

# Professor Sir John 'Jack' Goody FBA (OA 1938)

Social Anthropologist



Born in 1919, **Sir Jack Goody** grew up in Welwyn Garden City and St Albans, where he attended St Albans School. He went up to St John's College, Cambridge to study English Literature in 1938, where he came to know leftist intellectuals like Eric Hobsbawm.

Fighting in North Africa in World War II, he was captured by the Germans and spent three years in a prisoner-of-war camp.

Inspired by reading Frazer's *Golden Bough* and Gordon Childe, he transferred to Archaeology and Anthropology when he resumed university study in 1946. After fieldwork in Gonja in northern Ghana, Goody increasingly turned to comparative study of Europe, Africa and Asia.

Between 1954 and 1984, he taught social anthropology at Cambridge University, serving as the William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology from 1973 until 1984. He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1976 and has also been knighted by the Queen. He gave the Luce Lectures at Yale University-Fall 1987

Goody has pioneered the comparative anthropology of literacy, attempting to gauge the causal preconditions and effects of writing as a technology. He also wrote substantially on the history of the family and the anthropology of inheritance. More recently, he has written on the anthropology of flowers and food.

Sir Jack explained social structure and social change primarily in terms of three major factors. The first was the development of intensive forms of agriculture that allowed for the accumulation of surplus – surplus explained many aspects of cultural practice from marriage to funerals as well as the great divide between African and Eurasian societies. Second, he explained social change in terms of urbanization and growth of bureaucratic institutions that modified or overrode traditional forms of social organization, such as family or tribe, identifying civilization as “the culture of cities”. And third, he attached great weight to the technologies of communication as instruments of psychological and social change.

He associated the beginnings of writing with the task of managing surplus and, in an important paper with Ian Watt, he advanced the argument that the rise of science and philosophy in classical Greece depended importantly on their invention of an efficient writing system, the alphabet. Because these factors could be applied to either to any contemporary social system or to systematic changes over time, his work is equally relevant to many disciplines.

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