TRADITION AND TRANSMISSION

CURRENT TRENDS IN FRENCH ETHNOLOGY

THE RELEVANCE FOR INDIA

EDITED BY
LOTIKA VARADARAJAN
DENIS CHEVALLIER

6

Apprenticeship as Viewed by Ethnologists: A Stereotype?

François Sigaut

Till very recently, ethnologists paid practically no attention to the question of apprenticeship, that is to the learning of techniques. Anthropological research usually treated "apprenticeship" and "techniques" as two separate and unrelated categories. Studies on the transmission of culture carried out by American anthropologists between 1930 and 1950 (Herskovits, Klukhohn, Kroeber, Mead) dealt only marginally with techniques. As for European – or at least French- anthropology, at first glance it seems that nothing at all – although detailed bibliographical research may not quite confirm this – has been written on this subject. If studies on the apprenticeship of techniques were indeed carried out and published, they went unnoticed, and this is itself of significance.

I must admit that for a long time, I turned a blind eye to this issue. It was only towards the end of 1987, when the *Conseil du Patrimoine Ethnologique* entrusted me with a study on the "culture of technique" that I was made aware of this topic. For the purpose of the project, I had to comb through

Carpentry training in wooden boat construction

dozens of documents which drew upon research financed by the *Conseil*. Although very few of them explicitly dealt with the transmission of *savoir-faire* (such as Delbos & Jorion, 1984), the question of apprenticeship was frequently raised – even if only in passing – by other studies. The recurrence of this theme in studies not designed to address it aroused my interest. I was also struck by the stereotypical nature of their descriptions. The impression was created that researchers had stumbled by chance on the concept of apprenticeship but were unable to problematise the subject. Moreover, what they had uncovered was not apprenticeship as could be studied in the field, but a concept grounded in oral testimony proffered by elderly informants. Now, there are two reasons why such narration necessarily becomes schematised. First of all, because memory is selective. Secondly – and this is a very important point to which I shall return later – because in every discussion of the issue, apprenticeship and formal education are seen to be as different from one another as day from night. There is no doubt that the stereotyped descriptions of apprenticeship can largely be attributed to this antithetical image.

To what extent are these descriptions true to reality, and to what extent do they betray it? If we were to answer these questions, we would need to have at our disposal a corpus of ethnographic work based upon direct observation of apprenticeship. To my knowledge, nothing like this exists. But even as we wait for this body of knowledge to be constituted, it will be useful to outline the stereotypes of apprenticeship as they are to be found in the writings of ethnologists. For it is truly by describing stereotypes that we can escape being duped by them. Besides, not all stereotypes are necessarily to be rejected. On the contrary, I am convinced that fieldwork will actually give credence to the traits established by many of them. Finally, for ethnologists working in France, such stereotypes and their critiques are the only bases available for the development of an appropriate problematic. The question of apprenticeship is relevant to psychology, ergonomics, the sciences of education, etc., and every discipline has its own

perspective on the matter. It is essential for ethnology to enter into dialogue with all these other disciplines. But in order to make this dialogue meaningful – or even simply to make it possible – ethnology needs to develop its own problematic. It is towards this end that I hope to contribute.

Before describing the stereotype, it should be mentioned that we are not dealing with apprenticeship in general, but only with professional apprenticeship as it took place in certain branches of French craft and industry from the end of the 19th to the middle of the 20th centuries. Such situations of apprenticeship involved young boys who had just finished school – that is to say, boys who were usually fourteen years old, although some were as young as ten or twelve. We will not concern ourselves with younger children. Nor will we consider other kinds of situations (family, peer groups) or activities (household tasks, games, military service, etc.). It would of course be useful to compare and contrast all these kinds of apprenticeship, but I do not have enough material to be able to posit the utility of doing so here. Another important question is the validity of a model of professional apprenticeship across time and space. Is it specific to France between 1860 and 1940, or can it be extended to earlier epochs and other countries? Certainly, it cannot be extended indefinitely. The indigenous people of Mexico (Chamoux 1986) and the Limbu community of Nepal (Sagant 1987) project situations very different from our own. Even in countries neighbouring France, the situation is not quite the same. Some industrialists (Riboud 1987:141-142) and some teachers (Girod de l'Ain, 1988) have compared apprenticeship in Germany, for example, with that in France, and it is quite possible that these differences have a long history. As for England, its system of education functioned in a manner so different from our own (Laurie 1881), that it is hard to imagine there could be an identical system of apprenticeship. I do not know whether there exists sufficient material for an ethnographic comparison of professional apprenticeship in France, Germany, England and other industrialised countries. But in the absence of such materials, we can say nothing on

the subject. Nor can we say anything on matters of historical comparison – we do not know whether professional apprenticeship emerged in the 19th century, or in the 17th century, or in the Middle Ages, with the establishment of the guilds.

Having made these preliminary remarks, I will discuss the features of the stereotype of apprenticeship – as I see it – in two separate stages. In the first stage, apprenticeship is adjudged to result from the autonomy of the worker. In the second stage, apprenticeship is taken to be the opposite of formal education.

THE AUTONOMY OF THE WORKER

> There is permanent contact between the worker and his machine[....] He knows it in his own way, he knows it well, but not in an intellectual manner[...] The worker who knows his machine is the only one able to run it optimally. The management must therefore take great care not to deprive him of it, for it will take him a while to get a new one to perform just as well.
>
> One day in Saint-Chély, the Waldrich grinding motor had to be shifted, and the German engineer who was there to re-position the machine asked the usual operator to check its installation. For he was the only one capable of accomplishing the task without any difficulty. And when this worker had to leave the factory, he was replaced by his brother (Cartier *et al.*, 1983:31).

The first three points of our synopsis emerge clearly from this brief anecdote:

1) There are certain essential skills and abilities which, for varying reasons, can be transmitted or developed only during the course of production itself.
2) Such knowledge and skills are, in practice, the property of the producers – that is to say, the workers – and more precisely, only a few among them.
3) Hence, it is only through these workers that these skills and knowledge can be passed on to others.

In a way, this situation of the workers' autonomy, which necessarily precedes a situation of apprenticeship, seems to contrast with the Taylorian model where workers are viewed as the unthinking tools of an omniscient management. Of course, in reality, the workers' autonomy is neither absolute, nor is it entirely without substance. It is therefore difficult to imagine today just how Taylorian ideology could have gained the credence it enjoyed. It must be emphasised here that Taylorism did not supplant the model of the worker's autonomy. Indeed, the two evolved more or less simultaneously during the last quarter of the 19th century (in the printing works, for example, the system of limited partnership did not really develop till the end of the 19th century [Saulnier-Thiercelin & Masson 1984: 86]). Taylorian ideology led to the belief that with advances in science and technology, the workers' autonomy would disappear. Yet today, Taylorism is itself disappearing because of the excessive costs and mismanagement it has entailed. The most far-seeing business leaders are now elaborating upon a social model of the enterprise which reconciles the autonomy of the worker with the authority of the management (Riboud 1987). From this new perspective, it is quite logical for industrialists to renew their interest in the concept of apprenticeship.

All of this calls for another discussion, but to come back to the issue of traditional forms of the workers' autonomy, I believe that we need to briefly address two aspects of points 1 and 3.

In the first place, what are these "varying reasons" for which certain skills and *savoir-faire* become the property of workers?

We may find one answer in the example of Saint-Chély d'Apcher. When certain skills, that are essential to production, cannot be made explicit – or can be so done only at prohibitive cost – they inevitably remain in the hands of those who had developed them in the course of their own work. Indeed, the very nature of some techniques, and the absence of means to explicate them, lead to the situation of the workers' autonomy.

This happens very often. The most classic examples are offered in artistic expression, such as in glassware (Gérôme & Guiche 1985, *Maison du verre et du cristal* 1987). But they are to be found elsewhere, and to the extent that this phenomenon is discerned in virtually all industries which have been studied, we may well ask whether it is not a general occurrence.

There is yet another source of the workers' autonomy, and it lies in the tradition of trade unionism. The printing works, with their system of limited partnership, are a case in point. This example does not stand alone however, for the situation in the naval construction industry in Port-de-Bouc is similar (Degenne & Duplex 1984), and in all likelihood, more such cases will emerge with further research.

Of course, these two bases of the workers' autonomy are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, each makes a case for the other, and the workers' autonomy is probably most pronounced in situations where both bases co-exist. At any rate, both offer the same result, i.e., by placing the most qualified among them in charge of the recruitment and training of apprentices, workers were ensured, if not a monopoly, then an important role in this process. This leads us to point number 3 of our synopsis.

Recruitment and training play as vital a role in the growth or decline of the workers' autonomy, as they do in the development of hierarchy among workers. Taylorism tends to simplify this hierarchy and, in any case, withdraws the principal functions of authority from it, surrendering this into the hands of the external management staff. On the other hand, the model of the workers' autonomy considers this hierarchy from within, and thereby recognises the weight of its authority in all areas (including notably, discipline at work). The language of the worker often conveys this reality – the expert worker is called *master*, and sometimes even *boss* (in the hat-making industry in Chazelles-sur-Lyon). On the other hand, the apprentice is referred to as a *ruffian* (Chazelles) or as a *boy* (in the glasswork in Saint-Just-sur-Loire), etc. Between these two extremes lies a somewhat colourful vocabulary denoting a range of status (for

example, in the printing works, we find *racers*, *bears* and *monkeys*, all of whom fall under various categories such as *foremen*, *page-setters*, *slip-compositors*, etc.).

Within these hierarchies, the master-worker wields considerable authority, not only because he oversees the day-to-day work, but also – and this is more important to us – because he can decide to whom to transmit his skills and knowledge if he chooses to do so at all. It is clearly for this reason that the Waldrich grinding motor operator at Saint-Chély was replaced by his brother. Here, among others, we can cite two particularly explicit examples.

> Ten years ago [...] the glassmakers would hide their work from each other. They would not let others see how they were working [...]. Today, I think that the master-glassmaker chooses the person to whom he will transmit his knowledge, and when he makes that decision, it is already late, very late. He does it when he knows that he will have to make way for others. If he transmits it to someone, it is because he makes the choice rather than allowing someone else to do this for him. No one knows what goes on between the two. They must have some kind of contract by which the one who receives agrees to keep all that he has learned to himself (*Maison du verre et du cristal*, 1987:7).

> They [we are speaking here of highly qualified workers] were very powerful. They would decide the future of the young ones. They would train their teams, and negotiate their wages. They also had the authority, and this is very rare among workers, to control and distribute some of the surplus-value of their work.

> Another interesting aspect of their power relates to the replication of the group. Although they did not have the authority to hire people, they could, thank to their contacts, find employment and get promotions for those whom they were protecting (of course, these were, in the first instance, their children and apprentices) (Degenne & Duplex, 1984: 68-69).

As I have mentioned on previous occasions, it is likely that the workers' power to negotiate is not as unusual as the authors of the extract above believe it to be. But what is of importance to us here is this authority to recruit enjoyed by

the master-workers and the consequences that accrue from this. One outcome is that it becomes necessary for a novice to find a master, and to be accepted by him. As a general rule, the novice is aided in this search by his parents, his extended family as well as his neighbours. However, it is up to the novice to demonstrate that he has both the capabilities and the desire to learn the trade. This highlights one of the most important attributes of apprenticeship which is diametrically opposed to that prevailing in the world of formal education.

IT IS NOT LIKE AT SCHOOL

Indeed, formal education is open to everyone. It is a right, and to a certain extent, even an obligation. It is public in every sense of the term (and the existence of private schools in no way alters this fact). Apprenticeship is however, a private contract between two people – between the apprentice and the master. One may even consider it a personal contract, because it calls for a minimum degree of understanding between the two parties to keep it alive. There are other aspects which contrast it to formal education. A lot is asked of the apprentice, including lowly tasks such as cleaning the workshop or shopping for the master, whereas schoolchildren need only devote themselves to their studies. The apprentice must be willing to learn on his own, for the master may show nothing, very little or be downright evasive. Explanations are given with utmost parsimony. The student, on the other hand, receives instructions according to a predetermined syllabus which he is expected to *follow*, and this in itself is self-explanatory. The problem is not the lack of explanations, but of their abundance. Besides, the very notion of an educational programme is that its aim is to transmit knowledge. But apprenticeship has a far greater ambit. The apprentice not only acquires knowledge, but also a value system, an identity and the culture of an entire social group into which he is initiated. The school introduces the student to society-at-large, but this introduction is only theoretical, and there is no concrete base. Once again, the usual

expressions are very revealing: one *enters* into apprenticeship, but one *emerges* from school. And it is only when schooling ends that one enters life (and by this we often mean apprenticeship although we may not use the term).

We can carry on with this game of opposing apprenticeship and formal education, but soon we will realise that it is an artificial exercise. Of course, the game is not without merit for it makes us aware of the existence of a group of ambient ideas to which we unthinkingly turn as if they were accepted facts or scientific truths. These can lead us astray. This is not to imply that all the ideas are false, and even if they were, they would still be of interest to us because they represent the dominant ideology. However, research must transcend ideology, and it has no chance of doing so if it does not make the latter explicit. This is, at any rate, what I have tried to do here, and the best way is to set down in a diagram all the oppositions-apparent or real – between apprenticeship and formal education.

OPPOSING TRAITS

Apprenticeship	Formal education
Apprenticeship is a personal contract between the master and his apprentice.	Formal education is located in the public sphere. It is, in principle, open to everyone.
This contract is governed by the customs of the professional group.	The conditions of education are laid down by law.
Becoming an apprentice requires negotiating with the master, often with the assistance of family and friends.	Education is a right and a legal obligation.
The apprentice has to work efficiently and productively.	Schoolchildren have only to do their studies.

Apprenticeship	Formal education
The apprentice is initiated into a professional group that consists mainly of adults of different ages and with varying qualifications.	The student is in a class filled with other children of his own age, and where the only adult is the teacher.
The apprentice has to undergo various rites of passage which often take the form of bullying.	If there are any rites of passage, they are likely to be found at the end of school (examinations?).
The apprentice learns on his own. Sometimes, he has to go so far as to unmask that which is supposedly – or actually – being concealed from him.	The teacher "dispenses" education according to a "syllabus".
Apprenticeship transmits not only knowledge, but also a value system, a tradition, an identity...	The school essentially, if not uniquely, offers knowledge.
Apprenticeship provides a direct access to professional life, and indeed to life.	Schooling (and education generally) does not provide a direct access to professional life.

CLOSING REMARKS

I would like to end here by asking two questions. Firstly, what are the most important criticisms that one can make of these oppositions between apprenticeship and formal education? And secondly, does apprenticeship actually consist of the transmission of knowledge, or is it, as have suggested Delbos and Jorion (1984: 132), merely the transmission of work, the acquisition of skill being obtained by subterfuge?

To answer the first question, it seems to me that the major mistake lies in the fact that "real" apprenticeship – that is, apprenticeship as explained by those who were themselves apprentices – is compared to a theoretical school as is

schematised through the dominant discourse. This "real" apprenticeship and this "theoretical" school merely serve as foils to each other with often distorted results (though once again, the picture does not totally belie reality). In practice, apprenticeship may also rely upon a scholarly mode of transmission. This may be seen, for example, in trades where drawing plays an important role (carpentry, cabinet-making, joinery, lock-making, etc.). Moreover, exercises too have a role to play in apprenticeship, and the most famous example of this is the masterpiece which the "compagnon" (the stage after apprenticeship prior to professional entry) had to submit. (The vocation of wig-making could also, to a certain extent, be placed in the same category.) Conversely, it is probable that the school operates much more along the lines of apprenticeship than we believe. The *Grandes Écoles*[1] notably have several features in common with apprenticeship: a selection process (although in the case of the former, selection is based on competitive exams rather than on personal relations), spectacular rites of entry (including ragging, which Van Gennep in his *Manuel* laments, has not interested ethnologists) and a direct access to the *grands corps*[2] of the *Noblesse d'Etat* (Bourdieu 1989). Admittedly, even general education probably shares a few traits with apprenticeship, although these traits are often deliberately glossed over. Indeed, as with Taylorism, one may well ask whether, general education could exist without these. By all accounts, education, as it appears in our diagram, is a typically French ideological construct. British education is (was?) much closer to apprenticeship. The institution of fagging (an arrangement among students by which the older students would protect the younger ones in exchange for performance of chores), we find parallels with apprenticeship. For in his early days, the apprentice likewise performs tasks for his master. In fact, till the last war,[3] British education strove to prepare students for social life rather than for scholarship.

One last question remains: is knowledge transmitted in apprenticeship? Everything depends on what one understands by this transmission. If one considers knowledge to be a thing

in itself, as something that can exist outside the individual's nervous system and which can simply be transferred from one individual to another like a liquid that changes bottles, then it is clear that no such transmission of knowledge takes place within apprenticeship. But it is equally obvious that nowhere is knowledge ever transmitted in such a manner. The salt worker's knowledge is not "something transmitted like in school, from the master to the pupil" (Delbos & Jorion 1984: 133). Of course, neither is scholarly knowledge transmitted in this way (Giordan & de Vecchi 1987). And there is a simple reason for this: so long as a device which simply transfers thought is not invented, or till such time as there are machines that can transcribe thought, each individual must *learn*, that is, construct or reconstruct in his own head what will later become his knowledge. The act of learning is individual, and the master draws on this when he forces the apprentice to think his way through by holding out partial explanations. For what transmitting knowledge really entails is to offer the apprentice the best possible conditions for the acquisition of knowledge with the help of his own mental faculties and sensory perceptions. It is not, has never been, nor will ever be otherwise. That is why, to my mind, knowledge is transmitted in apprenticeship. And it is perhaps the highest and most direct form of transmission.

NOTES

1. Translator's note: State-sponsored establishments of competitive higher education.
2. Translator's note: The main state administrative bodies.
3. Translator's note: The Second World War.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bourdieu, P., *La Noblesse d'Etat. Grandes écoles et esprit de corps*, Minuit, Paris, 1989.

Cartier, C., *et al.*, *L'Usine en sabots. Enquête sur l'usine de Saint-Chély d'Apcher (Lozère), 1917-1940*, Office municipal de la Culture, Saint-Chély d'Apcher, 1983.

Chamoux, M.N., "Apprendre autrement: aspects des pédagogies dites informelles chez les Indiens du Mexique", in, Rossel, P. (ed.), *Demain l'artisanat?*, Cahiers de l'IUED, No. 16, Geneva, 1986, pp. 211-335.

Degenne, A., and Duplex, J., "Une qualification industrielle actuelle: les OHQQ de Port-de-Bouc", in, *Terrain*, No. 2, 1984, pp. 51-61.

Delbos, G. and Jorion, P., *La transmission des savoirs*, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication/Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris, 1984.

Gérôme, N., and Guiche, A., *La Danse du verre. Étude avec les verriers de Saint-Just*, Report submitted to the *Conseil du Patrimoine Ethnologique*, 1985.

Giordan, A., and de Vecchi. G., *Les Origines du savoir. Des conceptions des apprenants aux concepts scientifiques*, Delachaux and Niestlé, Lausanne, 1987.

Girod de l'Ain, B., "Sur le tas: réinventer l'apprentissage", in, *L'événement du jeudi*, 28 janvier-3 février, 1988, pp 62-63.

Laurie, A., *La Vie de collège en Angleterre*, Hetzgel, Paris, 1881.

Maison du Verre et du Cristal (Région de Lorraine), *La Route du cristal*, Serpenoise, Nancy, 1987.

Riboud, A., *Modernisation, mode d'emploi, Rapport au Premier Ministre*, UGE (10/18), Paris, 1987, pp. 141-142

Sagant, Ph., "Traditions enfantines. L'apprentissage des techniques au Népal oriental", in, Koechlin, B. (ed.), *De la voûte céleste au territoire, du jardin au foyer* (texts for Lucien Bernot), Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 1987, pp. 629-635.

Saulinier-Thiercelin, F., and Masson, D., *Hommes de plomb, hommes de lumière*, Report submitted to the *Conseil du Patrimoine Ethnologique*, 1984.