

**Excerpts from the short story “The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling”
by Ted Chiang**

It was the summer of Jijingi’s thirteenth year when a European came to live in the village. The dusty harmattan winds had just begun blowing from the north when Sabe, the elder who was regarded as chief by all the local families, made the announcement.

Everyone’s initial reaction was alarm, of course. “What have we done wrong?” Jijingi’s father asked Sabe.

Europeans had first come to Tivland many years ago, and while some elders said one day they’d leave and life would return to the ways of the past, until that day arrived it was necessary for the Tiv to get along with them. This had meant many changes in the way the Tiv did things, but it had never meant Europeans living among them before. The usual reason for Europeans to come to the village was to collect taxes for the roads they had built; they visited some clans more often because the people refused to pay taxes, but that hadn’t happened in the Shangev clan. Sabe and the other clan elders had agreed that paying the taxes was the best strategy.

Sabe told everyone not to worry. “This European is a missionary; that means all he does is pray. He has no authority to punish us, but our making him welcome will please the men in the administration.”

He ordered two huts built for the missionary, a sleeping hut and a reception hut. Over the course of the next several days everyone took time off from harvesting the guinea-corn to help lay bricks, sink posts into the ground, weave grass into thatch for the roof. It was during the final step, pounding the floor, that the missionary arrived. His porters appeared first, the boxes they carried visible from a distance as they threaded their way between the cassava fields; the missionary himself was the last to appear, apparently exhausted even though he carried nothing. His name was Moseby, and he thanked everyone who had worked on the huts. He tried to help, but it quickly became clear that he didn’t know how to do anything, so eventually he just sat in the shade of a locust bean tree and wiped his head with a piece of cloth.

Jijingi watched the missionary with curiosity. The man opened one of his boxes and took out what at first looked like a block of wood, but then he split it open and Jijingi realized it was a tightly bound sheaf of papers. Jijingi had seen paper before; when the Europeans collected taxes, they gave paper in return so that the village had proof of what they’d paid. But the paper that the missionary was looking at was obviously of a different sort, and must have had some other purpose.

The man noticed Jijingi looking at him, and invited him to come closer. “My name is Moseby,” he said. “What is your name?”

"I am Jijingi, and my father is Orga of the Shangev clan."

Moseby spread open the sheaf of paper and gestured toward it. "Have you heard the story of Adam?" he asked. "Adam was the first man. We are all children of Adam."

"Here we are descendants of Shangev," said Jijingi. "And everyone in Tivland is a descendant of Tiv."

"Yes, but your ancestor Tiv was descended from Adam, just as my ancestors were. We are all brothers. Do you understand?"

The missionary spoke as if his tongue were too large for his mouth, but Jijingi could tell what he was saying. "Yes, I understand."

Moseby smiled, and pointed at the paper. "This paper tells the story of Adam."

"How can paper tell a story?"

"It is an art that we Europeans know. When a man speaks, we make marks on the paper. When another man looks at the paper later, he sees the marks and knows what sounds the first man made. In that way the second man can hear what the first man said."

Jijingi remembered something his father had told him about old Gbegba, who was the most skilled in bushcraft. "Where you or I would see nothing but some disturbed grass, he can see that a leopard had killed a cane rat at that spot and carried it off," his father said. Gbegba was able to look at the ground and know what had happened even though he had not been present. This art of the Europeans must be similar: those who were skilled in interpreting the marks could hear a story even if they hadn't been there when it was told.

"Tell me the story that the paper tells," he said.

Moseby told him a story about Adam and his wife being tricked by a snake. Then he asked Jijingi, "How do you like it?"

"You're a poor storyteller, but the story was interesting enough."

Moseby laughed. "You are right, I am not good at the Tiv language. But this is a good story. It is the oldest story we have. It was first told long before your ancestor Tiv was born."

Jijingi was dubious. "That paper can't be so old."

"No, this paper is not. But the marks on it were copied from older paper. And those

marks were copied from older paper. And so forth many times.”

That would be impressive, if true. Jijingi liked stories, and older stories were often the best. “How many stories do you have there?”

“Very many.” Moseby flipped through the sheaf of papers, and Jijingi could see each sheet was covered with marks from edge to edge; there must be many, many stories there.

“This art you spoke of, interpreting marks on paper; is it only for Europeans?” “No,

I can teach it to you. Would you like that?”

#

Moseby gave a sermon every seven days, on the day devoted to resting and brewing and drinking beer. He seemed to disapprove of the beer drinking, but he didn’t want to speak on one of the days of work, so the day of beer brewing was the only one left. He talked about the European god, and told people that following his rules would improve their lives, but his explanations of how that would do so weren’t particularly persuasive.

But Moseby also had some skill at dispensing medicine, and he was willing to learn how to work in the fields, so gradually people grew more accepting of him, and Jijingi’s father let him visit Moseby occasionally to learn the art of writing. Moseby offered to teach the other children as well, and for a time Jijingi’s age-mates came along, mostly to prove to each other that they weren’t afraid of being near a European. Before long the other boys grew bored and left, but because Jijingi remained interested in writing and his father thought it would keep the Europeans happy, he was eventually permitted to go every day.

Moseby explained to Jijingi how each sound a person spoke could be indicated with different marks on the paper. The marks were arranged in rows like plants in a field; you looked at the marks as if you were walking down a row, made the sound each mark indicated, and you would find yourself speaking what the original person had said.

Moseby showed him how to make each of the different marks on a sheet of paper, using a tiny wooden rod that had a core of soot.

In a typical lesson, Moseby would speak, and then write what he had said: “When night comes I shall sleep.” Tugh mba a ile yo me yav. “There are two persons.” Ioruv mban mba uhar. Jijingi carefully copied the writing on his sheet of paper, and when he was done, Moseby would look at it.

“Very good. But you need to leave spaces when you write.”

“I have.” Jijingi pointed at the gap between each row.

“No, that is not what I mean. Do you see the spaces within each line?” He pointed at his own paper.

Jijingi understood. “Your marks are clumped together, while mine are arranged evenly.”

“These are not just clumps of marks. They are... I do not know what you call them.” He picked up a thin sheaf of paper from his table and flipped through it. “I do not see it here. Where I come from, we call them ‘words.’ When we write, we leave spaces between the words.”

“But what are words?”

“How can I explain it?” He thought a moment. “If you speak slowly, you pause very briefly after each word. That’s why we leave a space in those places when we write. Like this: How. Many. Years. Old. Are. You?” He wrote on his paper as he spoke, leaving a space every time he paused: Anyom a ou kuma a me?

“But you speak slowly because you’re a foreigner. I’m Tiv, so I don’t pause when I speak. Shouldn’t my writing be the same?”

“It does not matter how fast you speak. Words are the same whether you speak quickly or slowly.”

“Then why did you say you pause after each word?”

“That is the easiest way to find them. Try saying this very slowly.” He pointed at what he’d just written.

Jijingi spoke very slowly, the way a man might when trying to hide his drunkenness.

“Why is there no space in between an and yom?”

“Anyom is one word. You do not pause in the middle of it.” “But

I wouldn’t pause after anyom either.”

Moseby sighed. “I will think more about how to explain what I mean. For now, just leave spaces in the places where I leave spaces.”

What a strange art writing was. When sowing a field, it was best to have the seed yams spaced evenly; Jijingi’s father would have beaten him if he’d clumped the yams the way the Moseby clumped his marks on paper. But he had resolved to learn this art as best he could, and if that meant clumping his marks, he would do so.

It was only many lessons later that Jijingi finally understood where he should leave spaces, and what Moseby meant when he said “word.” You could not find the places where words began and ended by listening. The sounds a person made while speaking were as smooth and unbroken as the hide of a goat’s leg, but the words were like the bones underneath the meat, and the space between them was the joint where you’d cut if you wanted to separate it into pieces. By leaving spaces when he wrote, Moseby was making visible the bones in what he said. Jijingi realized that, if he thought hard about it, he was now able to identify the words when people spoke in an ordinary conversation. The sounds that came from a person’s mouth hadn’t changed, but he understood them differently; he was aware of the pieces from which the whole was made. He himself had been speaking in words all along. He just hadn’t known it until now.

#

Jijingi wanted to write down some of the stories of where the Tiv people came from, but the storytellers spoke rapidly, and he wasn’t able to write fast enough to keep up with them. Moseby said he would get better with practice, but Jijingi despaired that he’d ever become fast enough.

Then, one summer a European woman named Reiss came to visit the village. Moseby said she was “a person who learns about other people” but could not explain what that meant, only that she wanted to learn about Tivland. She asked questions of everyone, not just the elders but young men, too, even women and children, and she wrote down everything they told her. She didn’t try to get anyone to adopt European practices; where Moseby had insisted that there were no such thing as curses and that everything was God’s will, Reiss asked about how curses worked, and listened attentively to explanations of how your kin on your father’s side could curse you while your kin on your mother’s side could protect you from curses.

One evening Kokwa, the best storyteller in the village, told the story of how the Tiv people split into different lineages, and Reiss had written it down exactly as he told it. Later she had recopied the story using a machine she poked at noisily with her fingers, so that she had a copy that was clean and easy to read. When Jijingi asked if she would make another copy for him, she agreed, much to his excitement.

The paper version of the story was curiously disappointing. Jijingi remembered that when he had first learned about writing, he’d imagined it would enable him to see a storytelling performance as vividly as if he were there. But writing didn’t do that. When Kokwa told the story, he didn’t merely use words; he used the sound of his voice, the movement of his hands, the light in his eyes. He told you the story with his whole body, and you understood it the same way. None of that was captured on paper; only the bare words could be written down. And reading just the words gave you only a hint of the experience of listening to Kokwa himself, as if one were licking the pot in which okra had been cooked instead of eating the okra itself.

Jijingi was still glad to have the paper version, and would read it from time to time. It was a good story, worthy of being recorded on paper. Not everything written on paper was so worthy. During his sermons Moseby would read aloud stories from his book, and they were often good stories, but he also read aloud words he had written down just a few days before, and those were often not stories at all, merely claims that learning more about the European god would improve the lives of the Tiv people.

One day, when Moseby had been eloquent, Jijingi complimented him. "I know you think highly of all your sermons, but today's sermon was a good one."

"Thank you," said Moseby, smiling. After a moment, he asked, "Why do you say I think highly of all my sermons?"

"Because you expect that people will want to read them many years from now." "I don't expect that. What makes you think that?"

"You write them all down before you even deliver them. Before even one person has heard a sermon, you have written it down for future generations."

Moseby laughed. "No, that is not why I write them down."

"Why, then?" He knew it wasn't for people far away to read them, because sometimes messengers came to the village to deliver paper to Moseby, and he never sent his sermons back with them.

"I write the words down so I do not forget what I want to say when I give the sermon."

"How could you forget what you want to say? You and I are speaking right now, and neither of us needs paper to do so."

"A sermon is different from conversation." Moseby paused to consider. "I want to be sure I give my sermons as well as possible. I won't forget what I want to say, but I might forget the best way to say it. If I write it down, I don't have to worry. But writing the words down does more than help me remember. It helps me think."

"How does writing help you think?"

"That is a good question," he said. "It is strange, isn't it? I do not know how to explain it, but writing helps me decide what I want to say. Where I come from, there's a very old proverb: *verba volant, scripta manent*. In Tiv you would say, 'spoken words fly away, written words remain.' Does that make sense?"

“Yes,” Jijingi said, just to be polite; it made no sense at all. The missionary wasn’t old enough to be senile, but his memory must be terrible and he didn’t want to admit it. Jijingi told his age-mates about this, and they joked about it amongst themselves for days. Whenever they exchanged gossip, they would add, “Will you remember that? This will help you,” and mimic Moseby writing at his table.

On an evening the following year, Kokwa announced he would tell the story of how the Tiv split into different lineages. Jijingi brought out the paper version he had, so he could read the story at the same time Kokwa told it. Sometimes he could follow along, but it was often confusing because Kokwa’s words didn’t match what was written on the paper. After Kokwa was finished, Jijingi said to him, “You didn’t tell the story the same way you told it last year.”

“Nonsense,” said Kokwa. “When I tell a story it doesn’t change, no matter how much time passes. Ask me to tell it twenty years from today, and I will tell it exactly the same.” Jijingi pointed at the paper he held. “This paper is the story you told last year, and there were many differences.” He picked one he remembered. “Last time you said, ‘the Uyengi captured the women and children and carried them off as slaves.’ This time you said, ‘they made slaves of the women, but they did not stop there: they even made slaves of the children.’”

“That’s the same.”

“It is the same story, but you’ve changed the way you tell it.”

“No,” said Kokwa, “I told it just as I told it before.”

Jijingi didn’t want to try to explain what words were. Instead he said, “If you told it as you did before, you would say ‘the Uyengi captured the women and children and carried them off as slaves’ every time.”

For a moment Kokwa stared at him, and then he laughed. “Is this what you think is important, now that you’ve learned the art of writing?”

Sabe, who had been listening to them, chided Kokwa. “It’s not your place to judge Jijingi. The hare favors one food, the hippo favors another. Let each spend his time as he pleases.”

“Of course, Sabe, of course,” said Kokwa, but he threw a derisive glance at Jijingi. Afterwards, Jijingi remembered the proverb Moseby had mentioned. Even though Kokwa was telling the same story, he might arrange the words differently each time he told it; he was skilled enough as a storyteller that the arrangement of words didn’t matter. It was different for Moseby, who never acted anything out when he gave his sermons; for him, the words were what was important. Jijingi realized that Moseby wrote down his sermons not because his memory was terrible, but because he was looking for a specific arrangement of words. Once he found the one he wanted, he could hold on to it for as long as he needed.

Out of curiosity, Jijingi tried imagining he had to deliver a sermon, and began writing down what he would say. Seated on the root of a mango tree with the notebook Moseby had

given him, he composed a sermon on tsav, the quality that enabled some men to have power over others, and a subject which Moseby hadn't understood and had dismissed as foolishness. He read his first attempt to one of his age-mates, who pronounced it terrible, leading them to have a brief shoving match, but afterwards Jijingi had to admit his age-mate was right. He tried writing out his sermon a second time and then a third before he became tired of it and moved on to other topics.

As he practiced his writing, Jijingi came to understand what Moseby had meant; writing was not just a way to record what someone said; it could help you decide what you would say before you said it. And words were not just the pieces of speaking; they were the pieces of thinking. When you wrote them down, you could grasp your thoughts like bricks in your hands and push them into different arrangements. Writing let you look at your thoughts in a way you couldn't if you were just talking, and having seen them, you could improve them, make them stronger and more elaborate.

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When Jijingi was twenty, an officer from the administration came to the village to speak with Sabe. He had brought with him a young Tiv man who had attended the mission school in Katsina-Ala. The administration wanted to have a written record of all the disputes brought before the tribal courts, so they were assigning each chief one of these youths to act as a scribe. Sabe had Jijingi come forward, and to the officer he said, "I know you don't have enough scribes for all of Tivland. Jijingi here has learned to write; he can act as our scribe, and you can send your boy to another village." The officer tested Jijingi's ability to write, but Moseby had taught him well, and eventually the officer agreed to have him be Sabe's scribe.

After the officer had left, Jijingi asked Sabe why he hadn't wanted the boy from Katsina-Ala to be his scribe.

"No one who comes from the mission school can be trusted," said Sabe.

"Why not? Did the Europeans make them liars?"

"They're partly to blame, but so are we. When the Europeans collected boys for the mission school years ago, most elders gave them the ones they wanted to get rid of, the layabouts and malcontents. Now those boys have returned, and they feel no kinship with anyone. They wield their knowledge of writing like a long gun; they demand their chiefs find them wives, or else they'll write lies about them and have the Europeans depose them."

Jijingi knew a boy who was always complaining and looking for ways to avoid work; it would be a disaster if someone like him had power over Sabe. "Can't you tell the Europeans about this?"

“Many have,” Sabe answered. “It was Maisho of the Kwande clan who warned me about the scribes; they were installed in Kwande villages first. Maisho was fortunate that the Europeans believed him instead of his scribe’s lies, but he knows of other chiefs who were not so lucky; the Europeans often believe paper over people. I don’t wish to take the chance.” He looked at Jijingi seriously. “You are my kin, Jijingi, and kin to everyone in this village. I trust you to write down what I say.”

“Yes, Sabe.”

Tribal court was held every month, from morning until late afternoon for three days in a row, and it always attracted an audience, sometimes one so large that Sabe had to demand everyone sit to allow the breeze to reach the center of the circle. Jijingi sat next to Sabe and recorded the details of each dispute in a book the officer had left. It was a good job; he was paid out of the fees collected from the disputants, and he was given not just a chair but a small table too, which he could use for writing even when court wasn’t in session. The complaints Sabe heard were varied—one might be about a stolen bicycle, another might be about whether a man was responsible for his neighbor’s crops failing—but most had to do with wives. For one such dispute, Jijingi wrote down the following:

Umem’s wife Girgi has run away from home and gone back to her kin. Her kinsman Anongo has tried to convince her to stay with her husband, but Girgi refuses, and there is no more Anongo can do. Umem demands the return of the £11 he paid as bridewealth. Anongo says he has no money at the moment, and moreover that he was only paid £6.

Sabe requested witnesses for both sides. Anongo says he has witnesses, but they have gone on a trip. Umem produces a witness, who is sworn in. He testifies that he himself counted the £11 that Umem paid to Anongo.

Sabe asks Girgi to return to her husband and be a good wife, but she says she has had all that she can stand of him. Sabe instructs Anongo to repay Umem £11, the first payment to be in three months when his crops are saleable. Anongo agrees.

It was the final dispute of the day, by which time Sabe was clearly tired. “Selling vegetables to pay back bridewealth,” he said afterwards, shaking his head. “This wouldn’t have happened when I was a boy.”

Jijingi knew what he meant. In the past, the elders said, you conducted exchanges with similar items: if you wanted a goat, you could trade chickens for it; if you wanted to marry a woman, you promised one of your kinswomen to her family. Then the Europeans said they would no longer accept vegetables as payment for taxes, insisting that it be paid in coin. Before long, everything could be exchanged for money; you could use it to buy everything from a calabash to a wife. The elders considered it absurd.

“The old ways are vanishing,” agreed Jijingi. He didn’t say that young people preferred things this way, because the Europeans had also decreed that bridewealth could only be paid if the woman consented to the marriage. In the past, a young woman might be promised to an old man with leprous hands and rotting teeth, and have no choice but to marry him. Now a woman could marry the man she favored, as long as he could afford to pay the bridewealth. Jijingi himself was saving money to marry.

Moseby came to watch sometimes, but he found the proceedings confusing, and often asked Jijingi questions afterwards.

“For example, there was the dispute between Umem and Anongo over how much bridewealth was owed. Why was only the witness sworn in?” asked Moseby.

“To ensure that he said precisely what happened.”

“But if Umem and Anongo were sworn in, that would have ensured they said precisely what happened too. Anongo was able to lie because he was not sworn in.”

“Anongo didn’t lie,” said Jijingi. “He said what he considered right, just as Umem did.” “But what Anongo said wasn’t the same as what the witness said.”

“But that doesn’t mean he was lying.” Then Jijingi remembered something about the European language, and understood Moseby’s confusion. “Our language has two words for what in your language is called ‘true.’ There is what’s right, mimi, and what’s precise, vough. In a dispute the principals say what they consider right; they speak mimi. The witnesses, however, are sworn to say precisely what happened; they speak vough. When Sabe has heard what happened can he decide what action is mimi for everyone. But it’s not lying if the principals don’t speak vough, as long as they speak mimi.”

Moseby clearly disapproved. “In the land I come from, everyone who testifies in court must swear to speak vough, even the principals.”

Jijingi didn’t see the point of that, but all he said was, “Every tribe has its own customs.”

“Yes, customs may vary, but the truth is the truth; it doesn’t change from one person to another. And remember what the Bible says: the truth shall set you free.”

“I remember,” said Jijingi. Moseby had said that it was knowing God’s truth that had made the Europeans so successful. There was no denying their wealth or power, but who knew what was the cause?

#

It was a few years later that Sabe began attending a series of meetings of all the chiefs in the Shangev clan. He explained to Jijingi that the Europeans no longer wished to deal with so many chiefs, and were demanding that all of Tivland be divided into eight groups they called 'septs.' As a result, Sabe and the other chiefs had to discuss who the Shangev clan would join with. Although there was no need for a scribe, Jijingi was curious to hear the deliberations and asked Sabe if he might accompany him, and Sabe agreed.

Jijingi had never seen so many elders in one place before; some were even-tempered and dignified like Sabe, while others were loud and full of bluster. They argued for hours on end.

In the evening after Jijingi had returned, Moseby asked him what it had been like. Jijingi sighed. "Even if they're not yelling, they're fighting like wildcats."

"Who does Sabe think you should join?"

"We should join with the clans that we're most closely related to; that's the Tiv way. And since Shangev was the son of Kwande, our clan should join with the Kwande clan, who live to the south."

"That makes sense," said Moseby. "So why is there disagreement?"

"The members of the Shangev clan don't all live next to each other. Some live on the farmland in the west, near the Jechira clan, and the elders there are friendly with the Jechira elders. They'd like the Shangev clan to join the Jechira clan, because then they'd have more influence in the resulting sept."

"I see." Moseby thought for a moment. "Could the western Shangev join a different sept from the southern Shangev?"

Jijingi shook his head. "We Shangev all have one father, so we should all remain together. All the elders agree on that."

"But if lineage is so important, how can the elders from the west argue that the Shangev clan ought to join with the Jechira clan?"

"That's what the disagreement was about. The elders from the west are claiming Shangev was the son of Jechira."

"Wait, you don't know who Shangev's parents were?"

"Of course we know! Sabe can recite his ancestors all the way back to Tiv himself. The elders from the west are merely pretending that Shangev was Jechira's son because they'd

benefit from joining with the Jechira clan.”

“But if the Shangev clan joined with the Kwande clan, wouldn’t your elders benefit?”

“Yes, but Shangev was Kwande’s son.” Then Jijingi realized what Moseby was implying.

“You think our elders are the ones pretending!”

“No, not at all. It just sounds like both sides have equally good claims, and there’s no way to tell who’s right.”

“Sabe’s right.”

“Of course,” said Moseby. “But how can you get the others to admit that? In the land I come from, many people write down their lineage on paper. That way we can trace our ancestry precisely, even many generations in the past.”

“Yes, I’ve seen the lineages in your Bible, tracing Abraham back to Adam.”

“Of course. But even apart from the Bible, people have recorded their lineages. When people want to find out who they’re descended from, they can consult paper. If you had paper, the other elders would have to admit that Sabe was right.”

That was a good point, Jijingi admitted. If only the Shangev clan had been using paper long ago. Then something occurred to him. “How long ago did the Europeans first come to Tivland?”

“I’m not sure. At least forty years ago, I think.”

“Do you think they might have written down anything about the Shangev clan’s lineage when they first arrived?”

Moseby looked thoughtful. “Perhaps. The administration definitely keeps a lot of records. If there are any, they’d be stored at the government station in Katsina-Ala.”

A truck carried goods along the motor road into Katsina-Ala every fifth day, when the market was being held, and the next market would be the day after tomorrow. If he left tomorrow morning, he could reach the motor road in time to get a ride. “Do you think they would let me see them?”

“It might be easier if you have a European with you,” said Moseby, smiling. “Shall we take a trip?”

#

At the government station there was indeed paper from forty years ago, what the Europeans called “assessment reports,” and Moseby’s presence was sufficient to grant them access. They were written in the European language, which Jijingi couldn’t read, but they included diagrams of the ancestry of the various clans, and he could identify the Tiv names in those diagrams easily enough, and Moseby had confirmed that his interpretation was correct. The elders in the western farms were right, and Sabe was wrong: Shangev was not Kwande’s son, he was Jechira’s.

One of the men at the government station had agreed to type up a copy of the relevant page so Jijingi could take it with him. Moseby decided to stay in Katsina-Ala to visit with the missionaries there, but Jijingi came home right away. He felt like an impatient child on the return trip, wishing he could ride the truck all the way back instead of having to walk from the motor road. As soon as he had arrived at the village, Jijingi looked for Sabe.

He found him on the path leading to a neighboring farm; some neighbors had stopped Sabe to have him settle a dispute over how a nanny goat’s kids should be distributed. Finally, they were satisfied, and Sabe resumed his walk. Jijingi walked beside him.

“Welcome back,” said Sabe. “Sabe,

I’ve been to Katsina-Ala.” “Ah. Why

did you go there?”

Jijingi showed him the paper. “This was written long ago, when the Europeans first came here. They spoke to the elders of the Shangev clan then, and when the elders told them the history of the Shangev clan, they said that Shangev was the son of Jechira.”

Sabe’s reaction was mild. “Whom did the Europeans ask?”

Jijingi looked at the paper. “Batur and Iorkyaha.”

“I remember them,” he said, nodding. “They were wise men. They would not have said such a thing.”

Jijingi pointed at the words on the page. “But they did!”

“Perhaps you are reading it wrong.”

“I am not! I know how to read.”

Sabe shrugged. “Why did you bring this paper back here?”

“What it says is important. It means we should rightfully be joined with the Jechira

clan.”

“You think the clan should trust your decision on this matter?”

“I’m not asking the clan to trust me. I’m asking them to trust the men who were elders when you were young.”

“And so they should. But those men aren’t here. All you have is paper.”

“The paper tells us what they would say if they were here.”

“Does it? A man doesn’t speak only one thing. If Batur and Iorkyaha were here, they would agree with me that we should join with the Kwande clan.”

“How could they, when Shangev was the son of Jechira?” He pointed at the sheet of paper. “The Jechira are our closer kin.”

Sabe stopped walking and turned to face Jijingi. “Questions of kinship cannot be resolved by paper. You’re a scribe because Maisho of the Kwande clan warned me about the boys from the mission school. Maisho wouldn’t have looked out for us if we didn’t share the same father. Your position is proof of how close our clans are, but you forget that. You look to paper to tell you what you should already know, here.” Sabe tapped him on his chest. “Have you studied paper so much that you’ve forgotten what it is to be Tiv?”

Jijingi opened his mouth to protest when he realized that Sabe was right. All the time he’d spent studying writing had made him think like a European. He had come to trust what was written on paper over what was said by people, and that wasn’t the Tiv way.

The assessment report of the Europeans was vough; it was exact and precise, but that wasn’t enough to settle the question. The choice of which clan to join with had to be right for the community; it had to be mimi. Only the elders could determine what was mimi; it was their responsibility to decide what was best for the Shangev clan. Asking Sabe to defer to the paper was asking him to act against what he considered right.

“You’re right, Sabe,” he said. “Forgive me. You’re my elder, and it was wrong of me to suggest that paper could know more than you.”

Sabe nodded and resumed walking. “You are free to do as you wish, but I believe it will do more harm than good to show that paper to others.”

Jijingi considered it. The elders from the western farms would undoubtedly argue that the assessment report supported their position, prolonging a debate that had already gone too long. But more than that, it would move the Tiv down the path of regarding paper as the source of truth; it would be another stream in which the old ways were washing away, and

he could see no benefit in it.

“I agree,” said Jijingi. “I won’t show this to anyone else.”

Sabe nodded.

Jijingi walked back to his hut, reflecting on what had happened. Even without attending a mission school, he had begun thinking like a European; his practice of writing in his notebooks had led him to disrespect his elders without him even being aware of it.

Writing helped him think more clearly, he couldn’t deny that; but that wasn’t good enough reason to trust paper over people.

As a scribe, he had to keep the book of Sabe’s decisions in tribal court. But he didn’t need to keep the other notebooks, the ones in which he’d written down his thoughts. He would use them as tinder for the cooking fire.

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We don’t normally think of it as such, but writing is a technology, which means that a literate person is someone whose thought processes are technologically mediated. We became cognitive cyborgs as soon as we became fluent readers, and the consequences of that were profound.

Before a culture adopts the use of writing, when its knowledge is transmitted exclusively through oral means, it can very easily revise its history. It’s not intentional, but it is inevitable; throughout the world, bards and griots have adapted their material to their audiences, and thus gradually adjusted the past to suit the needs of the present. The idea that accounts of the past shouldn’t change is a product of literate cultures’ reverence for the written word. Anthropologists will tell you that oral cultures understand the past differently; for them, their histories don’t need to be accurate so much as they need to validate the community’s understanding of itself. So it wouldn’t be correct to say that their histories are unreliable; their histories do what they need to do.

It would be easy for me to assert that literate cultures are better off than oral ones, but my bias should be obvious, since I’m writing these words rather than speaking them to you. Instead I will say that it’s easier for me to appreciate the benefits of literacy and harder to recognize everything it has cost us. Literacy encourages a culture to place more value on documentation and less on subjective experience, and overall I think the positives outweigh the negatives. Written records are subject to every kind of error and their interpretation is subject to change, but at least the words on the page remain fixed, and there is real merit in that.