Culture

The world's writing Systems. Edited by Peter T. Daniels and William Bright. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. xlv + 920 pp. 222 $ CAN

Kevin Tuite

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In this case the formation of a common Sikh ethnic and religious identity was facilitated by communications technology in reaching the rural masses. To his credit Oberoi weaves the ideas of Canadian thinkers such as Harold Adams Innis (implicitly) and Marshall McLuhan (explicitly) in explaining how print culture played a role in the creation of monopolies of knowledge and formulation of a Sikh identity. The injection of Canadian flavour adds to the analysis and enhances understanding of the complex set of factors contributing to the formation of Sikh identity. It also demonstrates shared experiences of Empire between the South and the North — a connection worthy of study but rarely explored by scholars in both hemispheres.

A question that lurks in the shadows while reading The Construction of Religious Boundaries is: if the construction of a single Sikh religious identity in the form of the Tat Khalsa in the late nineteenth century is reductive and void of the rich Sikh tradition, what is a valid representation of identity? How does one judge a valid from an invalid representation? Dialogue on identity is generally limited to the educated elite. To what degree are democratic principles applicable to the formation of a common identity? These questions are not only pertinent to the Sikhs, but to other communities who are undergoing the convulsions of self-representation such as Native peoples, the French in Canada, former African and Asian colonies, Muslim countries and the newly independent states of Eastern Europe. Oberoi's The Construction of Religious Boundaries, while not answering these questions, is informative and germane.

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By Kevin Tuite,

Université de Montréal

Long confined to the margins of linguistics and anthropology, the study of writing has drawn the attention of a considerable number of scholars in the past three decades. After over twenty years of solitude, I. J. Gelb's ground-breaking 1952 monograph now has plenty of company on the library shelves: dozens of books offer theories on the origins of writing, its history and "evolution" (with the alphabet, of course, as its glorious endpoint), and its impact on cognition, culture and society. The book under review [henceforth WWS], is, however, primarily a reference work, intended to complement, rather than supplant, most of its thinner shelf-mates. Let me say at the outset that I recommend WWS very highly, and consider it a must-have for any secondary-school and university library. It is to be hoped that a more affordable paperback version will bring this valuable resource within the reach of individual buyers.

1. STRUCTURE

The two editors, Peter T. Daniels [PTD] and William Bright [WB], assisted by over six dozen contributors, present all of the principal and most of the minor scripts known to humankind. The individual articles, over a hundred of them, are grouped into thirteen Parts (I. Grammatology. II. Ancient Near Eastern Writing Systems. III. Decipherment. IV. East Asian Writing Systems. V. European Writing Systems. VI. South Asian Writing Systems. VII. Southeast Asian Writing Systems. VIII. Middle Eastern Writing Systems. IX. Scripts Invented in Modern Times X. Use and Adaptation of Scripts. XI. Sociolinguistics and Scripts. XII. Secondary Notation Systems. XIII. Imprinting and Printing). PTD, a specialist on the history and typology of Near Eastern writing systems, contributed Parts I and XIII in their entirety, as well as the introductions to most of the intervening parts and a useful sketch on the methodology of decipherment. In terms of page length WB's contribution is far less extensive, consisting of two entries on South Asian scripts and the introduction to Part XI. Simple division shows that the mean length of each contribution is slightly over nine pages, but the space is efficiently utilized. The typical entry comprises a brief account of the history and origins of the script, the uses to which it was put, and the nature of the writing system. Character lists are given for nearly all of the alphabets and syllabaries, and tables of selected signs, sometimes running to several dozens, for those writing systems employing logograms, characters which denote the meaning, rather than the pronunciation, of a word. Each entry is followed by a bibliography, usually fairly extensive and up-to-date. One especially attractive feature of WWS is the inclusion of sample texts, accompanied by not one, but at least four, parallel representations: the text in its original script, a transliteration of the latter, a phonetic transcription (often surprisingly different from the transliteration), a morphemic gloss, and a free translation into English. (The hundred or so type faces used in the book, incidentally, are of uniformly high quality, with regards to both legibility and aesthetics. Much of the credit, as the editors point out,

goes to the versatile font designer and linguist Lloyd B. Anderson, who designed laser-printer character sets for such exotic scripts as Irish Ogham, Orkhon runes, and the Hanunóo syllabary). The list of contributors is impressive, including many who are at the forefront of the study of their respective languages and scripts. To name just a few: Asko Parpola on the Indus script (which he believes was used to write a Dravidian language), Damian McManus on Ogham, Norman Zide on the Munda scripts, Larissa Bonfante on the alphabets of ancient Italy, and Bernard Comrie on scripts and script reform in the former USSR. In addition to the philologists, linguists and Orientalists one would expect in a collection of this type, a self-described "scribe", Stan Knight, has contributed an insightful calligrapher's eye (or hand?) view of the history of the Roman script in Western Europe. The articles are well-written, and in general maintain a high level of scholarly precision without becoming intimidating or tedious. The tight length restrictions keep the work almost entirely free from polemic; indeed, most authors make a point of at least mentioning — and including in their bibliographies — works presenting alternate views. I believe that WWS will prove to be not only a highly useful reference book, but a delight for browsers as well.

2. CLASSIFICATION AND TERMINOLOGY

In addition to inventorying, illustrating and describing most of the known writing systems, the editors, in particular PTD, offer a typology and terminology for classifying them. First of all, there is writing itself, defined by PTD as "a system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such a way that it can be recovered more or less exactly without the intervention of the utterer" (p. 3). To describe the various ways in which this transformation is effected, PTD and WB employ, besides the traditional terms *alphabet* and *syllabary*, the compound terms *logosyllabary* (a script like Chinese or Sumerian, the characters of which represent either words or syllables) and *logoconsonantary* (a rarer script type, of which Egytian hieroglyphs are the best known example, in which certain logograms represent consonants). These terms are employed not only for precision's sake, but to combat the still widespread impression that certain writing systems employing logograms are fundamentally "pictographic" or "logographic", that is, make exclusive use of characters which represent meanings rather than sounds. As PTD states at the very outset, "purely logographic writing is not possible: for a script to adequately represent a language, it must not only repre-

sent its words, but also be able to represent names and foreign words" (p. 4). These latter require some kind of phonetic representation; all scripts with logograms make use of some of them to represent sound groups — most commonly syllables — according to the "rebus principle". (If, say, English were to be written with a Chinese-type script, chances are an iconic character meaning 'rock' would also be employed for the initial syllables of "Rockefeller" and "Rachmaninoff"). The WWS typology of writing systems is filled out by two exotic-sounding terms appropriated by PTD from Near Eastern writing traditions: abjad, a script that represents only consonants (named after the initial letters of the Arabic script), and abugida, an Ethiopic word applied to writing systems whose basic characters denote a consonant followed by a basic vowel (usually [a]), with other vowels being marked by modifications or appendages to the character. (Most of the scripts of India are abugidas). These are useful items to have in one's conceptual toolbox, and certainly more pleasant to the tongue and ear than logoconsonantary.

3. HISTORICAL ISSUES

Although encyclopedic in scope, WWS is structured along historical and geographic principles. Parts II through X follow the various script families through their temporal and regional mutations up to the present day. It should be noted that PTD (p. 2) allows for at least three (Sumeria, China and Mesoamerica), but probably no more than seven, independent origins of writing (contrast this, for example, to J. Marcus' recent estimate of more than ten [1996: 1388]). This sets the tone for the rest of the book. One has the impression, in fact, of a tacit consensus on the part of the contributors to WWS to take diffusion — of at least the notion of writing, if not of the scripts themselves — as the null hypothesis. So, for example, both Egyptian hieroglyphic writing and the Indus Valley script are said to have originated as a result of "stimulus diffusion" through trade with literate Mesopotamians (Robert Ritner, p. 73; Parpola, p. 165). Chinese writing likewise is said to have stimulated the creation of several so-called "Siniform" scripts in Inner Asia (E. I. Kychanov, p. 228; Dingxu Shi, p. 239).

WWS concludes with three chapters given over to what are evidently seen as more peripheral matters. Part XI "Sociolinguistics and Scripts" is a mere 22 pages long, and consists of a much-too-brief introduction by WB, followed by four-page sketches on script and politics in Germany, the psycholinguistics of 'biscriptalism' in the former Yugoslavia, the impact of printing on the profusion of scripts in South Asia, the

design of writing systems by Christian missionaries, and on script reform in and after the Soviet Union. The concluding Part XIII is a charmingly-written reflection by PTD on the back-and-forth swing between analog and digital mechanization of writing. In between these sections is a rather uneven collection of pieces on "secondary notation systems", including numerical notation, shorthand, phonetic transcription and systems for notating music (Western classical only) and bodily movement (dance and gesture). With the exception of phonetic notation, these systems are clearly outside of the definition of writing given above, either because they are essentially variants of a primary writing system (shorthand), or because what they are used to transcribe is not an utterance. I would like to take this opportunity to mention a representational system which likewise falls outside of PTD and WB's definition of writing, but whose remarkable features merit the attention of those interested in the nature and origins of writing. In several Aboriginal communities of north-central Australia, including the Warlpiri and Warumungu peoples, women are expected to refrain from the use of oral language for up to two years after the death of a close relative. In order to communicate during the period of mourning, Warlpiri and Warumungu women resort to an elaborate gestural code. According to Adam Kendon's [1988] detailed description and analysis of the North Central Desert sign languages [NCDSL], these systems differ in interesting ways from the more familiar manual communication systems. Unlike ASL and similarly-structured languages used by Deaf communities, NCDSL is not a language unto itself, but rather a means of gesturally encoding the oral language of the community. On the other hand, NCDSL is not what Kendon terms a 'second order language code' — such as finger-spelling or Morse code — which serves to represent a first order code (i.e. writing) in a different modality [1988: 430]. In all important respects, save one, NCDSL resembles a logosyllabic system like Sumerian or Chinese in its early stages of evolution [Kendon 1988: 435-438]. The gestural symbols of Warlpiri and Warumungu sign language represent individual words or morphemes — including many inflectional suffixes — of spoken Warlpiri and Warumungu, and the sequence of sign presentation follows the morphological and syntactic rules of the oral languages (these being agglutinative suffixing languages with fairly free word order [Kendon 1988: 227-229, 436]). Many signs have a secondary phonetic function: English loanwords and proper names, for which no gestural logogram exists, are represented by near-homophonous symbols, following the rebus principle mentioned earlier. For example, the Warlpiri sign for /jija/ 'shoulder', made

by touching the shoulder with the middle finger, is also used for the homophonous loanword /jija/ < English '[medical] sister'. The sign for /winpiri/ 'spearwood tree' is also used for /wina/ 'winner', /wiki/ 'week' and the proper name 'Winnie', all of which share the same initial syllable [Kendon 1988: 195]. In a discussion of the origins of writing, PTD observes that "the three known cases of independent script invention — for Sumerian, for Chinese, and for Mayan — resulted in logosyllabaries" (p. 585). So has NCDSL. It is also not a coincidence that in all of these instances, the language in question was either monosyllabic or agglutinative. In these types of languages the sentence is composed of a sequence of readily segmentable morphemes, which may have facilitated their reduction to a different representational medium, such as writing, or gesture. The one feature not shared by the first order codes devised for Sumerian around 3200 BCE, for Chinese about two millenia later, and for Mayan perhaps a millenium after that; and those created for Warlpiri and Warumungu at an unknown date, is of course, that of permanence. Marks on stone, clay or paper remain after the communicative act is finished; gestures do not. And that, it seems, has made all the difference ...

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