This surprising study draws together the disparate fields of postcolonial theory and book history in a challenging and illuminating way.

Robert Fraser proposes that we now look beyond the traditional methods of the Anglo-European bibliographic paradigm, and learn to appreciate instead the diversity of shapes that verbal expression has assumed across different societies. This change of attitude will encourage students and researchers to question developmentally conceived models of communication, and move instead to a re-formulation of just what is meant by a book, an author, a text.

Fraser illustrates his combined approach with comparative case studies of print, script and speech cultures in South Asia and Africa, before panning out to examine conflicts and paradoxes arising in parallel contexts. The re-orientation of approach and the freshness of view offered by this volume will foster understanding and creative collaboration between scholars of different outlooks, while offering a radical critique to those identified in its concluding section as purveyors of global literary power.

Robert Fraser has published books on Proust, J. G. Frazer, Ben Okri, African poetry and postcolonial fiction. He is co-editor with Mary Hammond of the two-volume Books Without Borders (2008), and also enjoys a parallel career as a biographer. Professor of English at the Open University, he is Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and of the Royal Asiatic Society.
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In memoriam

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No one person can – or will soon – write a comprehensive history of the book from a postcolonial point of view. The subject is too protean, the readjustments required too radical for this moment in time. What I have attempted to do in this modest volume is to set a course by which others may later choose to steer. To adapt a title of Kant’s, I have tried to provide my readers – specialists, students and freelance scholars – with a Prolegomenon to Any Future Set of Histories of Textual Transmission in the pre-imperial, imperial and post-imperial worlds – and principally those of Africa and South Asia.

Some preliminary remarks are in order. I am concerned here with the book in the broadest meaning of the term, especially in so far as it draws on the parallel communicative modes of spoken expression and script. The phenomenon of hypertext lies largely outside my scope, though I have tried to keep it in mind as a field of contemporary comparison. Throughout I have endeavoured none the less to avoid privileging the print medium above others: much of my argument, indeed, concerns the parity between different communicative regimes. I have also tried to avoid over-privileging literary works in the narrow sense above other sorts of book, and works in English above those in other – specifically indigenous – languages. The result – though I hope concise – is a comparative study with a fairly broad sweep. In it, I should add, the term postcolonial refers to the historical vantage point from which the material is regarded rather than to a period under particular consideration, still less to an ideology of redress.

Though my examples are selective, and mostly drawn from two distinct geographical regions, it should be obvious that I am conducting an argument potentially of far wider application. Here then is an essay in method that derives its justification from a plea of necessity. Though the subject of book history enjoys diverse roots – several French, some British and American – its main guiding lights have to date been drawn from half a millennium’s experience of print culture in the West. Admittedly, over the last
few years, the discipline has demonstrated a cautious willingness to peer beyond this spacious lair. Hitherto, however, it has principally conducted this inquiry with outdated – and fairly parochial – equipment. Properly to account for the origins, development and proliferation of verbal diffusion in a global environment we require a number of drastic readjustments of vision, entailing for example a radical questioning of what we mean by a book, or indeed by a text. We will also need a broader approach to issues such as production, distribution, exchange, readership, audience and verbal authority than any so far espoused.

I have an ulterior motive, which is to explain book history to postcolonial theorists, and postcoloniality to book historians: two groups whose mutual incompatibility remains a scandal among the nations. In effecting this introduction, I hope I will be forgiven for explaining the basic assumptions of each specialism to the other in what may sometimes appear over-zealous terms. Despite my presumption, my hope is that – somewhere between the lofts of literary theory and the vaults of book history – my theme will find its allotted place.
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I would like to thank Priya Joshi for permission to reproduce Figure 3.1, which derives from her book In Another Country, and Jason Glavy for the use of his online version of Kisimi Kasara’s Mende script in Figure 4.1, and Simon Ager, who produced the chart for Figure 4.1 and kindly made the files available for printing purposes. The title page of A Grammar of the Bengal Language, issued in Calcutta in 1778 by Nathaniel Halhed and others, is reproduced as Figure 1.1 by permission of the British Library. I salute my friends Suman Gupta and Tapan Basu and their assistants Shvetal Vyas, Arunima Paul, Viahhal Parel, Akhil Katyal and Shivani Mutneja, participants at the Open University’s London workshop on ‘Contemporary
Indian Literature for the Indian Market’ in June 2007, for broadening my appreciation of the current publishing and bookselling scene in the subcontinent. Lastly interviews with a number of Indian and African publishers in situ, notably with Ritu Menon, Rukun Advani, Sachin Rastogi and Ntone Edjabe, helped me assess some of the varied challenges facing the book trade in today’s globalised postcolonial world. I am deeply grateful to my courteous and efficient copy-editor, Christopher Feeney. I owe a further and special debt of gratitude to four learnèd pandits: Harish Trivedi, Javed Majeed, Shafquat Towheed and Rob Francis. Where wisdom is bliss, ’tis folly to ignore.
Abbreviations of archival sources

Archival sources are cited in the text, with the following abbreviations to indicate the location of the relevant archive.

Angus  The Angus Library at Regent’s Park College, Oxford
As. Soc  The Asiatic Society of Bengal, Kolkata
Balme  The Balme Library in the University at Ghana, Legon
BL  The British Library, London
BM  The British Museum
Cory  The Cory Library, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa
NAG  The National Archives of Ghana, Accra
NAI  The Indian National Archives, New Delhi
NASA  The National Archives of South Africa, Cape Town
NELM  The National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown, South Africa
Nelson  The Nelson Archive, Edinburgh University Library
NLSA  The National Library of South Africa, Cape Town
OIOC  The Oriental and India Office Collections at the British Library
OUP  The archives of Oxford University Press, Oxford
Seramp  Serampore College Library, Srirampur, India
SOAS  The manuscript collections of the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London
Part I

Repositionings
A GRAMMAR OF THE BENGAL LANGUAGE

BY

NATHANIEL BRASSEY HALHED.

PRINTED AT

HOOGLY IN BENGAL

M DCC LXXVIII.
1 The problematics of print

A tale of two cities

Were you to sit amid the faded Georgian splendour of the Asiatic Society in Kolkata, or else amid the austere postmodern architecture of the Rare Books Room of the British Library in London, you might well find yourself staring at the very same page. The quarto volume that contains it is quite slender – a mere 216 pages of main text with 30 pages of prelims – but it could scarcely be of greater interest. What you would be looking at in either city is the title page of the very first book in the world to employ moveable Bangla – that is Bengali – type. *A Grammar of the Bengal Language* was compiled at Hoogly (by the banks of the Hoogly river in present-day Kolkata) in 1778 by Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, a twenty-seven-year-old ‘writer’ or probationer clerk in the East India Company. Halhed has signed the page near the top, so that the tail of the ‘d’ at the end of his surname curls across the first block of Bangla characters. That twin copies of his work can yield similar sensations in time zones set five and a half hours apart may seem slightly uncanny. In Kolkata you would need to shut your ears to the traffic in Park Street alongside the building, in London to amicable blandishments issuing from the Tannoy above your head. But lift the tome before you to eye level, and in either location you would notice, just beneath that trailing ‘d’, tiny indentations biting into the coarse, yellowing paper.

Considering the fact that two and a quarter centuries have passed since the book appeared, it is surprising how much has been learned about these marks. They were made by a font designed by Charles Wilkins, an accomplished linguist and writer to the Company, and cast by Panchanana Karmakara, local pandit, blacksmith and descendant of a long line of calligraphers and metallurgists. The expense of turning out both the typeface and the volume – 30,000 rupees, as Halhed’s biographer tells us (Rocher, 1983: 76) – was met by Warren Hastings, Governor-General of British India, who then claimed reimbursement from the Directors.
This was evidently a collaborative publishing enterprise, and the people involved had diverse though intersecting careers. Karmakara the technician, for example, had grown up in Triveni in nearby Hooghli. Within a year of finishing work on Halhed’s *Grammar* he was to be appointed as one of the Company’s official print technicians. At the turn of the century he would join a famous press established by the Baptist Missionary Society in Danish-administered Serampore (Srirampur), fourteen miles upstream from Calcutta, where he would set up and oversee its type-foundry. There he evolved two different – and increasingly sophisticated – Bangla fonts for use in translations of the Bible, and a font in Devanagari – the script in which Sanskrit and Hindi are commonly written – employing 700 different ‘sorts’ or characters. Karmakara is also credited with the creation of fonts in Arabic, Persian, Marathi, Telegu, Burmese, Chinese and seven other tongues. He died in 1804, to be succeeded at Serampore by his son-in-law, Manohara, who would remain there for forty productive years (Ross, 1999: 46).

In the meantime Halhed had returned to England, where he became a Member of Parliament and took up residence in Charles Street, Mayfair. In 1785 Wilkins would publish an English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the classics of Hindu spirituality. The translation would carry a Preface by Hastings dated 4 October 1784, and two years later both were translated into French. After adopting (and possibly fathering) a son by Jane Austen’s aunt Philadelphia, Hastings himself would be called back to Britain, where – partly as a result of revelations by the then nascent Calcutta English-language press – he was notoriously to be impeached for corruption in 1788.

The Wilkins *Bhagavad Gita* was published in London, Halhed’s *Grammar* in Calcutta but, partly because the decisions of the Company were minuted in India, we know a lot more about the production of the second. During the monsoon of 1778 it was run off on loose sheets in an edition of 1,000 copies. Five hundred sets were held for distribution in India once they had been bound, an operation which the printer advised the bookseller to delay for several months until the dry season. The Asiatic Society’s copy seems to have been presented by Hastings himself. (His slightly grubby portrait in oils hangs in the library lobby just above the lockers and, as you deposit your belongings there at the beginning of a day’s archival work, before him you must bow.) Twenty-five of the remaining sets were mailed to Halhed in Cape Town, where he was putting up for a few weeks on his way back to England (Rocher, 1983: 75). The remainder were shipped direct to London, followed later by two pages of errata that were to be bound in immediately after the Preface, together with an additional erratum slip Halhed himself had since added.
The problematics of print

If the title page and printer’s instructions tell you something about the book’s production, Halhed’s Preface discloses its purpose:

The wisdom of the British Parliament has within these few years taken a decisive part in the internal policy and civil administration of its Asiatic territories; and more particularly in the Kingdom of Bengal, where by the most formal act of authority in the establishment of a Supreme Court of Justice, it has professedly incorporated with the British Empire. Much, however, remains for the completion of the good work; and we may reasonably presume that one of the most important desiderata is the cultivation of a right understanding between the Government and its subjects: between the Natives of Europe who are to rule, and the Inhabitants of India who are to obey. The Romans, a people of little learning and less taste, had no sooner conquered Greece than they applied themselves to the study of Greek. They adopted its laws even before they could read them, and civilized themselves in subduing their enemies. The English, who have made so capital a progress in the Polite Arts, and who are masters of Bengal, may, with more ease and greater propriety, add its language to their acquisitions: that they may explain the benevolent principles of that legislation whose decrees they enforce; that they may convince where they command; and be at once the dispensers of Laws and Science to an extensive nation.

(Halhed, 1778: i–ii)

The language is confident, but it is also slightly ambiguous. The power relations invoked, for one thing, are quite explicit. The English will ‘command’, and the Bengalis will ‘obey’. Yet it is the British who are described as ‘natives’, and in the process of learning a foreign language they are compared to the ancient Romans, who, whilst doing the equivalent, were once ‘civilized’ by the Greeks. Perhaps the most expressive phrase describes the process of assimilating Bengali, presented as an act of direct, politically motivated ‘acquisition’.

Halhed’s primer occupies an iconic place in the print culture of Eastern India, and in 1978 the bicentenary of its publication was celebrated publicly in Calcutta. (It was ignored in England, even in the seaside town of Lymington in the New Forest Halhed had represented as MP, having purchased the then pocket borough for £114 4s 5d.) And certainly, from a postcolonial vantage point, it may seem as if the publication of Halhed’s Grammar was a decisive historical event. It represented, after all, the first primer printed on Asian soil for one of the most widely used languages on earth, spoken now by two hundred million people, the language of the literary polymath Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), and the poets Jibanananda Das (1899–1954)
and Buddhadev Bhose (1908–74), the language in which the texts of the national anthems of both Bangladesh and India were both initially written, even if the latter is sung in Hindi translation. Undeniably, too, the book involved at the time a substantial advance in non-Western typography. The only previous attempt to print some sort of Bengali grammar and dictionary had been made in Lisbon thirty-five years earlier. But its compiler, an Augustinian monk called Fr Manuel de Assumpção, had been forced to transliterate everything into Roman type. This had the advantage of highlighting lexical affinities between Indo-European elements in Bengali and de Assumpção’s own Portuguese (on page 592 the Bengali for *dente* or tooth, for example, is given as *dant* or *dont*). But Bengali is a syllabic rather than an alphabetical language, and this early attempt had proved wildly inaccurate.

Later, the British printer William Bolts acquired a copy (BL 16741) for 7s 6d, and on that basis attempted to learn the language and contrive his own Bangla font. This experiment had been, in Halhed’s words later, an ‘egregious’ failure (Ross, 1999: 78). After making a nuisance of himself for six years, Bolts was deported from Bengal.

So Halhed, Wilkins and Karmakara with their purpose-made Bangla type represented a vast improvement. The question they pose for us is this: did their book, and the many others printed in Indian typefaces in the decades that followed, represent a mere technical advance, or did they also, as some have insisted, involve a fundamental shift, even a revolution, in South Asian culture? It is not difficult to adduce arguments in support of the second, more dramatic, view. Two years after the American Declaration of Independence, eleven before the French Revolution, here apparently was a revolution-in-the-making of an equally formidable kind: the exporting of the European Enlightenment, the commodification of a language, the introduction to the east coast of India of a transforming technology of textual reproduction, even arguably the onset of ‘Modernity’ itself. Print history in South Asia, broken and intermittent before, can be traced in a continuous line from experiments such as Halhed’s, Wilkins’s and Karmakara’s in late eighteenth-century Bengal. The resulting transformation in modes of communication seemingly gave rise, not simply to instructional treatises such as theirs, but to the ‘publication’ of sacred books in myriads of traditions, and the issuing of newspapers in very many languages from centres all over India. It enabled the dissemination of multiplying literary and academic genres, and of scholarly journals and monographs, across great distances. It even – so this argument might run – eventually gave rise to today’s burgeoning and global artistic, political and scientific scene. Looking further ahead, one might – if so minded – attribute to the influence of these events two and a quarter centuries ago recent trends such as the emergence of the subcontinent as an international location for out-sourced printing,
or the indispensable place South Asia has come to assume in the matrix of world communications.

The purpose of this and the next chapter is to investigate such claims and, with them, the problematic position occupied by the technology of print in the deep history of postcolonial cultures.

Ex Africa semper aliquid novi

One person who seems to have been convinced of the transforming potential of print for his own culture was a Setswana neighbour of the Protestant missionary Robert Moffat (1795–1883) in Kuruman, South Africa. In 1831, fifty-three years after – and 6,000 miles to the southwest of – Halhed’s and Karmakara’s experiments in Bengal, he was shown a page that Moffat’s assistant Samuel Edwards had just run off on a wooden hand press. The press had newly been acquired in Cape Town, transported upcountry by wagon, and promptly dubbed by the locals ‘Segatisho’ (literally a *sharp impression*). The neighbour’s reactions were observed by Moffat himself, who recorded that he

bounded into the village, showing it to everyone that he met and asserting that Mr Edwards had made it in a moment, with a round black hammer (a printer’s ball), and a shake of the arm. The description of such a juggling process soon brought a crowd to the *segatisho*, which has since proved an auxiliary to our cause.

(Moffat, 1846: 563)

‘Segatisho’ is now in the museum at Kuruman, and is still occasionally used. Moffat and his wife had brought her up that very year along with some boxes of (Roman) type and a supply of paper and ink donated by the British and Foreign Bible Society. Soon they were putting her to good use printing parts of the Old Testament in Setswana, followed in 1848 by Moffat’s own translation of Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the first full prose text completed at the mission. Entitled *Loeto Loa ga Mokereseti* (Christian’s Journey), this is the earliest version of Bunyan’s classic in any language of mainland Africa, although in 1835 a translation had been made on the island of Madagascar (see p. 109 below) and printed in Malagasy using Roman type.

There is, however, an important distinction to be drawn between the Malagasy *Pilgrim* and Moffat’s, one that can perhaps best be explained by taking a look at a scene near the beginning of the book where, just before setting out on his travels, ‘Christian’ encounters ‘Evangelist’. Bunyan’s own intentions may be glimpsed in a woodcut accompanying the third English edition of 1688 in which Evangelist holds a parchment scroll and
Christian clutches a printed book, while the two men absorbedly talk and point towards the sky. Four varieties of human communication – speech, gesture, script and print – are thus brought together in one image (Figure 1.2). Now by 1835 Malagasy had been written for many centuries in Arabic script. Setswana, on the other hand, had needed to be supplied with a provisional writing system before any text could be printed. So, whereas the translators in Madagascar had at their disposal ready-made terms for both writing and reading as well as speaking and signing (even if they had freshly to transliterate them into Roman letters), Moffat was obliged to

Figure 1.2  Speech, gesture, script, print: woodcut from the third edition of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (London: For Nathaniel Ponder at the Peacock in the Poultry near Cornhill, 1688).
convey the former activities by adapting and extending existing vocabulary in a language that possessed no traditional orthography, and could as yet be written only in the somewhat approximate spelling system he and his local informants had been developing since 1826. In her seminal book *The Portable Bunyan* (2005) Isabel Hofmeyr has granted us an exposition of the significance of *Pilgrim’s Progress* for cultural identity formation in Africa. It may be useful, however, to spend a moment thinking through the formative role that this classic text, together with other early missionary publications, once played in the very terms in which people came to verbalise modes of textual transmission.

In his translation of *Pilgrim* Moffat is, for instance, sometimes able to rely on vocabulary his congregation had heard from their Dutch neighbours to the south. When, right at the beginning of Bunyan’s dream, Christian is revealed crying ‘as he read’ his Bible, his book is accordingly referred to with the hybrid term *buka*. Elsewhere the translator has sometimes had to improvise: the sentence continues *mi a buisa mo go coma, mi o rile a buisa a lela*: ‘he caused it to speak, and as it spoke, he wept’ (Moffat, 1848: 1). Equivalent challenges of diction faced the Bible translations published at Kuruman at this period. Setswana had soon gleaned *Bibela* from Dutch *Bijbel*, but it still required terms for the primary elements of scriptural arrangement: volume, chapter, sectional reading. So a volume became *kabo* or a portion; a chapter became *kgaolo*, a district or area; while for sections the compositors imported the typographic sign ¶. Some decisions were easy: the two books of Kings became *bukas* of *Lagosi* or Chiefs. Eden became *Edena*; Abraham *Aberahame*; Bathsheeba *Bere-sheba*. For God, however, Moffat fell back on *Modomo* (later spelt *Molimo*), who, as he bitterly complained in his journals, corresponded to a tricksome local spirit. Forty years earlier in Bengal, the Baptist missionary William Carey had wrestled with Genesis 1:21 in which God creates whales, since no whales swam in the Bay of Bengal. The Setswana Genesis of 1851 solved this problem by making the whale *leruarua*, a sea-monster. A greater challenge arrived in the Gospel of St John 19:22 where Pontius Pilate, justifying the notice he has fixed to Christ’s cross ironically identifying him as King of the Jews, insists Ο γέγραφα, γέγραφα (‘What I have written, I have written’). As Setswana contained no words for writing, the Kuruman missionaries improvised with: *Se ki se kuarileñ, ki se kuarile* (‘What I have counted out, I have counted out’).

At Kuruman we are therefore faced, not simply with the introduction of one technology into this part of Africa – that is the press – but with the simultaneous inception of two revolutionary undertakings: script and print together. A few weeks were all that had intervened between Moffat’s first crude experiments with Setswana orthography and his commission of a printed spelling book, published in London in 1826. This basic manual had been a spur to his
own further linguistic efforts, but it was also to serve as a practical guide for the mission’s compositors, once they had acquired a press. In effect, they were not printing a written language, but reproducing a language that they had written down experimentally, specifically so that they might print it.

Superficially therefore, in these historic if awkward interventions in southern Africa, we see the emergence of transformations just as radical as – perhaps more radical than – any that had taken place in Bengal, transformations that would eventually give rise to the growth of published communications throughout the hinterland of southern Africa. Multiplied many times across the continent, such changes might even be said to represent the beginnings of African publishing as we know it today. But, there again, if we were to construct an account of historical causality along these very lines, how honest would we be to the facts? Were these Halhed or Moffat ‘moments’ authentic revolutions, or were they accidental mutations? How much did such initiatives owe, not so much to the intervention of certain resourceful individuals, as to the pre-existent seedbed of local cultures? In his Preface Halhed prates of ‘acquisition’, and in his journals Moffat speaks of ‘conversion’, but in 1778 or 1831 what or who was acquiring or converting what or whom? Was print annexing Bengali and Setswana, or were Bengali and Setswana annexing print? These are not straightforward questions. Nor is the mindset that puts them at all simple.

The lure of a paradigm

Such queries are not, of course, new. Over the last half-century or so, the evolution of print culture (styled by Benedict Anderson ‘print capitalism’) out of earlier stages of human communication has been of much interest to scholars working in a number of different though inter-connected disciplines: students of the media, social anthropologists, historians of the book. Though each has brought to the subject their own angle and expertise, with hindsight it is possible to observe the persistence of certain assumptions. At the dawn of pre-history, so the received wisdom has run, all human society was governed by speech and gesture. At a given moment – differently timed in each context, but similar in its basic effects – script then emerged. With it came the possibility of correspondence between individuals across distant regions, of literature and sacred texts, even – in the view of certain more adventurous theorists – a revolution in the way in which people organised their thoughts, remembered the past and acted in concert. The Ages of Speech and Script were then superseded by the Age of Print, the consequences of which were apparently even more extreme.

Thus has the sequential trilogy of speech, script, print firmly established itself as a paradigm for human culture. A recent expression of it occurs in
David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery’s *An Introduction to Book History* of 2005, with its successive chapters headed ‘From Orality to Literacy’ and ‘The Coming of Print’. But the paradigm itself goes back decades: at least as far as McLuhan’s high-profile study *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and Ong’s influential *Orality and Literacy* (1982). All societies, these commentators maintained, were once elusively oral, their sole means of communication and dissemination being speech and allied forms such as ritual and gesture. With the introduction of writing, a radical ‘shift’ is supposed to have occurred in the relationship between societies and texts, and across a range of cognitive fields. There followed the invention of print, attributed in this account to the invention of woodblock engraving in China in the eighth century CE, and in Europe to Gutenberg’s introduction of the ‘alphabetical letterpress’ (Ong, 1982: 118) during the fifteenth century. Elsewhere, so it was maintained (and so Finkelstein and McCleery follow) print arrived through a process of diffusion, usually via colonial contact. McLuhan further argued that the global society of his own time was progressing beyond print culture to a fourth stage, sometimes called ‘secondary orality’, corresponding to the growth of electronic media worldwide.

All sorts of radical changes in consciousness have been attributed to the event that Elizabeth Eisenstein styled the ‘Print Revolution’, that Finkelstein and McCleery term the ‘Coming of Print’, and that we have already dubbed the ‘Halhed’ or ‘Moffat moment’. According to Marshal McLuhan these included ‘the stripping and the interruption of the interplay of tactile synaesthesia’ characteristic of pre-print man (1962: 54), the destruction of the acoustic universe, the invention of perspective, the doctrine of scriptural infal-libility, the Infinitesimal Calculus, the inception of national literatures, exams and fixed orthographies and dictionaries. Many of these claims were grossly inflated, and several hard to understand, given that McLuhan often failed to make it clear whether these supposed innovations were the result of literacy or of print or, indeed, sometimes even to distinguish between the two.

McLuhan also largely failed to distinguish between the effects of different print technologies – hand letterpress, say, and stereotyping or lithography. There was, however, a far more fundamental flaw running through his thinking, one not always recognised at the time. McLuhan wrote from an exceptionally fixed and limited cultural perspective. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* contains this magisterially chauvinist remark:

> Since the object of the present book is to discern the origins and modes of the Gutenberg configuration of events, it will be well to consider the effects of the alphabet on native populations today. For such as they *are* in relation to the phonetic alphabet, so we once were.

(McLuhan, 1962: 18)
A nexus of unexamined and authoritarian assumptions underlies such apparent relativism. Who are these they, and who this we? Are none of the ‘they’ (whoever these are) to be conceived of as readers of McLuhan’s book? Who, in any case, are these ‘native populations’? Everybody is a native of somewhere – McLuhan himself of Edmonton, Alberta – and his use of the term is far less sophisticated than even Halhed’s. In practice, of course, McLuhan means colonised (and therefore, to his Canadian eyes, backward) peoples. McLuhan and his followers tended furthermore to link print technology to alphabetical literacy, as if the invention of reading, writing and print had happened everywhere in a logical, pre-determined sequence. McLuhan himself took it more or less for granted that modern communications had arrived at one place and period, Renaissance Europe. From this temporal and geographical heartland it had supposedly spread out, inexorably and with the same general effects. This was the famous Gutenberg Galaxy, expanding through real time, the configurations of which McLuhan set out to illustrate through the application of some sort of literary-diagnostic version of the Doppler Lightshift. With this unwarranted and expansionist view came another: that the writing and printing systems adopted everywhere have been alphabetic (because writing, it seemed to such thinkers, is of necessity thus), and that all alphabets are phonetic.

Such were the views stemming from an approach to culture that was comparative, evolutionary and diffusionist. The first two of these two tendencies is of more assistance to us than the second and third. As Jack Goody, an anthropologist with a background in literary study, was later to remark, ‘any resort to comparative work necessarily raises the evolutionary issue’ (Goody, 1977: 2). There were, however, more fruitful ways of approaching this issue than hierarchy, hegemony or, indeed, any orchestrated pattern of ‘development’. In place of such panaceas, Goody himself focused on what he termed ‘technologies of the intellect’ (ibid.: 10). By this he meant the processes through which peoples in divers times and places have learned to express themselves, the methods they have adopted to embody such self-expression and the varied consequences of these choices.

There were, it seemed to Goody, crossover points between successive technologies, most interesting of which was the inception of literacy. In his book The Domestication of the Savage Mind (1977) he surveyed a gamut of cultural effects attributable to the introduction of writing into previously oral cultures, concentrating on changes in the nature of texts. Literacy, he thought, involved the arrival of lists and inventories (of which many of the earliest texts surviving from, say, Sumeria or Egypt, consist) and of recipes, prescriptions or reports on experiments, as in Greece. Where reality had been immediate and concrete, abstractions now made their appearance. Written genealogies emerged which, instead of serving the needs of the moment like
so many orally preserved pedigrees, purported to establish historical fact. Where texts – poems, sagas, plays – had been recited out loud, silent reading now gradually took over. And as communications systems became more complex, alphabets crystallised. A mythological way of interpreting the past gave way to annals strictly compiled and regularly revised.

Nowadays these claims again seem sweeping, but they had the undoubted effect of distinguishing the effects of writing from those of print. Thus, when Elizabeth Eisenstein turned to the inception of print culture in the West in her authoritative *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979), she was able to observe with clarity the distinctive and unprecedented transformations in intellectual dissemination arguably enabled by letterpress. For Eisenstein print was the true ‘revolution’, though its effects were quieter than had previously been thought. In the print age, she thought, alternate versions of texts, caused by overworked scribes, made way for definitive editions. Images, maps and diagrams newly abounded. The illuminations of medieval manuscripts ceded to the realistic possibilities of woodcut. Mnemonic aids now assisted memory, formalising though arguably weakening it: ‘the nature of collective memory was transferred’ (Eisenstein, 1983: 34). There occurred an explosion in knowledge and speculation, leading to a ‘wide-angled’ though sometimes ‘unfocussed’ scholarship. Accuracy became an ideal to which approximation became possible: orthographies (such as Moffat’s) or errata slips (such as Halhed’s) could be issued. A proliferation of fonts diversified presentation. Overall an increase in standardisation was apparent: in indices, in catalogues, in title pages (an innovation of print culture). The overwhelming effect, Eisenstein thought, was to arrest drift: in languages and in texts. As standard editions of works became feasible, so languages settled down into relatively fixed vernaculars in which national cultures could be enshrined. English literature; French literature; Spanish literature were some of the results in Europe.

Soon after these ideas were mooted, the American Jesuit Walter J. Ong attempted to bring together the work of McLuhan, Goody and Eisenstein in his work of synthesis *Orality and Literacy* (1982). Like McLuhan, Ong was interested in intersections between different cultural phases. Like McLuhan, too, he was concerned to extend the standard model beyond Europe to contexts where such intersections were currently observable; especially to Africa, where, he believed, literature had been introduced comparatively recently through outside agencies such as the missionary movement. As a literary critic, however, Ong was largely concerned with the repercussions of different communicative systems on form and style. As dialects gave way to grapholects so, he thought, ‘literature’ in our modern sense was born and, with it, academic study. Additive structures gave way to subordinate ones, redundancy of expression to economy. A conservative viewpoint lost
ground before a radical or sceptical one, participation before objective distancing. Print, Ong thought, ‘both reinforces and transforms the effects of writing on thought and expression’ (1982: 117). Originality was newly at a premium. Copyright established its domain; plagiarism was identified as a misdemeanour.

The universality of such diagnoses proved impressive to many, giving rise in certain academic communities to a sort of cult. Its ambitions, however, were parochial. Though the global expansion of the galaxy of communications proved an absorbing topic – even influencing the linguistics of Jacques Derrida – few of those involved in this debate possessed any firsthand knowledge of cultures beyond the West, with the exception of Goody, whose African fieldwork inevitably stressed certain locally driven preoccupations. Nor did many of these able scholars actively consider India with its centuries-long, and highly distinctive, traditions of textual transmission. Such theories as to the history of communication, moreover, pre-dated by some years the rise of postcolonial theory in the 1990s. Little attempt has since been made to bring these fields into line with one another, or to examine what effects postcolonial perceptions might have on the commonly accepted model. A lone exception has been Benedict Anderson’s seminal *Imagined Communities* (1983, 1991) with its famous view that worldwide print capitalism instilled national consciousness via a dissemination of vernaculars: in South America, in Europe and by extension in Asia and even in Africa. Such theories have proved provocative and useful. They mean little, however, until book and print history relocate themselves in an even wider geographical context, to be viewed there through critical, and postcolonial, eyes.

**Homage to a five-faced Siva**

One revealing aspect of Halhed’s sycophantic Preface to his *Grammar* is an omission: the print founder and punch-maker Panchanana Karmakara, whom it entirely fails to mention. That he played an indispensable role in the book’s production, as well as in the early history of print in Bengal, is pretty clear, however, even if Halhed himself preferred to perpetuate a heroic but extraneous myth of origin according to which Wilkins individually created Bengali typography *ex nihilo*. His praise for his countryman is profuse: ‘In a country so remote from all connection with European artists’, he fanfares, ‘he has been obliged to charge himself with the various occupations of the Metalurgist, the Engraver, the Founder and the Printer’ (Halhed, 1778: xxiv). The combination of aptitudes indicated in this encomium – acquired over a period of twelve months – would have been quite exceptional. In actual fact, as the print historian Fiona Ross has amply demonstrated (1999, 10), the task drew on the expertise and labour of at least eight different pairs of hands.
As his name indicates – since ‘Karmakara’ is none other than ‘Smith’ – Panchanana came from a hereditary caste of craftsmen. The Baptist missionary, Joshua Marshman later referred to him simply as a ‘blacksmith’, though it seems he was also skilled in general and alloy metallurgy, and in calligraphy as well. The combination of these aptitudes suggests that he was already adept at the sort of filigree metalwork that had long been practised in India and could with advantage be turned to the fresh demands of type founding. We get a fleeting glimpse of this man on page thirty-seven of Halhed’s text, where the elements of Bangla syntax are illustrated in four rhymed couplets from section seven (the drona-parva) of Kasirama Dasa’s Bengali recension of The Mahabharata, one of the classic epics of India.

Figure 1.3 represents the third of these couplet as set out in the book, with Halhed’s approximate Roman transliteration running beneath. An English verse translation might run: ‘Everyone – youths, old men and Ponchanon – all / With red-cloaked children gathered at his call.’ The name ‘Ponchaanon’ – a version of Panchanana – appears in the first line, and both imply ‘five-faceted’, referring to the five faces of the god Siva. To modern eyes the Bengali typography seems quite crude, since acceptable conventions were slowly evolving: what we are watching here, in fact, is the written transforming itself with some difficulty into the printed form. A standardised modern typesetting of the same lines would go:

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Somdoot baalik ada aar panchan
Sala shishu aail paaiya nismun
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Bearing in mind what we know about Panchanana’s background, and putting it together with our knowledge of the multiple processes involved in typecasting in 1778, it may now be helpful to bear in mind the kinds of work that went into the manufacture of the characters used in the printing of that passage, including those used for Karmakara’s name. Essentially there were six stages, each of which drew on aspects of metallurgy that had been

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Somdoot baalik ada aar panchan.
Saa bishu aail paaiya nismun.
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Figure 1.3 Couplet from Kasirama Dasa’s Mahabharata with Roman transliteration, from Halhed’s Grammar (1778), page 37.
practised in Asia and Africa, as well as Europe, for centuries. First, there was the striking of the tools: gravers (engraving instruments to cut the metal) and files. Second, the carving of ‘counter-punches’, three-dimensional reverse impressions of the hollow parts of characters, the dip in an ‘o’, the dimples in a ‘B’. Third, the creation, by Panchanana in this instance, of the all-important ‘punches’ – hard, three-dimensional mirror models of the required character – by painstakingly carving each on to the end of a shank of tempered steel. Fourth, the making of ‘matrices’ for casting, achieved by driving the punch into a softer piece of copper or brass, then filing down the edges so that it would fit comfortably into a mould. Fifth, pouring into the mould a molten mixture of lead, tin and antimony, then leaving it to set. Sixth, ‘dressing’ the piece of type thus formed, tidying it up by breaking off the ‘jet’ or excess. Once all this had been done, the character could be stored in a designated chamber in a wooden case in the print works – ‘upper case’ for capitals or ‘lower case’ for ordinary letters – so that when needed it could be selected by the compositor with his stick and placed alongside other characters, then locked into the ‘forme’ or printing surface ready for the press.

Nor was this all. Roman typography had developed in Europe in the late fifteenth century, and its rules were plainly set out in treatises such as Joseph Moxom’s *Mechanic Exercises* in the seventeenth. The printers of Bangla texts faced a much more daunting challenge, as did printers of texts in other Indian languages, whether Indo-European in origin like Marathi, or Dravidian like Malayalam in the south. Many of these tongues possess an inherent vowel that is not separately written. In Bengali it is an ‘a’, though confusingly the resulting sound is close to an open ‘o’, and not all ‘a’s’ are inherent. Its presence may be indicated by modification of the preceding consonant, through a diacritical mark (a subscript for example), or other mutation of the relevant letter. Mahabulul Haq’s guide to Bangla spelling, published in Dakha in 1991, lists 248 such ‘conjunct’ characters, swelling the writing system to in excess of 300 letters. When in the mid-twentieth century the Monotype Corporation in England devised a twelve-point Bangla font (no. 470) for use in hot-metal printing, its synopsis would amount to 343 characters, though this included punctuation marks. The typeface of 1778 possessed 200 characters: 12 vowels, 34 consonants and 154 other marks, all of which had to be made up at the forge (Ross, 1999: 20). This was no simple matter when dealing with a script as angular as Bangla.

Consider, just for illustration, the technical difficulty of reproducing Panchanana’s first name as it appears on that page in the *Grammar*, starting with the delicate butterfly-wing of the letter প, an unaspirated ‘p’. First there was the problem of making a counter-punch to match up with its irregularly shaped spaces, then of manufacturing a punch to contain the outline, followed by the hammering of the harder though still delicate counter-punch into the
punch itself to produce a matrix, into the tiny troughs of which hot metal had carefully to be poured; then the filing down of the cooled sort to maintain the precision of spider-like ascenders and descenders, and the horizontal header along the top of the character. For these tasks Karmakara would have needed every ounce of his inherited calligraphic and metallurgical skill.

Yet this was the scale of the challenge that was to face indigenous type founders the length and breadth of India as they reproduced acceptable fonts for language after language during the period up to the late nineteenth century (and in some places beyond that) when the hand press would remain the dominant technology for printing. The composing of the type into words, the printing and binding of the resulting volumes, their packaging and distribution posed further challenges, together of course with the weeks of preceding literary labour, when, as so often in this multilingual subcontinent, the book needed to be translated into parallel versions from its original text, whether that text had been in English, in an Indian language or, as in the case of the Christian Bible, in Hebrew or Greek. These were too many skills for one person to muster, and Halhed’s book – using Karmakara’s new Bangla font for its examples, and existing Roman type for the commentary – thus drew on the services of a number of specialists working in unison, as did all subsequent achievements in Bengali printing.

A few years later, the missionaries of Serampore were quite clear about the extent of their dependence on local know-how, linguistic, calligraphic and technical. Translation for a start was impossible without it. In 1815, by which time the works were employing ‘seventeen presses with workmen of every description’, together with ‘a Paper Manufactory on the spot’ (Baptist Mission, Serampore, 1815: 24), the mission could report in its *Seventh Memoir* ‘the capacity of Native youth to acquire the Hebrew language is placed beyond all dispute by the fact that there are already found many natives of India eminently skilled in Arabic, so much more complex and copious than the Hebrew. To the Greek language the *Sungskrita* [Sanskrit] scholar already has an unerring clue. No two languages of different origin resemble one another more strongly’ (ibid.: 30–1). William Carey, the founder-missionary of Serampore, and later Professor of Oriental Languages at Fort William College, had leaned on such local knowledge from the very outset. On his arrival in Calcutta in 1795, he had hired a coach, Rama Rama Vasu, to teach him Bengali. Meanwhile, with a publishing venture in view, he was negotiating for a press to be sent out from England. In the event, one could not be found, and Carey brought one for 400 rupees after reading a small advertisement in the Calcutta press. Bangla types, too, were unobtainable in England. By 1798 Carey had recognised that there was no doing without relevant local expertise. ‘I have succeeded in procuring a sum of money sufficient to get the types cast’, he then reported back to his sponsoring
society in Leicester. ‘I have found a man who can cast them, the person who casts for the Company’s press’ (Ross, 1999: 42). This man, of course, was Karmakara. The rest is publishing history.

Towards a new consensus

Just how collaborative early publishing in Bengal was, and just how many varieties of local skill it employed, can be gathered from this description of the works at Serampore in a letter of December 1811 from the foreman William Ward to his cousin William Fletcher in Derby. This was a period when Panchanana’s son-in-law Manohara was both in charge of the typefoundry and responsible for the training of apprentice technicians. His name does not appear amongst the milling and anonymous personnel described in this passage. The only individual identified, very much stage centre, is Ward himself:

Could you see your cousin in his printing-office, surrounded by forty or fifty servants, all employed in preparing the Holy Scriptures for the nations of India, you would, I am sure, be highly pleased. One man is preparing the Book of God for the learned Hindoos, in the Shanscrit [sic] language; another for the people of Bengal; another for those of Hindoostan; another for the inhabitants of Orissa; another for the Mahrattas; another for the Sikhs; another for the people of Assam; and for the Musselmen in all parts of the East, in the Persian and Hindosthanee languages; others for the Chinese; others for the Talingas; and others are soon to begin in the Cingalese, Tamul [sic] and Malayalim [sic] languages.

As you enter the office, you will see your cousin in a small room, dressed in a white jacket, reading or writing, and at the same time looking over the whole office, which is 174 feet long. The next persons you see are learned natives translating the scriptures into different languages, or correcting the proof-sheets. You walk through the office, and see laid out in cases types in Arabic, Persian, Nagaree, Talinga, Sikh, Bengalee, Mahratta, Chinese, Oriissa [Oriya], Burman, Carnata; Keshemena, Greek, Hebrew, and English. Hindoos, Muselmanns, and converted Natives are all busy: some composing, others distributing, others correcting. You next come to the presses, and see four persons throwing off the sheets of the Bible in different languages; and on the left are half a dozen Muselmanns employed in binding the scriptures for distribution; while others are folding the sheets and delivering them to the Store-keeper to be placed in the Store-room till they can be made up into volumes. This Store-room, which is 142 feet long, is filled
with shelves from side to side; upon which are laid, wrapped up, the sheets of the Bible before they are bound. You go forward, and in the room adjoining the office are the type-casters busy in preparing types in different Languages. In one corner, you see another grinding the printing ink; and in a spacious open place, walled round, you see Paper Mill; and a number of persons employed in making paper for printing the Scriptures in all the languages.

(The Baptist Magazine iv, 1812, 443–4)

It is clear from this passage that by 1811, eleven years after the establishment of the mission and its press, many segments of Serampore’s diverse community were involved in the business, and in every aspect of the trade. This is the complex, multifarious and local process that the postcolonial ironist Homi K. Bhabha, citing an incident outside Delhi five years later in his essay ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’, calls ‘the sudden fortuitous discovery of the English book’ (Bhabha, 1994: 102). The precise volume to which Bhabha seems to be referring is a translation of the New Testament into Hindi made in Serampore using one of Karmakara’s typefaces in 1816. With hindsight the dissemination via a Devanagari font struck by a Bengali technician, of a translation made from Greek by a committee of local pandits under expatriate supervision and run off by local compositors on paper from a neighbouring mill, does not look quite so English. Three months after Ward’s letter, a disastrous fire destroyed all but five of the presses and fourteen of the precious fonts. The presses were rebuilt by local carpenters, and the typefaces listed by Ward reconstituted from the three and a half tons of molten metal collected using the surviving punches and matrices the Karmakaras and their colleagues had created over the years. Within two months, the press was in business again.

We do not know quite so much about the printing works at Kuruman, but it is evident that here too there was a team effort. Local linguists were instrumental in the process of language acquisition and translation, impressing Moffat and his friends with the pithiness and vividness of the Setswana tongue. In Moffat’s unpublished notebooks (SOAS, Africa 4), there is a note on the superior brevity of Setswana to English verbs. The apostolic advice to ‘Use hospitality towards one another’ (1 Peter 4:9), for example, is given as amogelana; ‘Be kindly affectionate towards one another’ (Romans 12:10) is lo homogelanc. Moffat picked up such phrases from a succession of interpreters, using the lingua franca of Dutch. By the time the whole of the Bible was ready for production in one volume in 1857, local compositors were being used in the pressroom, and local catechists were employed for distribution. In only one respect was Kuruman fundamentally different from Serampore. Moffat had provided Setswana with a provisional script consisting of Roman letters
with a minimum of diacritical marks, such as the ~ over the nasal ‘n’ in so many word-endings. So by and large he could rely on imported types, despite the availability of local expertise in metalwork. Before purchasing his boxes of type in Cape Town in 1831, he seems seriously to have considered persuading the district metallurgists to turn out suitable typefaces for him. In his journals, and also in his book Missionary Labours (1846: 466), there is a detailed description of a local coppersmith at work. Moffat had paid him to mend some trappings from his wagon, and plied him with questions about his work. Why was he, or somebody like him, not used? The answer can be that, unlike the German one-time goldsmith Gutenberg or Halhed’s colleague Karmakara, this Setswana smith was non-literate. To involve him would have been to skip two rungs on the communications ladder, expecting a technician to turn out types in a language that he could speak, but could not as yet read.

Thus, if in South Asia the challenges facing print culture were the result of script complexity and diversification, in sub-Saharan Africa they were, to some extent at least, products of an orthography gap. Since the tenth century the Arabic script has been used widely along the Mediterranean littoral, across the Sahara and the Sahelian grasslands, around the East African coast and throughout Madagascar, both for the production of Arabic texts and for the replication of some indigenous or hybrid languages (Swahili, like Malagasy, before the nineteenth century was habitually written in Arabic letters). Beyond Muslim-influenced Africa, however, writing systems had been relatively scarce. Between the 1820s and the mid-twentieth century several assaults were made on these lacunae, both by Africans themselves and by interested outsiders. The indigenous initiatives were largely confined to West Africa, and produced a number of different writing systems, syllabic or phonetic. These were, in approximate historical order, the Vai syllabary of Liberia (1820s); the Bassa Vah system, also Liberian; the 37-letter Bété alphabet in Nigeria; the Bamum system masterminded in Cameroon by Sultan Ibrahim Njoya in the late nineteenth century; the Mende syllabary of Sierra Leone (1920s); the Kpelle syllabary of 88 graphemes invented by Chief Gbili of Sanoynya in 1935; and the N’Ko alphabet invented by Soulemanya Kante of Kankan, Guinea, in around 1946 (Dalby, 1967). All of these have given rise to written literatures, though few engaged initially with printing.

Attempts by outsiders to inscribe the spoken languages of Africa by contrast were primarily driven by a desire to produce printed books. Wary of the sort of balkanisation of writing systems to be found in South Asia, moreover, such interlopers preferred to concentrate their efforts on producing standardised alphabets with modifications on the basic Roman pattern that could be applied across the board for all African languages. The first such attempt was by the Prussian Egyptologist and linguist Karl
Richard Lepsius (1810–84), whose system of 1855 sprouted a wilderness of diacritical marks. Clumsy as it was, it proved attractive to Christian missionaries, both local and expatriate, keen to turn out devotional reading matter by the quickest practicable route. Two years later it was the Lepsius system, for example, that Ajayi Crowther, an emancipated Yoruba slave and first evangelist to the Niger, used for the first ever Igbo primer (Crowther, 1857). Lepsius continued in use until the early twentieth century, by which time his disadvantages were becoming obvious. By the First World War, Sol Plaatje (1876–1932), the veteran South African journalist, novelist and linguistic reformer, who had encountered the new science of phonetics in London, could wax scathing about the cloth-eared attempts made by Moffat and his successors to reproduce his mother-tongue Setswana through Lepsius-influenced methods (Jones, 1916). Radical reform arrived in 1927, when Diedrich Hermann Westermann (1875–1956) produced his ‘Practical Orthography for African Languages’, otherwise known as the New Script. Westermann, who had honed his skills as a linguist by working on the transliteration of Ewe in German-occupied Togo before the war, and who during the inter-war period enjoyed widespread support from several colonial governments, outlawed many of Lepsius’s symbols and simplified the whole procedure of transcription, partly to enhance inter-intelligibility, but largely to render printing more economical. His reform did not avoid controversy, mostly from enthusiasts of local authenticity worried by the ironing out of phonetic differences in so standardised a code.

I will be dealing with these matters in more detail below in Chapters 2 and 6. Suffice it to remark here that recognition of such divergent histories must perforce complicate any universalised history of the non-Western book. It also embarrasses attempts such as Bhabha’s to bring book history into line with fashionable theories of colonial interaction. Just to begin with, we are faced with two somewhat different trajectories. In one of them speech gives way to a lengthy period dominated by script, leading eventually to the inception of print. In the other, oral communication gives directly onto print, with writing appearing principally as an intermediate, instrumental mode. We must, however, strongly resist any temptation to identify these two tendencies too absolutely with geography. Africa, as we have already seen, possessed some lively pre-print script traditions, though they were largely confined to specific locales: the Mediterranean coast and the Maghreb; Egypt; Ethiopia; Somalia; the Indian ocean seaboard; Zanzibar; Madagascar; the sub-Saharan Sahel. And even today there remain areas of the Indian subcontinent where long-established languages are still to be written down, as is the case with certain ‘tribal’ communities in Bengal, and to a greater extent in Orissa. The position a given society occupies along any purported speech–script–print spectrum is thus little reflection of its position
on the map. Nor is any evolutionary paradigm of development between distinct and separable ‘stages’ any longer acceptable. Instead we are faced with a multivalent process that spirals off in several different directions, and in which many different combinations of orality, literacy and print culture are both possible and recorded as matters of fact.

The ancestries of print

Moreover, even where we are able to give approximate dates to times of transition between, say, a lively script culture and the inception of letterpress, the continuity involved is frequently as impressive as any apparent innovation. New technologies often rely on antecedent ones in convoluted, occasionally almost invisible ways. In any society some residual bedrock of skills exists on which any further structure of communicative efficacy will of necessity be built. Recently Finkelstein and McCleery have drawn on the researches of the German scholar Jan-Dirk Müller (1994) to take issue with Elizabeth Eisenstein’s notion of a Print Revolution in fifteenth-century Europe, conceding that ‘The application of moveable types by Gutenberg was, in some ways, no more than the adaptation of old materials and practices.’ In particular ‘the experience of the goldsmith, the writing-master, and the woodcutter all converged to create a new technology’ (2005: 50–1). To be fair to Eisenstein, the term ‘adaptation’ is hers, but the conversion of pre-existent skills to the evolving science of print is also very pertinent to the diverse publishing histories of the non-West. Gutenberg had been a goldsmith, Panchanana Karmakara a versatile metallurgist, and no doubt the team of typecasters whom Manohara later recruited and trained at Serampore enjoyed a similar professional background. The so-called Asian print revolution deployed their skills, just as surely as it would later draw on a wide range of firmly established crafts and technologies across Asia and Africa.

Print did not therefore emerge against a background of technological nullity, but drew on an existing base of skills and mechanical arts that fed and sustained it. Metalwork, both cast and wrought, was well developed in South Asia many centuries before the first presses were set up. Just how close this existing skills base came to actual printing techniques can be inferred, for example, from the range of activities associated with the shrine of the Hindu monk Chaitanya (1486–1533), long established at Navadvip in central Bengal. Here metal stamps of wrought copper were regularly used by pilgrims to impress in vermilion ink on their skin or clothing designs associated with the saint, many of which carried verbal incantations or messages (a fine collection of such was donated to the British Museum by Robin Hawkins between 1896 and 1903). Such practices were evidently less common in regions of Africa that possessed no orthographic system to
begin with. Yet metalwork was well-established in Africa, especially in the west, notably in Benin, where the *cire perdue* method of cast metalwork had been expertly practised since at least the fifteenth century. The occasional proximity of traditional stamping or painting to eventual printing, however, is strongly suggested by traditions such as the decoration of *ulu* designs on the skin, and occasionally too on inner or outer walls of houses, in the Igbo-speaking areas of what was to become Eastern Nigeria.

Nor was this technical interdependence confined to the early years of printing by letterpress in the ages of Wilkins or Moffat. As over the decades successive technologies arose, each in its turn drew on an existing base of acquired and inherited skills, giving rise in the process to a fertile marriage between home-grown and imported expertise. To take but one example to which I shall return in Chapter 5, the efflorescence of lithography – a technique which originated in Europe in the 1820s and migrated rapidly to South Asia and thence the Middle East – drew fairly immediately on centuries-old indigenous traditions of calligraphy and manuscript production. The result, as we shall see, was a revolution that was to give rise to cultural configurations, and to political alignments, of urgent relevance even today.

With due deference to the complexity of the problem, and at the risk of some simplification, it might therefore be helpful at this point to illustrate some patterns of dependence between local conditions, external interventions and evolving modes of communication in the form of comparative charts. I have drawn up two, the first more or less satisfactory for South Asia, the second more or less satisfactory for Africa, and will be referring back to both during the course of this book (Figures 1.4 and 1.5). The findings cover a number of historical periods from the inception of print to digital and electronic methods. In each case I have set the results out in three columns. The first represents – in Goody’s terminology – ‘technologies of the intellect’, that is indigenous and mutating techniques of creation, reproduction or circulation, while the third lists those external factors and influences which have contributed over time to successive phases of communication in the regions of the world covered. As may be expected, in each case the first column is longer than the third. In between in each chart lies a second column designating the communication shifts resulting from these twin inputs. The arrows are intended to suggest cross-paths of influence:

It may be helpful for readers to glance back at these at strategic points in ensuing chapters. Both of them, it should be noted, take the long view, and describe changes in some cases stretching over centuries, in others telescoped into a few decades. Sometimes, you notice, I have adopted the gradualistic term ‘evolution’, on other occasions the more abrupt and dramatic term ‘revolution’, a difference of usage that I hope to explain along the way.
Neither word, however, should be understood as implying a uniform direction of progress, or even necessarily of improvement. As I shall make abundantly clear, there have always been losses as well as gains. At all stages, however, pre-conditions were present which influenced the course and direction of further development. Just to confine oneself to the substance of the present chapter, it is clear that, well before the appearance of a Halhed or a Moffat in India or Africa, fields of local resourcefulness lay ready for seeding into print technology. The adaptations involved were many, various and always vigorously localised. To forsake the regional approach suggested above, one should note, however, that there are constants that appear in the historical record time and time again. One might mention *inter alia*, and occurring across vast swaths of such pre-colonial, colonial and even postcolonial worlds:

1 The adaptation of indigenous metalworking skills to the type-foundry and, thence, to the setting of books in hand, and later, power presses.
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2 The adaptation of indigenous phonetic systems to mimetic elements in the hit-and-miss – and at first necessarily experimental – construction of orthographies.

3 The adaptation of special and organisational properties of manuscripts, where and when these existed, to the physical layout and ‘look’ of a printed page.

4 The adaptation of indigenous calligraphic techniques to writing in wax and stone, and thence to the production of – especially vernacular – books by the lithographic process (to which I shall come in Chapter 5).

5 The adaptation (especially in Africa, Java, etc.) of traditional techniques of stamping on cloth, or else of Batik, to the illustrative content of printed books.

6 The adaptation of stamping with brass seals (as with the Akan in West Africa) to the making, and use, of metal fonts.

7 The adaptation of traditional avenues of trade to the advertisement, circulation, merchandising and dissemination of printed texts.

8 The adaptation of woodcarving to the illustrative techniques of woodcuts. This proved especially important in forested parts of Africa.

Figure 1.5 The roots of print culture (sub-Saharan Africa).
Over large sections of the apposite regions, the adaptation of habits connected with the compilation and circulation of manuscripts to the developments of book markets as conventionally understood.

Last, but of profound significance to literary historians, the crystallisation from a molten and creative mass of inherited intellectual and artistic traditions – narrative, poetic, dramatic, theological, philosophical and scientific – of the notion of a fixed and definable ‘text’, editions of which might be physically mass produced, then sold, catalogued, shelved, and afterwards even studied.

The second, ninth and tenth of these elements represent especially significant conditions transitional towards – and leading well up to – the international book trade. All three involve the phenomenon of script entailed by, but not exclusive to, the production and consumption of manuscripts, a dispensation either ignored or sidelined by quite a lot of existing book history. For this reason I intend to examine each of these factors in turn in the next chapter.
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