



**E. Efe Çakmak, Jack Goody**

## Myth, word, and writing

*An interview with Jack Goody*

The Cambridge anthropologist argues that in seeking to expose the "structures of the mind", Levi–Strauss and the Structuralists projected the categorized worldview of literate cultures onto simpler societies. In analysing oral cultures, a more flexible approach must be employed to take in the inconsistencies in myth–making, something made apparent by modern recording technology in the 1960s. In the second half of the interview, Goody discusses language development and the pitfalls of the genetic approach; the processes of "naming" and "discovering" in relation to western ideological concepts such as "freedom" and "slavery"; and the reception of western religion in non–western and formerly colonized cultures.

**E. Efe Çakmak:** Considering the recent publications on Levi–Strauss in English and the common interest in his work in Turkey, I think we should begin with your discussion with him — our readers must be curious whether you are still critical of his work. And, what is your opinion about the "rediscovery" of his work in the US?

**Jack Goody:** Your first question to me is about Levi–Strauss. It is true that *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* has a title that might seem to be critical of Levi–Strauss, but I did not begin it by thinking what my criticism on Levi–Strauss was. I started out with my positive interest in modes of communication. Now, Levi–Strauss too is interested in modes of communication; he is talking mainly about language. I wanted to take it further in a sense, and think about what it was in written language that led to the kinds of activity that we are engaged in, in the university or in the society at large. So, I did question the differences that writing made.

When I read Levi–Strauss's book *Pensée Sauvage*, I was struck by many of the differences which he saw between societies that practiced *bricolage*, as he would say, and those that practiced more systematic modes of thinking. I thought those differences could be explained (some of them anyhow, for me) by looking at the differences literacy made; that is to say, differences in oral cultures and written cultures, and I tried to relate these differences to the use of the written word. It is true that I was trying to explain something that I thought my own answer explained in better terms or more clearly than Levi–Strauss himself, but rather than saying "he is wrong", I sought to explain differences in a different way. If you want to look at the differences in the calculation of time for instance, then you can look at the use of calendars and other ways of marking time, rather than seeing this as a matter of difference between *bricolage* and some other ways of thinking. My own feeling is that speaking is much more precise than thinking in global terms, and I relate them to what I called "technologies of the intellect" — things that make your mind work. I

saw writing as one of the ways that make your mind work in a different way. So, this was what I thought of as significant on that subject.

I did also have a chapter in that book which was first published by Pierre Bourdieu in his journal, called *Actes de la recherche, en sciences sociales*. I called it "Turning the Tables", and it did relate partly to the kind of work that Levi-Strauss was doing — a very interesting work in seeing the so-called "basic structures" behind people's thinking (in his terminology), particularly in oral societies, looking at them in terms of these tables of opposites. And people were using these binary opposites as ways of testifying the world and thinking about the world. There was a time when anthropologists were constantly using these every time they studied another culture. They were trying to look for what they called "the structures of the mind", which often began in the same way, left and right, black and white, good and bad... And those were made into structures, into tables; they appear constantly in anthropological work of that kind. I argue in the article I did for Bourdieu, at the end of the book which he published in France (which there was called *La Raison Graphique* [The Written Reasoning]), that this way of presenting information was essentially a matter of literate cultures, and of people who came from literate cultures like anthropologists or philosophers who saw the world in these terms, or wanted to analyze the world in these terms and then projected it back on simple societies. I say that in simple societies, systems of categorization are more flexible than that. For example, if you are making a table of this kind, and you take the word black, you would put it together with night, witchcraft, bad, bizarre, moon, women on the left-hand side; all these terms are linked with one another in an analogical way, namely you are making a series of associations which, in oral cultures, in simple societies, are much more flexible than that. They don't have to have strict categories of that kind.

For example, I took particularly the term black. I said yes, in many societies black equals night, left hand, badness, women, but in other societies, at other times, in other contexts, black can mean the black earth that is very good, it could mean the rain cloud that would bring the rain when you wanted, and black can be beautiful in a society (for instance in an African society, black also means beautiful). So black is not always bad, you have to look at it in a contextual way. It can be beautiful as well as being bad. So, these category systems are not rigid as they would be in the rigid diagrams of the anthropologists. They make these diagrams by abstracting the concept of black from a whole set of contextual usages and by putting it abstractly in a category system, which in the end becomes a very different kind of object, much influenced by literacy, and by the fact that literacy does abstract from the flow of speech and renders things static. But there is no use projecting these back into oral cultures where things are much freer. For example, if in a literate culture you want to make a list of all vegetables and all fruits, you have to decide whether a tomato is a vegetable or a fruit (I am talking about the English classification now). You have to make a binary decision if you have got a list of that kind. But in an oral culture, there is no problem about a tomato being a fruit in one context and a vegetable in another. And when people have tried to analyze in a structural way the conceptualizations of simple societies, they have actually used literate means and in a sense falsified or misunderstood those concepts in significant ways. So, that's another reason why I think I was worried about some features of our structural work.

There are some other aspects, in which I was, I suppose, critical or I wanted to modify some of the implications of the work of Levi-Strauss and his students. One of these had to do with myth. I worked for many years on a myth from

northern Ghana. I did this at the time when the tape recorder had just come in, and I could record the myth being recited in each situation, in each ritual for five or ten years. And when I went back to the myth again, I realized something. The kind of myths that Claude Levi–Strauss used were often collected by an anthropologist who went somewhere, say to Mariquara one time, collected this myth, and came back and said "this is the myth of Mariquara". But when I looked at my recordings every time, I realized that was quite wrong: The myth varied considerably every time. Because what happened was that I was in a ritual, with everything happening around me and people reciting this myth; and I had to listen to that recitation. It was a long myth; it was like a Hermetic myth, as long as that in a sense. It was a long myth you could not learn just by listening to in that way. You forget some, you remember other pieces. You reconstruct it; and reconstructing, you invent new things. So, this accounted for the changes in what I perceived. And I have now produced three volumes about these different recordings of the same myth. All recordings were significantly different. This is because people are remembering them imperfectly, because memory is not perfect. Anyhow, people themselves do not mind when I say that the myth is different in each version. They say no. I can't falsify them. I can't show them, I mean what they can say is, that is a better version than the other. What they do say now is, unfortunately, that Goody's version is the best; because the one that he started with was recorded from people who have now become ancestors, who are now dead. So they assume mine is nearer to the original. In effect, it has always been like this. There was no original whatsoever; the myths were always changing in this way.

What is interesting for me in these different versions of the same myth is that the variations are not simply variations of narrative; they are much more than that. Some of the versions are much more theocentric than others. For example, they attribute the creation of mankind and everything that man does to God, to the creator God, to high God, or the gods in general. But in others, that is less true. They may give more emphasis to the ancestors or something like that, or to what I call "beings of the wild", which is some kind of *cin*, as you say in Turkish, some kind of spirit. And even still some versions which place much more emphasis on the creation of the world by man himself. So, you get a whole different series of worldviews, as it were, in one myth every time. If I had just taken the first myth that I recorded and said this is the myth of the *LoDagaa* (the name I gave to the people I worked with), I would have concluded that they are very theocentric people. But this would have been wrong, because ten years later, I would record a myth which would give a different view. Now, both of these views are characteristics of that society, not one of them, both of them. It may be that some people hold this one view more than they do the other. Both are possible within the conceptual framework of this society and within the framework of the myth. So, you get a very different picture of human mentality in the earlier stages than you do if you just take one myth and try to fix it. That was very important to me, but I don't think I've made much of it, I haven't written anything general about this. I sought for much more flexibility than it appeared in the analysis of Levi–Strauss and in the type of structuralism he was using.

I also had other problems. I was critical, to some extent, of some of the work about kinship, which again was tightly structured according to me; particularly as far as the role of women in kinship systems was concerned. Levi–Strauss sometimes describes women as the bones in the hands of men, being moved here and back there, and I argue that, although there was very often male dominance in most societies, a formulation of this kind was wrong and

unacceptable analytically.

Yes, women often had to move with marriage, but in some societies, they often retained some rights in their natal group at marriage. I remember, there was a group in Albania, I think a Muslim group. When the bride got married, they would tie a bullet on her back, signifying, "if you mistreat our sister we will come after you". She was still protected by brothers at home. I don't say this is perfect, but, under certain conditions, they would have the duty to protect her in marriage. It wasn't simply moving somebody across a chessboard as if you are exchanging pieces; you may move her, but she still had rights. And I thought it was necessary to take this into account in explaining various aspects of kinship systems in many societies; but particularly in Europe and Asia, where you had what I called "dowry systems", where the bride at marriage was given some endowment, some *mahr* in Arabic. It is true that that went into the family finances, but it was not the husband's property. If she was divorced, she took it with her, as is the case with Islamic law. It goes into a fund that is used in marriage, and yes, it might be misused, but she still remains the owner of property. So, it required, in my mind, finding a more sensitive discussion of rights in marriage. That was not my original idea alone. It came out of the people that I work with in Cambridge.

**EEÇ:** What is it that an anthropologist does, when he records a myth? Just a few minutes ago, you told me that people said the myth you recorded was the best.

**JG:** What I said was, they say *now* that is the best, because it is the earliest. I don't think it is the best; I do have my own judgments about the different versions. What an anthropologist does when he records a myth is very important and this depends very much on the machine that you brought there. For instance, there was the famous work of Parry and Lord from Harvard, the *Classicists*, who went to look at recitations in Yugoslavia in the 1920s or 1930s; they went to record there because they wanted to draw comparisons between the Iliad and the current recitations of what they called the oral culture in Yugoslavia. There was electricity in Yugoslavia at the time, and you could record things. But, if you were in Africa or New Guinea, or South America, you could not have recorded things like that; the technology was not available. Or if you are going to a recitation, whether it is a recitation or a mass or some Islamic service, you cannot possibly write down what is happening there; you reconstruct it afterwards. Instead, they get somebody who they called "an informant", and wrote things down. (I use the word myth, but I do not use it very often. I did it when I first published because I wanted to attract attention, but I usually talk about a recitation that has got to do with the creation of the world or something like that.) What we do is, we say, "Tell me a myth about the creation of the world or of heaven and earth." That was very effective in many ways...

I wrote down the first version of my myth when somebody came to me and said he knew this myth and would recite it to me. He knew I was interested in this society, which was a secret society that you had to be a member of in order to get in, and I was not a member. So he said, "I know you are interested in this, I will recite it, my grandfather told it to me." So he sat there and recited, for twelve days, and I went on writing. Then I came back thinking that this myth must be very fixed in the society, since he told me what his grandfather had told him. It was only when I got the tape recorder later on that I did things in a different way; I went to the reciters. A friend of mine who was a member took the machine into the room where they were reciting and recorded it, and

this was how I got a different version, and another different version, and another different version. They were different in various ways. In one of them, this man who recited to me, I think of him as a very intelligent man, gave me a much longer and thoughtful version than the others. I think one of the reasons for this, but I am not sure, is that it took some time for me to write down, and meanwhile he was thinking what to say. Whereas, if you are in the ceremony, you are forced to say one line of the myth after another, just like in an Athenian ceremony. You do not have much time to think about what to say. But he did, and perhaps gave me a more complicated version than I got when I took my recording machine into the room. But earlier anthropologists did not have portable recorders; not until the 1960s. So everything was recorded in this other way, and they were maybe more elaborated or more simplified than the recitation that takes place in the room or in the ceremony. So, yes I think it does make a difference.

For the version I mentioned for instance, I sat down for twelve days and wrote it down. I did not always hear very well and I wanted to understand the myth, I used to ask him. He spoke a little English, he had been in the army, I used to ask him either in the local language or in English to explain a bit for me and I would write down the explanation. So I made a rough translation as he went along. Now, you don't usually have the time or the opportunity to do that. Many times you can't get a plurality of versions. Anyhow, I could not find another person like him. If I have a tape recorder, I simply go to one ceremony after another. Afterwards I would have to spend three or even four years transcribing and translating. This takes a very long time, compared to the recording that takes much less time. So in earlier times, when anthropologists just went to a place for a short period, they didn't even have this much time. But even me, when I went to this *Birifu* village for two years, whose people I called *LoDagaa* due to their relative terminology, I did not have the opportunity to do a recording or more than one recording. When I got the tape recorder, in one day I could go to a performance, I could go to one group and record, and then to the next group and record, I could bring back an enormous amount of recording. As you can see in my publications, there are a lot of variations. In my view, this has to do with variations in human understanding and in humans' creation of cultures. So, for me it is not just a simple matter of variance in a particular society, it does reflect something much wider.

The kind of stories used by writers such as Levi–Strauss were usually collected by missionaries in the evening, when they would call somebody up and say "tell me a story about this or that". Then they would write this down and say that it is about the X or Y or Z. But all of this was recited in some oral context, usually the context of a ritual or a ceremony. You can't write things down in these conditions at all.

Therefore, I was worried about Levi–Strauss's great work *Mythologiques*. I thought, if you made certain verbal relationships with a particular society at one time, that was rather mechanical, and static. I thought you had to look over time at the changes that were happening, and then you would have come out with a very different answer. You would also have come out with the idea that oral cultures were not simply repeating what they had learned; they were constantly inventing things. There were some advantages of considering societies in that way, particularly in explaining the differentiation between neighbouring societies. If you look at Africa, or New Guinea, unlike written cultures where large areas are basically the same, you get a lot of differentiation over small areas both in language, and in rituals, myths, and ideas. I think you can only explain this variation in human societies, if you

admit that they are in a process of continuous invention, of continuous creation. They produce these variants. I am not saying that society is changing every minute, but there are changes going on. There are certain types of rituals that get performed every sixty years or each time a ruler is installed. These don't remain the same over time. But the people cannot recall what happened twenty...thirty...fifty...sixty years ago. Or, if they do recall, their recollection is guided by some other notions or influences. So things are changing, and this is how we can account for the fact that there are different rituals and inventions in one society. Otherwise, you don't really have any process that explains the very considerable variations.

Levi–Strauss and some of his pupils, who develop a set of his ideas in various ways, go in a very different direction. My friend Dennis Barbour and others like him want to look for constants in behaviour, which are structured in the human mind. In other words, they look for constants that are genetic; differences which have to do with the classification of some animals or things of this kind, or the ways of conceiving the deity which go back to what they call cognitive science. In other words, they go back to cognitive differences, which are related to genetic differences, to differences in the human mind that are inherited. They speak along Chomskian lines, and consider language as something inherited, a matter of genetics, an inbuilt structure of the human mind. So they look at other aspects, and even perhaps see some of these binary systems, since they are concerned with binary systems particularly when they are dealing with genetic processes. For me, the question whether language is inherited or not is unknowable. I mean, if somebody shows me a gene for a language, then I might understand. But I am more interested in the differences between say one Turkish language and another; or one European language and another. If you take away the racist view of the world, they obviously are not inherited; they have got to be a matter of human communication, of linguistic communication. They have got to merge out of a system, like the one we are in now, where there is linguistic communication going on; not something which is inherited. Otherwise, you are going to claim that your genetic setup is different than my genetic setup, which will get you into great conceptual difficulty.

So the ability to learn a language may possibly be related to biological factors. It is quite clear to me that many of the things that lead to differences between human societies and linguistic structures, rituals, and myths, are not related in that way. They have to be located in terms of systems of communication, of the inventive capacities of these systems of communication and the fact that differentiation is constantly taking place. So that's something else that sets me apart a bit from the work not only of Claude Levi–Strauss, but also my friends Dennis Barbour, Pascal Boyer, and others.

**EEÇ:** Do you think such an attitude will lead us to some kind of *racism*? Or do you find clues of racism in this attitude?

**JG:** Well, by using the word racism, I am putting it too strongly. I do think that genetics has made important strides in the world in recent years; for example, DNA and these kinds of things. Obviously, they have made very important discoveries. But, I think there's a great danger in seeing these discoveries as models for the interpretation of other aspects of human behaviour. I am in fact quite against the notions of some of my anthropologist colleagues, like Marshall Sahlins. I mean, I think we can make some biological inferences, but the idea that they affect all aspects of human society is absolutely wrong. I think that human society is very much concerned with communication, and

that linguistic communication is a singular feature of the human race, the human species. Whether or not there are predisposing factors that enable us to speak, and I suppose there must be in some way, that are biological in character, the fact is that the speech we use in communicational processes is a cultural matter, in the sense that it is not fixed, it is something that may change. I could bring my children up to speak Chinese if I want to. We must keep this in mind all the time when we are thinking about the aspects of human culture.

If there is — I don't know if I was quite right to use the word racism there — I do think genetic influences on the rest of human behaviour have to be demonstrated like any other hypothesis and not assumed at any point at all. We have to go very carefully down that line; or else we run the danger of getting into a discourse that presumes that all particular behavioural aspects of human beings have to do with race rather than with culture. I don't think that we are seriously going down that way, and I am sure that my friends who are working in the field of cultural science do not see it in that way. But I think there remains a danger that Durkheim discussed when he was dealing with the problem of incest, what he called biologizing human behaviour, or treating it too much in genetic terms, in a way. I'd rather say that it is very important to fight against those people. You can say that there is a genetic explanation for schizophrenia, for example. But you have to demonstrate that. You cannot dogmatically assume it. The fact that you have a genetic explanation for schizophrenia doesn't mean to say that we can get a genetic explanation for depression that may have much more to do with social factors.

I summed up the critical comments I would have about Levi–Strauss in my life, you did not ask me to sum up the areas of agreement, and I am not going to start doing that now. I think that is enough on Levi–Strauss, myths, and so on.

**EEÇ:** In your lectures at Bilgi University, you insisted on disclosing the basic Eurocentric misconceptions offered by famous historians and anthropologists, and you frequently referred to Finley — for example, you are critical about his account of the origin of freedom, which he finds in ancient Greece. Considering the Greeks, you tell us that the difference between *naming* and *discovering* is a crucial one. But does such an account not neglect the importance of *naming*?

**JG:** I do think the name is important, but I think you can be misled about that. For example, the name may have a peculiar relationship with the reality. There are two kinds of naming, I think. Consider the naming of philosophy, for example. The people I work with certainly do not have a name for philosophy, yet they share certain concerns of philosophers. For instance, in this myth that I have been talking about, they ask questions about the role of God, the role of man in creation, and these kinds of things that are similar to the concerns of earlier philosophy. They discuss things like the problem of evil. "If God created the world, why do bad things happen?" sort of questions of philosophy and theology. They do not have a name for that, but they still discuss the problems. And take for instance zoology; I do not think they were aware it was "zoology", but nevertheless, they know about the behaviour of animals and do have something that we anthropologists call "ethnic science". It does not mean that just because they do not have the name zoology, they do not have scientific aspects in their discussion about the reproduction of animals.

I think with freedom I was thinking of something slightly different. I do think that when Europeans discuss the notion of freedom, they often get into a

terminological problem. For instance, I said in my *LoDagaa* you find slavery, but unlike Finley, I do not see slavery as necessarily associated with a concept of freedom. They are perfectly well aware that people who are not slaves are free, if you want to describe it in that way, and they behave in different ways. But, I thought that the notion of freedom, and particularly the notion that the westerners made of it, and particularly the notion that western philosophers like *you* made of it, is restricted. And I thought even if we agreed that the Greeks have invented freedom because they had the word *eleytheria*, they certainly did not invent the idea of freedom. Now, naming may be important, I agree with you, naming may be highly significant in certain ways, but I think if you emphasize that too strongly, it might get into what I call *nominalism*.

I don't think there is an anthropological view of freedom; not a single one. But Finley sees notions of slavery and freedom linked. I know societies which have slaves but I could not see a name for freedom or a name for a free person, because everybody who was not a slave was assumed to be free. For instance, there was a person coming from this area who visited Cambridge, and upon seeing factory workers, he asked in his local language: "Are these slaves?" These are people we regard as free workers. So I think, a) these notions are very relative; b) there may not be freedom named in that way. You say, "Does such an account neglect the importance of naming?" Naming is important, but it is not *all* important. It may come after the event. I think that societies that don't have a specific concept of freedom, something that we can reasonably translate as free, are not societies that have serfdom or slavery. The Greeks have the word *eleytheria* that we translate as freedom, but this does not mean to say that they invented this. Other people may have some other concept, which they do not express with a name or with a word, but with a phrase. We often experience this, when we look at something like colour, which should be very interesting to anthropologists and cross-cultural studies. If you look at the single names of colours, you find that in many societies in Africa or elsewhere, you get a very restricted number of names, three or four. And yet, if you show people colours and say, "Is that the same as this?" they recognize many more different colours, but they don't have particular names for them. They don't necessarily need a name for every aspect of rainbow, unless they get to paint it. I mean, unless there is a particular reason, why name them? People call things, say, "that colour is the colour of the banana tree", which is just as good as saying "it is light green". So they may not have a specific name for it. You may disconnect something like that; you may have it and you may give a long description of it. You don't have to have a specific name of something for it to be there. The aspect of discovery that you asked me about names, I don't think naming is unimportant but it is not *all* important. That's all I would say. There are other ways than using words.

**EEÇ:** When I asked you the question, "What is it that an anthropologist does, when he records a myth?" yesterday, I had in mind something peculiar to naming. Because by recording a myth, the anthropologist somehow makes it something definite; only then it becomes a subject for study, for knowledge.

**JG:** It is true that obviously by writing something down it becomes something for a different kind of study. I mean, that is the essence of the invention of writing, and I discussed it in my *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. It requires a different kind of attention, a different kind of reflexivity, a different direction with the word, a different sort of study. That is what happens; it is true, when you write a myth of this kind. People take it as the orthodox version, but it wasn't meant to be the orthodox version, it was a version I took at random. But when I write it down it becomes the orthodox version, it

becomes studied by other people in the future as the orthodox version, because it has been recorded that way. It does change the nature of it.

I am not sure how that's involved in naming; I do have a problem in naming the myth. I call it "The Myth of the Bagre" because various anthropologists talk about *mythologiques* and myths and so on; but of course these people have no concept of myth. They have no word for myth, but they have a word for the actual recitation, which they called the Bagre — that was the name of the particular recitation. I wanted to avoid some implications of the word myth, so in the second version published in French, I called it "A Recitation of the Bagre"; because I wanted to avoid the word myth. I thought it would lead me in certain directions that I didn't want people to go. I wanted to emphasize that it was just one recitation among very many possibilities. Rather than thinking of it as one myth, say "the myth of the Turks", it was just one possibility among many, one recitation. So I didn't call it myth in that way; so there was a naming problem for me in that way; there was no problem for the people *per se*, they just called it the Bagre. And what is more, that identity was not at all important for them; they saw identity in a verbal culture without the written record, they saw it in a different way. Whatever was spoken at the ceremony was the Bagre, so all the versions were the same to them. They may have thought of them as more identical than they turned out to be, but they thought it was all the same; it didn't matter to them that it was conceived in the context of the ceremony, it was the same.

**EEÇ:** Against the traditional assumptions about the origins of modern Europe, you argue that it is difficult to imagine some kind of continuum between ancient cultures and modern Europe — you emphasize that the Middle Ages broke the assumed lineage. But I believe that, at least on the basis of *reflexivity*, our basic modern concepts can be traced back to ancient Greece, and can be found even in the Middle Ages. What is your opinion of reflexivity in this context?

**JG:** The notions of ancient Greece in the Middle Ages are very restricted, very impoverished. And there was not much continuity in thoughts about the Middle Ages at any level in society, even in the most literate levels. That is why we talk about humanism and the Renaissance; because we talk about the rebirth of interest in Greece. Where there is a rebirth of interest, this is because some of the materials were not there, nobody had read it. If it wasn't there, you couldn't invent it. If they get passed down they get passed down through a book, but if the book isn't there, it does not get passed down. There were traditions, as you know, like of the Royal Family of Britain, tracing their origin back to Troy by someone who paddled his way all around Britain and founded a dynasty. Somebody called Bruce, which I think is Brutus, founded the royal dynasty. And there are some genealogies of the royal family, which are all rather fictitious, but which go back to Brutus. So they gave it a try, but they didn't think with Greece directly. And it is true that there are many parts of Europe where Greece and Rome, particularly Rome, left physical remains, which obviously had been accounted for, but there wasn't much reflexivity/reflection on them; there were only occasional references to Greece and Rome. It wasn't a central theme, and things very much change when you've got scholars looking back deliberately to Greek and Roman texts. And all the Greek stuff came of course through the people moving from Constantinople. The difference between the West and eastern Christianity is that the West forgot about the Greek language until these guys came over and started the academy. So I do think there was a great gap. If you go and check the literary texts or records, you will see that there were no references to the

Classical Period. We all talk in Europe about the Dark Ages or the Period in which knowledge of Greece and Rome, in many spheres disappeared. And I don't really think it is the question of reflexivity, because they didn't have the things to reflect upon. It was the absence of a continuous literate tradition. The collapse of the Roman Empire caused a great deal of this. It meant virtually the loss of literacy in Britain, and yet the myths of Europe make it look as though there is continuity, as though "we" go back to the Greeks. They do not go back to the Greeks, but the Greeks were rediscovered in the Renaissance.

**EEÇ:** Bernal accuses those scholars whom he refers to as Eurocentricists of being over-political; to mention another famous scholar, Bernasconi thinks that, in the Eurocentric attitude of scholars like Finley, we find the clues of racism. But, do you not think that these accounts themselves are somehow over-political as well? To put in another way, what drives Bernal, Bernosconi, and even you, to theorize?

**JG:** I am not sure how that links up with the earlier question. Let me answer the first question before. I think the attribution of racism is, as you would say, over-political. In my own view, basically, thinking that the other is different for inherited reasons is what racism is about. This exists almost everywhere. It exists between Greeks and Turks here, between the British and Americans, or between the British and the French. The other is different and we often attribute that to inherited characteristics, quite wrongly.

But I think that Bernal is wrong in linking this matter of Greece and the Near East with the anti-Semitic world and with nineteenth-century racism in Britain. I mean it was there, but it certainly did not begin there. It began with the Greeks themselves. The Greeks themselves took a view of Asia and the Asiatic shore, or what was behind the Asiatic shore, and saw them very different from themselves. I mean, they started this business about Asiatic despotism.

I think that the business of defining the other in relationship to yourself, what I refer to as ethnocentrism rather than racism (racism is putting it on a genetic footing) is very common. You see it with regard to the Chinese and the other, the Middle East and the other, you find it in contemporary Israel, you find it everywhere, in some places more acute than others in particular times. I think the phenomenon is about one's self-identity. I mean, I have to think that the French are different; because that is a part of my identity in thinking that the French are different. I may fight against it, but I can't dismiss it altogether.

"To put in another way, what drives Bernal, Bernosconi, and even you, to theorize?" I don't understand how that relates to the same question, can you explain that to me?

**EEÇ:** I just thought, if Eurocentrism is an ideology, what stands against it? Is it still an ideology or is it something else?

**JG:** Now, I don't think I myself would use those terms. I see Eurocentrism as a tendency; it may take some ideological aspects and implications if you like, but most people who are Eurocentrics don't admit to being a Eurocentric; some do, but most people don't. Certain aspects, say Nazism, was an ideology. Some aspects about their use is ideological. I do not see ethnocentrism as an ideology. I think it is a way that we perceive the world, which is almost a part of our own makeup. I see the world from my eyes, I do not see it from your eyes; that is, I see it ethnocentrically, or rather egocentrically; from my own

personality, rather than from my own group.

As for the arguments against them, if you think these ideologies are bad, you have to say it — and everything is an ideology in that sense. For instance, Bernal is trying to correct as he sees it. The situation he claims stems from certain racist genocides in nineteenth-century England and resonates in the relationship between Greece and the Middle East. I am not sure if using the word ideology — if you are using it in a Marxist sense or any other — gets you very far. You could say, I suppose, that both of us, Bernal and myself, have some tendency to try to see things from a wider world perspective, and perhaps this has ideological implications. But I don't accept thinking of it simply as two ideologies in that way. I think one can make some choices between the two of them and it may be that Bernal was pushed towards that situation because of the fact that his father was a Jewish scientist, his mother was the daughter of a very distinguished British Egyptologist, and he wanted to reconcile these two things. Yes, part of his motivation may have been that, rather than a purely objective, rational orientation. I am not going to refer to my motivation; that is for other people to do. But I don't think there is any great way of viewing the situation; there are more correct ways than others, that is, ways that answer more questions than others do. And I feel that my account would be more acceptable in Beijing today than the account of some Eurocentric Marxists; that is all I would say about them.

**EEÇ:** Yesterday we discussed the conflict between religion and humanism in Africa. Do you think that cultural imperialism in Africa had two conflicting aspects, one being importing Christianity, and the other importing the Greek ideal? I am not sure whether it would be relevant to refer to an artist in such a discussion, but the South African novelist, J.M. Coetzee, maintains that the African preferred Christianity to the Greeks — of course if we can rely on what he says in his fiction. Considering your personal experience in Africa, I would like to ask you whether they did prefer Christianity to the Greeks, whether Christianity was more popular than Greek ideals. And why is that?

**JG:** I think there are two conflicting elements that came in but I am not sure that the people who brought them in saw them as conflicting elements, except a few people, like Sister Blanche in Coetzee's novel. She sees them as conflicting, because she takes one particular view. I don't think most of the people would see them as conflicting, either the transmitters or the recipients. I think there were, in fact, conflicts inherent in the humanist enterprise all along the line. When we use the word humanist in England today, we think about people who are non-religious, who are secular; there is a humanist society that tries to organize non-religious burials for its members. So that is complete secularization, but this was not the version brought to people that you are talking about here. I am not sure that I agree with Sister Blanche that they were basically looking for texts to confirm their own religious beliefs. I mean, I think there were a lot of different motivations. Some may have been doing that. Others were looking for other forms of knowledge. They wanted to see more of Aristotle or more of Plato. They were not looking to confirm a version of a translation of the Bible in the fifth century or whatever it may be. There was a certain common element in the search for the texts for knowledge. And given my earlier argument about the Middle Ages, they had to go back to the texts of knowledge. When they went back to Aristotle or Plato, they read them both in a religious and in a secular context. I think both of these things are happening really. For somebody like Petrarch, it is all about the search for knowledge, and going back to the classical texts, not the Christian classical texts but the others feeding into Christianity. These things were not regarded as

contradictory in many ways, even if they were partly contradictory, because some of them were pagan and some of them Christian. And there may have been problems just as there may have been problems for Islam, but people did not themselves see them as contradictory. But, contradictions came out later. You can see the contradictions in scientific fields when you went back to Aristotle and then probably to Galileo and Copernicus and the other stream that led to new studies. But I don't know whether they thought of themselves as antagonists, except for certain situations. I mean they did in Galileo's case, because there was a particular problem there. But I don't think that he thought of his activity as being anti-Christian. That usually started happening in the nineteenth century. I think it did arise with scientific thought when it was perceived that there was a contradiction between explanations in scientific terms and explanations in terms of the divine words. But that didn't occur with people like Newton or even earlier scientists and Pascal. I mean, for them God could be organizing this kind of thing. To give an explicit account, we can refer to the discussions between William Force and Habsley about the Darwinian problem in the middle of the nineteenth century. The Darwinian problem, I think, brought it out in a very critical way and separated the two. It still separates them in America, and it separated them in Bayreuth. When I was there, I discovered that around 1860, the American University of Bayreuth dismissed teachers because they wanted to teach Darwinism. But earlier on, by and large, it was spotted over as we would say, but it was overcome. It was not acute enough to make a difference. People could do their scientific inquiry and at the same time have their religious beliefs. There are plenty of scientists that take the same view now. The majority makes this opposition; there are plenty of scientists now that prepare to bridge over the differences.

As for whether the Africans preferred Christianity to the Greeks; if you accept my argument, these were never offered as alternatives. It was not just the Greeks *or* Christianity. They were offered both. Both would seem to be bridged somewhere or the other. Except for maybe a few, for most people, there was simply no opposition between the two. I mean, in Africa, people were certainly open to Christianity as well as to Islam. What most Africans had before Islam or Christianity were local religions, which didn't correspond to the things happening in the wider world. If you were a trader, you could become a Muslim, and easily go to different countries and so on; a Christian too could do the same kind of thing. The local religions thus disappeared.

People were very open to being converted to Christianity or to Islam, there was no resistance. It wasn't like in China or India, where there was resistance from Indian or Chinese religions of great importance, like Hinduism or Buddhism.

So many converted to Christianity, but I don't think this excluded the Greeks; the Greeks were already in Christianity. My friend, who became the head at the university of Ghana, went to a Christian school. Whether he was a Christian martyr, I don't know; he certainly didn't see Christianity as being opposed to Greeks, and neither did his teachers; they were teaching him Greek and at the same time they were teaching him Christianity. The two things went together. They would rationalize the differences, like Petrarch did.

**EEÇ:** We spoke about humanities in colonized Africa, but what about Turkey, which itself was never colonized? Considering the origins of humanities and humanism, does it not seem odd to have humanities and even some kind of humanism in Turkey? If colonized Africans preferred Christianity to humanism, how would things evolve in Turkey? To put it another way: can we think of the rise of Islam in Turkey in analogy with the African experience?

**JG:** You ask me about Turkey. From now on, let's set aside the words and look at the reality behind them. Of course, the humanities, or the equivalent of humanities, existed in Turkey, perhaps in terms of going back to Greek knowledge, if you want to put it that way, and in terms of encouraging humanist values in various ways, and thirdly, in periods of a certain amount of secularization. I don't know the intellectual history of Turkey well enough, but I assume you had similar problems during the periods where there was more interest in Greek and Classics on a more secular basis. This certainly happened in southern Spain, and I presume you also had it here. I was very surprised that it didn't happen in Islam next door; in other words, I was surprised that people there were not interested in earlier forms of knowledge, which were secular, not purely religious. That led to various advances in knowledge.

And there was the encouragement of secular science over time. In a religious universe, where most people believe in God, everything is themed with religion. On the other hand, it is also true that in any society, there is always a certain amount of scepticism about religious explanations of the world. When there are problems about the religious explanations of the world, a more secular worldview gains importance in particular times and places. Perhaps this is how humanism comes about. Nevertheless, you cannot characterize a society all the time as humanistic, and you cannot talk about human periods in which humanistic activity is more important than it was in others.

---

Published 2005-09-12

Original in English

Contribution by Cogito (Turkey)

First published in *Cogito* 43 (2005)

© E. Efe Çakmak/Jack Goody/Cogito

© Eurozine