

Keith Hart Professor Sir John Rankine (Jack) Goody FBA, 1919-2015

Jack Goody was born in July 1919 and died just before his 96th birthday. He went to St Albans School. After that he read English at St. John's College, Cambridge, where he came under the spell of Hugh Sykes Davies, a surrealist poet, novelist and communist. He had not completed his degree when the war broke out. Jack joined the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Regiment (Sherwood Foresters). He was captured in North Africa, then locked up in concentration camps from which he escaped several times, including for an extended spell in Italy's Abruzzo.

He returned to Cambridge in 1946 to complete his degree and then took a diploma in anthropology. He became an education officer in Hertfordshire, married and had three children. Then he took up anthropology again at Oxford and completed a Cambridge PhD in 1954, based on fieldwork in Northwest Ghana and supervised by Meyer Fortes who hired him as an assistant lecturer. His marriage to Joan Goody, a noted teacher of English, did not survive these upheavals. Jack only received a fellowship at St. John's in 1961, when Fortes put pressure on the colleges to appoint several lecturers. He married Esther Newcomb, his American doctoral student, and they had two daughters. Jack and Esther Goody became a team in the following decades, frequently sharing fieldwork in Ghana and sometimes publishing together.

Jack embraced the anti-colonial revolution after the war and the Gold Coast was its epicentre in Africa. He joined Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party during his first fieldwork and soon saw that an independent West Africa would need histories of the precolonial past in order to chart a postcolonial future. He then switched to the precolonial history of West African kingdoms. In the process he led the move from ethnography to history that marked African anthropology then and African Studies in general today.¹

This was also when he completed the book of his PhD thesis, *Death, Property and the Ancestors*.² Although Jack published dozens of books, many of them since his retirement three decades ago, this is his masterpiece. The three words of his main title say it all. What does humanity care most about? Our mortality. What can we do to transcend our fate? We can try to live on through the real estate we bestow on our descendants or we can become an ancestor. Jack practised both assiduously. He acquired houses, helping some of his children to acquire their own. But his real money was on being an ancestor and how can an intellectual

achieve immortality if not through writing books? I once asked him why he published so much and he replied, “Because I was behind (Edmund Leach) and had to catch up”.

Death, Property and the Ancestors (1962) is grounded in meticulous ethnography, but it is also a wide-ranging compendium of social theory, featuring the tradition of comparative jurisprudence on which social anthropology was founded (Maine, Maitland etc). In the 1960s Jack proposed that his discipline should be renamed comparative sociology. He envisaged a new synthesis of sociology, politics and anthropology, much to the dismay of Meyer Fortes who had built up Cambridge social anthropology as a world leader more or less from scratch.

Jack Goody duly succeeded Fortes as head of department in 1973. He did not try to merge social anthropology with sociology and politics. But he soon launched his series of books on world history, at first contrasting Africa with Eurasia, beginning with *Production and Reproduction: A comparative study of the domestic domain* (1976). He also wrote about the significance of literacy, taking on Lévi-Strauss in *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977).³

Jack was in many ways Meyer Fortes’ opposite, bringing to his headship the spirit of his own research and writing. He had no respect for disciplinary boundaries, telling us “You must find a question and follow it wherever it takes you”. As a result, Cambridge social anthropology became an assemblage of solipsists, with PhD students often pursuing topics unknown to their supervisors. This was exciting and contrasted strongly with LSE, for example, where a sense of shared tradition was more onerous. The new Cambridge *laissez faire* model was open and dynamic, but it was also fragmented and didn’t do much for intellectual reproduction. Jack Goody himself never left behind a coherent school of followers.

Jack was, however, extremely gregarious and entertained large crowds in his Cambridge home, treating them to cheap red wine and delicious pasta cooked by devoted followers, one of whom was Italian. At some stage his marriage to Esther broke down. He then married Juliet Mitchell, the eminent feminist psychoanalyst and writer, in 2000. Her devotion to him was remarkable. Near the end, Jack fell down at home and was admitted to a geriatric ward in Addenbrookes’ hospital. Having to endure the night cries of demented old people and being treated like one of them was intolerable and he signed himself out. I asked him if he broke anything when he fell and he replied, “Only my spirit”.

In a short preface to *Production and Reproduction*, Jack Goody tells us that ethnography, the aspiration to write about another culture studied intensively through fieldwork, never defined

his intellectual horizons. His subject was always historical comparison and beyond that “the development of human culture”. He placed himself as an actor in a historical period, coming of age in the Second World War, encountering the Eastern Mediterranean, then entering Africa at the decisive moment of its anti-colonial revolution. With European empires collapsing everywhere, he rejected the euro-centric idea that the West is special, looking instead for forms of knowledge that are more truly universal, better suited to the new world society launched by the war.

As a former student of English literature, he knew something about medieval European society and culture. He wanted to connect a newly independent West Africa to the Islamic civilization he encountered briefly during the war. His subject therefore was the comparison of pre-industrial societies, past and present, an ethnographically informed juxtaposition of Africa, Europe and the Middle East. This enquiry was an extension of his own personal experience, fuelled by social interactions and political engagement. The ultimate historical question is where human civilization is going, but the key for Jack lies in the similarity and divergence of regions with an agrarian past.

Future generations will want to study the world society emerging in our times and they will look to us for antecedents; but they will be disappointed by the fragmented narrowness of our anthropological vision. Jack Goody, with Eric Wolf as his only serious contemporary rival, devised and carried out an anthropological project on a scale to match the human civilization now being formed.

By the time Jack became an anthropologist, colonial empire was rapidly being dismantled. Yet the intellectual legacy of imperialism still underpins anthropology. So he chose to attack the lingering opposition of ‘modern’ and ‘primitive’ cultures by studying the chief activity of literate elites, of which he was himself a leading example -- writing. The most important communications technologies are speech and writing, orality and literacy. Most African cultures are predominantly oral, whereas the ruling classes of Eurasian civilization have always relied on literate records. Lévi-Strauss’s lists linking ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ societies to other pairs, such as history and myth, science and magic, far from exemplifying universal reason, were a parochial by-product of mental habits induced by writing.

In *The East in the West* (1996) and numerous volumes since,⁴ Jack Goody sought to refute the claim, promoted by the founders of modern social theory, that the West’s economic ascendancy could be attributed to a unique type of rationality missing from the less fortunate

societies of Asia and elsewhere. He shows first that Europe's distinctiveness is either non-existent or has been exaggerated; and second that the rate of adoption of western industrial techniques by Japan, China and India has been faster than it took for the innovations of the Italian Renaissance to diffuse to Northwest Europe. He concludes that euro-centrism obscures Asia's current economic performance and potential, while misrepresenting western history. It makes more sense to see Eurasia as a single entity, at least since the Bronze Age, where the advantage of particular regions has fluctuated considerably. Africa drops out of Goody's focus at this point.⁵

Jack drew on Gordon Childe's (1942) materialist synthesis of revolutions that marked definitive stages in the history of human production and society -- the 'neolithic' 10,000 years ago and the 'urban' 5,000 years ago, with the 'industrial revolution' of unproven significance so far. Childe got his basic framework from Morgan-Engels, sometimes seen as the origin of modern anthropology; "the anthropology of unequal society" is a powerful strand of our history and its leading protagonist for half a century was Jack Goody.

Jack Goody has been telling us something about the formation of contemporary world society. Like Bruno Latour, he says we have never been modern. Modern democracy is predicated on the abolition of the unequal society that ruled the Eurasian landmass for 5,000 years. Goody reminds us of the durable inequality of our world and suggests that its causes may be less tractable than we think. Redress for this situation seems further away today than it did in 1945, when Jack set out on his post-war journey.

What were Jack Goody's core ideas? The key to understanding social forms lies in production and that means the uneven spread of machine production today. Civilization or human culture is largely a consequence of the means of communication -- once writing, now an array of mechanized media, but always interacting with oral and written forms. The site of social struggles is property. And his central focus on reproduction has never been more salient than now when the aging citizens of rich countries need to reinvent kinship too. If human culture is to be rescued from the unequal society that results when agrarian civilization is strengthened by machines, Jack Goody's anthropological vision offers one indispensable means of contemplating how. Let him have the last word:

The idea that Europeans invented a new form of rationality or even social change itself was a product of their temporary superiority in the nineteenth century and the attempt to explain why until then others had not achieved what they had done. However invention is not something that is alien to any human mind nor yet is

rationality; they appear throughout human existence in different forms, at different tempos and in different mixes. From the very beginning humans have invented solutions to their problems and they have explored the world around them, often ending with transcendental visions. The idea of an earlier, static, 'primitive', non-rational society has been maintained by many sociologists and historians, including Marx and Weber, but it is quite foreign to most of us who have engaged in 'participant observation' among such peoples.⁶

¹ See Hart (1985).

² Goody (1962).

³ The only comprehensive festschrift is Olson and Cole (2006). See also *Theory, Culture and Society* (2009) and, published a week before Jack died, *History and Anthropology* (2015).

⁴ Of which the most important is *The Theft of History* (Goody 2005).

⁵ See Hart (2012).

⁶ From Goody (2012: 290) *Metals, Capitalism and Culture*. See also Hart (2014).

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