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## Jack Goody

The British anthropologist and historian Jack Goody (b. 1919) is acknowledged as one of the most versatile intellectuals of our times. His work, marked by great erudition, breadth of interest and a distinctly ‘Goodyan’ approach, has attracted the attention and admiration of not only anthropologists and historians but also philosophers, educationalists and economists. The great French historian Georges Duby, for instance, characterized Goody’s work as a disconcerting but ‘superb lesson in thoroughness’ and acuteness that greatly broadens the horizons of historians. Amartya Sen, the philosopher and economist and 1998 winner of the Nobel Prize for economics, recommended it as an excellent remedy for the distorted view that the West has of East–West differences. The repercussions and impact of Goody’s ideas have been so great that a few years ago his work was the subject of a conference in France, something which does not usually occur during an intellectual’s lifetime.

The path that led Jack Goody to anthropology and history was not a straightforward one. He began his higher education in 1938 reading English literature at the University of Cambridge, at which time he associated with E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and Raymond Williams, three other giants of English intellectual life. But the Second World War soon took him off to fight in the African desert, where he was captured by the Germans; he spent three years in prisoner-of-war camps in the Middle East, Italy and Germany, escaped from prison, and then spent six months living under cover in Italy. After a long time when he was deprived of books, ironically it was when he reached the German prison camp at Eichstätt (which surprisingly had its own library) that Goody came across two books that were to make a significant impression on his intellectual life: *The Golden Bough* by the anthropologist James

Frazer, and *What Happened in History* by the archaeologist Gordon Childe. On returning to university in 1946, he abandoned his literary studies and transferred to the faculty of archaeology and anthropology. After devoting himself to adult education (like his friend E. P. Thompson he wanted to 'help change the world'), he started his career as an anthropologist with fieldwork in an African village, where he became a 'friend of the ancestors'. Since then he has opened up several new fields of study: always rethinking his ideas and constantly moving from one subject to another, he has tackled themes as diverse as the impact of writing on societies, cooking, the culture of flowers, the family, feminism, the contrast between Eastern and Western cultures, etc.

His reputation as an anthropologist among his British colleagues was acquired primarily through the fieldwork that he carried out in Gonja in northern Ghana and the series of studies that resulted from it: studies on property, the ancestors, the relationship between forms of technology and the state, and so forth. He consolidated his reputation at an international level with broad comparative studies on the society and history of Africa, Europe and Asia. He was originally interested in the subject of literacy among Africans, ancient Greeks, Assyrians and traditional societies in general. His controversial 1963 article on the consequences of literacy, written in collaboration with the historian of English literature Ian Watt, was the first of a series of studies on this subject, the best known of which is his book *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977). Another field in which Goody has used his talent for comparison is the history of inheritance and the family. His most famous contribution in this area is *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (1983), in which he explains the Church's ban on marriage between relatives as a reaction to practices that could deprive it of property. More recently Goody has broadened his comparisons to embrace food and flowers. *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (1982), *Flowers* (1993) and *Love and Food* (1999) are studies in which he uses his knowledge of Africa to contrast the culture of that continent with that of Eurasia, an area which, as he explains, developed in a different direction after the rise of cities and writing caused by the Bronze Age 'revolution'. In short, anyone examining Jack Goody's work has to acknowledge that the all-embracing view of society and long-term history that lies behind it is so broad that it makes even the German sociologist Max Weber and the French historian Fernand Braudel appear limited and Eurocentric in comparison.

Jack Goody taught social anthropology at the University of Cambridge from 1954 to 1984, but throughout his life he has also been an itinerant researcher and lecturer in all four corners of the world. The dynamic, productive life that Jack Goody still leads at over eighty arouses admiration and astonishment in many of his colleagues. His academic production remains enviable both in its quality and in the number of his

publications; his performance at seminars and conferences is always marked by a mixture of spontaneity and brilliance which captivates and inspires his audience. When at last a gap appeared in his tireless schedule of activities, Jack Goody gave me this interview in his room in St John's, the Cambridge college to which he has belonged since 1938, first as a student and subsequently as a fellow. In a conversation full of surprises and fertile digressions, during which he was extremely expansive, polite and good-humoured, Goody spoke at length about his interests, his experiences and his intellectual development.

MARIA LÚCIA PALLARES-BURKE *You have written about an amazing number of issues, that range from the consequences of literacy and educational reforms to family and marriage patterns; from contemporary Africa and nineteenth-century Brazil to ancient Greece, China and Mesopotamia; from flowers and rituals of death to love, lust and food – just to mention some of your interests. How do you explain this breathtaking curiosity and encyclopaedic range?*

JACK GOODY Well, maybe partly this is due to the peculiar situations I experienced in the war. At one time, for instance, I was in the desert fighting and coming up against Bedouins, and then, the next time, I was a prisoner of war living with Indians, South Africans, Russians, etc.; at another time I was escaping from prison and hiding in the houses of Italian peasants from the Abruzzi, and so on. I think that when I came back from the war, somehow or other I wanted to make some sense of all this diversity. But I think that it's only partly that, because reading Marx and Weber made me interested in broad sociological problems, such as why things happen in one place but not in others. That's something that has interested me for a long time. When I was doing fieldwork in a village in northern Ghana, I never wanted to stay locked into it, but rather to understand it in a wider framework: in its connection with the desert trade, the routes across the Sahara and its relation to the gold trade from the East and from South America, and so on. I've always been interested in that kind of connection. So, that's why I like to think that I am a specialist in the area that I've worked in Africa, but I don't like to see myself as an Africanist. Nor did my teacher Meyer Fortes. Like some other anthropologists, he didn't like to be seen simply as a specialist on one continent, but rather as someone able to discuss family systems in different parts of the world. This is why when the African Studies Association was founded in England, Fortes and most of the other senior anthropologists didn't join it. They wanted to be much more like the economists who had some kind of more general approach and were not seen as African economists or South American economists, or something like that. I don't think they

were altogether right, because there is something much more concrete and specific in anthropology than there is in economics, but, nevertheless, the general principle was that you shouldn't be an Africanist or an Oceanist, in that kind of way.

*What relationship do you see between your personal experiences and the anthropologist and historian you became?*

I'm not sure that any early experiences led me to anthropology. I was much encouraged in school by my parents, who had left school early, especially by my Scottish mother. I grew up first of all in the new town of Welwyn Garden City in Hertfordshire, and then the family moved to St Albans, so that my brother (who taught astrophysics at Harvard) and I could attend the nearby St Albans [Grammar] School. There I got interested in archaeology, since Mortimer Wheeler was digging up the Roman town of Verulamium, which was next to the school.

But my main interest, apart from English literature, which was the sexiest subject at school and university, was current affairs and history. My schooldays were overshadowed by the expansion of Germany and Italy, and above all by the Spanish Civil War (more so than by the 'colonies', although the future of India was a concern). So my interest in literature had a more 'social' aspect to it than some of my teachers at Cambridge – above all Leavis – would allow.

*During your fieldwork in Ghana, in which you became 'the friend of the ancestors', you defended their independence and even joined the Convention People's Party. How do you reconcile this with the anthropological ideal of impartial observation?*

When I was in Ghana I was not only concerned with looking at some so-called primitive tribe, but also at what was going on politically. And you cannot do any observation unless you are, to some extent, a participant as well. I mean, unless people allow you to see what is going on. And if you want to see what is going on in politics you really have to belong to a political party. But since at the same time as I was a member of the party I also knew very well the local district commissioner working for the colonial government, I could more or less see both sides.

But my joining the Convention People's Party was not just a strategy. I was really interested in the process of independence and obviously was not a completely neutral observer. In fact, all of us who were working in Africa after the war were in one way or another committed to the idea of independence, to the idea of social change in these countries, and we were working towards those aims, perhaps overrating the role of education in society.

*Your interest in educational issues – as part of your effort ‘to change the world’ – goes back to the time you worked with adult education after the war and was encouraged by your observation of the educational systems of many African and European countries. Almost two decades ago you proposed a radical reform of education that would involve the ‘partial de-schooling’ of the youngsters. How do you reconcile this proposal with your interest in literacy?*

My interest in the social changes which followed the introduction of writing made me aware of two things. On one side, the means of oral communication do not disappear with the arrival of writing. On the other, the dominance of written culture (and of literate people), and the contempt for illiterates associated with it is deplorable. One of the reasons for my becoming interested in this issue was the experience of having a dyslexic daughter who at the age of ten or eleven developed an aversion to school when she realized that she had great difficulty in reading and writing. Well, people like her should be valued for something else they can do well. Some, for instance, go into gardening, and you can actually find excellent college gardeners who have reading and writing problems. And this is not an individual problem (it is known that 10 per cent of the population have this problem), but a general phenomenon associated with alphabetic literacy. So, when I made that proposal of de-schooling I was not thinking that it is possible to reverse the historical trend, even if that was desirable, but that one ought to evaluate non-written work and oral achievements in a more positive way. One of the disastrous things about education is that it takes people away from productive activities, the living activities in society, and locks them into a classroom. This is certainly not the way to learn respect for other types of labour besides the intellectual ones. When I worked in education in England after the war, in certain country districts children were allowed to spend some time in an ordinary productive system, learning, for instance, what a potato is and how it grows by observing the real thing and helping with the potato picking. The sad thing is that the experience didn't last very long because schoolteachers became very anxious to get rid of that living activity and bring back the students to their enclaves.

But I also had another thing in mind when I wrote that. I was thinking about the problems derived from the discrepancy between the educational system and the productive system, something that is particularly dramatic in the case of Africa, where there is not much functional reason for literacy. I must admit that at the time of the independence movement I went along with other intellectuals and politicians and also thought that with good schools and universities the economy would take off, the whole society would develop. But things didn't work out like that. While

education – at an enormous cost – has been rather successful, even producing great novelists and playwrights (many now living in the USA or Europe), the productive system remains more or less the same. This means that a lot of money is spent in training people to be migrants and to have rather minor jobs abroad, because after having studied for seventeen or eighteen years, let's say, they don't want to go back to hoe agriculture, and yet there is no other job for them to do; they are taken away from traditional farming but they are not provided with any alternative. That's why you have now got an extraordinary number of Ghanaians in Chicago alone – about 10,000 of them, some with twenty years of schooling – working as taxi drivers and in other low-status jobs. The irony is that we, in the West, think that we are doing a great thing when we cancel debts or send them some help, while in fact we are probably taking more from them than we are giving to them, when we consider the jobs they are doing for us. I mean, the USA, for instance, gets very good taxi drivers in this way!

When I argue, then, that education has to be adjusted to the economy, I obviously don't mean this in any absolute sense, but in relation to certain particular situations. Alone, universal literacy cannot change the world, and certainly couldn't change Ghana! So, besides keeping education more in harmony with the economy, I'm defending the revaluation of oral achievements as well as of the literary ones, so that the great ballad makers and the great singers of tales can be praised alongside the great writers of books.

*You have recently written an ethnographic and historical book about the culture of flowers, and from the outset you alert the reader that the topic was not as narrow as it might appear, but that, as in the case of cooking, it had a lot to do with 'the serious things of life'. Could you develop this idea?*

It all started a long time ago when I was in Africa studying the funerary rituals and realized that you couldn't find the culture of flowers, which is so widespread in Asia and Europe. Not only is there very little use of flowers in Africa, but also very little symbolism attached to flowers, in either songs or stories. That's usually the way things start with me; the contrast arouses my interest. In this case, the contrast between the situation in Africa with, say, the situation in India, China or Europe. The question why people don't make use of flowers in Africa is posed against the background of the fact that in India, for instance, people are putting garlands around politicians all the time.

Assuming, then, that the use or non-use of flowers says a lot about society's attitudes and characteristics, I decided to write a historical and anthropological book on this theme. Wherever I went I started collecting tales of flowers, walked around cemeteries, talked with florists, visited

flower markets, and did some research in libraries. That is how I discovered the great symbolic meaning that flowers can have in certain societies and the clashes that might exist between different cultures of flowers. Once, when my assistant from Hong Kong retired, an Italian friend tried to stop me giving her yellow chrysanthemums, because that is a flower that you give to the dead in his part of the world. Little did he know that in China the same flower carries a message of long life.

As to the reason why there is no culture of flowers in Africa, I would say that this continent never adopted the changes of the Bronze Age, of the Urban Revolution, which had such an enormous impact in Europe and Asia, as the archaeologist Gordon Childe showed so well. With no writing system, no plough, no intensive agriculture, not a large range of crafts, no proto-industrialization, no accounting system, the African societies did not have the large estates, the leisure class and the economy of waste that allow for the development of the culture of flowers as well as for a special cuisine. Yes, because a differentiated cuisine and the aesthetic use of flowers require economic stratification. You can go to the house of an African chief, who may be politically higher, but he will be eating the same food as anyone else in the community. So, there is much less cultural stratification in Africa than there is in the societies that have gone through the Urban Revolution of the Bronze Age. By and large you hear the same music, you eat the same food and you perform the same rituals wherever you are in Africa. In this context, there is no room for the use of domestic or even of wild flowers. They are regarded as a preliminary to the fruit or to the tree, and cutting them down is considered a waste. That was in essence the same attitude that my mother would have about cutting a branch from an apple tree: you would be spoiling the fruit. And if the Africans never domesticated wild flowers, as happened in China or India, where there was an enormous development of controlled agriculture, it is partly because they were much more concerned with domesticating the essentials of life, and saw the use of flowers as rather frivolous.

*In your book on the culture of flowers you discuss the relative scarcity of flowers in graveyards and at funerals in Protestant northern Europe and contrast it with their abundance in the Catholic south, for instance in Italy, where respect and love for the dead is shown in the language of flowers. How would you then explain the tons of flowers (sent in a hurry from Israel, Thailand, Holland and Kenya), which the Protestant British offered to Princess Diana before, during and after her funeral?*

I think this is very intriguing, because it is true that the Protestant Reformation with its condemnation of luxuries and elaborate rituals drastically affected the culture of flowers. So flowers are used in the

Protestant countries in a much more limited way. My mother, as a Scottish Presbyterian, would have been horrified to see that waste. If someone offered her flowers, she would say quietly: 'I'd rather ha'e eggs.' Things have, nevertheless, changed since the seventeenth century and the historical compromise that produced the Church of England has allowed flowers to come into vogue. But even so, we never give anywhere near as many flowers as they do in France or Italy, and not only at funerals. In nineteenth-century France, for instance, there were very interesting publications about the language of flowers which every young lady should know. So I cannot make very much sense of the Diana event, which was certainly a unique demonstration. A little earlier something similar – on a much smaller scale – had happened in Brussels when people poured spontaneously into the street to protest against the government after the murder of a child by a paedophile. In the case of the Diana event, the demonstration also came from below. It was a great expression of sympathy, also with an element of anti-establishment involved – because the royal family had rejected her. I wouldn't say that it was a media event at all, although the media stimulated it, provoking a certain amount of contagion. Watching what was happening, more and more people were drawn to London to participate in the event. As in the case of Judaism, where people are not supposed to make an offering either to God or to the dead, but they go to the cemetery and leave a stone on top of the grave to show that they've been there, the British wanted to make their mark, to add their piece by throwing those flowers. And yet it is intriguing to see re-enacted a Catholic practice that, together with many of the saints, had been abolished in England so long ago.

*As a result of your comparative study of Asia and Europe, you have argued that, contrary to what sociologists, anthropologists and historians have assumed, the West did not have a special predisposition towards the development of capitalism or modernization. In fact, you even suggested that, instead of talking about the 'uniqueness of the West', we should rather talk about the uniqueness of Eurasia, and especially about Asia's considerable contribution. Do you mean to say that the idea of stagnant oriental societies, put forward by Marx and so many others, is really a myth of the West?*

Yes, I think it is very much a myth of the West, since all societies have been stagnant at certain periods, and the East has certainly had very dynamic periods. The deep-rooted cultural difference that, according to Marx and to some extent Weber, divided the East from the West, one being stagnant while the other was dynamic, is simply not true. The view of the Western sequence that dates the advance of the West from the ancient Greeks in a direct line, with no interruption, is just part of the folk wisdom of Western Europe. Contrary to what Marx thought, you could



find in the East institutions of civil society and systems of commercial law which allowed for the development of mercantile capitalism.

There is a more or less common view that thinks of the enormous population of India and China as being somehow an index of failure. That is absolute nonsense! An enormous population like that is, on the contrary, an indicator that the economy has been very successful; otherwise they'd not have survived! The great work of Joseph Needham has shown so well that until the fifteenth century China was in many aspects in advance of Europe.<sup>1</sup> In the Middle Ages European societies, in any comparative sense, were pretty stagnant types of society, whereas Asia was more dynamic in terms of the accumulation of knowledge, the agricultural economy, and also in the manufacturing economy, with the sophisticated production of silk and porcelain in China, for instance, and the production of cotton cloth in India, products which were exported in vast quantities to Indonesia, to Africa and even a little bit to Europe well before the Portuguese took over the trade.

It is true that we have to explain the fact that in the sixteenth century the balance started to change and Europe began to be in advance in certain ways. But the explanation cannot, in my view, be in terms of claiming that one society was stagnant and the other was dynamic. We should remember that, in a sense, the Industrial Revolution was partly concerned with copying Asian manufactured products and producing them on a mass scale. Cotton cloth in Manchester was an import substitute for textiles from India and silks from China, while the Wedgwood and Delft industries were copying Chinese porcelain.

*Is it fair to say that the main motive behind your extremely wide-ranging work is the will to undermine the notion of the 'uniqueness of the West'?*

Well, that is one important element. While studying inheritance practices in Africa I became interested not only in their specific features, but also in the similarities and dissimilarities to those in the West. If in every society people have to pass on their goods and values to the next generation, there will be different ways of doing it, but also certain problems in common. When I started my work on flowers I travelled in Indonesia, Bali and India. On seeing the intense use the people make of flowers – wearing garlands around the neck and so forth – I started to wonder why in Africa they were almost completely absent. That was when I was rather surprised to find that Keith Thomas seemed to think that the concern with nature had been a uniquely European, and more specifically an English process, part of the sensibilities and the mentalities of Western

1 Joseph Needham (1900–95), historian of science, author of *Science and Civilization in China* (7 vols), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1954–.

modernity. But that was contrary to all the evidence that showed that there was a much more intensive garden culture in China than there ever was in England, that the symbolism of flowers was so much more important there. Thus, the idea of England as the home of the intensive cultivation of flowers and of college gardens, an idea held by so many people, could not be sustained by a comparative approach. So I thought it important to show not only that Asia had had a sophisticated culture of flowers (more sophisticated than that in Europe), but also that Europe had to go to Asia for flowers as well as for flower patterns. If this was true about flowers, the same point could be made about attitudes to the rest of nature. The earlier existence of the so-called animist religions, which can be seen as part of a dialogue between man and nature about the world, is another example showing that we did not invent ecological concerns. In short, on the basis of a broad comparison between attitudes and ambivalences towards the control and exploitation of nature, the claims to the priority and the uniqueness of the West cannot be sustained.

*You have undermined the claim to the uniqueness of the West and argued that it distorts our understanding of the past and present not only of the 'others' but also of ourselves. Do you mean to say that there is nothing unique about 'us' or 'them', and that, therefore, this category is misleading in itself?*

Not altogether, because there is nothing wrong with the idea that every country and every person is unique. But in what ways are we unique? I tend to think that I am unique because I consider myself a very generous person, or have some similar quality, but that may not be at all true if someone else comes and compares me with others. The idea of explaining modernity as the result of so-called Western singularities, like individualism, rationalism and family patterns, has prevented us from having a deep understanding of the East as well as of the West. What I'm trying to say is that the idea of the uniqueness of the West has got, in a sense, out of hand. Of course England is unique in some ways, Europe is unique in others, China in yet other ways, and so on. But the idea got out of hand because it became a common assumption to think that it is because we are unique that we could invent things like capitalism, modernization, etc. Well, this is possibly true if we're thinking of industrial capitalism. But if one is thinking of mercantile capitalism it is certainly not true, since mercantile capitalism was just as vigorous as or more vigorous in the East in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries than it was in the West. As to modernization, who is to say that Hong Kong or Japan is not more modern than we are? So, things are always changing, and somebody is more modern at one time and somebody else is more modern at another. It is not a unique feature of my constitution as an Englishman

or European that has allowed me to 'modernize'. And yet, that is the way historians like Lawrence Stone and others are thinking. Just look at the history of the family, for instance, and how this notion of the singularity of the West was overemphasized and then used in a theoretical way that is very misleading. You can only tell if the English family is unique by looking at other families, like the Chinese. You can't just claim that uniqueness on the basis of data on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English families. That does not make any sort of sound theoretical sense at all. Was it unique in relation to modernization, to industrialism, to capitalism? Nevertheless, that is what's been happening.

*And this is the reason why you strongly argue for the importance of the comparative studies as a way to avoid ethnocentrism and misleading notions. But could you say something about the dangers of making comparisons and contrasts?*

Yes, there are lots of difficulties, an immense number of difficulties, starting from the fact that one never knows enough about even one society, let alone about several. So we are forced to rely upon the work of other people. But, in fact, in whatever field we work we are always doing that, quoting this and that without being able fully to verify the quality of the data and not having any recipe for perfection. This is particularly true in anthropology because there may be just one person who worked amongst a particular people, which makes it much more difficult to assess the quality of the work than in the case of European societies, say, which have been looked at from a variety of perspectives. Nevertheless, it seems absolutely essential that we should find out something about different societies before we make any sort of generalization. A good number of historical studies, especially on early modern Europe, tend to declare that something is happening for the first time in history (like the notion of childhood), without looking around to see whether what is being claimed might be quite untrue. English historians, particularly, tend to be rather island-centred and to overemphasize the uniqueness of England. The problem is that at the end of the eighteenth century England undoubtedly made some particular advances in the organization of production and the control of energy that were later taken up in the rest of the world. From this, then, English historians extrapolate and make assumptions about the uniqueness of English society without looking around to see whether this was truly so. This is particularly serious in family studies that assume, following Malthus, that the Asian patterns were very different and claim that it was the uniqueness of Western European patterns that promoted modernization, capitalism and so forth. The problem is that we are always having to adjust those ideas to allow for similar developments in other regions. At one time,

people were saying that Japan was advancing because, like England, it was also a small island, or that Japanese feudalism (supposedly the only other system in the world like Western European feudalism), was instrumental in helping them to advance to capitalism. You can see that very clearly in Perry Anderson's *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1974). But then, no sooner you've said that than you discover that China and Taiwan are developing in the same way and you have to make a series of further adjustments to the argument. So, yes, there are a lot of difficulties and this is why many people, postmodernists and others, have rejected comparison altogether.

But, however difficult it is, we have to engage in the kind of comparisons Weber, for example, was making about world religions. Even though we may get it wrong, it is better than simply saying that Christianity is unique without looking around to find out what is really unique about it. Although there is no recipe for perfection and we may not be able to do it terribly efficiently, comparison is one of the few things we can do in historical and social sciences to parallel the kind of experiments the scientists do.

*One of the problems of the comparative approach is that of comparing and contrasting ideas, objects and practices in different cultures while ignoring the context that gives them their meanings, a criticism often made of the work of Frazer. Is it possible to solve this problem?*

My predecessors, who couldn't imagine how studies on African societies could illuminate anything in the lives of European peasants, criticized Frazer heavily. On the other hand, I was fascinated by his work ever since I found the two abridged volumes of *The Golden Bough* in the library of the prisoner-of-war camp at Eichstatt in Germany. This is the book which made me interested in anthropology and I don't think I would have come into this field had it not been for Frazer. I agree that he treated some ideas very atomistically, like the ideas of the soul from all over the world that he discussed and compared. He had no experience in fieldwork, something we all have now. Whether we are historians or anthropologists, we all have done intensive work in a field, so we have some kind of touchstone, something to go back to in order to test our judgement and see how certain ideas fit together in a particular society.

But I think that the reaction against Frazer went much too far, because he helped to make it possible to understand the relationship of advanced societies with other cultures, in a way that no other anthropologist, except possibly Lévi-Strauss, has done! His influence was enormous not only on social and historical sciences, but also on literature. If you look at the notes to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (which was my favourite reading at university), they are full of references to Frazer.

So, with the better data we have now collected about particular societies, we should continue to look into the important questions that Frazer raised. Because the questions he put are the ones that human beings ask about society. To ask, for instance, if the beliefs we have are universal or local is a perfectly valid question.

*You describe yourself as a Marxist, but you have also shown how Marx's views about the so-called 'stagnant oriental form of society' and the specific 'Asiatic mode of production' fed the ideological bias of the West. In spite of this, do you still think that Marxism has any contribution to make to comparative studies?*

I'm certainly not a non-Marxist, because I think that Marx has a lot of good starting points for a number of questions. I've just today been writing a sort of critique of some of Marx's ideas, only because I think they are still worth taking seriously. He has certainly added a long-term historical dimension to the social sciences, which many social scientists don't have. He has a theory about the development from one type of social formation to another which has some value as a kind of general theory, although it may be, in many ways, crude and inadequate. So he might be wrong about Asian societies and also about special features of the European ones, but he certainly raises exciting problems and treats them in interesting ways. Archaeology is one field in which Marx's influence has been very positive, forcing it to attempt to see the flow of history in general terms. I'm thinking particularly about another fascinating book I read in the prison camp, *What Happened in History*, by Gordon Childe. This Australian Marxist historian transformed the study of prehistory in this country and made it much more socially oriented. He was especially important to me in giving a social dimension to major changes in history and prehistory. And his ideas about the great advances of the Bronze Age which took place first in Mesopotamia and then in northern India and China showed, contrary to what Marx and Weber had said, that you couldn't really differentiate Europe and Asia at this time. If anything, Asia was more advanced than Europe; therefore, its societies were not as stagnant and despotic as these authors thought them to be.

Of course, given their lack of knowledge of oriental languages, it was almost impossible for Marx and Weber to know about the commercial and manufacturing development of these societies. Now that the data available in Western languages, not only on the East but on Africa as well, have improved out of all recognition, the faults that were understandable in the past are much less forgivable. On the other hand, this increase in the amount of data that we now have has also increased the problem of controlling the data.

*One of the consequences of the relatively recent convergence of history and anthropology has been the wider appeal and diffusion of micro-history. Following anthropologists, historians have acquired a taste for the study of small communities and obscure individuals. As you know, respectable historians have criticized this new trend. They express the fear that micro-history may tackle only micro-problems and trifling issues, and that those who write it become mini-historians. In a dramatic way, John Elliott, for instance, says that something is very wrong when 'the name of Martin Guerre becomes as well or better known than that of Martin Luther'. What are your thoughts about this?*

I have a certain amount of sympathy for Elliott on that, but fortunately micro-history is not the only convergence between history and anthropology. On the other hand, there have been some interesting points coming out of these micro-studies, which shows that it is an exciting field. And the same is true of the study of particular individuals in particular places and times, points which might be relevant on a wider front. So I personally don't mind about Martin Guerre, provided that people don't look upon this as the only method of enquiry and dismiss wider comparative studies. That is, in fact, what sometimes happens in anthropology, when people become attached to fieldwork, to particular studies, thinking that general studies are of no value. And the further danger in anthropology is one of being caught not simply in a micro-study of a particular people, but in a micro-study of the observer's reaction to that people. In that case, you are not primarily concerned to learn anything about the people, let alone about the wider frame of reference.

*What are then the advantages of the convergence between history and anthropology?*

If you go into a culture that has no historical records, there is the terrible danger of thinking that it has been like that forever; that there is something natural in the way the Jivaros or the Zuñis, for instance, are behaving. Well, one thing that we can be pretty certain of is that this is never the case. On the contrary, cultures are always changing. I've recently become interested in the changes in people's attitudes to images, realizing that cultures are not always iconophiles or iconodules [image worshippers], but that they change over time. So a society that has been Catholic like medieval England, and has made much use of flowers, changes and pushes that aside when it becomes Protestant; and then, it changes again in the nineteenth century; and so on. Neither individuals nor societies are locked into particular attitudes over the longer terms. Now, if you are taking a snapshot view, a synchronic view of a society (as we used to say in anthropology), which is basically what you get when

you do fieldwork in a society, you get the idea that culture is something which goes back in an almost material form to the beginning of time. That is the assumption that allows you to talk about the Ashanti culture, for instance. History, in a sense, is what saves us by giving us the time dimension and depth that is lacking in anthropology. It is true that it is not always possible to get time depth in anthropology, given the lack of early material on the cultures we study; nevertheless anthropologists can at least bear in mind the possibility that these world views, the attitudes they observe, are not necessarily permanent features; as in all society, such attitudes may contain contradictions which can potentially lead to changes over time. Certain recent studies of African peoples offer the evidence for this, since we can observe the changes in their attitude to images, which turn from figurative art into abstract forms.

Thinking about the problem the other way around, anthropology can be beneficial for history, influencing it by the theoretical and generalized way it looks at certain issues, like kingship. Anthropology can help historians to look at certain problems, like marriage rules and inheritance systems, with a wider range of data that has been analysed in a different frame of reference. I've myself found it very exciting to work with E. P. Thompson and Joan Thirsk on a volume for Past & Present Publications on different inheritance systems, in which the European systems when viewed in a wider framework raised interesting problems, especially as regards women.<sup>2</sup>

*As someone who began by working on Africa and who now writes a lot about Europe, you have become a more or less unique intellectual in the world of the social sciences. How important do you consider your mediation between these two worlds?*

Well, I consider my African experience very important, because whatever problem I'm considering, whether in Europe or elsewhere, I ask myself, how would this look in an African context? So it's been very important to me to look at some aspects of European experience against an African background. Observing the similarities and differences between certain aspects of African societies and Western societies – like the inheritance systems, for instance – I've also been trying to arrive at some kind of explanation for those differences and not simply point them out as being the result of savage mentalities. That was partly why I became interested in the role of literacy and writing in societies. What I was trying to say then was that some of the differences between Europe and Africa, which exist, are related to the fact that the Africans did not have a writing

2 *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200–1800*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976.

system. In other words, instead of explaining African societies by talking about savage mentalities in contrast to advanced mentalities, if we look at them in a concrete and contextual way we can see things actually happening as a result of the introduction of writing and schools. In Ghana I could see a great deal of change taking place within a very short space of time; people's horizons being opened up, people performing different kinds of operation, writing books, etc. I've known people who came from simple villages in Africa where writing does not exist and who have become university lecturers, novelists, businessmen in the world at large and even the secretary general of the United Nations!

*Having studied some African cultures which are marked by a relative isolation, what do you think about Edward Said's sweeping statement, 'the history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowing'?*

The idea that these oral cultures in Africa were stagnant just waiting for ideas to come in from abroad is definitely wrong. I think we should not play down the amount of invention that is going on in different cultures. You can only account for the great diversity that exists in human society by thinking not only of borrowing but of the element of invention which exists among human agents. These two processes go together in most cultures and I don't think one can put everything down to internal invention or everything down to external borrowing. We have to study the matter sector by sector, and in the case of Africa, for instance, there is a great deal of invention in the religious and artistic sphere, with new cults and new ideas emerging all the time, sometimes with a few borrowings of thematic elements involved. In other spheres, like the agricultural, technological and the writing system, the fact of cultural borrowing is important.

*Brazil is not missing from your wide-ranging works. What made you interested in the 1835 slave revolt in Salvador, Bahia?*

Partly because I am interested in revolts in general, but actually, in this particular case, because I was very fascinated by the local police chief's understanding of the event. He attributed the relative success of the revolt to the important role that writing played in its organization. It's known that the slaves and free men who participated in the revolt in Salvador – the majority being Muslims of Yoruba origin – were learning to read and write in Arabic characters in informal Islamic schools, and that many of the leaders were educated Africans who had travelled considerably and had excellent knowledge of Arabic. With these abilities, the rebels had been able to send notes to one another giving instructions,



and it is these sources, which were confiscated and collected by the police, that were studied by Nina Rodrigues in 1900.<sup>3</sup>

In the aftermath of this failed revolt, a draconian measure was taken in order to expel dangerous elements from the black community: 400 literate blacks were sent back to West Africa, and this exodus removed them as a factor in future rebellions. So, as you can see, my earlier interest in the consequences of literacy was stimulated by this dramatic event, which showed that once these people had acquired the Arabic script they could operate in a much wider sphere of activity. This event, therefore, brings to light, in a dramatic way, the potential that reading and writing have for cultural transformation. As a result of this work I became interested in the role of literacy in other slave revolts in the Americas, but didn't do much more about it.

*One of your main aims has been to refute the ethnocentric distinctions between 'we' (the civilized, advanced, logical-empirical people) and 'they' (the primitive, mythic people). At the same time, you refuse to accept cultural relativism, which you refer to as 'sentimental egalitarianism'. What is wrong with cultural relativism?*

This is very much a postmodernist fashion, although there has long been this element in anthropology itself, since to some extent its practitioners have always wanted to point out, quite rightly I think, that some societies are not as different from ours as many people have thought. But it's also very important to recognize the differences alongside the similarities. Relativism, in its extreme form, is saying that the people in Africa are the same as the Chinese, the Japanese, and so on. Well, if they are the same, why are their achievements not the same? So the notion that arose in recent years that all human societies are the same goes against cultural history, I think, because it's not possible to equate the achievements of people without writing to those of peoples with writing. We have to take into account the fact that societies that do not have what I call the technology of the intellect are not able to build up knowledge in the same way as the ones that have. Of course, they have knowledge systems about nature but they cannot achieve the same as the societies that have books, encyclopaedias, dictionaries and all that sort of thing. Simply saying, as a philosopher like Derrida does, that reading nature is the same as reading a book is quite wrong. Reading the stars does not give the same kind of knowledge about Brazil, for instance, as the knowledge one can get by reading books. That's what I think is wrong with cultural relativism.

3 R. Nina Rodrigues (1862–1906), Brazilian anthropologist, author of *As raças humanas e a responsabilidade penal no Brasil* (1894), *Os africanos no Brasil* (1933), *O animismo fetichista dos negros baianos* (1935).

It is not that I am better or cleverer than they are, but I have the ability to use pen and pencil, to read and work with books, and this enables me to do things that people from another type of culture, however clever and gifted they are, cannot do. The same applies to the plough and tractor. With the plough, animal traction or the energy from a tractor I can produce a great deal more than I can if I'm a farmer who works with the hoe, as in Africa. It's only because systems of production have become so elaborate that they produce a surplus, that we can be sitting here like this for all these hours just talking. In a simple oral culture we would have to be out there farming to get our food most of the time. It seems obvious therefore that it is a mistake not to realize the existence of these differences. They are not moral differences.

*You have strongly rejected the notion of mentality as an appropriate historical explanation. The histories of mentalities, you argue, betray a certain intellectual laziness. Could you expand your reservations about this approach?*

I think that it is too easy and even simplistic to discover changes in mentalities in history as Philippe Ariès, Lawrence Stone and so many others have done. The 'invention of childhood', for example, is unconvincing because a comparative perspective is lacking. In order to affirm that this invention took place in Europe at a given historical moment, it would be necessary to know, in the first place, what childhood was like in the previous period, and in the second place, how other societies, past and present, have regarded it. The same point could be made about the idea that conjugal love arose in Europe in the eighteenth century. All we have to do to see that this idea does not work is to turn back to the Middle Ages and to ancient Rome. It was along those lines that Ian Watt (my former Cambridge colleague and the author of a fascinating book on the rise of the novel) and I criticized the explanation of the great Greek achievements as the fruit of the 'Greek genius'. There is a kind of intellectual laziness in invoking the 'genius' or 'mentality' of the Greeks to explain their success. In this respect I share the criticisms made by Geoffrey Lloyd in his book *Demystifying Mentalities*. In order to escape this circular argument, which explains nothing, we have to try to discover the factors that contributed to the so-called 'Greek miracle'. This is what we tried to do in a rather polemical article of 1963, 'The Consequences of Literacy', in which we approached human development via the categories of literate and illiterate.

*But in what way does your dichotomy literate–non-literate (which you contrast to the binary oppositions savage–civilized and logical–pre-logical*

*used by Lévi-Strauss and Lévy-Bruhl), differ from the other oppositions, which you claim to be ethnocentric and simplistic?*

The other dichotomies seem to treat human societies as fixed, since they do not explain their differences and do not have any inbuilt notion of change. Simply saying that societies are logical or pre-logical, or hot or cold does not tell you anything about these differences and how you get from one to the other. Whereas what I try to do with literacy is to show what writing actually does in a human society that makes it different from a society that does not have it; and introducing a dynamic element, I also try to show how you get from one type of society to the other. So, contrary to the other oppositions, I don't see them as being fixed for all time because I point to the mechanisms of change, the coming of writing being one important cause for the changing of the system. But in any case my opposition is not binary, like the others, because I see all sorts of changes in the mode of communication as being relevant. It is true that the shift from non-writing to writing was of enormous importance; but I also suggest that the changes which writing provoked differed depending on what system was adopted, whether it was a logographic system as in China, or an alphabetic system as in the later Near East. And again, subsequent changes, like the invention of printing and the mechanization of book production, had an immense impact on the modern world. Before these, the whole human experience went through a major change with the development of a system of speech. So, I see a whole series of divisions that make a difference to human society, and not, like some of my colleagues, a single great divide.

Historians, for example, often talk about the difference between history and prehistory, one with documents and the other without them, and, like Lévi-Strauss's hot and cold societies, I don't think these divisions are very meaningful if they don't try to show, through a particular mechanism of change, what happens when, for instance, people start to write things down. In fact, the idea of oral societies as being very fixed, rigid, is to my mind quite mistaken because they have no fixed system of storage as we have with paper and pencil; therefore, with no book to go to, they have to be continuously creating something new. So far as religion is concerned, for instance, I've always argued that writing makes things rather conservative, whereas in oral cultures religion is usually very fluid, with a multiplicity of cults coming into existence. When you have a written religion, you are always going back to the book in some way or other, the sacred text becoming a fixed text. So my aim has been to show what the differences between writing and non-writing are and how these differences affect the various spheres of human activity like the economy, religion, and so on.

When I wrote about 'the domestication of the savage mind', I chose the title deliberately to stress the fact that I wanted to deal with a process and

not simply a dichotomy. I wanted to show the process of domestication, what was involved in that shift, because I thought that some of the things – not all – which Lévi-Strauss attributed to cold and hot societies could be better explained in terms of differences in the modes of communication.

Two experiences were crucial for the development of this special concern of mine. The first was that of having suddenly found myself without any book when I was a prisoner of war in the Middle East and Italy (as I said earlier, the German camp surprised me with its excellent library). After the war, when I met Ian Watt again, who had had the same experience (but without the library of Eichstatt), we decided to work together on the influence that modes of communication have on human society; and, above all, on the role of memory and on the consequences of the introduction of literacy in societies without writing. The second experience was my being able to observe the process of ‘domestication of the savage mind’ in action in Africa. Lévi-Strauss’s discussion of the two opposite types of society seemed to imply that people were locked into that division, whereas my experience in Africa had suggested exactly the opposite, that is, that people were changing constantly, particularly with the establishment of schools that concentrated on the teaching of writing. The notion of property, for instance, was dramatically affected when people were asked to register the land that they had farmed for hundreds or even thousands of years. Until that happened, they owned a piece of land along with a lot of other people, in the sense that many people had rights over it. But when they were called to write down – ‘I Jack Goody own this patch of land’ – this act excluded everybody else. So introducing written transactions in that way changed the whole nature of ownership.

*In your book on representation and ambivalence you introduced a notion of culture which includes an important and complex element that you call ‘cognitive contradiction’. What is its role?*

I’m sorry if all this is somewhat obscure, but it’s a little obscure to me too! The notion of ‘cognitive contradiction’ arose from my conviction that societies are not locked into a fixed state, that a culture is not something which goes back in solid form to the beginning of things. With this notion I was trying to explain some aspects of cultural change by showing that there is an element of contradiction in each and every culture, however simple. It is in fact part of the human situation, something that is shared by everybody. Representation is essential to human life, and yet there is ambivalence about the whole process of representing things. And it is because a contradiction is implicit in each culture that there exists a potentiality for change.

The question which I initially faced, as I briefly mentioned before, was the shift from figurative to abstract forms of art that can be observed

among peoples in Africa. Why, for example, do certain African cultures have figurative images, while neighbouring peoples have abstract representation? And why does this situation change over time? This distribution did not seem to be completely random, accidental, but, on the contrary, it appeared that there were some general doubts as to the form of the images. While certain groups saw no problem in making figurative images, others regarded them as inappropriate. The same phenomenon can be found in early Christianity, and later on with the Protestants who pulled down the statues from the front of Ely Cathedral, showing that there is a kind of movement back and forth within a culture over time. Similar movements or shifts from figurative to abstract and back again you can find, for example, in the history of Judaism and Buddhism. We think today of Buddhist temples as full of images of the Buddha, but in the first five centuries of Buddhism there were no such figurative images. They apparently began to be made by monks in order to spread the religion among the populace. Even now Zen Buddhism does not pay too much attention to images; the followers of Zen see themselves as practising a more refined form of religion that pays attention to the word rather than to images.

So the evidence that in many cultures you find great changes in the use of images over time suggested to me that there is a sort of ambivalence about the idea of representation, on the same lines of the old Platonic objections to representations as never being the thing itself. In Plato's words, they are a lie. This means that people who were using images would tend to ask the question 'what is the difference between the presentation and the representation?'; and from that they might, in the end, reject representations, as abstract artists did in Russia and France at the beginning of the twentieth century. The host, for example, regarded at one time as sacred, came to be viewed as a simple piece of bread.

So, with the element of 'cognitive contradiction' that I introduced into the concept of culture, I was trying to understand certain aspects of cultural change, some of them very sudden, like the people chopping off the hands of angels in Ely Cathedral, and then putting them back again ten years later. Or the complete disappearance of the theatre in London in 1648, followed by the great burst of theatrical activity with Restoration drama in the 1660s. What is intriguing is that these were the same people, the same Londoners, rejecting at one moment and accepting at another. So I'm arguing that these shifts are not simply effects of an imposition from outside. On the contrary, they show both the culture and the people being ambivalent about what they were doing; because people were also having doubts whether the theatre was a proper activity, whether the figurative images were appropriate, and so on. One dramatic case of this kind of shift you can find in Judaism. At first, the Jews took very seriously the Old Testament injunction that they should not make images

of anything on earth, and definitely had no images. But then all that changed very suddenly. In the nineteenth century the Jews were not painting, were not active in the theatre, and yet they founded Hollywood and became extremely important in the world of films, painting, sculpture, theatre and arts in general. It's said that Marc Chagall at the beginning of the twentieth century was the first Jewish painter in history!

*Of all the books in your area of interest which ones would you like to have written?*

Well, there are a lot of novels that I'd like to have written. But in the area of non-fiction, and the nearest to my own field, it would've been a great achievement to write the two books that I discovered during the war at the prison camp of Eichstatt, before I took up anthropology: Gordon Childe's *What Happened in History?*, a magnificent synthesis of the early period of human history, and James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, a very inspiring book, which was greatly disapproved of by my predecessors. These books, which have influenced me a great deal, would certainly have fulfilled my greatest ambitions. But if I may refer to my own books, I think probably the one I'm particularly proud of is one that has not got any word of mine in it. It might sound odd, but it was the recording and translation of the myth of the Bagre that I regard as being my most permanent achievement. It's not that I created a work of literature, but by registering and translating this African myth I in a sense recreated a work of literature that discusses fundamental theological issues and reveals the philosophical element in an oral culture. What might appear to be theological questions that relate specifically to Christianity or Islam I showed to be widespread problems, which come up in many religions. Yes, because they are all there in this myth: the problem about the material and the immaterial nature of God, the problem of a creator God, the problem of evil – why did God create evil as well as good, and why does he not come down and change all that, etc.

So one of the things that I most enjoyed about doing that book is that, although this entire philosophical element was there, if I had not written down that particular version of the myth at that particular time, it would have vanished. And the extraordinary thing about this is that nowadays the people themselves look upon my translation as some sort of sacred text, a Bible; and I'm very much part of their history now. My version is interesting to them not because I wrote it, but because I took it down from old men fifty years ago. If someone decided to write it down nowadays, the version would be rather different because it would have been recorded fifty years later. So it is as if I've recorded the living memory of wise men. If I can think of an analogy, it is as if I had sat down

with Homer and written down his recitation, while other people only had the poems of Homer in a version fifty years later, which was very different from my version. Unlike our own societies, which store culture in writing, in all oral societies cultures are stored in the memory. It is, therefore, an obvious remark that old people have a special place in oral societies, as a source of power and knowledge. They are the wise people because, by having longer memories, they are a store of information. If you then believe, as they do, that knowledge has come down from a long way back, then the people who are nearest to that period are the ones who know it best, who've got the truth.

I must explain, though, that I didn't take down the myth in the actual context of recitation. To enter into the room where things were happening I would have had to join a secret society, much like joining the Masons. Only this would have allowed me to participate in the initiation ritual of the society where the myth was recited. I had, then, to find someone who had participated in the ceremony, willing to recite it for me outside. And the reason why I never joined this secret society is partly because the initiation procedure meant that you had to sit silent under a tree for some six weeks, and that didn't seem the best way of passing my time out there!

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