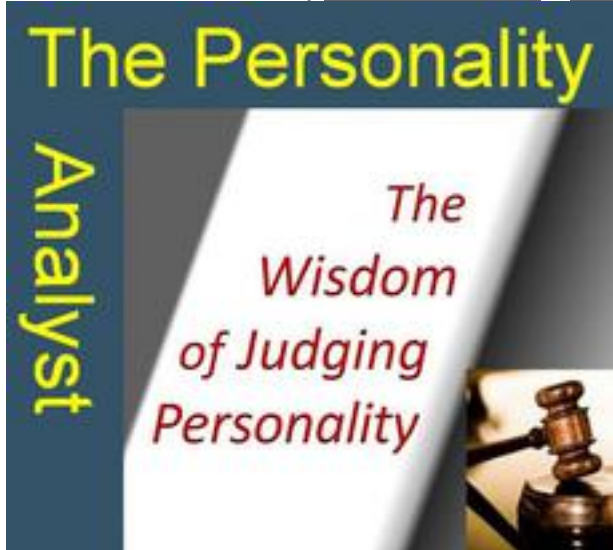


## Judgments of Others in Primarily Oral Cultures

Primarily oral people judge others differently than literate people

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*Please note: The regular schedule of the Personality Analyst will resume July 20th, 2009. This will be the last post until then.*

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Before about 1000 BCE, almost everyone lived in primarily oral cultures. The history of how we judge one another, then, must draw on how personality judgments are made in primarily oral societies.

Throughout history, many languages emerged, but only some peoples developed writing. Walter Ong, the eminent scholar of oral cultures, described many differences between the psychologies of peoples who lived in oral cultures and those who lived in cultures with writing and Professor Ong argues that oral people are less reflective than those in literate societies. For one, oral people have little incentive to think through something as abstract as a rational argument. Even if a fully oral person could reason out a particular problem, there would be little way to remember it. Ong states:

In the total absence of any writing, there is nothing outside the thinker, no text, to enable him or her to produce the same line of thought again or even to verify whether he or she has done so or not. *Aides-memoire* such as notched sticks or a series of carefully arranged objects will not of themselves retrieve a complicated

series of assertions. How, in fact, could a lengthy, analytic solution ever be assembled in the first place?

In an oral society, puzzling out the physical world can lead to rewards: gains through innovations in agriculture, boat- and wagon-making, and the further development of tools are possible. Such gains, in fact, finally led to pictographs and alphabets, and the writing materials such as papyrus and rice paper, on which such pictographs and alphabets could be written.

Before writing, however, any re-tracing of an abstract line of thought from memory was essentially impossible. In an oral culture, the payoff of developing a cogent analytic argument and expressing it simply does not exist. Similarly, subtlety and nuance of expression, which also require considerable effort to recall, are quickly lost.

In primarily oral cultures, in other words, simple, memorable thoughts were to be preferred in almost all instances. Rhetoric in oral cultures reduces thought to groups of easily-remembered sets of striking, image-laden, material. The oral person thinks mostly memorable thoughts, often arranged as stories that themselves are made up of highly rhythmic, formulaic expressions. For oral peoples, clichés are crucial because they so easily come to mind, whereas for literate peoples, they are something looked down upon because they seem to reflect slavishly repetitive thought.

As Ong puts it:

Oral folk prefer, especially in formal discourse, not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess, but the beautiful princess; not the oak but the sturdy oak. Oral expression thus carries a load of epithets and other formulatory baggage which high literacy rejects...

Consider such formulaic judgments of people from the *Iliad*, the Greek oral poem that was first written out about 800 BCE. (See an [earlier post on the \*Iliad\*](#))

In the very first book of the *Iliad*, Calchas, son of Thestor, is described by the narrator as: "...wisest of the augurs, who knew things past and present to come...", and he is described by Agamemnon to his face as:

"...Seer of evil, you never yet prophesied smooth things concerning me, but have ever loved to foretell that which was evil".

Achilles describes Agamemnon in this way: "You are steeped in insolence and lust of gain...We have followed you, Sir Insolence! For your pleasure, not ours...for your shameless self." In return, Agamemnon calls Achilles: "...ever quarrelsome and ill affected. What though you be brave? Was it not heaven that made you so?...I care neither for you nor for your anger...". Further threats follow -- but you have to know the story to follow them.

Based on such logic and examples we can speculate with some confidence about how people judged one another in primarily oral cultures. On the whole, the most repeated judgments were formulaic and clichéd, rhythmic, evocative and extreme, and often repeated in several different ways (while the speaker searched for the next thing to say). The emphasis was on the memorable qualities of the judgments more so than any nuance, qualifications or subtlety. To draw an analogy to literate societies, judgments were like tabloid newspaper headlines as opposed to more carefully-written articles.

Such judgments, in other words, were painted with broad strokes -- they were exaggerated and defamatory, on the one hand, or absurdly flattering on the other.

I imagine people generally did not appreciate being the targets of crude depictions -- especially critical ones. As more and more people became literate during the Great Transformation (Axial age; 1000-200 BCE), it is no wonder that the judgments people made of one another became the subject of greater scrutiny.

And so it makes sense that as the written word spread during the Great Transformation, the wisdom traditions that emerged during those times: Buddhism, Confucianism, Jainism, Judaism, Hinduism, and the rest, each provided guidance as to how to carry out such judgments in a more thoughtful and balanced fashion.

### **Notes:**

My considerable thanks to Steve Grant who, in a comment on an earlier post, recommended Walter Ong's book to me.

Ong, W. (1982). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. New York: Methuen. The quotes "In the total absence of any writing...", is from p. 34; the quote "Oral folk prefer..." is p. 38. Further points follow pp. 34-41. The quotes from the Iliad are from the MIT classics online at:<http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/iliad.1.i.html>, paragraphs 9-18.

The note concerning the Personality Analyst schedule was added on July 2nd.

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