NOTES ON THE MOROCCAN SENSORIUM

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Abstract: This research note begins by setting out the received wisdom concerning the structure and content of knowledge in oral as opposed to literate societies. I then proceed to analyze some of the stereotypes which inform that wisdom from the perspective of Bourdieu's notion of the "habitus." The major part of the essay is devoted to showing how the notion of the "habitus" helps to explain the patterning of oral, visual and tactile knowledge and communication in Morocco.

Résumé: Ce travail commence par une description du savoir acquis concernant la structure et le contenu des connaissances dans des sociétés orales plutôt que littéraires. Ensuite, l'auteur fait l'analyse de quelques stéréotypes qui informent ce savoir du point de vue de la notion de l'«habitus» de Bourdieu. La plus grande partie de l'étude se propose de démontrer comment la notion de l'«habitus» aide à expliquer la «typification» des connaissances et de la communication orales, visuelles et tactiles au Maroc.

Communications scholars, following the example of Walter Ong (1967), typically divide world history and the world's cultures into four types or stages: oral (or speech-based), chirographic, typographic and electronic. Each of these kinds of media is said to "frame and facilitate the act of perceiving" differently, and thus contribute to the formation of a different "hierarchy of sensing" or "perceptual field" (Lowe 1982:1). In oral culture the emphasis is on the ear rather than the eye. In chirographic culture this emphasis tends to persist because manuscripts continue to be read aloud. It isn't until typographic culture that the sense of sight comes to dominate the sensorium, largely because the standardization of print makes visual knowledge more reliable than information communicated via any other channel.

In addition to relating perceivers to their environment in qualitatively different ways, media are credited with the power of shaping how people

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think. Thus, according to Lowe (1982:3), in oral culture "metric recitation of rhythmic formulas and commonplaces provides a communicational grid to determine knowledge." In order for any knowledge to be preserved it must fit this grid; otherwise it will be forgotten. With the invention of writing and then of print, there is a progressive separation of speech and memory.

Lowe's discussion of the "perceptual field" and its attendant "communicational grid" bears a certain resemblance to Bourdieu's notion of "habitus," which the latter defines as "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks" (Bourdieu 1977:83). But the resemblance is purely formal, for there is no room within Lowe's mechanistic schema for the analysis of human agency, or, what is equally important, the *context* of communication. By contrast, Bourdieu (1977:15) focusses on the *strategies* involved in the use of the "habitus." He also emphasizes that even in the most ritualized of exchanges, "the agents remain in command of the *interval* between the obligatory moments and can therefore act on their opponents by playing with the *tempo* of the exchange." The greater flexibility of Bourdieu's notion of the "habitus" lends itself well to the analysis of how knowledge is conceptualized and communicated in Morocco, as the remainder of this research note seeks to demonstrate.

In his discussion of traditional Islamic education in Morocco, Eickelman (1985) stresses the importance of "mnemonic possession." Still today, the *Qur'an* and other standard texts are wholly memorized—a feat which takes a minimum of six years for the *Qur'an* alone. Eickelman (1985:63) adds that "the discipline of Qur'anic memorization is an integral part of learning to be human and Muslim." These facts might seem to bear out Lowe's (1982:3) characterization of knowledge in oral and residually oral culture as "preservative and unspecialized, its content nonanalytical, . . . formulaic." However, this characterization fails to take account either of the cultural importance of the melodic voice, or of the indigenous concept of "understanding" (*Fahm*).

To take the second point first, Eickelman (1985:64) explains that in Morocco *understanding* "was not measured by any ability explicitly to "explain" particular verses. . . . Instead, the measure of understanding was implicit and consisted in the ability to use particular Qur'anic verses in appropriate contexts." It was only gradually that the student developed this ability to make appropriate practical reference to the memorized text, mostly by listening to how his father and other relatives did so at social gatherings.

As regards the voice, Nelson (1985) stresses that in Egypt as elsewhere in the Islamic world, the *Qur'an* is not the *Qur'an* unless it is heard. Indeed,

according to scholars and listeners alike, "the beauty and inimitability of the Qur'an lie not in the content and order of the message, on the one hand, and in the elegance of the language on the other [though both of these certainly matter], but in the use of the very sound of the language to convey specific meaning" (Nelson 1985:13). This interpenetration of sound and imagery amounts to what she calls "an almost onomatopoeic use of language." The manipulation of such things as choice of verse, nasality, pitch, phrasing, repetition and pause — not to mention melody — are intrinsic to the meaning, not mere stylistic flourishes, and not simply to facilitate memory. For example, one reciter was admired because he was able to demonstrate "the distance (referred to in a verse) with his voice" (Nelson 1985:65).

It might be surmised on the basis of the preceding discussion that the oral/aural modality is the most important medium of communication in the context of Moroccan culture. Such a conclusion would also find support in the well-known iconoclasm of Islamic art. What this iconoclasm implies is that visual communication is repressed in order to privilege oral communication. However, the tremendous power of Islamic art and architecture is testimony to a deep significance attached to visual know-how. In fact, a master craftsman in the visual arts is called "*ma'allem*," which means "he who knows." A *ma'allem* must work with exactly 357 different shapes of tiles, each with its own name and some so small that they must be put in place with tweezers, to create the mind-boggling puzzles of ceramic tiles that traditionally cover walls, floors and fountains (Paccard 1983:379-89).

Women's crafts involve an equal degree of visual intelligence. Flint (1980:57) describes how a woman learns the art of rugmaking:

> A little girl sits beside her mother at the loom and her eye learns to judge what can be done and what can't, what looks attractive and what doesn't. She becomes a master or mu'allima when she has absorbed all the elements (patterns and structures) so thoroughly that she is able to improvise on any given subject.

According to local conceptions, therefore, in the visual as in the verbal arts, knowledge *is* formulaic, and only through the thorough possession of the relevant formulas can creation take place. However, even though change may be slight, due to the highly structured nature of the vocabulary, creation does happen. Whether it be in the domain of oral communication or visual communication, then, the "disposition" (in Bourdieu's sense) is the same. Let us now examine how this analysis can be extended to the sense of touch.

It is a fairly common view that North African men tend to touch each other more often than North American men do. Greetings between men vary from a simple handshake to a full embrace. Moroccan men often walk

holding hands, or with one arm around another's shoulders. This does not, however, necessarily signify the degree of closeness or affection between them. Rather, the touch of greeting should be understood as a tool, or better, a barometer of where two people stand at a given time in a continual play of dominance and dependence.

Crapanzano (1980) explains that every man is born into the set of associations and obligations of his group. However, upon reaching adulthood he is free to develop his own network of associations. In fact it is from this personal network that he will derive his identity. Everyone is of potential benefit and therefore "must be bound into a relationship through an act—a gift, a favour, a gesture of hospitality, a greeting even" (Crapanzano 1980:77-78). There is no act without significance. The touch, however slight, is the sign of a relationship and every gesture requires reciprocation.

To maintain one's network of associates, or "clientele," involves a strong competitive element (Crapanzano 1980:80), for as Bourdieu (1977:9) observes, "even in cases in which the agents' habitus are perfectly harmonized and the interlocking of actions and reactions is totally predictable from the outside, uncertainty remains as to the outcome of the interaction as long as the sequence has not been completed." Thus in a given relationship, there exists much ambiguity as to who is dominated by whom at any given time. Indeed, in my own experience, one can often identify the dominant person in a given relationship by observing which person dotes and hangs on the other. It is as if the dominant person must continually throw affection on the subordinate one in a show of dependence, to mask his actual superiority. Flaunting one's superiority would effectively end an alliance.

This point is also stressed by Waterbury (1970). He notes that a person who amasses a significant degree of wealth and power becomes concerned with conserving it. He doesn't want to "rock the boat" by accumulating too much power, because he could lose it all, and this would cause disequilibrium—"a state that Moroccans generally seek to avoid" (Waterbury 1970:6). For this reason, intricate systems of alliance and counter-alliance are created and recreated according to the shape of events. In that way a balance of power is maintained.

Waterbury's discussion of this striving after equilibrium in interpersonal relations can be related to the interest in abstract patterns so characteristic of Islamic art. As McDonough (1984:9) explains:

> This interest has led to the elaboration of complex abstractions that indicate a perceived interrelatedness of all forms. Harmony and balance have been major characteristics of Islamic art. This awareness of equilibrium, suggested in the work of artists, has also shaped the thinking of jurists and others who have been concerned to design social forms.

We may surmise that in Morocco, whether a message is addressed to the eye, the ear or the touch, it is the context that counts, and the form of the message is subordinate to the social imperative, the maintenance of equilibrium.

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