

A Giant with Encyclopaedic Knowledge: A Short Biography (and Personal Portrait) of Jack Goody

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POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

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The world-renowned Africanist and social anthropologist John Rankine Goody, known to all and publishing as Jack, died in Cambridge after 95 years of an exceptionally fertile life. [1] He authored more than two dozen books, edited another dozen volumes, contributed to several collections, and wrote and published innumerable journal articles. He was married three times and fathered five children. Jack Goody was an original thinker and a warm person, who cherished friendship. Although he was a Cambridge professor, he never was a don who would look down on people surrounding him. Although he deserved a knighthood a long time ago, he got it only when he was 86. Perhaps he had to wait because he did not cherish undeserved privileges and was essentially an egalitarian.

His interest in Africa was awoken when fighting Rommel's Afrika Korps as a soldier in the British Army. He was captured, escaped twice from Italian POW camps, and read his first anthropology books while in a German camp. After the war he studied first in Oxford, under the Africanist Edward Evans-Pritchard, and later under another famous anthropologist of Africa, Meyer Fortes, in Cambridge. It was Fortes who sent him to the north-western Gold Coast to carry out research on the stateless and chiefless LoWiili and LoDagaa. Altogether he spent five years in the field. While Ghana was being born, he became a supporter of Nkrumah's Convention People's Party. The revised PhD thesis, turned into the book *Death, Property and the Ancestors* (1962), is arguably one of Goody's best works. In this major study he addressed the human quest for posterity on the basis of data from Africa. Goody later continued his research in Ghana among the Gonja, in collaboration with his second wife

Esther and a local chief and scholar J.A. Braimah. He eventually published a voluminous transcription and translation of the *Myth of Bagre* (1972) that he considered his most important contribution to posterity.

I first met Jack Goody in Prague in 1970 where he came to talk about his Africanist and anthropological work at an invitation arranged through Ladislav Holý, who knew Goody from his Cambridge days. Jack followed his head of the department, Fortes, who visited Prague twice, in 1962 and 1966. The lecture in the Department of Oriental Studies at Charles University was a reflection of his pioneering article “Feudalism in Africa?” Then I had to adjust for the first time to his mumbling style of speech. The lecture revealed to the listeners the ways in which sub-Saharan Africa was different from North Africa, Europe and Asia. His stress on technology and war (“booty production”) as state-forming factors seemed to me pretty close to Marxism, at least anti-dogmatic Marxism, then in vogue, one which respected the data from the field. The ensuing book *Technology, Tradition, and the State in Africa* (1971) was another milestone in Goody’s academic trajectory. Goody soon turned into “Jack” for me; we met the same year in Varna during the World Sociology Congress and had the opportunity to discuss our joint interests. It was Jack Goody, who along with Fortes and Susan Drucker-Brown, inspired me to choose my fieldwork site within northern Ghana: the Nanumba people and their chieftaincy. Once I managed to escape from communist Czechoslovakia in 1976, Goody invited my wife and me to Cambridge and we stayed for a week in his spacious house at 8 Adams Road. Jack’s hospitality was endearing. I recall meeting Chinua Achebe in that house when he was passing through Cambridge. Later Jack also found a lectureship for me in Zaria, in case I was not able to settle in the Netherlands. Instead of Zaria, however, I went to Ghana for my first period of fieldwork. Jack was among the few whom I informed about my fieldwork results in northern Ghana. Eventually I managed to spend a month at his invitation in Cambridge in 1981. Jack assigned me to an office next to his in the department and I could observe how busy he was as the departmental head. I was asked to present a paper in the regular Friday afternoon seminar. I recall that seminar vividly because I refuted the idea that Nanun was a state and Jack did not like that. He expressed his objections so clearly that the audience was shocked because normally Jack would be mumbling. In 1983, when Goody was 64, he retired prematurely from his departmental headship, I passed through Cambridge to say goodbye before I left for Cape Town, and we did not keep in touch during the intense nine years I worked there. When I came to Cambridge for another month in the winter of 1992, Jack was more relaxed as he no longer needed to attend to administrative duties; he was now enjoying writing his books in his spacious quarters in St. John’s College. Whenever I visited him there he hardly stopped searching for something in the heaps of paper that covered the floor. He apparently worked on several pieces at once. Later we saw each other in Piran and Halle. I joined Chris Hann when he took Jack to the airport. On the way, we stopped at Wittenberg. He was then in his eighties but did not stop walking in and around the church famous for Martin Luther’s 95 theses, asked questions and behaved like a fieldworker in Ghana. The last time I saw Jack Goody was again in Cambridge. He was then 92 but still writing normally in his new quarters near the college gate. He was

then working on the last touches of his book *Metals, Culture and Capitalism: An Essay on the Origins of the Modern World*.

Jack Goody was a good Africanist fieldworker but in his heart he was a comparative social anthropologist, a historian of social structure, a student of culture across centuries, interested in both Africa and Eurasia, enormously erudite and with a broad expertise from technical kinship studies to the social role of food and flowers. He wrote extensively on the family in three continents, and explained the difference between dowry and bridewealth, but was fascinated by the continental distinction between the logic of writing and orally transmitted knowledge. Early in my studies I admired the lucidity in his analysis of succession to high office in Africa, Europe and the Near East. It helped me in my own research on the Nanumba paramountcy. Goody also tackled cognitive developments in human culture, referring to the spurious dichotomy between primitive and advanced societies. Pre-literate societies was one of the subjects. Anyone with an interest should read his book, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977). His interest in Africa never petered out. In 1995 he published his meticulously researched account of the rise and the heyday of British anthropology. By spending a great deal of time studying Ghanaian and other archives he documented the intricacies of relations and circumstances of doing anthropology in Africa between several anthropological giants such as Malinowski, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard. It makes for exciting reading and I have to emphasise that Jack Goody wrote very lucidly, while perfectly documenting every fact taken from others. Chapter 8 of this book, *The Expansive Moment*, summarises Goody's own contributions up to his book, *The Culture of Flowers* (1993). He clarified a number of points, which others did not know well or at all. The intellectual influences on him were numerous and his interests were very wide. If readers want to get to know Goody, I recommend studying this chapter first and then following it up with the works as they emerged from his workshop.

Science lost a giant with encyclopaedic knowledge, passionately pursuing the right questions and looking for answers to them. He was keen to know and understand what had been happening in the eastern parts of Europe. Africa and Africanists will long profit from the knowledge and wisdom contained in his books and other works.

Jack Goody's major works (in chronological order)

1954 *An Ethnography of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast East of the White Volta*. London (mimeographed).

1956 *The Social Organisation of the LoWiili* (London: H.M.S.O. (2nd ed. 1976, London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute).

1958 ed. *The Developmental Cycle in Domestic Groups*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

1962 *Death, Property and the Ancestors: A Study of the Mortuary Customs of the LoDagaa of West Africa*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- 1966 ed. *Succession to High Office*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1966 ed. with Kwame Arhin. *Ashanti and the North-West*. Legon: University of Ghana.
- 1968 ed. *Literacy in Traditional Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1969 *Comparative Studies in Kinship*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (*Family and Kinship*, in 7 volumes, vol. 3). Reprinted in 2004.
- 1971 *Technology, Tradition, and the State in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 1971 ed. *Kinship: Selected Readings*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- 1972 ed. *The Myth of the Bagre*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 1973 ed. *The Character of Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1973 with Stanley J. Tambiah. *Bridewealth and Dowry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1975 *Changing Social Structure in Ghana: Essays in the Comparative Study of a New State and an Old Tradition*. London: International African Institute.
- 1975 with Nelson O. Adda. *Siblings in Ghana*. Legon: University of Ghana.
- 1976 *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1976 ed. with Joan Thirsk and E.P. Thompson, *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1977 *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1982 *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1983 *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1986 *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1987 *The Interface between the Written and the Oral*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1990 *The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1993 *The Culture of Flowers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1995 *The Expansive Moment: The Rise of Social Anthropology in Britain and Africa, 1918-1970*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

1996 *The East in the West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; translated into French and Italian.

1997 *Representations and Contradictions: Ambivalence towards Images, Theatre, Fiction, Relics and Sexuality*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

1998 *Food and Love: A Cultural History of East and West*. London: Verso.

2000 *The European Family: An Historico-Anthropological Essay*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

2000 *The Power of the Written Tradition*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.

2003 *Islam in Europe*. London: Blackwell. Reprinted 2004 Cambridge: Polity Press.

2004 *Capitalism and Modernity: The Great Debate*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

2004 *Comparative Studies in Kinship*. London: Routledge. Previously publ. 1969.

2006 *The Theft of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2010 *Myth, Ritual and the Oral*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2010 *Renaissances: The One or the Many?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2010 *The Eurasian Miracle*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

2012 *Metals, Culture and Capitalism: An Essay on the Origins of the Modern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[1] This article was first published by the Czech Association for African Studies, Philosophical Faculty, University of Hradec Králové: Skalník, Petr, "Jack Goody (1919–2015)", *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*, vol. 3, No. 2., 2015, pages 5-11. ISSN 2336-3274.