as they are for oral histories and genealogies. The difference is that the selective forgetting and remembering is more unobtrusive and smooth in the case of an oral tradition. Within an oral tradition there is simply less friction to impede innovation, and what is in fact quite novel can pass itself off as the voice of tradition without much fear of contradiction.

The Advantage of Not Having a History

If an oral history and genealogy provide more room for maneuver than a written history and genealogy, then perhaps the most radical step of all is to claim virtually no history or genealogy at all. Hjorleifur Jonsson contrasts the Lisu, in this respect, with the Lua' and the Mien. The Lisu, aside from insisting that they kill assertive chiefs, have a radically abbreviated oral history. "Lisu forgetting," Jonsson claims, "is as active as Lua' and Mien remembrance." He implies that the Lisu chose to have virtually no history and that the effect of this choice was to "leave no space for the active role of supra-household structures, such as villages or village clusters in ritual

life, social organization, or in the mobilization of people's attention, labor, or resources."⁴²

The Lisu strategy radically extends their room for maneuver in two ways. First, any history, any genealogy, even in oral form, represents a strategic positioning vis-à-vis other groups: it is only one of many such possible positionings. A particular choice might prove inconvenient. Adjusting that positioning, even in oral accounts, is not instantaneous. The Lisu, by refusing to pin themselves down to any account of their past—except for their tradition of autonomy—have no position to modify. Their room for maneuver is virtually limitless. But Lisu historylessness is profoundly radical in a second sense. It all but denies “Lisuness” as a category of identity—except perhaps for outsiders. By denying their history—by not carrying the shared history and genealogy that define group identity—the Lisu negate virtually any unit of cultural identity beyond the individual household. The Lisu, one might say, have devised the ultimate “jellyfish” culture and identity by not positioning themselves at all! This option would appear to curtail the possibilities of collective resistance while maximizing their capacity to adapt to a tumultuous environment.

Relatively powerless hill peoples, I have argued, may well find it to their advantage to avoid written traditions and fixed texts, or even to abandon them altogether, in order to maximize their room for cultural maneuver. The shorter their genealogies and histories the less they have to explain and the more they can invent on the spot. In Europe, the case of the Gypsies may be instructive. Widely persecuted, they have no fixed written language but a rich oral tradition in which storytellers are highly revered. They have no fixed history. They have no story they tell about their origins or about a promised land toward which they are headed. They have no shrines, no anthems, no ruins, no monuments. If there were ever a people who needed to be cagey about who they are and where they came from, it is the Gypsies. Shuttling between many countries and scourged in most, the Gypsies have constantly had to adjust their histories and identities in the interest of survival. They are the ultimate bobbing and weaving people.

How much “history” does a people need or want? This brief examination of oral and written histories raises the larger question of what, after all, is the history-bearing social unit, whether that history be oral or written?

Given the existence of a centralized government and a ruling dynasty, it seems apparent that rulers would want to craft claims (even if fabricated) for their legitimacy and ancientness by genealogies, court legends, poetry,

epics, and hymns of praise. It is hard to imagine any institutional claim to naturalness and inevitability that does not rely in large part on history, oral or written. A similar case can be made for virtually any social ranking. The claim that one particular lineage should be ranked above another or that a particular town ought to be privileged over another, if it is not to seem arbitrary, or based on raw power, will be justified by reference to history and legends. One might even say that assertions of superior rank or inequalities beyond a single generation necessarily require a historical warrant. Such claims need not be written or oral; they may rest, as they often do in the hills, on the possession of valued regalia, gongs, drums, seals, heirlooms, even heads, the display of which on ceremonial occasions represents such a claim. Sedentary communities, even if they are not strongly ranked, are likely not only to have a story about their founding and past but to historicize their claim to their fields and house lots to the extent that those have become valuable property.

What, however, of people living at the margins of the state, in unranked lineages, and moving their fields frequently, as swiddeners typically do? Does it not follow that such peoples might not only prefer an oral history for its plasticity but might need less history altogether? First, the “history-bearing unit” itself, including lineages, may be shifting and problematic. Second, whatever the history-bearing unit might be, it is for swiddeners likely to have little in the way of entrenched historical privileges to defend and many strategic reasons to leave their history open to improvisation.

In his classic book on oral history, Jan Vansina makes a persuasive case along these lines in contrasting the oral traditions of neighboring Burundi and Rwanda. They have much in common, but Burundi is far less hierarchical and centralized and has, as a result, Vansina claims, far less oral history than centralized Rwanda. Burundi, unlike Rwanda, had no royal genealogy, no court songs, no dynastic poetry.

The fluidity of the whole political system is striking. There was nothing to favor the rise of detailed oral traditions: no provincial history because provinces were unstable, no histories of important families because besides the royal family [a usurper with little authority] there were none, and no centralized government hence no official historians. . . . It was in everyone’s interest to forget the past. The former senior regent of the country told me that history was of no interest at court so there were practically no historical accounts. The political system shows why.⁴³

Written and oral cultures are not mutually exclusive; no oral culture is untouched by texts, and no text-based society lacks a parallel and sometimes

resistant oral tradition. As with wet-rice agriculture and swiddening, or with hierarchical and relatively egalitarian social forms, it may be more useful to speak of oscillation. As the advantages of text-based states grew, stateless societies may have moved toward literacy and writing; as these advantages diminished, stateless peoples may have remained or moved toward more exclusively oral traditions.

The relationship of a people, a kinship group, and a community to its history is diagnostic of its relationship to stateness. All groups have some kind of history, some story they tell themselves about who they are and how they came to be situated where they are. After this common ground, the similarity ends. Peripheral, acephalous groups are likely to emphasize itineraries, defeats, migrations, landscapes. Rank, heroic origins, and claims to territory are, by contrast, the stuff of centralization and (would-be) state formation. The form traditions take also varies. Written traditions are of enormous instrumental value to the process of permanent political centralization and administration. Oral traditions, on the other hand, have substantial advantages for peoples whose welfare and survival depend on a fleet-footed adjustment to a capricious and menacing political environment. Finally, there would seem to be something of a difference in how much history a people choose to have. The Lisu and Karen, for example, seem to prefer to travel lightly and to bring along as little excess historical baggage as possible. Like skippers of tramp steamers, they know from experience that they cannot be sure what their next port of call might be.

Stateless peoples are typically stigmatized by neighboring cultures as “peoples without history,” as lacking the fundamental characteristic of civilization, namely historicity.⁴⁴ The charges are wrong on two counts. First, the stigmatization presupposes that only written history counts as a narrative of identity and a common past. Second, and more important, how much history a people have, far from indicating their low stage of evolution, is always an active choice, one that positions them vis-à-vis their powerful text-based neighbors.