

OBITUARIES



Jack Goody on Holiday in Figeac, France, 1976. (Photo courtesy of Mary Goody)

Jack Goody (1919–2015)

A giant of British social anthropology, Jack Goody died on July 16, 2015, in Cambridge, England. Goody began his career as an ethnographer in Northern Ghana when it was still a colony called the Gold Coast, and he continued to make substantial contributions to scholarship in the 21st century. Based from his first academic appointment at the University of Cambridge, Goody was the youngest member of a triumvirate that transformed the Department of Social Anthropology from the 1950s onward. Associated more closely with Meyer Fortes than with Edmund Leach, for both theoretical and ethnographic reasons, it did not take

Goody long to find his own distinctive path. Even while establishing his anthropological credentials with contributions to the study of kinship, domestic social organization, and oral traditions in Africa, Goody preferred to define the discipline as comparative sociology, following A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (and Émile Durkheim before him). He spent the last decades of his life as a leading protagonist in interdisciplinary debates in world history, drawing on his anthropological knowledge to attack insidious Eurocentrism in all its guises.

John Rankine Goody was born on July 27, 1919, in London and raised in the Home Counties, just north of the capital, in a middle-class family that prized education highly. Unlike his younger brother Richard, who followed him to Cambridge University and later earned international recognition as a Harvard physicist, Jack's studies in English were interrupted by World War II. Much later he wrote extensively about his experiences as a prisoner of war, explaining that reading Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*—together with his exposure to Italian peasants in the Abruzzi—induced him to switch to the study of anthropology. After completing his BA in English, Jack took the one-year diploma course at Oxford and worked for two years as an adult education officer in Hertfordshire. He returned to Oxford to study for a BLitt with E. E. Evans-Pritchard before going back to Cambridge for his Ph.D., which was based on over two years field research in northern Ghana. His dissertation, *The Ethnography of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, West of the White Volta*, was examined by Max Gluckman and G. I. Jones in 1954. Goody began teaching at Cambridge the same year. He was elected to a Fellowship at St John's College in 1961. His gruff manner, unkempt hair, colorful African shirts, and progressive politics (he was an active supporter of Ghana's independence movement) endeared him to generations of students. They generally profited more from the clarity of his writings than from his rasping, sometimes inchoate delivery in the lecture room.

Publications began to flow very quickly. With Fortes and others, he contributed to an influential volume on the developmental cycle of the domestic group (Goody 1958). Early papers on incest and adultery (1956), the relation between mother's brother and sister's son (1959), and double descent systems (1961) drew on his fieldwork among the LoDagaa, but he also explored cross-cultural variation with reference to other Ghanaian societies with different

principles of descent and more centralized political institutions. In addition to advancing the study of kinship in journals of the discipline, Goody edited a popular reader (1971b) and a rich Festschrift for Meyer Fortes (1974).

Yet Jack Goody was never content to remain within the limits of Fortesian kinship studies. His first monograph (based on the dissertation) probed wider comparisons concerning the intergenerational transmission of property, including European societies documented by historians and legal scholars (1962). These interests, which he later pursued in collaboration with leading historians of rural England (notably Joan Thirsk and E. P. Thompson), culminated in *Production and Reproduction* (1976). Drawing on the data of George Peter Murdock's Human Relations Area Files as well as ethnographic and historical works, Goody showed that domestic institutions in Africa south of the Sahara differed significantly from those of Eurasia. The continental contrast was vividly expressed in marriage payments, which he investigated with another Cambridge colleague, Stanley Tambiah (Goody and Tambiah 1973). Bridewealth, understood as "horizontal" transfers between groups of kinsmen, was the dominant form in egalitarian Africa. The more stratified societies of Europe and Asia were marked by "diverging devolution" in which the "vertical" transfer of a dowry (or of an "indirect dowry" when the payment was not controlled by the bride but served as a conjugal fund) was a form of premortem inheritance that reflected the family's concern to maintain the social standing of daughters and sons alike. Such contrasts—also evident in the use of female labor, concubinage, and adoption—had their deep causes in systems of production. Eurasian societies that had taken up plough agriculture were more productive and more concerned with individuated ownership and status differentiation than African societies reliant on the digging stick.

This argument was strongly materialist, but Goody distanced himself from the neo-Marxist approaches that became fashionable in anthropology from the late 1960s. He drew attention to the importance of the "means of destruction" alongside the means of production in explaining the larger patterns of West African history (1971a) as well as to the "means of communication" in explaining human social evolution more generally in *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977). As its title implies, this was a response to the ahistorical structuralist binaries of Claude Lévi-Strauss. It was shaped not only by Goody's work on oral traditions in Ghana but also by his earlier studies of English literature. A very productive collaboration with Ian Watt in the early 1960s had resulted in a strong thesis emphasizing the transformations wrought by literacy (Goody and Watt 1963). Rather than posit a universal great divide between "cold" and "hot" societies in the monumental manner of Lévi-Strauss, Goody stressed how the emergence of alphabets had made possible the systematic codification, manipulation, and transmission of knowledge on which subsequent human accomplish-

ments, from philosophy and theology to science and technology, were founded. He later modified the strong version of this argument, in which literacy is the key causal variable. Fundamental cognitive capacities, including the ability to doubt as well as to reason logically, are also present in oral societies. Literacy is often restricted to exclusive minorities over long periods of time, and for many purposes logographic forms are just as effective as alphabetical scripts (Goody 1986). Goody's work in this field remains foundational (see Olson and Cole 2006). He liked to remark that the enormous investment he made (in collaboration with Kum Gandah) in writing and translating the *Myth of the Bagre* (Goody 1972) would be his most enduring contribution to scholarship.

During the decade of his tenure of the William Wyse Chair in Social Anthropology (1973–1984), Goody transformed the department, both by expanding regional interests and through his theoretical openness and eclecticism. He encouraged closer engagement with the social sciences, including the expanding fields of development studies and ethnicity. He also supported historical research, notably that of Alan Macfarlane, even though he was never convinced by his younger colleague's emphasis on the uniqueness of the English. Cooperating closely with Cambridge University Press, particularly in the series of *Cambridge Papers* and *Cambridge Monographs in Social Anthropology*, Goody was the dominant figure in what became one of the most productive centers of anthropology in the world. His successor in 1984 was Ernest Gellner, who shared his broad intellectual interests and maintained his openness to history and comparative sociology, even after this became unfashionable in the wake of postmodern influences and the "writing culture" debates.

Having stepped down from teaching and administrative responsibilities earlier than he needed to, Goody became ever more productive in the decades of nominal retirement. Major studies of consumption practices were consistent with his earlier work—for example, in showing how refined notions of haute cuisine (1982) and the aesthetic use of flowers (1993) had emerged in various Eurasian societies. In the less-differentiated societies of sub-Saharan Africa, flowers were not cultivated, and chiefs (where they existed) consumed the same food as commoners. He gradually set aside this Africa–Eurasia contrast to allow for closer inspection of distinctions within the Eurasian landmass and above all for east–west comparisons. Goody continued to draw on historians. He often invoked V. Gordon Childe's account of the urban revolution of the Bronze Age, which he had first encountered along with Frazer as a prisoner of war in a camp in Bavaria, to explain the basic unity of the Eurasian landmass. After a pioneering study that highlighted the impact of early Christianity on the family and marriage in Europe (1983), he published a richly detailed comparative account of "Systems of Marriage and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia," which brought together the evidence from various

“ancient” civilizations, including Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, and Greco-Roman (1990). In these projects, he had frequently to endure the ire of specialists, but those with a larger vision tended to applaud the brilliance of his insights. In France, the admirers included Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff. Almost all of Goody’s mature works have been translated into French, and in recent decades his influence has probably been greater there than in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Goody’s main subject in the last phase of his life was global history (see Hart 2014 for an insightful evaluation). More specifically, he contributed an original anthropological voice to the interdisciplinary chorus of scholars seeking to “decenter” Europe. He did this most forcefully in *The East in the West* (1996) and again a decade later in *The Theft of History* (2006). Complementing historians such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and political economists such as Andre Gunder Frank, Goody complained of a fundamental Eurocentric bias in our understanding of the past, which continues to permeate Western social theory. Karl Marx, Max Weber, Norbert Elias, and countless historians have seen the emergence of an industrial economy and liberal democratic governmental institutions as inhering in a uniquely European teleology. For Goody, this is an error: the sequence is largely accidental. Just as fossil fuels and other energy sources were decisive for the industrial revolution in England, so the patterns of earlier revolutions in human society depended on metal and the distribution of ores across Eurasia (2012).

Goody was by no means a simplistic “Europe basher.” He did not underestimate the significance of the rupture that was initiated in western Eurasia in the 18th century. But he put Karl Polanyi’s “great transformation” and Ernest Gellner’s “big ditch” in a *longue durée* Eurasian context. Not even the contingencies of European imperial expansion could permanently disrupt the long-term pattern of “alternating leadership” between east and west. China fell back significantly in the “great divergence” (Pomeranz 2000) of the 19th century, but for Goody its rise in the 21st century was confirmation that the “miracle” of the modern world was not a European one but a Eurasian one (2010). The breakthrough to modernity (a word he used skeptically) had nothing to do with Athenian democracy, or with rationality, or with “the” Renaissance, “the” Protestant ethic, “the” scientific revolution, or “the” Enlightenment, because equivalent phenomena to all of these can be found outside Europe. It followed for Goody that the origins of capitalism must be pushed far back into the Eurasian past, when “merchant cultures” enabled the diffusion of goods, ideas, and technologies along both the overland routes of the Silk Road and the maritime routes of the Indian Ocean. He drew many of these strands together in an accessible overview that appeared in a special issue of *History and Anthropology* in the month of his death (Goody 2015).

Jack Goody was a larger-than-life figure who inspired great affection among his students and colleagues. He was married three times. With Joan Wright, he had a son and two daughters. With Esther Newcomb, he had two daughters. Esther shared her husband’s fascination for the domestic institutions of West African societies, and she became a highly respected member of the Cambridge department. Their hospitality was legendary, both at their large house in West Cambridge and at their summer house in France. The last decades of Jack’s life were spent with the feminist psychoanalyst and sociologist Juliet Mitchell. In his last book (2012), he thanked “my family past and present for their varied support.” The formal dedication was “to the Master and Fellows of St John’s College . . . for the help so many of them have given me, now and since I came up.”

For his “services to social anthropology,” Jack Goody was honored with a knighthood by Her Majesty the Queen in 2005. His academic honors were numerous. Elected to the British Academy in 1976, he preferred to remain in the Sociology, Demography, and Social Statistics Section rather than join the anthropologists when they fissioned to form a separate section with geographers. He was elected to the U.S. National Academy of Sciences in 2004. In France he was appointed *Commandeur dans l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* in 2006, the same year in which he was awarded an honorary doctorate at the University of Nanterre Paris Oest la Défense. In spite of this international recognition, there is no Goody school in anthropology. His influence is considerable but diffuse and probably stronger outside anthropology (notably in cultural history) than within it (see the contributions to Featherstone et al. 2009). Some anthropologists fault him for not having kept up with the latest theoretical ideas in their journals; archaeologists question his interpretation of Childe; and specialists in medieval Europe, Islam, or China are liable to point out that his citations of particular cases or legal texts were selective and even outdated. But this is surely beside the point. The contributions of Jack Goody will only be adequately appreciated when social anthropologists resume practicing their discipline as a comparative historical science of human society.

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