

Literacy and the ‘great divide’ in the Islamic world, 1300–1800

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Abstract

The study proposes an approach to the history of literacy in the Islamic world that uses a flexible and gradated definition of literacy. It goes on to propose some factors that lay behind the acquisition of certain forms of literacy and of the way that they were put into practical use. Among these factors were the religious factor, which had consequences on a broad region; commercial conditions, which were an impetus to make use of the written word; and the development of a legal culture.

Approaches to the study of literacy in the Islamic world

The present study of literacy is an attempt to formulate an approach to a subject, the history of literacy, which is still largely unexplored for the Islamic world in the medieval and early modern periods (1300–1800). This subject has, for various reasons, been the object of a certain degree of neglect, and even at times of misrepresentation. The focus of studies on education has been on higher learning. A considerable literature on Islamic education exists, but it is almost exclusively focused on colleges of higher education, notably the *madrasas*, which made their first appearance in Khurasan, in eastern Iran, before moving westwards to the Arab region then back to India and Central Asia.¹ Consequently, the *madrasa* institutions and the scholars that they produced, as well as the voluminous intellectual and scholarly output they produced, have received much attention. Other forms of basic or elementary education were rarely given an in-depth consideration, the study of literacy arousing little interest among historians. In fact, the implicit assumption has often been that, with the exception of these scholars, societies were illiterate. The importance of oral culture in many Islamic societies has tended to support this view, since oral culture is often viewed as being the opposite of written culture.

1 George Makdisi, *The rise of colleges: institutions of learning in Islam and the West*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981; George Makdisi, ‘Muslim institutions of learning in eleventh-century Baghdad’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 24, 1961, pp. 1–56; Jonathan Berkey, *The transmission of knowledge in medieval Cairo, a social history of Islamic education*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992; Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and social practice in medieval Damascus, 1190–1350*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; Anthony Welsh, ‘A medieval center of learning in India, the Hauz Khas *madrasa* in Delhi’, *Muqarnas*, 13, 1996, p. 14.

This approach to the study of literacy poses a number of problems. It implies a dichotomous model or a 'great divide' between highly educated scholars, on one side, and everyone else, on the other; or an equally 'great divide' between the scholarly world of writing and the oral culture of those who could not read or write. Between these two lay a deep vacuum.

In keeping with the modernization paradigm, the logical conclusion that could be reached by this approach was that literacy only appeared at a later date, its spread associated with modern developments. These developments were either the consequence of the introduction of printing, considered as the landmark that led to popular literacy, or of the introduction of modern education, associated with a certain type of school, either state-run institutions or schools founded by religious missions. Both of these offered a set curriculum of studies. Pupils were examined regularly, and at the end of the study period, they obtained a diploma, in recognition that they had achieved an acceptable level of literacy or education.

The imbalance of this dichotomous approach can, in part, be explained by the way that literacy has often been defined. If literacy is considered to be the ability to read and write, as tested by examinations in the context of a set school program, we reach a certain conclusion. If we define literacy in more flexible terms, we can reach another conclusion.

The present article aims to consider the history of literacy in the light of another approach, notably by a consideration of literacy in much broader and more flexible terms, as a social phenomenon. It is an approach that is more inclusive about the way that literacy is defined and it incorporates much more diversity regarding what can be considered as literacy, both in terms of the type of literacy and its level. This approach has been used in the study of literacy in other regions of the world. Thus, with regard to medieval Europe, for example, rather than use the more common definition of a literate person as being someone who knew Latin – *litterati* meaning to know Latin – recent studies include many more graded categories. These include persons who were read to but were not themselves able to read, could read but were not able to write, or had limited writing capacities.²

'Literate', in such a definition, can include those who were familiar with the contents of a book but had not actually read it. Alternatively, it could be defined, as R. A. Houston did in his study of Northern England, as being able to read only, rather than both read and write.³ Parallels can be made between those people who were familiar with the book culture without actually being able to read the book, on the one hand, and, on the other hand the tradition of 'blind scholars' in Islamic culture, who had a great familiarity with the contents of books, but could not read them and instead had to memorize them. Biographical dictionaries in Arabic abound with examples of blind scholars who achieved academic prominence, composing books and engaging other academics in scholarly exchanges. This kind of academic achievement was possible because of the strength of oral culture and the interchange between oral and written culture. Were one to use the strict definition of literacy

2 Franz H. Bauml, 'Varieties and consequences of medieval literacy and illiteracy', *Speculum*, 55, 2, 1980, pp. 237–65; Cheryl Glenn, 'Medieval literacy outside the academy: popular practice and individual technique', *College Composition and Communication*, 44, 4, 1993, pp. 497–508.

3 R. A. Houston, 'The development of literacy: northern England 1640–1750', *Economic History Review*, n.s. 35, 2, 1982, pp. 200–01.

as the ability to read and to write, these blind scholars would be considered illiterate. Thus rather than one form of literacy, we see a wide range of literacies.⁴

The ideas of 'new literacy studies' may have some validity in the study of literacy in the Islamic world. Notably, literacy should best be studied neither as an autonomous phenomenon that can be understood in abstraction of its context, nor through a strictly institutional approach. Rather, literacy is part of complex social dynamics that are linked to particular historical contexts.⁵ This approach has the advantage that it does not focus on institutionalized education, but tends to include more informal channels for learning. It also brings into the picture the ways that people actually made use of literacy or of the written word. In other words, there is an interest in actual practice rather than in literacy in the abstract. By taking into consideration the way that people made use of the written word and of their relationship to it, we can explain the extensive use of written deeds and documents that are today in archives, or in the private possession of individuals in different parts of the region. One can also attempt to identify the social groups who made use of the written word at a given moment in time, and try to identify a context that could be behind such a trend.

There are various types of literacy and a multitude of reasons that may have pushed people to become literate. Whatever these reasons were, whether it was to fulfill a religious function or to help run a business, they did not necessarily lead to a standardized form of literacy, but, on the contrary to a variety of levels of reading or of writing. In other words, it is important to focus not only on the identity of the persons or groups who were literate, and on the degree of their literacy, but also to observe what role writing or reading may have had in their lives, notably among those who were not professional scholars or administrators.

The absence of in-depth studies of popular literacy in specific areas in the Islamic world or in specific periods makes the task of studying a broad region particularly difficult. Therefore most statements here will be tentative and subject to reconsideration. The subject of the history of literacy is nevertheless important enough to warrant a start.

One of the difficulties in the study of the history of literacy in the way just mentioned has to do with sources. These are relatively abundant in relation to the modern school system, especially for state-run schools that were supervised by ministries of education or other such bodies. For periods prior to the appearance of state-run schools or missionary-run ones, information relevant to the history of literacy is not only more difficult to obtain, but also more controversial to interpret. Also in geographical terms, some regions, Egypt for instance, have yielded a much richer documentation for researchers than others, either because documents have not survived as well elsewhere (Iran), or because they did not exist in large quantities in the first place (parts of sub-Saharan Africa).

Another difficulty one confronts in a history of literacy in the pre-modern or early modern world is the criteria by which literacy is defined. Many studies on the history of literacy in Europe were based on the use of signatures in marriage certificates as evidence of literacy. R. A. Houston, for example, who studied literacy in early modern England,

4 Glenn, 'Medieval literacy outside the academy', pp. 498–9.

5 James Collins, 'Literacy and literacies', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 1995, p. 86; Steven E. Rowe, 'Writing modern selves: literacy and the French working class in the early nineteenth century', *Journal of Social History*, 40, 1, 2006, pp. 55–6; Kate Stevens, 'A critical discussion of New Literacy studies', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 48, 1, 2000, pp. 12–13.

defined as literate those persons who could sign their name, while those who made a mark instead of a signature were deemed to be illiterate. This way of measuring literacy meant that tables could be drawn according to professions or according to gender, and the progression of literacy could be measured within a set period.⁶ Many scholars, however, considered this approach to be too dichotomous, as it did not show a whole range of possibilities between the fully literate and the fully illiterate. This system of measuring literacy was, moreover, criticized because signatures did not necessarily indicate literacy.⁷

Signatures, whether on marriage certificates or on other deeds, do not exist in the Islamic world of 1300–1800, and one consequently needs to look for other ways and other criteria that can lead to the same objective. The laws of procedure in Islamic jurisprudence and their application in courts did not require a person's signature to confirm a deed, but rather the presence of witnesses to the act. People, therefore, did not need to sign their names on marriage contracts or transactions of sale. It is no easy task to find criteria that are relevant, but nevertheless, there are a number of channels and factors which, taken together, help us to see indications of literacy. These can only remain indicative rather than absolute, but this of course is also the case with regard to the use of signatures, which is subject to a heated debate, and which, in spite of its extensive use, has remained problematic.

The present study will address some of these issues by exploring two channels. One of them is to identify the factors which could potentially have a bearing on literacy in particular societies or regions. As in many other societies, religion was an important factor behind the development of literacy. In some societies, literacy was only introduced with the spread of Islam and Islamic learning. However, religion cannot alone explain how or why literacy developed in certain directions. Nor can religion alone provide explanations for the diversities between one Islamic society and another. One of the goals of the present study is precisely to emphasize, and try to explain, these diversities. We consequently need to consider other factors that had a bearing on the subject.⁸ One can propose other factors that appear to be relevant, without, however, claiming to be exhaustive, but simply to be offering some suggestions on ways of developing the history of literacy. Some might be applicable to particular regions, while others are applicable to broader regions.

The other, more hazardous, channel is to suggest a tentative chronology or periodization for the history of literacy between 1300 and 1800. Here again, this is not an attempt to find a single chronology that fits the whole Islamic world, but rather to try to identify some (and certainly not all) relevant factors that may bring about change, and some of the significant moments in this history. These suggestions, however, can only make sense if one limits the geographical regions where they can apply or where they may have had an impact.

6 Roger Chartier, 'The practical impact of writing', in Roger Chartier, Philippe Aries, and Georges Duby, eds., *A history of private life, volume 3, passions of the Renaissance*, Arthur Goldhammer, trans., Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard University, 1989, pp. 112–15.

7 Houston, 'The development of literacy', p. 200; Barry Reay, 'The context and meaning of popular literacy: some evidence from nineteenth-century rural England', *Past and Present*, 131, 1991, p. 89.

8 Francis Robinson, 'Technology and religious change: Islam and the impact on print', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27, 1, 1993, p. 233.

Elementary schooling 1300–1800

The first of these factors is the basic education that was available, in one form or other, in a very broad region of the Islamic world from a fairly early date. It sometimes took an institutionalized form, and at other times a more informal one.

During the centuries between 1300 and 1800, elementary education took place in the *maktab/kuttab* (elementary school), or in the mosque in numerable locations of the Muslim world, in the Mediterranean region, in Black Africa and in Asia. They, moreover, had a long history, going back in many of these regions to a period much earlier than 1300 in the central areas, and shortly after that in other areas. Wherever there were *madrasas*, one would expect to find forms of elementary instruction, even if we have no concrete data about it. And they could exist in regions as far apart as Mauritania on the western African coast;⁹ thirteenth-century Tabriz in Iran, where the study of Ann Lambton shows that Oljeitu's *waqf* (pious foundations) provided for one hundred orphans to be taught in a *maktab*; or sixteenth-century Kabul.¹⁰

Most towns, in the central areas of the Islamic world, either had an elementary school or the local mosque undertook to teach children. In the major urban areas of the central Islamic lands, schools were numerous and consequently accessible to important sectors of the population. Moreover, the *kuttab* was never exclusively responsible for teaching children the basics of education, since mosques also offered this service, with the objective of teaching students or pupils to read or recite the holy book and to familiarize them with religious teachings. Education of the young sometimes took place neither in the mosque nor in a school but in the more informal setting of the home of the *shaykh* or teacher.

Although towns must certainly have been privileged in terms of such facilities for the teaching of the young, occasionally, we find references to village mosques or school teachers who provided rural dwellers with some form of basic education. The late-seventeenth-century Egyptian author Yusuf al-Shirbini, whose book contains many humorous stories about peasants living in the Delta, narrates a number of anecdotes that make fun of the village teacher. His portrayal of the rural teacher as unlearned and rough was intended to contrast the village teacher with the more sophisticated and educated urban school teacher.¹¹

In the elementary schools, young boys were taught basic education and recitation of the Qur'ān.¹² For a number of reasons, these schools have not been given consideration in studies of literacy. In the first place, some historians have noted that these schools emphasized recitation and memorization rather than actual learning, and were consequently detrimental to intellectual development, rather than the other way round. In the second place, the emphasis on the religious dimension, often to the exclusion of a social context, has meant that these schools are studied not so much as part of the history of literacy, but rather as

9 Chouki El Hamel, 'The transmission of Islamic knowledge in Moorish society from the rise of the Almoravids to the nineteenth century', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 29, 1, 1999, pp. 62–87.

10 Ann Lambton, 'Awqaf in Persia, 6th–8th/12th–14th centuries', *Islamic Law and Society*, 4, 3, 1997, pp. 316–17; Stephen F. Dale and Alam Payind, 'The Ahrari *waqf* in Kabul in the year 1564 and the Mughul Naqshabandiyah', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 119, 1999, pp. 218–33.

11 Yusuf al-Shirbini, 'Hazz al-quhuf bi-sharh qasid abi shaduf', vol. 1, in Humphrey Davis, ed. and intro., *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta*, Leuven: Peeters, 2005, pp. 94–6.

12 Robinson, 'Technology and religious change', pp. 234–7.

part of a rigid religious upbringing, which discouraged initiative and creativity, and which encouraged blind obedience, regardless of time and place.

Elementary schools have been given consideration via two channels. One of them is through architectural history, since cities such as Istanbul, Cairo, Aleppo, and Damascus are adorned with these beautiful historic buildings. The second channel for exploration has been the study of these schools in the context of a *waqf* system, since most of them were part of pious foundations. In addition to the architectural remains, there exists a voluminous number of *waqf* deeds, which provide data on these schools, the number of children that could attend, the funds that were available for them and for their teachers, as well as, in many cases, the subjects that they were taught. Rarely have they been studied in relation to popular literacy.

These schools were primarily conceived for religious purposes, notably to introduce the young to the basic religious precepts, which is why they were so widespread. In medieval European culture, the faithful were often taught the basics of their religion by a picture culture, such as the church paintings and the stone carvings on the façades of churches, relating important religious narratives that told stories of Christ and of Mary, the last supper, or the events leading to the crucifixion. These provided a visual, and sometimes a dramatic, representation of what a Christian should know, but was unable to read about. In contrast, Islamic culture did not use visual culture in this way, as figurative art was forbidden, so that the focus was entirely on the word.¹³

For many people, whether they lived in town or in the countryside, elementary education, in a school, a mosque or a home, was all they received. But they nevertheless made use of it in various ways, as we shall see. Teaching the young, and perhaps the not so young, was a religious function, even though, as I will show later, the consequences of this function went beyond the strictly religious domain.

In addition, a certain amount of teaching was undertaken in the context of Sufi brotherhoods, known to have spread extensively as of the fifteenth or sixteenth century onward. Like the elementary schools, education in the context of Sufi lodges was primarily undertaken for religious purposes. Numerous were the ordinary town-dwellers who joined these brotherhoods or *turuq*. These brotherhoods were very diverse in their concerns and in their conduct, and it is consequently difficult to make any generalizations regarding the link between this trend and literacy. However we do know two things. Firstly, certain Sufi brotherhoods were particularly interested in teaching their disciples. The writings of al-Sharani, who lived in Cairo in the sixteenth century, show the way that this Sufi master gathered his disciples around him in his *zawia* and gave them lessons. Secondly, we also know that innumerable Sufi works were written in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, most of them of a popular nature, rather than of a philosophical or intellectual one. The members of Sufi brotherhoods must have been amongst the readers of these writings. These works, most of which are unpublished, are yet to be explored in their social context, in terms of content, language and readership. Yet there may have been a link between the spread of popular Sufism and the spread of certain forms of literacy, albeit that of listening to texts read out loud in the way that al-Sharani did to his disciples.

13 Lawrence Stone, 'Literacy and education in England, 1640–1900', *Past and Present*, 42, 1969, p. 76.

Out of these diverse forms of basic education, the impact on the young boys in their later lives was anything but homogeneous. What a young boy learnt, once he had finished his basic education, was subject to much diversity. We know what the *waqf* deeds required boys to be taught. For many, this included reading, writing, spelling and reciting the Qur'ān. But even though the curriculum was specified in *waqf* deeds, we have no sources telling us how deeds were implemented. Thus we are in the dark as to whether these instructions were enforced to the letter and, more significantly, what level the pupil may have reached when he left the school.

On the one hand, since some of the boys who went to these schools ended up as scholars in *madrasas* or colleges, they must have learnt at least basic reading and writing in their schooling. In other words, they must have had sufficient training in school to be literate in the classical sense of knowing how to read, and knowing how to write. These would represent one side of a broad spectrum of possibilities. On the other hand, for many more of these young boys, education was focused essentially on recitation and memorization. However, there was also a dose of basic education (spelling, arithmetic) and many of the young pupils eventually ended up following very diverse trajectories in their later lives. Their elementary education gave them a certain level of literacy, perhaps reading but no writing, or possibly a little of both.

In the peripheral areas of the Islamic world, where Islam was introduced late, or it touched only a small portion of a population, or where Arabic remained a foreign language, the situation was somewhat different. There was less emphasis on either reading or writing, and the process of learning the Qur'ān could be entirely oral, as David Skinner suggests in his study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Sierra Leone.¹⁴ In fact, at a much earlier date, the traveler Ibn Battuta, on a visit to Mali (1352–53), remarked with satisfaction that young children were forced to memorize the Qur'ān and severely punished when they failed to do so.¹⁵ Moreover, in sub-Saharan Africa, Islamization brought with it schooling and centres of learning which by the fourteenth century came to distinguish Muslim from non-Muslim populations.¹⁶ Likewise in India, where by the Moghul period (1556–1739) Islamic institutions were well established, young children were taught to read or to memorize parts of the Qur'ān without necessarily learning Arabic. Only those who continued their studies to a higher level were taught Arabic and Persian.¹⁷

Some of those for whom Arabic was their native language did not learn how to read or write, but only memorized certain texts. If we apply a broad definition to literacy, one could include listening to texts read out loud, or in this case reciting texts, as one of the forms of literacy, albeit different from other forms. Thus the basic education that was so common and so widespread, in urban and sometimes in rural Islamic societies, itself could ultimately produce a variety of forms of literacy. This diversity was due not only to the schooling of the

14 David E. Skinner, 'Islam and education in the colony and hinterland of Sierra Leone (1740–1914)', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 10, 3, 1976, p. 510.

15 Stefan Reichmuth, 'Islamic education and scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa', in Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, eds., *The history of Islam in Africa*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000, pp. 422–3.

16 Reichmuth, 'Islamic education', p. 419.

17 Claude Markovits, *Histoire de l'Inde moderne 1480–1950*, Lille: Fayard, 1994, p. 194.

young but also to the social, economic and cultural contexts that the young confronted in their later lives.

Thus, the way that they put their literacy, whatever its level was, to practice, is an essential part of our understanding of literacy during the period under study and of its social role. We can ask how did these people, who enjoyed a limited level of literacy, actually put it into practice, how did they make use of it in their work or in their lives, in other words what did literacy mean to them? This is one way of moving away from the social structure related to knowledge, which puts the learned on one side and the ignorant or the illiterate on the other. It provides a space for those who had a use for limited literacy, because it had a practical function in their lives. What emerges is a much more graduated structure in which people like the *ulama* were 'learned' in the sense of being academic and specialized, whereas many other social groups had varying abilities either in reading or in writing, or in both, and used these skills in a diverse number of ways suitable to their way of life and their abilities.

The distance remained a significant one between the high-ranking '*ulama*, devoted to religious learning, and the tradesman or craftsman, who carried out certain transactions in writing. The ordinary person who was semi-literate was cut off from academic knowledge, '*ilm*, which remained the domain of the academic community. An ordinary craftsman was unlikely to be able to read works in religious sciences produced by scholars and intended for scholars and their students. This no doubt gave the scholars the upper hand in interpreting religious knowledge. Nevertheless, there were also overlaps between traders and scholars, between those in the economic sphere and those in the world of learning. In fact, many young men who spent time in *madrasas* ended up as craftsmen or tradesmen, in some cases because the administrative or religious positions available to scholars were more limited in number than the graduates of these *madrasas*. In other cases, scholars, to make ends meet, were also engaged in some commercial activity.¹⁸

The social impact of being literate at some level or other is an important aspect of the history of literacy, and consequently one has to see what uses were made by those who had at least certain notions of reading or writing. There is sufficient evidence to show that the basic religious education offered by the channels elaborated earlier had consequences on the lives of those concerned.

Literacy and trade

The fundamental objective of basic education was to teach the young the main religious precepts, but the consequences of this education were more complex, because they could branch in different directions. In a society where trade was an important activity, literacy came into use by larger numbers of people.

One could use the argument that Brian Street put forward in his study of a contemporary Iranian town. For him, '*maktab* literacy' with its focus on memorization, nevertheless enabled men to adapt to commercial literacy. The majority of young pupils attending these

18 Nelly Hanna, *In praise of books: a cultural history of Cairo's middle class, sixteenth to eighteenth century*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003, pp. 41–4.

schools, when they went out to work in a trade or craft, could make use of what they had learnt and apply it to their professions.¹⁹

This argument is of considerable importance because it suggests that even though the primary objective of the school was a religious one, to teach the young the basics of their religion, the consequences were not entirely in the domain of religion but had an impact on the market place, since those that had some knowledge of the written word, and some familiarity with basic arithmetic, could apply it on a daily basis to their dealings. A large number of people, consequently, can be considered to have been literate in some sense or other.

Street's argument is also helpful if we want to make a link between literacy and trade. At a level other than that of fulfilling a religious duty, one can argue, with Carlo Cipolla, that one of the factors that encouraged literacy was trade. That is how Cipolla explained the level of literacy in Italy, a Catholic country, arguing against historians who had linked literacy to Protestantism.²⁰ Lawrence Stone was in fact one of many historians of literacy who considered the rise of Protestantism as a major factor behind popular literacy, as the Catholic Church feared heresy, and thus did not encourage the ordinary person to read. The Protestants, on the contrary, spread the creed by the written word. However, this explanation did not give consideration to the level of literacy in some Catholic countries like Italy.²¹ An in-depth study of literacy in Renaissance Italy between 1300 and 1600, before the emergence of Protestantism and the invention of the printing press, confirms the extent of literacy in the population of certain cities as early as the fourteenth century or before. It shows that the importance of commerce was part and parcel of the educational system. Church schools were not the only type of basic education available. Communal schools too were set up by communes with the objective of training young men to become, amongst others things, merchants and accountants.²² The schooling system was clearly affected by an economic dimension. It is consequently possible to argue that where trade was a major activity, those who made use of the written word, in some way or other, would be those that needed it to protect their business interests.

This argument can be used to explain not only why major commercial centres were more likely to have a higher literacy rate than agricultural agglomerations, but also why, at times of intensive trade, the rate of literacy might be higher. A good example of a city which flourished because of the combination of trade and of learning is Timbuktu, a great West African centre of learning, with highly educated scholars, in which trade was the economic base for scholarship. As of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, scholars from Timbuktu reached levels of prominence and fame that went well beyond their borders, and its scholars produced numerous writings in Arabic.²³

19 Brian Street, *Literacy in theory and in practice*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 179.

20 Carl F. Kaestle, 'The history of literacy and the history of readers', *Review of Research in Education*, 12, 1985, p. 12; Chartier, 'The practical impact of writing', p. 119.

21 Stone, 'Literacy and education in England', pp. 82–3.

22 Paul E. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: literacy and learning, 1300–1600*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, pp. 6 and 22.

23 Nehemia Levtzion, 'The eighteenth century: background to the Islamic revolutions in West Africa', in Nehemiah Levtzion and John O. Voll, eds., *Eighteenth-century renewal and reform in Islam*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987, pp. 24, 28; John O. Hunwick, *Arabic literature of Africa: the writings of Western Sudanic Africa*, Leiden: Brill, 2003, pp. 8–11.

Likewise, in the fourteenth century, Jean-Claude Garcin has shown that the Upper Egyptian town of Qus, a major stop on the Red Sea trade route, flourished as a centre of learning, where prominent scholars gathered and important *madrasas* were founded. At the moment when this trade route was diverted, and Qus lost the commercial importance that was the source of its wealth, its educational structures also collapsed.²⁴

Thus, the history of literacy did not follow the same path everywhere. Regions with strong trading activity might bear more similarities to each other with regards to popular literacy, while in regions where Protestants were dominant, popular literacy could be linked to religion. Consequently it should not be surprising to include in the same zone Italy, in the north, which had close trading relations for a long time with parts of the Islamic world, and Egypt and Syria, in the south, since there were parallel histories of literacy. This issue deserves to be further explored because it could create cracks in the wall of the 'great divide' between the west and the east.

One could put forward arguments to show that the literacy rate was often related to how intensive trade was. For example the work of Adam Sabra has shown a considerable increase in the number of elementary schools in the Mamluk period in Cairo, roughly corresponding to the period of its domination of the Red Sea spice trade. His study of *waqf* deeds between 1300 and 1517 shows that at least forty-six Qur'ānic schools were established in Cairo. Sabra's graph has fifty-two *kuttabs* for 1,176 students.²⁵ Studies of eighteenth-century Cairo, a period of the expansion of the coffee trade and of intense commercial activity, likewise indicate large numbers of new schools appearing. My estimations indicate that, with regard to the late eighteenth century, the number of elementary schools in relation to the total population of the city show that about a third of the male population had been through these schools.²⁶ Similar calculations could probably be made for other cities.

This matter can be examined from another angle. Many of the private documents or deeds that have survived over the centuries are commercial in their content. For instance a collection of medieval deeds recently uncovered in Ardabil, Iran, dating from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, are for the most part private deeds related to transactions between individuals, such as the purchase of property.²⁷ As a matter of fact, one of the earliest letters found – in seventh-century Egypt this time – was written by a merchant.²⁸ It is also in Egypt, a crossroads between the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, and the trans-Saharan trades, that the most important collections of documents, whether private letters or deeds and transactions, have come down to us. There is a voluminous number of letters dating from an early

24 Jean-Claude Garcin, *Un centre musulman de la Haute-Égypte médiévale: Qus*, Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 1976, pp. 287–357.

25 Adam Sabra, *Poverty and charity in medieval Islam Mamluk Egypt, 1250–1517*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 80–3.

26 Nelly Hanna, 'Culture in Ottoman Egypt', in M. W. Daly, ed., *The Cambridge history of Egypt, vol. 2, modern Egypt from 1517 to the end of the twentieth century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 101–2.

27 Monika Gronke, 'Les notables iraniens à l'époque mongole', in Yusuf Ragib, ed., *Documents de l'Islam médiéval: nouvelles perspectives de recherche*, Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1991, pp. 117–22.

28 Yusuf Ragib, 'La plus ancienne lettre arabe de marchand', in Yusuf Ragib, ed., *Documents de l'Islam médiéval: nouvelles perspectives de recherche*, Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1991, pp. 1–10.

period, which formed the basis of S. D. Goitein's work on the Jewish community.²⁹ The equally voluminous papyrus collections, some of which date from the later period, are yet to be fully exploited by social historians, as are the archives from specific digs in various regions.³⁰ This again suggests how closely literacy and writing were linked to trade and commerce.

It is also likely that the intensification of international trade from the sixteenth century onward had an impact on literacy in those regions most affected by this trade, as for instance in the Eastern Mediterranean. Andre Raymond's work has shown a steady increase in the number of new elementary schools founded in Cairo during the early eighteenth century. This increase chronologically corresponds to a period of intense trading in Yemeni coffee, which transited through Cairo on its way to numerous other Mediterranean destinations.³¹

Other factors behind literacy

Other reasons than trade and commerce were the motivation for an emphasis on basic education at a given time. An increase in schools could be a reflection of a growing urban population, or in other words, it answered a specific social need. But it could also be understood as a more political process, undertaken by the ruling elite for any number of reasons. The construction of public monuments as a form of charity was a way of creating consensus and projecting a certain public image, regardless of population growth or of the demand for schooling. It was thus a political act. But since the *waqf* foundations of these schools offered pupils financial incentives, like the distribution of food and clothing, they would still attract students to attend. Pious foundations were, thus, used as a mechanism for the spread of education, and where they were frequently set up by rulers or ruling classes, for political or other motivations, there could be an impact on literacy.

Literacy was given a push forward when a more religious society emerged at a particular point in time. Niezen provides an example of such a trend in his study of Wahhabism in West Africa, which, he argues, attempted to revitalize religion through the promotion of literacy.³² Reform movements may have had similar effects in other regions. In other parts of West Africa, notably in eighteenth-century Sierra Leone, the establishment of schools and of mosques by incoming traders and scholars often had the objective of promoting Islam among the indigenous populations. Thus, it was part of a process of conversion.³³

29 S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean society: the Jewish communities of the Arab world as portrayed in the documents of the Cairo Geniza*, Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1967–88.

30 Li Guo, 'Arabic documents from the Red Sea port of Qusair in the seventh/thirteenth century', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 58, 3, 1999, pp. 161–90, and 60, 2, 2001, pp. 81–116; see also Hanna, *In praise of books*, pp. 55–6.

31 Jack Goldstone, *Revolution and rebellion in the early modern world*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 386–7; Hanna, *In praise of books*, pp. 61–2.

32 R. W. Niezen, 'Hot literacy in cold societies: a comparative study of the sacred value of writing', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 33, 2, 1991, pp. 228–9.

33 Skinner, 'Islam and education', pp. 501–4.

Literacy and legal culture

Another factor worthy of further scholarly investigation, because it could constitute an important moment in the history of literacy, is the development and the expansion of a legal culture. Legal documents have had an importance in Islamic societies for a long time, a fact that is easily attested by the numerous collections that have survived in many parts of the world. Especially important are *waqf* documents, a *waqf* being on principle endowed in perpetuity, so that the possession of *waqf* documents was essential for future claims or disputes. As David Powers has clearly shown in his study of Maliki *waqfs* in North Africa and Spain (tenth to sixteenth centuries), at a time when there were no institutional records of births, deaths and property transactions, family archives were of great importance, as *waqf* disputes could last over generations.³⁴

During certain periods, the document played a more prominent role and affected various groups in society. One could in fact argue that there was a link between literacy in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries and the emergence of what one could call a legalistic culture. This development, especially associated with the Ottoman Empire from the fifteenth century, occurred as the empire was developing its great bureaucratic tradition, the judiciary being a part of this development. Legal culture was thus partly linked to the expansion of the Ottoman court system, and the great weight that the state gave it. In addition, the courts, rather than relying fully on the oral testimony of witnesses in order to obtain evidence, also allowed written documents to be used as evidence.³⁵ This was an incentive to safeguard the documents relevant to a property or business.

The responsibilities and the competences of the courts and the *qadis* (judges) were, moreover, likewise expanded. For the first time, for instance, people had to register their marriage contracts in court. Islamic law recognizes oral contracts as long as there are witnesses, so that having to put a marriage contract on paper was an innovation. Further evidence for this expansion lies in the thousands of court registers that are still extant for many towns and cities in all the parts of the Ottoman Empire. This enhanced legalistic culture pushed more people to make greater use of the written document.

Certainly, this need to protect one's right was, for some people, an incentive to achieve a certain level of literacy. Once one had a number of documents in one's possession, a marriage contract, a property deed for one's house, a business partnership with a colleague, it became imperative to have, as a basic minimum, the ability to decipher the meaning of the document, and to read the names inscribed in it.

Many a time, individuals could find themselves in a position in which they had to be in possession of documents, or at least in which written proof strengthened their position. These conditions could entice people to learn to read or to decipher their contents. The examples are numerous. When the Ottomans entered Egypt (1517) the period that followed was one of great confusion, as the historian Ibn Iyas narrates. The Ottomans wanted to inspect the land registers and the *waqf* registers. As for private urban property, people were asked to show

34 David Powers, 'The Maliki family endowment: legal norms and social practices', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 25, 3, 1993, pp. 389–90.

35 Bogac Ergene, 'Evidence in Ottoman courts: oral and written documentation in early-modern courts of Islamic law', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 124, 3, 2004, pp. 11–12.

their deeds of ownership in order to protect their homes.³⁶ This was also true of smaller towns. The studies by Ronald Jennings on towns like Qaysari in Anatolia in the seventeenth century suggest that even people who did not have extensive property resorted to using written documents to present to the court as evidence.³⁷

Moreover, routine matters pertaining to daily affairs were often recorded in court registers. Again and again, these records provide anecdotal material that confirms that many ordinary people were eager to have documents for one thing or another. Even though oral testimony remained primordial, it appears that people often came to court with documents that supported their claims. And although this was usually linked to the sale or rent of property, the use of the written document as testimony was prevalent in many other domains. One of these domains concerned personal status, important because it touched on those other than property-owning social groups. The purposes were multiple.

The court records of seventeenth-century Cairo show that a large number of 'ordinary' people, rather than only those who owned property or those long-distance merchants dealing in large volumes of merchandise, had recourse to dealing with documents. Craftsmen and tradesmen, for example, might record their daily affairs on paper. When the raw material was divided in the guild of sesame oil producers, the guild head had a copy, and the guild members another copy, of the list of guild members who received their share in sesame seeds. Thus recording things on paper was part of a routine. When a flax oil presser bought flax seeds from the rural producer, he signed a paper where the amounts owed were recorded. The registers contain innumerable examples of small deals of this nature. A plaintiff could, if he so desired, get copies of a deed that was recorded in the register against the payment of a sum of money to the court.

There were various other ways in which guilds members made use of paper and the written word. The guild of cotton makers and sellers (*taifa al-qattanin*) had a guild *waqf*, and a *shaykh* was made responsible for keeping its written records in order and up to date.³⁸ Was this *shaykh* doing the job because no guild member could write or make the necessary calculations of expenditures and revenues? Or did the cotton weavers read but not write? Either possibility is plausible. This kind of court case, of which many examples survive, is indicative of the importance of the written word among craftsmen and artisans.

Interestingly, whereas these cases suggest that there were business interests to protect, other cases show that written deeds were used for matters that were not connected to vital business interest. It was not uncommon for a prostitute to declare officially in court that she had repented of her sinful life. One sees this kind of deed more frequently in the port towns of Cairo, Bulaq and old Cairo, where transitory populations of sailors and traders were numerous. A case dated 1079 AH (1668 CE), for instance, shows that a certain Karima al-Mahallawi came to court to complain against a local official who was accusing her of prostitution, whereas she had a deed in her hand proving her repentance.³⁹

36 Ibn Iyas, *Bada'i al-zuhur fi waqa'i al-duhur*, Muhammad Mustafa, ed., Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1961, vol. 5, pp. 188–9.

37 Ronald Jennings, 'Limitations of the judicial powers of the kadi in 17th c. Ottoman Kayseri', *Studia Islamica*, 50, 1979, pp. 173–4.

38 Court of Bab Sharia, register 637, case 334 dated 1146/1733, p. 136.

39 Court of Bulaq, register 51, case 1285 dated 1079/1668, p. 557.

In other words this deed was in her possession, and she was ready to show it when she was threatened.

The possession of deeds did not necessarily mean that the persons who had them could read them in their entirety. Some people may have had this ability, while others may have ‘deciphered’ the contents, or may have been able to read a few words, enough to distinguish between a marriage contract and the sale of a house. Others still might need to resort to another person to do the reading for them. We also have evidence from these records that literacy among craftsmen and tradesmen was not limited to the ability to read, since some of them also had the ability to write. References in court cases to craftsmen using writing are not rare. For example, the head of the guild of oil pressers (*shaykh taifa al-masaraniya*) Hijazi Ali Abul Fuz in 1034 AH (1624 CE), when he took a loan from a merchant, wrote a declaration in ‘his own handwriting’ to this effect in the merchant’s *daftar* or register.⁴⁰ This is an indication of the diverse levels of literacy that the *kuttab/maktab* elementary school system could produce.

These cases, reflecting conditions in seventeenth-century Cairo, were not unique. In many other towns and cities in the Ottoman Empire, parallels could be found, whether in Syria or Anatolia. They are significant at more than one level. On the one hand, the social strata that made use of deeds and documents included members of the middle strata, tradesmen and craftsmen, that is, persons of a somewhat lower status than the merchants whose correspondence in the Geniza documents was studied by D. S. Goitein. This could point to a degree of popularization in the utilization of deeds. On the other hand, the nature or subject matter of these deeds was very diverse. For simple people, at the middle to lower scales of the social structure, to be acquiring deeds or documents for matters of more or less importance was one of the manifestations of a spreading legal culture. It indicates that legal culture penetrated lower down the social scale to people other than academicians, administrators, or men of letters. It had in fact become a commonplace practice among significant portions of the middle strata to acquire written documents.⁴¹

One can, moreover, observe the impact of this legal culture on the courts themselves, through the language that the court records occasionally use. In general, court scribes made use of strict legal formulas in the way that a deed was written and in the language that was used for the different types of cases. Occasionally, however, in the midst of these legal formulas, the direct speech of the plaintiffs appears, in its vernacular form. It is recorded in the deed, creating a contrast between the spoken word, as it was expressed by a claimant or litigant, and the traditional legal formulas.

Clearly, these conditions, whether religious, economic or cultural, had a varied and diverse impact on the popularization of reading and writing. Of those who were in some sense literate, whether affected by commercial culture or legal culture, or for other reasons, one can try to find out what level of literacy some of them reached. For instance could they write, and how did they use their reading abilities? Did they use writing as a means of communication, especially with those people whose professions required the use of writing, that is, scholars or bureaucrats?

40 Court of Bab Ali register 106, case 1006, dated 1034/1624, p. 283.

41 Regarding the use of cheap European paper see Hanna, *In praise of books*, pp. 81–9.

Elementary schooling, trade and the development of a legal culture have been identified as factors that could help to bring about a level of literacy among certain sectors of populations. They affected people who wanted to learn the basic precepts of Islam, those whose work required the use of writing, reading or written documents for the purpose of carrying out business or protecting their interests. The focus is on a kind of literacy that had a specific objective, or that would be used in particular contexts. In some urban areas, a significant portion of the population, men at least, was affected.

Literacy and writing

There were others, fewer in number, whose link to the written word had additional dimensions, less dictated by religious duty or material necessities. Recent studies of probate records have explored the possession of books in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Although book production for academic circles had always been voluminous, it appears that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a significant number of people who owned books were not part of the world of the academy. They included merchants and traders, and occasionally artisans and craftsmen. In a study of inheritance records of early-eighteenth-century Damascus, Colette Establet and Jean-Paul Pascual estimated that one out of every five houses in this city had books. Book owners included textile merchants, soap merchants, weavers, dyers of cloth and tailors.⁴² A similar trend can be observed in Cairo in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where one also finds many traders, craftsmen and merchants who possessed books.

One reason that can explain this trend was that many books, according to the prices provided in probate records, were relatively inexpensive.⁴³ Elsewhere, I have explained the expansion of book ownership by the greater availability of cheap paper. Paper production in Europe, an important source for the importation of paper in the Eastern Mediterranean, increased dramatically as a result of the establishment of printing, and resulted in decreased paper prices. Imports from Gujarat in India to the Ottoman Empire after the fifteenth century likewise played an important role in its availability.⁴⁴

There are other ways in which we can observe the way in which literacy was put into practice, presumably by persons with exposure in an elementary school or other less formal channel of education. One of these is letter writing. Letters are important for our purposes because they show a written form of communication between individuals. Nevertheless, this has not been explored by social historians writing about Arab or Islamic societies, with the exception of the Geniza documents. Collections of letters do exist, coming mostly from Egypt, and to a lesser extent from Syria. They are clearly a formidable mine of information,

42 Colette Establet and Jean-Paul Pascual, 'Les livres des gens à Damas vers 1700', *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 87–88, 1999 (Livres et lecture dans le monde ottoman), p. 147.

43 Hanna, *In praise of books*, pp. 91–3.

44 A. Rahman, 'Paper technology in India', in A. Rahman, ed., *History of Indian science, technology and culture, AD 1000–1800*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 264–6.

whether the letters were exchanged between traders on their business deals, or were private letters sent to family members.⁴⁵ Most of these collections are still, by and large, unpublished, such as the Vienna National Library, which has the largest collection of Egyptian papyrus in the world, including some dated to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Therefore, until we have a better idea of what these collections contain, and until further research in the field is undertaken, it is difficult at this point to formulate any conclusion on their historical development.

The study of letter writing can be useful since letters are indicators of literacy put into practice. One significant dimension can be explored by considering the language used. If one is interested in a process of popularization, then it is those letters written in sub-standard language that are of particular significance. They are the letters that were written by people who had not studied in an institution of higher learning (a *madrasa*) or who were not part of the scholarly professions. These letters are consequently indicators that persons with a restricted education were making use of writing.

Among the letters that have reached us, the ones of a more personal nature, and those showing spontaneity of expression, are also of great interest. Werner Diem has published the undated letter of a distraught wife, who wrote to her husband to express her great pain and distress at finding out that he had taken another woman, in spite of his promises to her, and in spite of the hopes that she had pinned on him. As one might expect, neither the proper form of language nor the 'correct' vocabulary is followed in this letter. The language used is not the colloquial output of the educated person who turns to write in the spoken language because it is closer to the subject she is writing about, but the grammatically incorrect language of a person with limited education, whose knowledge of writing is restricted.⁴⁶ The letters that Diem published go up to the fifteenth century, but there are lesser-known collections from the later period that we still need to explore.⁴⁷

In addition to these letters, which shed light on aspects of literacy, another genre of writing has recently attracted the attention of a number of historians of the late medieval and early modern periods. These are the narratives of people who write diaries or agendas of their lives or activities, often personal, and at times intimate, in nature. Their interest lies in the use that they make of writing as a means of self-expression. A number of these have been uncovered, written by middle-strata bureaucrats, lower-ranking religious officials, or the like. Here writing has another purpose, notably one of putting down on paper thoughts, inner feelings, anxieties, and the like. These writings, in the words of a recent study, mirror the profound changes of the early modern period.⁴⁸ In the context of the study of the history of literacy, these writings are significant insofar as they could be considered to

45 Werner Diem, *Arabische Geschäftsbriefe des 10. bis 14. Jahrhunderts aus der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Wien*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1995; and *Arabische Privatbriefe des 9. bis 15. Jahrhunderts aus der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Wien*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996, pp. 53–5.

46 Diem, *Arabische Privatbriefe*, pp. 53–5.

47 Muhibb al-Din al-Muhibbi, 'Kitab nuzhat al-nufus wal-albab fi mukatabat al-muhibb lil-ahbab', manuscript in al-Azhar University, Cairo, no. 7116; Nasir Ibrahim Abaza, *Al-mamalik al-Misriyya wal-Fransis: murasalat mamlukiya Fransiya 1800–1801*, forthcoming.

48 Derin Terzioglu, 'Man in the image of God in the image of the times: Sufi self narratives and the diary of Niyazi-i Misri (1618–1694)', *Studia Islamica*, 94, 2002, p. 164.

be an extension in the uses and functions of writing, an expansion in the practice of literacy and of written communication. Often these writings show a certain intimacy, the writer expressing private thoughts or feelings, much as we find in some of the letters that have reached us.

Also worthy of our attention are those writings that deal, usually in part, with the details of day-to-day life. Some of these go into the realm of the private and of the inner person.⁴⁹ Others dwell on down-to-earth, banal, everyday experiences, narrating in some detail what the writer ate for dinner, the illness of a family member, a miscarriage, or a visit paid to a friend or relative.⁵⁰ We also find an elderly man complaining of impotence and of solitude,⁵¹ or a detainee complaining of his confinement.⁵² One of the most voluminous, which has the great merit of having been fully published in three volumes, is the work of Abu al-Tawq of Syria (d. 1509), who wrote day-to-day entries in his writings, which included public, professional, family and personal events. As far as we can tell, these are the writings of a literate class, but who were, for the most part, of modest means, rather than elite ulama.

Together these writings represent an additional dimension in the practice of literacy and of the relationship between the writer and the written word. What this also means for our history of literacy is that, in a society which placed considerable importance on oral culture, these various forms of writing of a personal, private, or family nature constitute a means of non-oral communication worthy of our consideration. These people put their literacy to practice, but many of them made either occasional or frequent use of language close to the spoken word, or of vocabulary that came from colloquial speech. The informal nature of the text allowed for the integration of the oral into the written, even if this meant that the language used was poor or ungrammatical, in some cases.

Even if the level of writing in these personal and private texts was sometimes informal, at other times close to colloquial forms, and at times even made use of sub-standard language, on the whole the personal narratives and other genres of private writing often show a level of sophistication that is absent in the various forms of commercial writing, like the acknowledgement of a debt or other such deeds. These personal texts or narratives reflect a different use of the written word, certainly not as widespread as other uses of writing discussed earlier. One could place them at the top of the hierarchy of those writings which were not specifically the product of members of the academic community of scholars and students. As such they can be seen as one more manifestation of diversity in the uses of writing.

Conclusion

Local specificities and historical factors seem to play a major role in the way the history of literacy developed. Some factors, notably the religious factor, were widespread in much

49 Dwight F. Reynolds, *Interpreting the self, autobiography in the Arabic literary tradition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, pp. 80–5.

50 *Journal d'Ahmad Ibn Tawq 834/1430–915/150; la vie quotidienne à Damas à la fin de l'époque mamelouke*, Sheikh Jaafar al-Muhajer, ed., Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 2000, vol. 1, pp. 340–1, 374–5.

51 Hanna, *In praise of books*, pp. 168–9.

52 Terzioglu, 'Man in the image of God', p. 151.

of the Islamic world. Other factors, like the level of trade, the availability of paper, for instance, were specific to certain times and regions. The confluence of several of these factors meant that in certain regions popular literacy was more widespread than in others.

The Eastern Mediterranean was possibly one of the regions with a more developed literacy among its urban populations, because of the confluence of a number of factors. This region had a long history of writing, going back centuries, in some cases to pre-Islamic times, as the voluminous papyrus collections indicate. Furthermore, from the thirteenth century onwards, there was extensive funding, through the *waqf* system, for schools. Finally, its position on major trade routes was important.

Likewise in certain parts of India, although sources are much less abundant, studies have shown that urban populations in some regions had largely attained some literacy within the time frame 1300–1800.⁵³ Literacy, in some form or other, was fairly widespread, since it touched not only scholars and bureaucrats, but also merchants and traders. Thus, before the appearance of missionary schools or state-run schools, there were certain locations, usually urban, which had relatively widespread literacy.

Within the borders of the Islamic world, many regions remain outside the purview of literacy studies. Some of these may have been non-literate, and consequently left no records for the period 1300–1800. This could be true, notably, of rural and tribal regions which were not closely connected to large bureaucratic centres, to trading or commercial centres, or to centres of learning. Others may have had forms of literacy but few sources that historians can make use of. Our picture of the Islamic world thus remains somewhat incomplete and patchy.

There were among these various societies many different reasons to become literate and numerous ways in which this literacy was put to practice. Literacy could be limited to specific domains, or it could have multiple purposes in a person's life, especially in those regions where literacy was more developed.

In most of these societies where literacy (reading or writing) was prominent, oral culture continued to play an important role, in the transmission of learning and in a literature which remained oral. This is as true of the great bureaucratic centres, which depended heavily on writing, as it is of other regions with less literate societies. Much of the learning process in institutions of higher education depended on oral transmission and oral literature was an important part of cultural exchange, even amongst the highly educated. In other words, many of these cultures used both oral and written forms of expression and communication, and both were vitally important, in different ways. The complex relationship between oral and written, and the impact of the increased use of the written word on oral culture, are subjects that have as yet to be investigated.

Once one takes into consideration the geographical diversities and the different paths of historical developments of different regions, the picture of literacy that emerges is a complex and multi-faceted one, in which the diversities in time and place cannot be easily enumerated in a few pages. There is room to understand literacy in the context of the social and

53 Kathleen Gough, 'Literacy in Kerala', in Jack Goody, ed., *Literacy in traditional societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968, pp. 136–9.

cultural conditions around it and one can see both their impact on literacy and the impact of literacy on them. There is also room for comparative studies between the history of literacy in the Islamic world, Europe and elsewhere. On all these issues, and more, there is much that remains for future studies.

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