

Letter to the Editor

Dear editor,

Regarding the discussion of “nonliterate” (*DRJ* 27/1, p. 25), Moe Meyer is apparently not aware that the term is from the anthropological literature. Here is the seminal passage from *Man and His Works* by Melville J. Herskovits (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948, pp 74-75).

Several terms to replace “primitive” have been suggested: [“preliterate”] carries a meaning of time that [implies] prediction... it implies that peoples without written languages are at a stage antecedent to the one in which, presumably, they will devise, or at least acquire, writing... nonliterate ... simply describes the fact that these peoples do not have written languages. It is sometimes confused with “illiterate,” but the use of this latter word should be guarded against, since it carries a distinct connotation of inferiority in ability or opportunity, or both. Nonliterate, because it is colorless, conveys its meaning unambiguously and is readily applicable to the data it seeks to delimit, is thus to be preferred to all the other terms we have considered.

He further explains “... terms such as ... ‘nonliterate’ are used to indicate, in a kind of anthropological shorthand, a condition that marks off some peoples from others, [and] nothing more than this is connoted.” (p.606).

The suggestion to substitute “oral” for “nonliterate” is ill-considered. I disagree that “literate” and “nonliterate” are less specific than “orality” and “literacy.” Furthermore, in the final analysis, all human societies are oral but not all are literate.

I write this letter for two reasons. First, I think the readers of *DRJ* should know the logic behind the word “nonliterate.” Second, “nonliterate” is a viable and useful word, and people will continue to use it.

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