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CONCEPTIONS AND USES OF LITERACY IN A PAPUA NEW GUINEAN VILLAGE

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Among certain scholars, educators and missionaries working in the Pacific, there is a debate currently brewing about the consequences of vernacular literacy for traditional societies. On the one hand, the missionary-linguists of the Summer Institute of Linguistics/Wycliffe Bible Translators (SIL) increasingly justify their continued existence in countries like Papua New Guinea by de-emphasising their evangelistic goals and by accentuating instead the role they play in furthering vernacular literacy. These missionary-linguists stress the importance of literacy in the promotion of the 'dignity of the indigenous people and their languages' (Franklin 1975: 139). There is an oft-unstated assumption in all that they write about their work that vernacular literacy a priori strengthens the position of the vernacular.

This view of literacy has begun to be challenged by others. In a number of recent papers,[1] the linguist Peter Mühlhäusler has argued that vernacular literacy, far from leading to the preservation of local languages and cultures, in fact has the opposite effect. 'Vernacular literacy', he writes, 'is potentially as powerful an agent of social change and decline of traditional modes of expression and life as literacy in a metropolitan language' (1990: 203).

Even though the overt focus of this debate is on vernacular literacy, what is really at issue are the pros and cons of any type of literacy, as Mühlhäusler's statement makes clear. The basic point of contention between the SIL missionary-linguists and researchers like Mühlhäusler is whether or not the effects of literacy on small-scale societies are desirable. The missionaries, who believe in the power of the Word to 'transform' people into Christians (see, for example, Townsend 1963: 8; Renck 1990), consider that literacy, the ability to read the Word, is unquestionably positive. Indeed, translating the Christian gospel into local languages is the *raison d'être* of the SIL. Mühlhäusler, who draws attention to the proselytising motives of the SIL, and who appears to regard all literacy as an 'agent of decline' of traditional lifestyles, considers that the overall effects of literate skills on small-scale societies are dubious.

Regardless of whether they can be said to be for or against the acquisition of literacy by such societies however, those engaged in this debate appear to accept without much reflection the view that literacy

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constitutes a kind of potent, active force in itself, and that it acts as an 'agent' of 'linguistic, religious and social change' (Mühlhäusler 1990: 203). This is a position underlying most of the scholarly work that has been done on literacy since the 1960s. Indeed, this work can largely be seen as a grand attempt to demonstrate the ways in which literate skills transform cognitive processes, social institutions and historical consciousness (Goody 1977, 1986; Ong 1982; Olson 1977; Havelock 1976).

In reading through this literature, it is often difficult to escape the conclusion that human beings are basically passive objects who become affected by literacy in ways they are neither fully aware of nor able to control. One of the more unfortunate practical consequences of a position which assumes that people become changed in predictable ways by literacy is that debates like the one referred to above can easily assume a tone of paternalistic wrangling over whether or not 'the natives' are ready for, or should have, access to literate skills.

In this paper, rather than stress how literacy affects people, we want to take the opposite tack and examine how people affect literacy. We are going to demonstrate how individuals in a newly literate society, far from being passively transformed by literacy, instead actively and creatively apply literate skills to suit their own purposes and needs. In pursuing this argument, we are not claiming that the acquisition of literacy might not in itself have consequences for social groups. We are suggesting, however, that these consequences should not be simply assumed, nor should they be exaggerated. Like an increasing number of researchers in disciplines such as social psychology (Cole and Scribner 1981), history (Clanchy 1979), linguistics (Stubbs 1980; Cook-Gumperz 1986) and anthropology (Finnegan 1988; Heath 1983), we have come to the conclusion that literacy has been and continues to be unjustifiably reified in discussions and debates around the world. By analysing empirical data in a way that shows how literacy is bound up with 'quite profound levels of belief and the fundamental concepts through which a society creates order and design in the world' (Street 1984: 114), we hope in this paper to contribute to what appears to be a growing consensus that literacy is shaped by a group's social organisation and cultural concerns in much more far-reaching and subtle ways than has formerly been appreciated.

The uses of literacy

The data on which we will base our discussion come from a small, rural village located in the lower Sepik region of Papua New Guinea. The village is called Gapun, and it is populated by about 100 people who are largely self-supporting through a combination of swidden agriculture, hunting and sago processing.

When discussing literacy in Gapun, or anywhere else in Papua New Guinea, it is first necessary to understand the rather complicated linguistic situation into which reading and writing skills become embedded. In Gapun, two languages dominate the verbal repertoire of the villagers. These are the vernacular language, Taiap, and Tok Pisin. Taiap is an isolate non-Austronesian language, probably belonging to what in the linguistic literature is called the Sepik–Ramu Phylum of Papuan languages (Kulick and Stroud in press; Laycock and Z'graggen 1975). It is spoken only in Gapun and it is not a written language. Tok Pisin is an English-based creole. It is the most widely spoken language in Papua New Guinea today.

A few members of Gapun village have been minimally literate in Tok Pisin since the late 1950s. In 1967, a government-run grammar school was opened in a nearby village, and since that time the majority of children in Gapun have attended school for three to six years. In addition to the two languages spoken in the village, the children who attend grammar school are confronted with yet another tongue: English. For a variety of social, historical and political reasons, English is the language of instruction in Papua New Guinea, and it is used in classrooms from the very first day of school.[2] Gapun children thus acquire literacy skills in a language they almost never hear or use outside the classroom. Despite the fact that the children learn very little during the first two or three years of school, due in large measure to their inability to cope with instruction in English, most of them leave school having acquired some literacy skills. The children are able, without any formal instruction, to transfer those skills to Tok Pisin, thus becoming functionally literate in that language.

Outside of school, however, literacy skills are almost never used. Most boys and virtually all girls who become literate in school make almost no use of their reading and writing abilities outside the classroom, and after they leave school at ages fourteen to fifteen, many of these young people may never read and will almost certainly never write again. There are few opportunities in the course of normal village life to read or write. The only type of literature that regularly enters the village, for example, is the *Sydney Morning Herald*, but this is purchased in loose sheets by the villagers and is used to roll cigarettes; it is never read.

Nevertheless, most households do contain some printed matter which is occasionally looked at, and a few villagers do sometimes write. But the ways in which Gapun villagers have incorporated literacy skills into their community differ from the ways in which the written word is often assumed to be used in literate societies. Noticeably absent from Gapun are those types of reading and writing which are stressed in Western societies and educational systems. Gapuners do not read to gain information about people they do not know or about events which do not

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directly concern them. Nobody in the village considers that one can become better informed or more competent in any way by reading (although there is the belief that an intensive reading of a text might cause one to understand its hidden message – we return to this below). Consequently, there is no notion in the village that everyone *should* read. The act of reading in itself has no value apart from accomplishing some immediate goal like confirming the words to a hymn, preparing to recite a prayer, reading a note one has been given, deciding to discover a heretofore concealed truth in a religious text, or checking the hand of cards one has just been dealt in a game with friends.

Writing too has particular, circumscribed uses in the village. Despite the fact that children do some expository writing in school, none of this is carried over to a village context: villagers do not keep diaries or write letters to friends in distant villages to maintain contact. Instead, the single most common type of writing done in Gapun is short notes that villagers write to one another requesting a favour or a loan such as the use of a hunting dog or a gun. Other uses of writing include the habit of a few villagers of recording the dates of deaths in the village, and sometimes the writing of lists of villagers' names by men elected to positions of nominal importance instituted by the national government (the listing of these names serves no other purpose than giving these men occasion to tell the villagers, in dark tones, that their names have been recorded 'in the book'). Like reading, writing in Gapun is never talked about or evaluated in terms of aesthetics, and there is no notion that everyone should know how to write.

While the people of Gapun use their literacy skills in a variety of ways (see Kulick and Stroud 1990a for a more detailed description), two general characteristics stand out. First, a great deal of the villagers' literate activity is directed towards Christianity. This is especially true of the reading that occurs in Gapun, which is primarily concerned with religious material. Second, the great bulk of the villagers' writing concerns aspects of their relationships with one another. Messages requesting favours, lists of names and notes recording deaths are all part of the general flow of communication that villagers have with and about one another.

These characteristics of the uses of literacy in the village lead us to pose certain questions. Why, we wonder, is so much of the villagers' literate activity concerned with Christianity? And what aspect of village interpersonal relationships is being addressed when, for example, a villager sends a note to his mother's brother asking for a chicken?

We will attempt to answer those questions by demonstrating that Gapun villagers use their literacy skills in the ways they do because of the meanings they have attached to the written word. That is, they have

creatively adapted reading and writing activities to pursue certain goals and achieve particular effects which have been generated from larger cultural concerns. Using the two characteristic features of Gapun literacy as rubrics, we will examine the ways in which local conceptions of Christianity, and of interpersonal relations have influenced how the villagers structure, use and evaluate literacy.

We begin by arguing that the villagers' interpretation of the relationship between Christianity and literacy is based upon their pre-Christian notions of language as a powerful means by which knowledgeable men and women could bring about transformations in their world. Following this, we then go on to discuss how local ideas about the self and others are articulated and reinforced through a pronounced emphasis on particular dimensions of oral language use. We will show how this emphasis has consequences for the uses to which literacy is put, the structure of the writing that the villagers produce, and the ways in which the villagers attribute meaning to written texts.

Getting the word to work

Historically, literacy in Gapun, like virtually everywhere else in the Pacific region, was introduced by missionaries. The first village man to acquire literacy skills did so on a Catholic mission station in the mid-1950s. This man, Kruni Aiarpa, worked hard to learn how to read and write. He learned these skills by sitting in on lessons that the missionaries and nuns held for local children:

> I learned my A B Cs and after a while I could read and write now. I knew now. I went and read the Bible, the prayer book, the hymn book...

The social setting in which Kruni became literate and the uses to which he subsequently applied his literacy skills illustrate the tight connection that has existed between literacy and Catholicism ever since villagers first began acquiring the written word. When Kruni returned to Gapun from the mission station, he used his newly acquired literacy skills in Tok Pisin to say a simple mass on Sundays. He shared his knowledge of letters with other village men, and a few of these learned enough to follow along in hymn booklets and perhaps write their names. In the early 1960s, several of the village men and women who are now in their forties were sent by their parents to another mission station for schooling. Harsh punishment drove these boys and girls to run away before acquiring any literacy skills beyond perhaps learning the alphabet.

In any case, from the introduction of literacy in Gapun in the mid-1950s, until the late 1960s, any villager who became literate did so in a

context directly associated with the Catholic Church, be this through Kruni, the village prayer leader, or on a mission station. This link between literacy and the Church was reinforced even more by the fact that there was a total absence of any literature except booklets and pamphlets addressing Catholic beliefs and liturgy. When villagers learned to read, they did so in order to be able to read Christian literature.

Catholicism and Cargo

The establishment of Catholicism in Gapun had occurred in the years immediately following the Second World War. It coincided with and was in all probability reinforced by a period of Cargo cult activity in the area. The first of these was a typical Cargo cult, involving ecstatic prayer, promiscuous sex and expectations that money would materialise in the village graveyard. It was inspired by stories of the Rai Coast cult led by the well-known cult leader Yali (Lawrence 1964; Morauta 1974). This cult, which lasted several months, was soon followed by another spate of millenarian activity, inspired this time by the teachings of a man named Ninga, who came from the lower Sepik village of Bien. This movement was based on a combination of intensive prayer and the imitation of plantation work routines and military drills, and lasted perhaps as long as a year.

From its very beginnings, then, Catholicism in Gapun has been closely linked with notions of Cargo. Since the 1950s there have been two more outbreaks of overt Cargo cultism in the village: once in 1965–6, and the other as recently as 1987.

The millenarian activity in 1987 is particularly interesting from the perspective of the study of literacy, because it was directly sparked off by rumours that the villagers of Bogia (about one and a half days' walk from Gapun along the coast) had received a letter from God informing them of the exact time at which the world would end. For weeks, Gapun villagers talked excitedly about travelling to Bogia to see this letter for themselves. Although no one actually ever made that trip, bits of information contained in the letter from God did leak out and eventually reach Gapun: the world, it was said, would end at 'three o'clock' on 'day ten'. This would be a Thursday, in 'year thirteen'.

Nobody in Gapun understood what 'year thirteen' possibly could mean, but many of the villagers began to 'ready themselves' for the End anyway, expecting it to arrive at any moment. They constructed an elaborate altar which they decorated with flowers, large, bulbous orange seeds, sago fronds and eight inch plastic statues of the Virgin Mary. And every evening for several weeks they held prayer meetings, sometimes lasting most of the night. Several times these meetings resulted in many of those present falling into convulsive *extase*.

That this latest bout of Cargo activity was directly related to a written product, from the pen of no one less than God Almighty Himself, testifies to the extremely salient and vigorous associations that exist in Gapun between Christianity, Cargo and literacy. The strength of these associations is further illustrated by the type of literature that the villagers possess.

Types of literature in the village

To discover what literature actually existed in Gapun, a survey was conducted by going from household to household and asking the villagers to show all the books and papers they possessed. Discounting loose pages and the vaccination booklets that the nurse who occasionally comes to the village sometimes gives to parents for their children, eighty-four specimens of printed matter were found in Gapun.

Of these eighty-four specimens, all but two were directly connected with Christianity. One of those two items was an automobile maintenance manual in English that the sons of one couple had somehow come by during a trip to the Provincial capital of Wewak. The other item was a small booklet called *Daisy Sing-Along*. It contained a number of evergreen songs like 'Yellow Rose of Texas' and 'O Du Lieber Augustin'. The automobile maintenance manual was frequently passed around in the household which owned it, as adults and children enjoyed tracing their fingers along the line drawings of gears and sockets and wondering how they all fit together and made a car run. The *Daisy Sing-Along* booklet was never read.

All the rest of the literature in Gapun was religious. The most common printed item in the village is the small paperbound hymn booklet called *Niu Laip* (New Life). If a household possesses only one item of literature, this will be it. The next most common item is the soft covered *Nupela Testamen na Ol Sam* (New Testament and the Psalms), which several households keep in a plastic rice bag up in the rafters of their roof. The remainder of the religious matter consists of various booklets and calendars containing Bible stories, prayers and liturgical instructions, always in Tok Pisin.

With the exception of the hymn booklet, which the villagers take with them to mass and sometimes look in while singing, most of this literature is almost never read. Only printed matter containing pictures or line drawings is ever really looked at. Nobody ever actually reads the Bible, for example, but school children or an adult and several school children sometimes page through it together and comment to each other about the abstract line drawings of figures they find there. This paging through printed material and commenting to one another about the pictures there is how villagers most often 'read' such material.

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Figure 1.1 'The death of a sinner.'

One extremely popular item of literature in the village is a single copy of an old soiled booklet without a cover called '*Bel Bilong Man*' (Man's Heart; literally Man's Stomach) by the villagers. It contains line drawings of various animals, which the Tok Pisin text explains personify different sinful behaviours: a bird of paradise represents vanity and '*bikhet*' (big-headedness, wilfulness); a dog symbolises '*pasin bilong pamuk*' (promiscuity); a cassowary is meant to stand for aggression, and so on. The story that the booklet tells is that men must work to drive these sinful

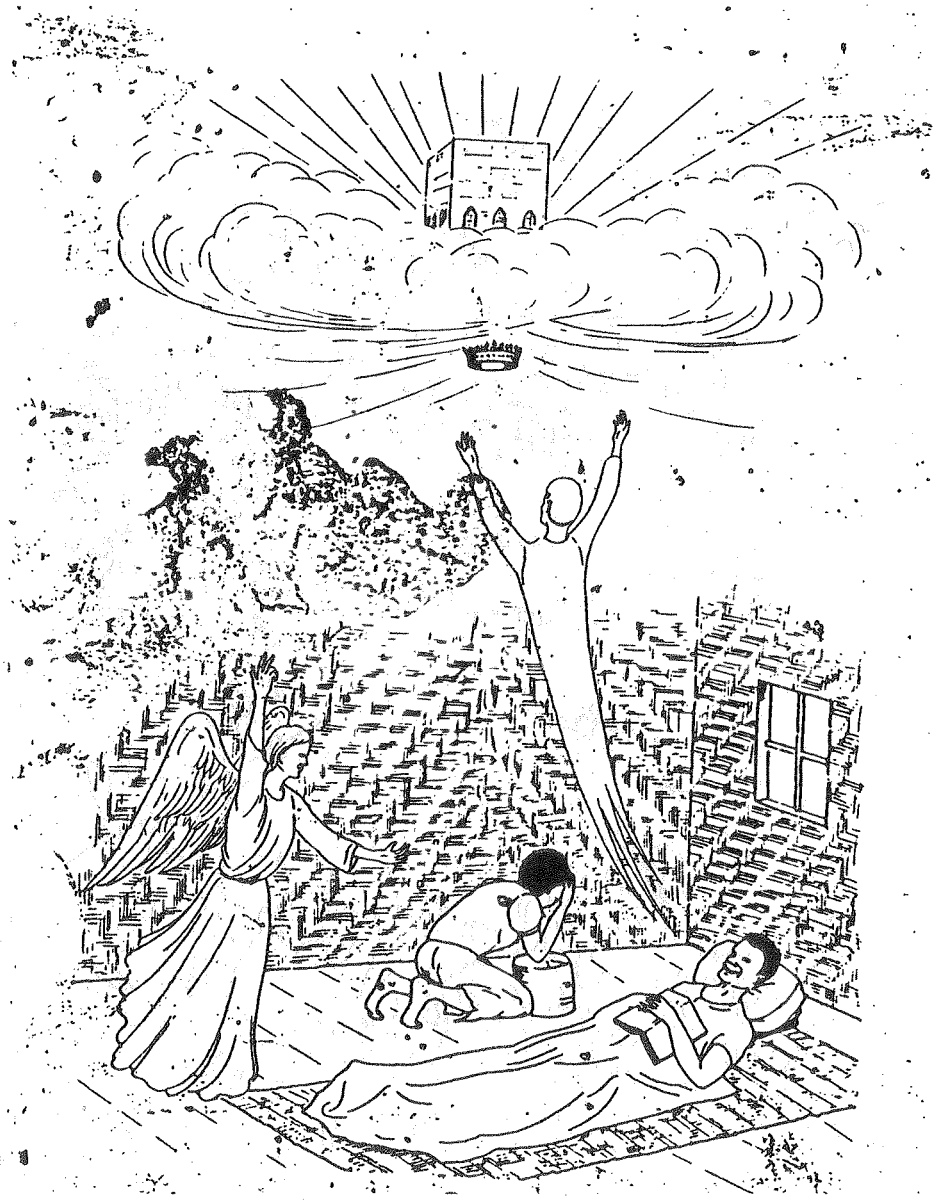

Figure 1.2 'The death of a believer.'

ways from their heart and replace them with Christian qualities, symbolised iconographically by a smiling mouth (for a Christian conscience), an open eye (for seeing the Light), an open book (symbolising the Bible), a burning bush, and a crucifix. If one does not replace sinful ways with Christian ways, the text warns, then one's soul will be dragged to Hell. This fate is rather dramatically illustrated in a drawing from the booklet reproduced in figure 1.1.

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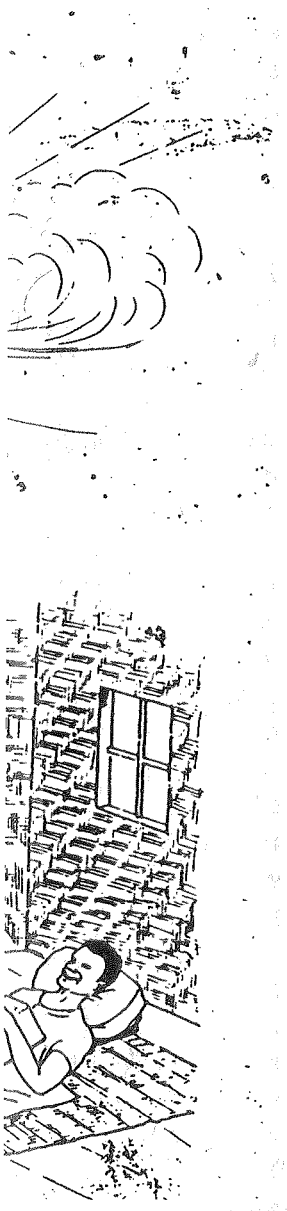

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Another drawing later on in the booklet represents the death of another man – possibly this same prayer leader (figure 1.2). The text on the page opposite this illustration explains that it depicts 'The death of a believer' (*Indai bilong man i bilip*). There are several interesting details in this picture, such as the European-style window in the man's house, but what is most relevant for us here is to note the prominence, once again, of a book. The book in this drawing is again unlabelled, but it is clearly not representing a *Daisy Sing-Along* book or a car repair manual. This picture is an uncommonly apt and powerful encoding of what the villagers in Gapun believe to be the relationship between literacy and Christianity. Note also the colour of the rising spirit's hair (and, by association, of his skin). In illustrations such as this, the villagers continually find proof that they are correct in believing things such as that they 'change' and become white when they die.

The power of the Word

We are now in a position to ask ourselves why the villagers of Gapun maintain such a tight link between Christianity and literacy. Scholars who have addressed the issue of literacy in Papua New Guinea in recent years (for example Mühlhäusler 1977, 1990; Gilliam 1984; Lynch 1979) have frequently put forward the argument that the almost total absence of any literature in Tok Pisin other than religious material has shaped rural Papua New Guineans' perception of what literature is and what literacy is for. While it would certainly be possible to present such a case for Gapun, an argument phrased in such language implies that the villagers are merely passively moulded in their conceptions by the availability of a certain kind of literature. We want to emphasise instead that the villagers of Gapun *actively* maintain and elaborate this link between literacy and Christianity because they are convinced that they can get that link to work for them.

Gapuners strongly believe that Christianity is the key to obtaining the Cargo. They anticipate that the Cargo will arrive as reward for their pious Christianity. In this sense, the whole idea of Cargo is an expression of a

strong emic notion of agency. The villagers believe that the Cargo will materialise as a result of their actions; it is they themselves who can bring about the change. They are therefore always on the lookout for a 'road' which they can manipulate to obtain the money and the factories they want. And it is at this juncture that the villagers' literacy skills fit into their scheme of things.

Like numerous other Melanesian societies described in the ethnographic literature (for example Lawrence 1964; Meggitt 1968), Gapun villagers consider that words have power; words have always been associated with the ability to directly influence spirit powers to make things come about. Village men and women possessed (and some still possess) magic chants that they used for a variety of reasons, from making dogs able to hunt better, to curing illness, to killing someone through sorcery.

Personal names are also imbued with power, and certain relatives, such as in-laws, cannot be called by name, lest one bring down ancestral wrath upon oneself or one's close matrilineal relatives. Likewise, mythical figures usually have many names: 'big names' that can be said aloud, and 'little names' or 'inside names', that if uttered anywhere near Gapun would cause the entire village to perish.

So in Gapun, certain words uttered in certain contexts are seen by the villagers to have the power to bring about certain outcomes. Words constitute direct links to spiritual powers, who will respond in desired ways if the proper words are said in the proper manner. The power of words is thus a creative power; those who have obtained verbatim knowledge of a chant, for example, can utilise the power of those words for their own purposes. Words are, in themselves, 'roads': ways of obtaining desired results.

It appears to be the case that the Christian Word of God has been interpreted by the villagers in precisely this manner. Gapuners were certainly not slow to notice the strikingly prominent role played in the Catholic religion by particular words uttered in specific ways. In order to demonstrate their devotion to God, villagers had to learn to recite prayers, sing hymns, and respond with the appropriate formulaic phrases during Sunday mass. Such a stress on words and on proper formulae for the saying of those words must have seemed unremarkable to the villagers. What was remarkable, on the other hand, was the effect that those Christian words had on the Christian God. Whereas their own words to their ancestors or cult deities (*trambaran/mərip*) could only cure a sickness or make a dog kill more pigs, the words of the priests linked them to a much more potent Being – one who rewarded His devotees with outboard motors, aeroplanes, money and white skin.[3]

As soon as they discovered that 'God's talk' was marked on paper and actually accessible to anyone who could learn to decipher the marks,

enterprising villagers like Kruni Aiarpa in the 1950s seized upon literacy as the 'road' they had been searching for. Why the villagers still have been unable to obtain the Cargo, even though they can now read the Word, is a point to which we shall return below. But even though they have not been able to make literacy work for them yet, the villagers have not given up. Gapuners are ingenious people forever on the lookout for some new clue that might reveal to them how they can *really* get the Cargo, and all recent innovations in village life have come to be seen in this light. The opening of a government-run grammar school in a nearby village in 1967, for example, gave the villagers their first access to non-religious reading material. But schooling is interpreted by Gapun villagers in terms of their millenarian world view, and they believe that the ultimate purpose of schooling is to reveal to their children the secret of the Cargo.[4] What this means is that even the secular literature read by children in school is conceptualised in what is essentially a religious framework. In addition to this, literacy in school, as noted earlier, is acquired in English, a language which the village children almost never encounter in any form outside the classroom. The esoteric and mysterious nature of this language, together with a growing realisation that English, and not Tok Pisin, is the white man's true *tok ples* (vernacular) further fires the villagers' suspicions that the 'meaning' of school is to reveal millenarian secrets to their children.

The power of the word thus persists in Gapun, and the villagers are busy trying to get that power to work for them in Christian contexts. This is why they accept some types of literature into their lives and reject others. Although it is still scarce, secular literature in Tok Pisin, such as the weekly newspaper *Wantok*, does exist today. But none of this interests anyone in Gapun. The only non-religious literature ever actively read by the villagers is glossy, brightly coloured brochures from American mail order companies that have been passed into Gapun from friends in other villages. Even though they are secular, however, these brochures are invariably interpreted by the villagers within a religious framework. Men and women pore over them in excited groups and marvel at the abundance of goods that the brochures seem to be offering. Proclaiming triumphantly that they have finally found the 'road' they have been seeking, young men sit down and write brief letters to the addresses they find in the front of the brochures, requesting that the Cargo be sent to them forthwith.

Writing, the self and others

The idioms of Christianity and Cargo receive a tremendous amount of elaboration in Gapun, and, as we have just seen, they are a major factor shaping the way in which the villagers choose to think about and use literacy.

But Gapuners do not only use their literacy skills to read hymn booklets or to write to foreign companies asking for steamliners. They also write notes to one another. In order to understand why they do this, and how, we believe that it is necessary to examine the villagers' notions of self, and their ideas about how different selves most appropriately relate to one another through language.

The maverick hed

Gapuners have very strong and very definite notions of self. An essential aspect of the self is referred to by the Tok Pisin word *hed* and in the vernacular by *kɔkir*. Both these words mean, exactly, 'head'. Each individual, the villagers believe, 'has *hed*', which means that each individual has a strong will and sense of personal autonomy.

From the moment of birth, babies in the village are treated as stubborn, big-headed individualists. Pre-verbal infants are frequently shaken lightly by their mothers and chastised playfully that their *heds* are too 'strong' and 'big', and that they 'never listen to talk'. When children begin to make babbling noises and sounds, these are commonly interpreted by caregivers as expressions of anger or dissatisfaction. Thus a baby cooing softly in its mother's lap is likely to suddenly be shaken and asked: '*Ai! Yu belhat long wanem samting? Ah?*' (Ai! What are you mad about? Ah?). Similarly, a child's first word is generally held to be *ɔki* (go + IRREALIS), a vernacular language word meaning, approximately, 'I'm getting out of here'. This word, which adults attribute to infants as young as two months, reflects the village notion that children are born with *hed*, and that they will go where they want and do what they want, regardless of the wishes of anyone else.

In anyone but small children, *hed* is officially condemned. Village rhetoric uses the term *hed* to mean egoism, selfishness and maverick individualism. *Hed* is bad. It is anti-social and stubbornly autonomistic. It is held up in stark contrast to 'development' (*kamap* [literally 'come up']), which is portrayed as a group pursuit: development and change will only occur in Gapun if everyone joins together, becomes truly Christian and makes the village into a *kristen komuniti*. That this has not yet happened is blamed in part on the *heds* of fellow villagers. Other villagers' *hed*, especially the 'big' *heds* of women, is what is preventing the village from 'coming up', everybody agrees. It is the plug blocking the metamorphosis that one day will occur and change their village, their material living conditions and even their physical selves.

But even though the villagers harshly deplore the *heds* of each other in their talk and rhetoric, they spend much of their time defending their own personal autonomy. Furthermore, in a myriad of different ways, from

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their political institutions to their notions of provocation, Gapuners make it clear that a person's *hed* is inviolate in their community.

Like most Papua New Guinea societies, Gapun is acephalous and politically anarchistic. There are 'big men' (*bikpela man*/*munjɛ suman*) in the village, but these are not leaders in the usual sense of the word. Men are 'big' because of their strong personalities, their age and experience, their skills in hunting and oratory (and, traditionally, in warfare) and their ability to maintain a wide range of social relationships. There are no formal or hereditary underpinnings to the big man role, and people listen to these men to the extent that they want to. For their part, big men cannot order anyone to do anything. They can suggest and cajole and harangue, but they cannot command. To do so would be considered to be the grossest provocations, and it would almost certainly result in violence.

This type of relationship permeates the entire society. No relationship, not even that between adult and child, is understood by the villagers to legitimately involve the power to order another person to do something against his or her will. Any attempt to do this is regarded by the villagers as provocation. Provocation (*pusim* [literally 'to push']/*kɔkir ikru* [literally 'to give head']) is considered to be any action by an individual which causes somebody else to feel put out, exploited, insulted, wronged, violated or mistreated. To 'push' somebody, to 'give them head', is to challenge them, and among adults this will almost inevitably result in an argument or a fight, sooner or later.

Villagers' abhorrence of any type of provocation has led them to develop a number of dramatic ways of announcing it and dealing with it. The most common consequence of perceived provocation in Gapun is what the villagers call a *kros*. *Kros*es are public proclamations of conflict in which villagers – especially women – assert themselves and their autonomy by sitting in their houses and shouting through the village that these have been violated in some way. *Kros*es occur almost daily in Gapun, and they are often scathing and bitterly vituperative (see Kulick 1992 for a detailed discussion). Another, even more flamboyant way in which villagers deal with what they consider to be provocation by another person is by ostentatiously destroying their own possessions – their betel palms, their cooking utensils, their hunting spears, even their entire houses – in fits of rage. Whenever this happens, villagers are usually unhesitant in laying the blame for the destruction not on the person who wrought it, but rather on the person or persons seen as having provoked the destruction.

This kind of notion of provocation both reflects and reinforces the villagers' conceptions of themselves and others as fiercely individualistic. Any attempt to influence the behaviour of another person is risky, because that person may react against such an attempt with violence. In

this kind of social climate, almost any kind of social interaction contains the potential for conflict.

One might justifiably wonder at this point how villagers ever actually cooperate and work or live together if everybody is always on guard against violations of their personal autonomy. The answer to that is partly that villagers do not, in fact, work together very often, despite a great deal of talk in the men's house that they should cooperate and work together to repair rotting bridges or clear overgrown footpaths. Also, it is as though the villagers have decided they can live together as long as they can make sure that everyone else is constantly aware of their rights. And so these get proclaimed in a *kros* or through the destruction of one's own possessions whenever a violation of some sort provides the opportunity for self assertion.

The consensual self

Yet another reason why the villagers do not leave the village forever and move away with their families into the jungle, as most of them periodically threaten to do, is the fact that in addition to having *hed*, the self in Gapun is also considered to possess *save* (knowledge; the vernacular equivalent is *numbwan*). In its most basic sense, *save* signifies knowledge: the knowledge of facts and being able to learn from experience and through doing. But it also means more than that. *Save* is knowledge about appropriate behaviour and speech, awareness of social obligations and roles, cognisance of the consequences that one's own or someone else's actions or words can have. *Save* is a metaphor often used in Gapun to mean social sensitivity and solidarity. When the old Kruni Aiarpa in the middle of a tirade about not getting his dinner screams at his ancient wife from his men's house, shouting that she '*nogat save*' (has no knowledge), he means that she is not fulfilling her role as his wife and as a good Christian; he means that she is 'showing *hed*', flaunting her autonomy, being selfish. *Save*, the knowledge that one sometimes must 'suppress *hed*' (*daunim hed*), compromise and fulfil social obligations even if one doesn't want to, is the existential quality which villagers consider most clearly separates adults from children. Adults have, or should have, *save*. Children don't.

Attaining *save*, coming to know, is not something that the villagers think children can be taught. Children can be taught certain things, like the names of objects and of relatives, but *save* itself is not taught: *save*, in the villagers' view, 'breaks open' (*bruk/krarara ɔ-*) inside the child, like an egg. Children begin to show evidence of *save* when they start, at between about twenty to thirty months, to use language by themselves to engage others in verbal interactions. Villagers thus view language used in inter-

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actions with others as both an indication and a result of *save* 'breaking open'. This conceptual tie between verbal interaction and *save* suggests that villagers see language as one of the chief means through which an individual can express his or her social competence.

Talking consensus

In informal interactions, this belief is expressed through the work that villagers do to accommodate others verbally. Speakers are considered to be demonstrating their *save* when they accommodate others in language choice and in the opinions they express, for example.

The most powerful and archetypical expression of the villagers' concern with displaying social awareness and knowledge through speech, however, is the verbal genre of oratory. Oratories are delivered frequently in Gapun. They occur whenever groups of men gather together in the men's house for any specific reason. These gatherings, which nowadays usually concern the need to organise communal labour or large-scale cooperation in preparation for events such as funerary feasts, provide the men with occasion to engage in speeches that downplay tension, smoothe over disagreement, emphasise consensus and, in doing so, create contexts in which they and others may publicly demonstrate their *save*.

However, as is commonly the case in Melanesian societies (Lederman 1984; Brison 1989; Lindstrom 1990; McKellin 1990), any consensus reached as a result of oratory is essentially only cosmetic. Villagers know this, since they have all at one time or another found it expedient to express agreement with opinions that have been completely antithetical to their own. The prominence in village life of oratory and the values associated with it indicates, though, that village men ascribe importance to the appearance of consensus even when it does not necessarily mean anything in practical terms. The villagers, to put it another way, like to agree, even when they disagree.

One consequence of the strong link between oratory and consensus is that talk during formal village meetings is expected to be and is interpreted as being consensus oriented. Unlike the *kros*, which overtly announces conflict, open disagreement is not possible within the framework of oratorical speech. The only way of truly disagreeing in a social situation dominated by oratory is to say nothing at all. Meetings such as the yearly parent-teacher meeting in the nearby village of Wongan, which are always pockmarked with long silences on the part of the villagers and by anxious urgings of one or two men to '*Toktok! Toktok!*' (Talk! Talk!) are meetings in which most of the participants are very much opposed to the general direction that the talk is taking.

Another result of the villagers' stress on consensus in oratory is that the

particular facts under discussion and the specific points made by speakers in their speeches are not as important as the creation of a general feeling of agreement. One way in which agreement – or, at least, the absence of open disagreement – is achieved in village oratories is by structuring talk so that the speaker both expresses and simultaneously dissociates himself from controversial statements. This strategy of rhetorical dissociation has strongly influenced the villagers' literacy patterns. In order to see clearly how this is so, we can begin by briefly examining a short extract from the beginning of a forty minute long speech by Kem, a forty-five year old man who is one of the most skilful orators in the village.

Kem's speech was delivered near the end of a meeting held in the men's house to discuss the status of the village's *yut grup* (youth group). *Yut* is a government-instituted village work force to which, despite its name, all villagers ideally belong. *Yut* is supposed to provide an organisational basis for the villagers to cooperate in performing communal labour such as repairing broken bridges and cutting grass along footpaths. It is also intended to serve as a labour pool which enterprising villagers with coffee crops or coconut trees can hire to harvest crops or collect and prepare coconuts for drying into copra. In Gapun, the village *yut* group had been inactive for quite a while, due to conflicts among villagers. It is this situation which Kem begins his speech by addressing:

Yes thank you
And
I'm going to tell you all a little talk.
Sorry true, it's not a big talk.

Talk/Your work is good.
Good now,
there aren't any complaints.
The work you're doing now is good.
The way of *yut*, you've understood it.

And
A little problem arose
Last month.
This little problem is here
I haven't straightened it out.

And
Maybe that's why there are a few complaints around.

And
So I'm saying this:
A sickness has got [my] wife

20 And
So I'm still getting ready.
I don't know what time what day I'll be able look
after this problem from earlier . . .[5]

Kem's speech is typical of the majority of oratories that get produced in the men's house. Several specific characteristics of his speech are especially relevant here.

First, there is the formal structure of the talk. Kem begins with the formulaic marker '*yes*'. *Yes*, *plis* (please) and *tenk yu* (thank you) are oral markers of formality that men habitually use to begin their speeches. They are usually followed by phrases announcing that the speaker has 'a little talk' or 'a little worry' to deliver to his audience. These opening phrases are discourse framing devices which function partly to mark what follows as a formal speech and partly to announce the speaker's intention to assume the floor. Notice also the use Kem makes of the conjunction 'And' (Tok Pisin *Na*). In oratorical speech, this conjunction is used to maintain the floor and to structure information into bounded units. Kem uses 'And' as a means of segmenting his talk and as a way of signalling the introduction of new information.

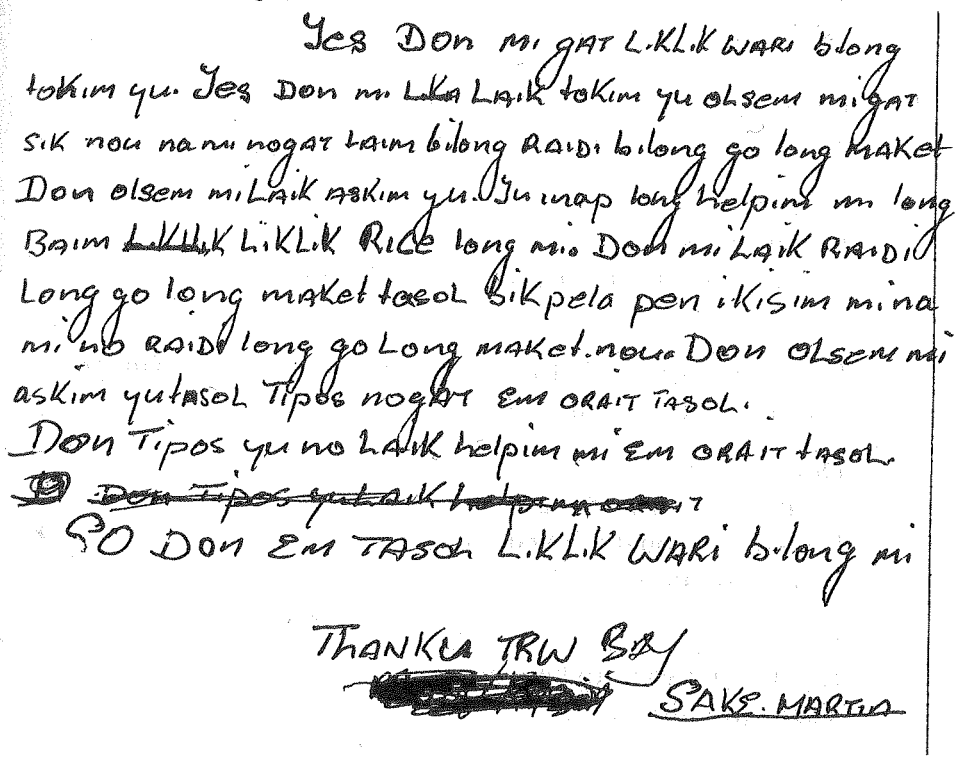
The second important feature of Kem's speech is his use of indirection and reneging to dissociate himself from the talk he is producing. After announcing his intention to make a speech, Kem hurries to stress that the work of the village's youth group is 'good', and that 'there aren't any complaints'. Once he has established this, Kem then goes on to reveal that there are, in fact, 'a few complaints' about the youth group after all. Kem uses extreme indirection here, and he is careful not to assign blame to anyone but himself. Furthermore, he doesn't criticise. Nothing in Kem's speech could possibly be interpreted by any villager as aggressive or 'pushy'. By first saying there are no complaints and by then leaving unstated who has the complaints, Kem is indicating that he is not accusing anyone of being anti-social and harbouring complaints; he is merely noting the fact that complaints 'are around'. Such a discursive strategy conveys the impression that the speaker's words have been generated from a source outside the speaker and that the speaker is merely reporting something.

This dissociative strategy is tied to the third relevant aspect of Kem's talk. Throughout this entire stretch of speech, Kem displays a guise of self-effacement. He consistently tones down his status and role as a big man. The speech is delivered in a placating tone which suggest 'I really have nothing to say and perhaps shouldn't be wasting your time talking at all'. His consistent use of diminutives emphasises this: he explains that his talk is not 'a big talk'; he speaks of a 'little problem' and 'a few complaints'.

Kem's self-effacement is purposeful. One of the things that he is doing with his talk is reaffirming his intention to sponsor a large conciliatory feast to compensate another village man, who had been injured in a fight which had been started by Kem's twenty-year-old daughter. Kem chose this context to mention his plans because that fight had at the time generated other fights, one of which constituted the reason why villagers no longer would cooperate in the youth group. In reaffirming his intention to go through with the conciliatory feast, Kem is requesting help. To perform the feast, various people on Kem's 'side' (that is, his kin group and the matrilineal clan of his daughter) must help him by contributing prestige food like white rice and sugar, and garden produce like bananas and yams to the prestation of food that will be delivered to the injured man. Kem cannot and should not amass all of this by himself. Here he is indicating that others should begin collecting money and thinking about the state of their gardens so that they will be able to assist him in carrying out the conciliatory feast.

This dimension of Kem's talk is what the villagers call 'hidden' (*i hait/ambugar*). Kem supplies no explicit information regarding his intention to sponsor the feast (except to say, obliquely, 'I'm still getting ready' [he doesn't say for what]: line 21), he gives no background information, and his referents are left unspecified (he mentions only 'this little [unnamed] problem': line 13). In order to grasp the meaning 'underneath' Kem's words, his listeners must be intimately acquainted with village affairs, and they must connect their knowledge of those affairs to Kem's one brief clue: his sudden mention of his wife's illness. By introducing the notion of sickness, of inability, into his talk, Kem blithely alerts the villagers that he is in fact unable to carry out all the preparations for the feast by himself, and that those listening should begin thinking about helping him. This is as close as Kem comes to a direct request for help. It was effective, however, because shortly after this talk, several of Kem's relatives did indeed begin making small preparations for the conciliatory feast.

The most important thing to keep in mind about Kem's speech is that the way in which he uses language to present himself and his situation is in keeping with the villagers' ideas about the expression of social sensitivity and of not 'giving *hed*'. By portraying himself as a poor man with a sick wife, Kem lays the foundation for a reaction based on sympathy. The response from Kem's listeners will not arise out of any sense of threat or force. Instead, it will be generated from within themselves. The people listening to this speech will feel moved to help him out of their own sense of social solidarity and goodwill. By correctly interpreting the hidden message in Kem's talk and by coming to his assistance, the


Dear Don

Yes Don mi GAT L.KL.K WARI blong tokim yu. Yes Don mi LKa LaiK tokim yu olsem mi GAT SIK nou na mi nogat taim bilong RAIDi bilong go long MAKet Don olsem mi LaiK askim yu. Yu inap long helpim mi long Baim LKLK LiKLiK RiCE long mi. Don mi LaiK RAIDi Long go long maket tasol SikpeLa pen iKisim mina mi inb RAIDi long go Long maket. nou. Don olsem mi askim yu tasol Tipos nogat Em ORAIT TASOL.

Don Tipos yu no LaiK helpim mi Em ORAIT tasol.

~~Don Tipos yu laiK helpim mi?~~

SO Don Em TASOL L.KL.K WARI blong mi

THANKIU TRU BOY

[redacted] SAKE. MARTIN

Figure 1.3 Letter to Kulick from Allan Kasia and Sake Martin.

listeners of this speech can seize the opportunity provided by Kem to display their *save*.

From talk to text

We have dwelled on these characteristics of Kem's oratory because this particular way of using words has been carried over to the villagers' notes to one another. Notes in Gapun are oratories compressed and written down. This is exemplified by a note sent to Kulick by a village couple in their thirties. The note was delivered about a week before Kem's large conciliatory feast (the one he alludes to in his speech above) was due to be held.

Dear Don

Yes Don
I have a little worry to tell you.

Yes Don
I want to tell you that I'm sick
And
I don't have time to get ready to go to the market
[to sell produce in order to earn some money].

So Don
I want to ask you.
Can you help me to buy a little rice for me.

Don
I wanted to get ready to go to the market but a big pain got me
so I didn't go to the market.

Don
It's like, I'm just asking you.
If no [i.e. if you don't want to]
That's just alright.

Don
If you don't want to help me,
That's just alright.

Don [crossed out]
If you want to help, alright . . . [crossed out]

So Don
that's it, my little worry.

Thank You Truly
By
Allan Kasia [crossed out]
Sake Martin[6]

The parallels with Kem's speech in the men's house should be fairly clear. The note begins with the formulaic opening phrase that villagers with some schooling have learned to use in letters: '*Dear*'. But directly after that comes a new opening, this time the oral marker of formal speech '*Yes*'. This is followed by the formulaic 'I have a little worry [to tell you]'. Just as orators use these phrases to assume the floor and announce their intention to deliver a formal speech, so are they used in the villagers' writing. Kulick here is not being written to so much as orated at. Note

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also the frequent use of the name 'Don'. This would appear to serve the same segmenting function as 'And' in Kem's speech.

In a way markedly similar to Kem, the authors of this note first make a statement – in this case a request – only to then dissociate themselves from that statement/request and diminish its implications by in effect apologising for having made it at all. Like Kem, who spends a great deal of verbiage establishing that the villagers' work 'is good' when what he is really addressing in his talk is the fact that the 'work' has broken down completely, Sake and Allan spend more words in their note telling the recipient that he doesn't have to 'help' them than persuading him that he should help them. Like Kem's words, the overall effect of this kind of discourse is that it makes it difficult to accuse Sake and Allan of being assuming, presumptuous or pushy.

Even though this note is more direct in making a request than is Kem's speech, it still contains a great deal of indirection, and no background or contextual information is explicitly given. But in order to be able to respond to the note in an appropriate manner, the recipient must be familiar with village affairs. The note assumes that Kulick not only is aware of the impending conciliatory feast, but that he also knows how much rice Sake and Allan are expected to provide. In this case, the request for 'a little rice' is a somewhat forced diminutive, since both the sender and the receiver of the message know that for Sake and Allan to adequately fulfil their social responsibilities during the feast, at least twenty-five kilos of rice is required. Furthermore, the reader of this note is expected to be able to get 'behind' the words and understand that Sake and Allan are not requesting a contribution to help them buy rice – as they explicitly state. What they want and expect is for Kulick to buy the entire twenty-five kilos of rice for them.

The final point of similarity between Kem's talk in the men's house and this note is the amount of work done on self-effacement and the creation of a context in which the listener/recipient can demonstrate his *save*. As in Kem's talk, this is built up partly through the use of diminutives ('a little worry'; 'a little rice') and partly by the introduction of the notion of sickness, of inability. Again, the authors of the note are seeking to avoid, just as Kem did in his talk, giving the impression of forcefulness and insistence. They are not really making a request, it is implied, they are merely bringing some compelling facts about sickness to the attention of the recipient of the note, leaving him to act on those facts. How he reacts is up to him. He can respond on the basis of his *save* and display social solidarity with the afflicted person, or he may not. In any case, the decision is his. He cannot claim at some point to have been 'pushed' into doing something he didn't want to do.

Writing consensus

Just as their ideas about their place in the world in relation to God, white people and the Cargo have influenced the villagers' perceptions and uses of literacy, so have their understandings about themselves as persons played an important role in shaping how they have incorporated literacy skills into village life. Villagers' notions about the self as stubbornly autonomous and vitriolic contribute to the formation of a general social climate in which almost any type of interpersonal interaction is potentially fraught with conflict. This is especially the case with requests, since by asking another person to do something, one comes perilously close to confronting him or her – the boundary between a request and an order is as narrow as the listener's interpretation.

To lessen this potential for conflict, Gapuners have developed particular ways of making requests, involving conventions of indirection and dissociation, which greatly reduce the chance of their being interpreted as infringements or demands. Writing has presented the villagers with another powerful means of distancing themselves from their words when making requests. In notes like the one sent by Sake and Allan, the symbolic distance between a speaker and his words is multiply underscored: not only is the message delivered by a third party, but the words themselves have been fixed on paper and have physically travelled through space away from the speaker/writer. Gapuners have thus seized upon a particular dimension of writing – its potential for spatial extension – and they have elaborated that dimension in the context of their relationships to one another. Requests made in notes spare both writers and recipients the shame and embarrassment and potential for direct conflict that arise when a request is made in person. Also even the rhetorical dissociative force of direct speech is retained in most cases, because notes are structured as spoken requests embedded in discursive strategies which involve indirection and reneging.[7] In these senses, it can be said that the very structure of the villagers' writing has been shaped by local ideas concerning *save* and appropriate ways of handling social relationships.

Contextualised talk, hidden talk, and literacy

But the fact that language is so tightly linked with the expression of *save*,[8] of social sensitivity and cognisance, in Gapun has consequences beyond the structure and delivery of village notes. Because the main emphasis on speech in the community is on the expression of consensus and agreement, the point of talk becomes not so much to debate facts and express thoughts as it is to elaborate and manipulate social relationships. Kem's oratory in the previous section illustrates this. An important aspect of this

speech is that it is not concerned with establishing or elaborating factual matters. Kem says nothing in his talk not already well known to each of his listeners: everybody knows that the village youth group has not performed any work for months and everybody knows why, the reason for the breakup being that the man who was president of the youth group had chased several other villagers brandishing an axe during a major fight in the village. The problem was that an impasse had been reached. Villagers would not work as part of the youth group if the president did not first compensate them for having swung an axe at them. The president, however, was a young man who clearly had no intention of doing this.

What Kem does in his oratory is attempt, in effect, to rework the factual situation at hand and lay the way open for a new interpretation of the problem. Even though Kem's role in the conflict which has resulted in the villagers refusing to work together in the youth group was extremely peripheral, he invites villagers in his speech to realign their understanding of the conflict so that he, and not the president of the youth group, becomes the focus of attention. One advantage of such a realignment is that Kem fully intends to organise (and later did organise) a conciliatory feast in order to straighten the 'problem from earlier' (that is, the fight started by his daughter, which indirectly led to the axe-swinging incident) that he refers to. The villagers, if they accept this new interpretation of who has responsibility for compensating them, will eventually receive compensation, even if it isn't from the youth group president.

This dimension of Kem's use of language reflects the fact that talk in Gapun is to a great extent concerned with establishing an intersubjectively constructed framework within which meaning can be publicly negotiated. Villagers are not really interested in the pure referential and propositional characteristics of language. They do not argue academic points nor do they dispute the absolute correctness of facts. Instead, the presentation and evaluation of utterances and actions as good or bad, true or false, and wrong or right varies with the social contexts in which they are presented and were performed. In order to be able to make such evaluations, all actions and utterances are embedded by the villagers in the context of their ongoing social relationships. Gapuners do not own radios, read newspapers or have access to other depersonalised sources of information, and so whatever they know about other people and other places, they know through their own experience or through the stories of others. In this way, knowledge about anything is ultimately anchored in the talkers and in the social contexts in and about which they speak. There is no notion of decontextualised or objective knowledge in the village. And consequently, as in the case of the fight referred to by Kem in his speech, the actual factual basis of an issue or a conflict can unproble-

matically be disregarded and reworked through language to better fit with current social realities (see Read 1955, articles in Watson-Gegeo and White 1990).

As far as literacy is concerned, this emphasis on contextualisation has the consequence that all written material must also become embedded through language into village relationships. In practice, this means that written messages are always accompanied by oral elaboration. Villagers reject messages sent without messengers. In one of the few cases in which this occurred during 1986–7, it involved a note sent to the villagers from the prayer leader in Bien, a village about four hours away by motor-powered canoe from Gapun. This prayer leader wrote the note asking the villagers to contribute fifty Kina to the building of a trade store in Bien whose profits would go to the local church. The letter had been given to a village man passing through Bien, and he had no clear idea of its contents.

The letter was read aloud by Gapun's prayer leader during a meeting in the men's house and was dismissed out of hand. 'If he comes and tells me, if I see his face, then I'll consider', announced one man, referring to the writer of the note. Others waved away the letter saying, 'I have some questions to ask him that he has to answer first'. So in practice, a written message without oral accompaniment is disregarded. Never do the villagers answer a *pas* (written note) with another *pas*. If they wonder about the message contained in a *pas* or have questions, they let the matter drop until it is either forgotten or somebody comes to talk to them.

The oral contextualisation of written material is a necessary component of virtually every literacy event in the village. Notes from other villagers are read aloud and explained by the messenger bearing the note, telling the time has no meaning other than self-display, lists are made not for practical use but to be announced, written-down facts have no significance unless they are orally proclaimed.

A further consequence of the fact that language is continually contextualised in village social relationships is that words, what one actually says, are considered to indicate a sensitivity (*save*) as to what one *should* say in a given context, rather than what one might like to say. That is, what one says is generally interpreted as a willingness to show *save* and be agreeable. Words are not regarded, in themselves, as revealing a speaker's intentions or inner states. To discover these things, villagers direct their attention to what might lie beyond the words themselves. They try to 'get behind' a person's words. What the speaker really thinks is thought to be 'underneath' his/her words or 'inside' them. Language is said to have 'little little corners' which a listener must manoeuvre around in order to discover the meaning of an utterance.

Meaning in Gapun is in this way the responsibility of the listener or the recipient of speech. In this sense, village communicative expectations

differ importantly from those common to middle-class Euro-Americans, among whom the burden of successful communication is seen to lie with the speaker, who is expected to strain to 'get across' his or her viewpoints and thoughts to the listener.[9] While speakers in Gapun hasten to accommodate listeners in terms of language choice, opinions and topic, considerations about *save* place them under no burden to make themselves clear or facilitate listener comprehension of what they say, and ideas about provocation make it advantageous for speakers to formulate themselves as vaguely as possible.

Such an understanding of communication as something the listener or recipient must sort out and make sense of has important consequences for the way in which literacy is perceived and used. In Gapun, it has given rise to what might be called the *truth-seeking* function of literacy. We noted above that the villagers, despite their acquisition of literate skills and their application of those skills in Christian contexts, still have failed to bring forth the Cargo they expected to get through the precise manipulation of the Word. In such a context, the cultural emphasis placed on the role of the listener/receiver and of the 'hidden' meanings in words provides explanations. There is a widespread assumption among the villagers that the 'true meaning' of religious texts is escaping them, because they lack the necessary background and contextual information to perceive all the 'little little meanings' contained in the words they read. Those who possess this knowledge, the Catholic priests and certain members of the government, are 'hiding' this necessary information from them, because for a variety of reasons they do not want Papua New Guineans to obtain white skin and the Cargo. Thus, all the villagers can hope to do is read and reread the texts they possess, as several village men spend a considerable amount of time doing, hoping that someday they may stumble onto a clue that will reveal to them the 'true' meaning of the words contained in their books.[10]

Conclusion

What we hope we have shown throughout this analysis is that the villagers of Gapun, with a characteristic Melanesian eye for the novel and the useful, have been active and creative in their encounter with literacy. The matter has not so much been one of literacy 'taking hold' of Gapun, as it has been of Gapuners seizing hold of those dimensions of literacy for which they consider they have the most use. Throughout this process, the wishes and goals concerning literacy of the Church and the school have remained largely peripheral. The villagers of Gapun have their own ideas about reading and writing, generated from their own cultural concerns. It has been and continues to be these ideas, and not externally generated and culturally foreign ones which they apply to the written word in the village.

The villagers have not been 'transformed' by literacy. If anything, they themselves have 'transformed' it.

In demonstrating that point, we have been addressing ourselves to several related issues at once. First of all we have been concerned that the data presented here should have relevance for the controversy about literacy currently taking place in that part of the world from which the data were gathered, namely the Pacific. It seems to us that in this debate, neither the position of the SIL missionary linguists nor that of scholars like Peter Mühlhäusler is totally valid, because the discussion is being carried on with too little awareness of how Melanesians and Pacific islanders actually think about literacy and how they apply their literacy skills in their day to day lives. Lack of this kind of fundamental knowledge leads both positions to downplay the creativity and cultural concerns of those people being taught to read and write in this area. More research on this topic is sorely needed.

Secondly, the analysis presented here is addressing this specific lacuna in our knowledge about literacy. In a recent paper on the introduction of literacy among the Diyari of Australia, Charles Ferguson pointed out that 'although many of the recent literacy studies are ethnographic in perspective ... we still have very few descriptive studies of the introduction of literacy into particular non-literate societies' (1987: 223). We hope that this account of literacy patterns in Gapun will help to fill that gap, and will contribute to a broader understanding of the kinds of processes that are involved when a non-literate society begins to incorporate literacy skills into its communicative repertoire.

Finally, we see our discussion as fitting into the broader and increasingly more nuanced way of looking at literacy that has been emerging in recent years in the ethnographic work of scholars like Heath (1982, 1983), Scollon and Scollon (1981), Street (1984) and Duranti and Ochs (1986). Thanks to studies like these, we are beginning to fully appreciate and explore the implications of the fact that literacy, like other technologies, is culturally shaped. It is our hope that this study of the way in which villagers in a small village in Papua New Guinea have shaped their literacy will contribute, together with the ideas expressed in works like those just cited, to a more pronounced shift of emphasis away from a view of people as being passively transformed by literacy to an understanding and analysis of the active and creative role which people play in the cultural construction of literacy.

Notes

Fieldwork in Gapun was carried out for fifteen months during 1986–87 by the first author and for three months during the same period by the second author. We are deeply indebted in the villagers of Gapun for teaching us and allowing us to

become part of their lives. We also gratefully acknowledge funding from the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries (SAREC) and the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSFR). This paper has benefited greatly from comments on earlier drafts by Tomas Gerholm, Shirley Brice Heath, Kenneth Hyltenstam and Eija Kuyumcy, and from editorial suggestions by Brian Street.

1 Even before it was published, the main points of Mühlhäusler's (1990) paper had been disseminated and debated among SIL workers through the periodical *Intercom* (October 1986–March 1987 issues). Aspects of the relationship between the SIL and literacy in Papua New Guinea have also been discussed by Mühlhäusler 1989, Gilliam 1984 and Lynch 1979.

2 Apparently government policy has changed somewhat on this point since fieldwork was conducted, and since 1989 the official policy seems to be one of encouraging, at least, vernacular pre-school, followed by 'bridging classes' for grade one (Renck 1990: vii). Because this policy assumes the existence of vernacular-speaking teachers, it is irrelevant for Gapun, where no such teachers exist. The only consequence it could have is the increased use of Tok Pisin in the primary school that village children attend, although even this seems doubtful, since the policy seems aimed at encouraging vernacular languages, not Tok Pisin.

3 See Meggitt's 1968 discussion of the uses of literacy among the Mae Enga of Papua New Guinea.

4 Related to this is the belief that villagers have about schooling after death. A number of people explained in several different contexts that after villagers die, they first of all 'change skin' (*sensim skin*) and become white. Thereafter they materialise in Rome, where they spend their days *going to school*. Once they have *kisim save* (received/comprehended knowledge), they then go on to Heaven, where they are united with their relatives and ancestors. For a more detailed description of the villagers' ideas about school, see Kulick 1992. See also Swatridge 1985.

5 Underlined utterances were spoken in the village vernacular, Taiap. Nonunderlined utterances were spoken in Tok Pisin. For an analysis of the villagers' code-switching patterns, see Kulick and Stroud 1990b, Stroud 1992.

6 This note was written by Sake's husband Allan (Sake herself is virtually illiterate). Allan crossed out his name at the end of the note, however, in what clearly is an attempt to emphasise that Sake is the one most affected by Kulick's decision about whether or not to 'help' the couple buy the rice. In order to fully understand this gesture, it is necessary to know that Sake and Allan were Kulick's adoptive mother and father in Gapun, and they helped him and looked after him in innumerable ways. By presenting Sake as the recipient of the rice (and as the one who will be shamed should she not produce any rice during the conciliatory feast), the couple is subtly reminding Kulick of the responsibilities and feelings of helpfulness and sympathy that one should properly have towards one's mother.

7 Messages delivered on behalf of others by children or others never contain this element of rhetoric, but are usually short and formulaic, consisting of the single phrase: '*X tok long Y*' ('X wants [literally, speaks of] Y').

8 Even *kros*es (pp. 43–4) are in a significant sense ways of displaying one's *save*, even though on the surface they appear to be inflammatory and socially disruptive. Actually *kros*es are attempts at re-establishing a public consensus, since after the protagonists have satisfied their desire to publicly abuse and accuse, the matter is considered settled, or will result in some sort of settlement being arranged. It is considered far more dangerous when a person who feels wronged or offended does not 'talk out', because then the grievance will *stap sting long bel* (remain and rot in the stomach – the seat of one's emotions) and *givim tingting nogut* (give bad – that is anti-social – thoughts) to the offended person. 'Bad thoughts' are associated with dark powers outside the control of the villagers. In the case of big men, such thoughts may cause their ancestors or *tambaran* to 'give pain' to the offender or one of his or her matrilineal relatives. In other cases, 'bad thoughts' may drive a person to seek out the services of a sorcerer to kill the offender.

9 Reddy 1979 discusses in detail some of the implications of this Euro-American view of communication. For analyses of the consequences that a listener-centered view of communication has among various groups, see Clancy 1986 and Brett-Smith 1984.

10 The observation should be considered in light of Mühlhäusler's recent contention that in Papua New Guinea 'printed messages are regarded as inherently true by the first few generations of literates' (1990: 203). On the basis of our understandings of literacy in Gapun, we would dispute such a general claim. It appears that Gapun villagers do not regard written texts as any more 'inherently true' than people's words. Like spoken words, printed messages may not be 'straight'. A text may contain 'little little corners' and it may enclose its meaning in boxes, just like talk does. There are certainly truths to be found in a printed text, and this is what villagers spend time looking for. But the search for truth in texts does not differ in any substantial way from the way in which the villagers extract truths from 'inside' or 'behind' spoken words.

This whole matter of truth becomes even more subtle and contorted if recent anthropological discussions on the nature of truth and deception in Melanesian societies are considered. In light of these discussions, the question becomes whether anything at all in a large number of Melanesian societies can be said to be believed to be 'inherently true'. We find it significant, for example, that a central tenet of the ritual activities of a great many Melanesian groups appears to turn on what Barth (1987: 70) calls 'the meta-premise ... that things are not what they appear on the surface' (cf. Strathern 1987, 1988; Tuzin 1980). It seems clear to us that such a 'meta-premise' is not confined to the goings-on in the men's house, but is also involved in the Gapun villagers' view of language as 'hiding' a variety of different meanings.

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