

Guest Editorial

Nearly one billion adults in the world today cannot read and write. Ninety-eight percent of them live in the Third World. According to 1990 UNESCO statistics, 138.8 million illiterates live in Sub-Sahara Africa. Absolute figures for illiteracy in Africa, relative to Asia's 678.3 million, may seem small, but percentages of illiteracy in Africa are as high as 52.7. For every one male, at least two women are illiterate.

Not everyone in the world is excessively agitated over all this. Indeed, some people are quite complacent. There are some who suggest that literacy does not necessarily improve life chances. Others point out that there are more urgent things that need doing first. Some, of the poetic bent, want to save oral discourse and traditional performances from the onslaught of literacy. They are worried about the illiterate losing touch with their traditions.

Policymakers around the world seem to better understand the potential of literacy. Literacy has been widely accepted as a human right and a minimum basic need. To challenge the world's conscience, the United Nation's General Assembly has proclaimed the year 1990 as the International Literacy Year (ILY). Together, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, and the World Bank organized the World Conference on Education for All at Jomtien, Thailand, 5-9 March 1990, at which the policymakers of the world asked for:

Reduction of the adult illiteracy rate (the appropriate age group to be determined in each country) to, say, one-half its 1990 level by the year 2000, with sufficient emphasis on female literacy to significantly reduce the current disparity between male and female illiteracy rates (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990).

With the end of ILY 1990 already upon us, the greater challenge of the Literacy Decade of 1991-2000 begins! Africanists everywhere must make their special contributions to the tasks of policymakers, planners, and practitioners of literacy work in Africa by reminding them of their historical experiences with writing and print, analyzing for them the political, economic, and social structures that can promote or inhibit the diffusion of literacy, and pointing out the rewards of universalizing literacy in Africa for Africa's peoples, institutions, and cultures, while singing about the customs and traditions that must be

saved from the overzealous proponents of literacy. "Literacy in Africa"—this special issue of the *African Studies Review*—hopefully will have provided Africanists an opportunity to make some important contributions to the discussion of literacy in Africa.

As this special issue was planned, it was hoped that it would include many more Africans speaking for Africa than it now has. Some of those Africans, it was hoped, would be women. In spite of several general calls for papers through various journals distributed worldwide, and in spite of one call made personally by H. S. Bhola at the International Conference on the Future of Adult Education in Southern Africa, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe, 31 January to 3 February 1989, there was little success in getting submissions from Africa. The material that did arrive was descriptive and, ironically, came from one African country with little commitment to adult literacy work!

It was, of course, also hoped that the special seminar, "Literacy in Africa," organized at Indiana University during the fall of 1989 as a contribution to ILY 1990 would generate some useful papers. It produced much less than had been hoped.

Ultimately, it was personal soliciting that worked. Africanists working on adult literacy within the technical assistance culture were contacted by H. S. Bhola through personal communications. It worked! It was most opportune that many of those contacted happened to be doing research and writing on literacy as part of the ILY 1990, in preparation for the World Conference on Education for All in March 1990. Most of the invitations were accepted and papers delivered by the thrice-scheduled deadline.

What is now presented in this special issue is by no means something merely satisfying—fruit of a desperate effort of last resort. Indeed, what appears here represents world-class scholarship on literacy, language, and culture in Africa. All of the authors have spent long years in Africa and what they tell us about Africa is based on personal experience and reflection. This issue of *ASR* has been assembled from a policy perspective. All of the papers focus on literacy promotion in Africa and are relevant to making concrete policy choices. The first paper, by H. S. Bhola, sets the stage for later discussions. The history of literacy diffusion in Africa is briefly sketched, followed by a discussion of the influence of the written word on the culture and institutions of Africa during the colonial period. The new symbiosis between literacy and oracy as literacy takes a central place in the processes of modernization and democratization of African societies is analyzed.

The second paper, by Adama Ouane and Yvette Amon-Tanoh, focuses on the policy and practice of literacy in French-speaking Africa. While the expansion of primary education in French-speaking Africa since the 1960s has been spectacular, work in adult literacy has been rather dismal. Literacy as offered in French-speaking countries was functional, intensive, and selective, that is, taught to the

very few within organized sectors of the economy, and it was taught in French! While literacy is now being taught more and more in the mother languages, this still creates a duality since French remains the language of the formal school and of the political, social, and economic institutions. The paper also describes the excellent work done in Mali with rural newspapers that are assisting new learners to retain and use their literacy skills and thereby become active creators of a literate environment. As could be expected from those who have worked in national institutions of literacy promotion such as the National Directorate for Literacy and Applied Linguistics (DNAFLA) and an international institution active in lifelong education, that is, the Unesco Institute for Education (UIE), the authors have a bi-focal perspective on literacy problems seeking to use tradition for modernity.

Julia Van Dyken, in the third paper of the volume, reports on what can easily be characterized as a historic seminar on the subject of languages of minorities organized by UNESCO in cooperation with several African professional associations in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1989. In recounting the presentations made at the seminar and reporting on the seminar discussions, Van Dyken provides us with the essential issues of language policy in Africa relating to both formal schooling and adult literacy programs all over the African continent.

In her discussion of language policies in Africa, Van Dyken mentions that in Cameroon all languages have been declared "*national* languages" and both English and French are "*official* languages" enshrined in the Cameroonian Constitution. In the fourth paper of this issue, Clinton D. W. Robinson brings us back to Cameroon. On the basis of a systematic experience of teaching ten select national languages, he reports that, while literacy in the mother tongues gave learners in Cameroon considerable cultural pride, it did not connect them with the national development processes. That he speculates may have been because the development institutions active in the area perhaps did not understand the role or the possibilities of literacy in national languages in development communication and, therefore, failed to respond.

In the fifth paper of the special issue, Christine McNab discusses the practical difficulties of teaching literacy in the mother tongue in the context of the world-renowned multilingual mass literacy campaign of Ethiopia. The political decision to teach literacy in all the fifteen nationality languages could not be implemented effectively on the ground. Almost all the resources of the state ended up being allocated to the four *major* languages—Amharic, Oromigna, Tigrigna, and Wolaitigna—while all that the *minor* nationality languages got was lip service.

The sixth paper, by Anton Johnston, provides an analytical and sensitive description of adult literacy in Mozambique. Johnston agrees that motivation is central to successful literacy work but points out that motivation is not spontaneous and that the success of

any large-scale program depends “principally on the power, legitimacy, and encouragement of the state.” Johnston points out several reasons why a mutually beneficial relationship between literacy and culture did not emerge in Mozambique, among them: lack of a central vision, excessive centralization that extinguished local initiatives, and the bureaucratization of the revolution itself.

Gabriel Carron, in the seventh paper of the volume, reports on an evaluation study of literacy programs in Kenya. At first sight, it seems literacy programs in Kenya may have succeeded less than reasonably expected. However, as the study peels off the layers of complexity, one finds that literacy inputs may not have been commensurate with needs, commitments may not have been deep, and local initiatives may have perished because the larger national vision was lacking. Again, learners may not have obliged the program officials by dutifully taking their tests and filling their forms. Indeed, the learners may not have fulfilled the peculiar expectations of literacy providers but may have fulfilled their own expectations and left with a feeling of achievement, ready to use the skills they *had* learned.

All the papers described are written by literacy enthusiasts who, while they see problems with literacy policy and practice, have no doubt about its inherent usefulness. No one considers literacy as deterministic, but they do accept a mutually beneficial relationship between literacy and social change. This relationship is, of course, dialectical, and contradictions do and will emerge as new literates as individuals and as members of particular groups, institutions, and ethnic groups make economic, social, and political uses of literacy—sometimes selfishly and sometimes selflessly. It is important that literacy skeptics do not demand from literacy workers the impossible—perfect means with perfect ends. On the other hand, it is necessary that literacy workers deliver the best that is possible in this imperfect world of planned change.

Reference

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