

Sir Jack Goody obituary

The Guardian (<http://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/aug/06/jack-goody>) · by Peter Burke

The anthropologist Sir Jack Goody, who has died aged 95, combined thorough fieldwork with an original intellect that led him to establish links between very different civilisations, and gave him a deep understanding of the processes of change. One of his most remarkable pieces of work was a comparison between the societies of ancient Greece and modern Ghana.

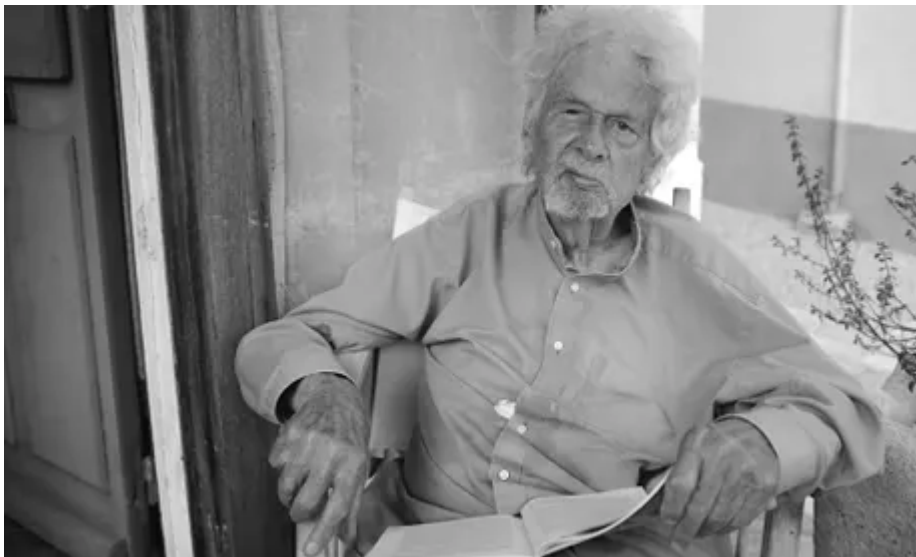
He was particularly interested in the transmission between the generations of both property and knowledge, in his work in northern Ghana. His comparisons of inheritance systems led him to the conclusion that, in medieval Europe (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/europe-news>), the Roman Catholic Church had resisted marriages between relatives for fear of losing bequests of property.

As for oral tradition, Goody recorded a local myth recited during the initiation rituals of a west African society (The Myth of the Bagre, 1972), and noted the importance in oral cultures of “structural amnesia”, the loss of the memory of differences between the past and the present. His point was that in these cultures the memory of changes is lost in a generation or so, since the past is constantly updated, by being reconstructed in the image of the present.

Northern Ghana at the time of Goody’s fieldwork, in the 1950s, was a society of restricted literacy. In what became a famous article on the consequences of literacy, written with his friend Ian Watt, Goody made comparisons with ancient Greece and argued that alphabetic literacy, in particular, expanded the intellectual horizons of a community by allowing knowledge to accumulate, undermining structural amnesia and so making possible the development of historical inquiry, comparison and scepticism.

As Goody wrote later in one of his best-known books, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977): “Differences in the mode of communication are often as important as differences in the mode of production.” Writing affects cognitive processes. By this time Goody had modified his original emphasis on alphabetic literacy and noted the achievements of societies that employed other forms of writing such as Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese characters.

At this stage, halfway through a long academic career in which he produced more than 40 authored and edited volumes as well as hundreds of articles, Goody was reinventing himself. From a social anthropologist who had carried out fieldwork in villages, he was turning into a historical sociologist or social historian concerned with what the American sociologist Charles Tilly called “big structures, large processes, huge comparisons”. Originally a specialist on Africa, he now focused on Eurasia.



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The red thread that bound his many achievements together was the idea of a “Bronze Age revolution” – the rise of advanced agriculture, cities and writing – put forward by the Australian Marxist archaeologist Gordon Childe, one of whose books Goody had discovered in the library of a German prison camp during the second world war. Goody devoted his professional life to working out the consequences of this Bronze Age revolution, in which Europe and Asia

participated but Africa was largely left out. From the study of literacy he moved on to the investigation of cuisine – socially and culturally differentiated in Europe and Asia but not in Africa, as he pointed out in *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (1982) – and “the culture of flowers”, contrasting the lack of interest in flowers in Africa with the enthusiasm shown for them from Britain to Japan, in *The Culture of Flowers* (1993).

Awareness of the history of Africa led Goody to emphasise what east and west, Asia and Europe, had and have in common. Opposing traditional views of the long “rise of the west”, he argued that the two regions alternated for supremacy until the years around 1800 (*The East in the West*, 1996). Instead of speaking of a European miracle, like some western historians, he thought in terms of a Eurasian miracle, “based on the common attainments of the Bronze Age”. His implied criticism of Eurocentrism became explicit in some of his later books, notably *The Theft of History* (2006), in which he undermined western claims to have invented democracy, capitalism and individualism.

Jack was born in London to Lillian, a civil servant, one of the first women to pass the civil service exams, and Harold, a manager at the Mazda electrical company. Brought up in St Albans, Hertfordshire, he went to St Albans school, and, encouraged by his parents’ passion for education, won a scholarship to St John’s College, Cambridge, in 1938 to read English. However, his interests were not limited to literature and he discussed politics and history with Eric Hobsbawm (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/oct/01/eric-hobsbawm>), who became a lifelong friend.

On the outbreak of the second world war, he joined the army and served in the Sherwood Foresters. He was captured at Tobruk, Libya, after the siege of 1941, escaped from a PoW camp in the Abruzzo region of central Italy, and was recaptured and sent to a camp in Bavaria, where he discovered James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* and Childe’s *What Happened in History* in the camp library. Goody’s enthusiasm for these books led to him switching from English to archaeology and anthropology on his return to Cambridge, where he graduated in 1946.

After an interval teaching in the adult education service in Hertfordshire, he gained a doctorate in social anthropology at Balliol College, Oxford (1954), following fieldwork among the LoDagaa people of northern Ghana. He returned to Cambridge as an assistant lecturer (1954-59) and then lecturer (until 1971) in the department of archaeology and anthropology, becoming a fellow of his old college, St John's (1961), reader (1972), professor of anthropology and head of his department (1973-84). In 1976 he was elected a fellow of the British Academy, and in 2005 he was knighted.

After his retirement Goody held visiting professorships, received awards and gave endowed lectures at universities around the world, but Cambridge and particularly St John's remained his academic base. Friends remember him for his wisdom and hospitality; those who knew him from his books have often been struck by his wide range of references, with frequent quotations from novels and plays, and by his insatiable curiosity, fuelled by travel and disciplined by sharp insights into history, culture and society.

He is survived by his third wife, Juliet Mitchell, whom he married in 2000, and by a stepdaughter, Polly; by his children, Jeremy, Joanna and Jane, with his first wife, Joan Wright, whom he married in 1946; and by his daughters, Mary and Rachel, with his second wife and fellow anthropologist Esther Newcomb, whom he married in 1956. His first two marriages ended in divorce.

Sir John Rankine Goody, anthropologist, born 27 July 1919; died 16 July 2015

From Italy to Sweden, Hungary to France, the far right is once again a force to be reckoned with. Its hostility towards immigrants encourages xenophobes everywhere, including in France. Its social conservatism threatens hard-won LGBTQ+ rights. Its euroscepticism has already upset the dynamics of the EU.

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Contribution frequency

Contribution amount

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Peter Burke