

# Sir Jack Goody, F.B.A. (1918- 2015)

Some personal memories: Alan Macfarlane (July 2015)



*Jack Goody and Alan Macfarlane, at Jack's retirement party in 1983*

Some people have influenced me through the force of their ideas, some through the force of their personality. The distinguished Cambridge anthropologist, Professor Jack Goody has combined these. He has undoubtedly been the strongest influence on my career as an anthropologist.

I first came across Jack's work during my M.Phil at the L.S.E. in 1967. He was clearly a friend of my supervisor Isaac Schapera. Schapera had supervised my dissertation on the history of sexual and marital relations in early modern England.

When I came to write on incest and marriage, I read several articles by Jack and used them in my thesis. Jack became my external Examiner.

I next met Jack in Cambridge (where he became William Wyse Professor in 1973), just after I arrived in Cambridge. I remember that he was friendly and encouraging in various ways. He read my Ph.D. thesis on the Gurungs after it had been accepted for publication and made important suggestions for improvement (in particular including an introductory chapter on demographic theory). He sent me a bundle of his offprints. He encouraged me to attend the 'Friday' seminar, then held in King's College and asked me to present a paper.

Most importantly, when I applied for my first teaching job in the Department of Social Anthropology, in 1974, the post until lately held by Jack's wife Esther, he not only encouraged me to apply, but clearly backed me strongly for the post.

For the rest of his tenure as Professor (to 1983) Jack was always a wonderful mentor and friend. He supported me for an a Readership and later for a Professorship. He encouraged me in every possible way and it is difficult to measure his influence, but here are a few examples.

Whenever we needed equipment for our various projects computer projects, he supported the application. On one occasion I remember him pulling out his own cheque book and paying for a piece of equipment and muttering that he would somehow find some money later. It was this 'can do' attitude which I appreciated so much. He was always optimistic, believing that anything was possible. This was particularly important in relation to the various projects which I started up. He was an inspiration in the main years of the historical Earls Colne project and put great efforts into helping it flourish. I do not think that such a purely historical project would have been encouraged in any other Department of anthropology at that time.

Jack himself was always intrigued by new technologies and was among the very first to recognize the value of computers and video. For instance, his indexing of the large offprint collection in the department, his computer version of the west African Bagre myths, his purchase of the Human Relations Area Files, all showed this interest. As did the very early recordings he organized of off-air television programmes which gave the Department the basis for its excellent video library. Or again his early realization that we should video-tape sessions with senior, retiring or retired anthropologists. He did this with Meyer Fortes, Audrey Richards and M.N.Srinivas and I have continued over the years to add another two hundred recordings (including one of Jack himself, interviewed by Eric Hobsbawm). My 'Rivers Video Project', later the 'Cambridge Rivers Project' owes its inspiration to him.

His enthusiasm and energy meant that not only did he build up a large department in a short time, but early acquired through grants and then the University a technician post. These technicians have been invaluable for many projects in the Department.

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Jack's drive and political skills made the Department of Social Anthropology a really exciting place to be from 1975 to 1983. The feeling is well caught in the title of one of his books, *The Expansive Moment*. He prevented feuding and stopping the Department from narrowing down to selected specialisms. He encouraged all forms of anthropology and all areas of the world. Cambridge became the main exporter of good graduates to teach in European universities.

One of the many things I learnt from Jack was how to approach local academic politics. Watching Jack at work through a long day of teaching and administration was an education in itself. He was occasionally over aggressive, took up lost causes, and fought unnecessary battles. But on the whole his immense energy and deep cunning (he reminded me of a bear, apparently clumsy, but lethal and quick thinking) and many ties of friendship and reciprocal networks made him a formidable operator.

Observing and talking to Jack gave me many practical hints. Don't waste too much time on lectures; make them spontaneous and rough rather than too polished. Don't waste time going up to London during term. Don't waste time on formality – a quick note on the back of an envelope will usually serve the trick. Don't be seduced by the idea of think-tanks. If one has ideas they will come out in any setting and teaching is an encouragement to creativity. Don't waste time on administration, but try to achieve the maximum amount with the minimal effort. Be courteous and encouraging to assistant staff, secretaries and others, and make them feel valued.

Through Jack I learnt how the University and Department worked, which has since stood me in great stead. I could not have had a better guide and mentor to the extraordinary complexity of Cambridge, which informed my book *Reflections on Cambridge*.

Intellectually Jack's written work and conversations with him had an enormously enlivening effect. Part of his breadth of vision arose from the fact that he was interested in and encouraged inter-disciplinary work with many disciplines. He had read English as an undergraduate, but fortunately for me a particular interest was in history and its relationship to anthropology. So we discussed themes and overlaps, in particular in relation to the history of European kinship and marriage, about which were both writing in those years. Much of his work was set in a long historical time frame, often covering thousands of years. He was practising an early form of global history and maintaining the honourable tradition in anthropology of A.L. Kroeber in looking at long sweeps of civilizations.

Another stimulation was Jack's interest in technology and material life. Not only was he interested in the practicalities of computers and machines, but he again maintained an earlier (and somewhat unfashionable) anthropological tradition in being interested in material technologies. Thus he wrote books and articles exploring technologies of production, destruction and communication and their effects. This was all the more suggestive because it was broadly comparative, always coming back to the basic contrast which informed his work, that is the difference between the post-Neolithic civilizations of Eur-Asia, and the pre-Neolithic technologies of sub-Saharan Africa.

I am sure that my own later interest in technologies – agricultural, medical, productive – which led to my books on Japanese and English technology especially glass and tea – was encouraged by his work.

So a whole set of areas of interest overlapped, demography, kinship, communication and technology. And the idea of speculating at a broadly historical and comparative level, taking India, China, Europe and Africa all as grist to the mill, was a constant inspiration. Listening to Jack at seminars, talking to him and reading his stream of works was a constant source of new ideas and themes to pursue. He was constantly suggesting new links, expanding the borders of what anthropology might be. And this was based on a large library and much travel and experience.

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Jack was enormously productive. By the time he retired, he had published seven single-authored books, and several co-authored and edited ones and many articles. In the thirty years since his retirement he has published another sixteen, many of them very long. This set me a target, something to exceed in friendly competition.

In particular I was interested in how he managed to write so much, always based on meticulous reading and research, and to bring together so many diverse ideas. I picked up various hints.

Jack seemed to be working in parallel on half a dozen books or articles at once. If one became bogged down, he switched to another. Furthermore, he was always observing and writing, on journeys, in meetings, even in the shortest period. The blight of busy people is that they have only small bits of time and are tempted to put off producing something worthwhile because of distractions or feeling that they will be interrupted. This did not affect Jack. Great self-discipline and concentration as well as enormous energy and curiosity lay behind this. One aid to his creativity was that he wrote as if was filling in a jig-saw puzzle or making a mosaic. At first he would write a few scraps of ideas on a sheet of paper and have it typed. Then he would add in a few more sentences. So a book would be built up as if it were a Lego construction.

Another key was moving every two or three years on to a fresh subject. He did not, like so many of his colleagues, become stale. This made for great creativity and a freeing of the mind in order to make connections. The fact that Jack was constantly exploring new subjects, and then darting back to old ones, always with the backdrop of deep fieldwork in West Africa and a constant low-key ethnography wherever he went, made his writing very rich. One learnt alongside him and new worlds were opened up.

Whereas Jack's lecturing and speaking style was sometimes awkward, pausing in the middle of sentences, going back, long 'oh' and 'ah' pauses (it seemed to me that his speech could not keep up with the lightning speed of his mind) his writing is very clear and easy to follow and in some of his books very good indeed.

There was a certain core to all his work which gives it consistency and unity. This is the question as to why Eur-Asia had developed through the Neolithic and post-Neolithic revolutions of many kinds, while Africa had not done so (a theme he had early encountered in Gordon Childe's work). His flexibility arose out of the fact that he did not become constrained by a particular academic fashion. Jack was a materialist, yet not a Marxist, interested in myth and communication, but not a structuralist. He was no faddist and because of his interests in his later years he was more famous perhaps in France than in England. Likewise, his reputation was as great, in neighbouring disciplines, particularly history and literary studies, as it was in social anthropology.

I cannot end without noting that he was enormously kind and supportive to many of those he encountered, from children to elderly dons. He would put his hand on your shoulder and draw you into his world, and you knew you could depend on him in any contingency. He was a warm and rounded human being and always exciting to be with.

Jack Goody was a big man in every sense. He was finally knighted, as he should have been earlier. Perhaps he had to wait because there was an 'Agin the Government', contrarian, streak in him which annoyed some in the Establishment, a characteristic he shared with Edward Evans-Pritchard.

Jack was an excellent ethnographer, a wide ranging and innovative thinker, and bridged the difficult years when anthropology was changing fast from the late colonial period into post-modernity with style and wit.

I have met many fascinating people in my fifty years in Oxford, London and Cambridge and elsewhere, and interviewed several hundred of them, but Jack stands up there as the man who has shaped my life most and as a constant inspiration. He was a major thinker, innovator and institution builder.

## **Books (there are also numerous articles).**

### **Kinship, marriage and demography**

*Bridewealth and Dowry* (Cambridge, 1973), with S.J.Tambiah

*Production and Reproduction, A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain* (Cambridge, 1976)

*The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of marriage and the family in the pre-industrial societies of Eurasia* (Cambridge, 1990)

*The European Family* (Blackwells, 2000)

### **The history of anthropology**

*The Expansive Moment: Anthropology in Britain and Africa 1918-1970* (Cambridge, 1995)

### **General comparative theory and sociology**

*The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, 1977)

*Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology* (Cambridge, 1982)

*The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge, 1993)

*The East in the West* (Cambridge, 1996)

*Food and Love: A Cultural History of East and West* (Verso, 1998)

*Islam in Europe* (Polity, 2004)

*Capitalism and Modernity: the Great Debate* (Polity, 2004)

*The Theft of History* (Cambridge, 2006)

*Renaissances: The One or the Many* (Cambridge, 2010)

*The Eurasian Miracle* (Polity, 2010)

*Metals, Culture and Capitalism* (Cambridge, 2012)

### **Orality, Writing and Representation**

*Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), editor and contributor of three articles.

*The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge, 1986)

*Representation and Contradictions: Ambivalence Towards Images, Theatre, Fiction, Relics and Sexuality* (Blackwells, 1997)

*The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge, 1987)

*The Power of the Written Tradition* (Smithsonian, 2000)

### **African History and Anthropology**

*Death, Property and the Ancestors: A Study of the Mortuary Customs of the Lodagaa of West Africa* (Stanford, 1962)  
*Salaga: The Struggle for Power* (Longmans, 1967), with J.A.Braimah  
*The Social Organization of the LoWiili* (Oxford, 1967)  
*Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa* (Oxford, 1971)  
*The Myth of the Bagre* (Oxford, 1972)

#### FILMS ON THE WEB

Jack Goody chairs a seminar given by Audrey Richards in 1982

<http://upload.sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1129889>

Jack Goody interviewed by Eric Hobsbawm in 1991

<http://upload.sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1117872>

Jack Goody's 80th birthday party in 1998

<http://upload.sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1909453>