

Ill Met in Ghana

Jack Goody and Norbert Elias on Process and Progress in Africa

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Abstract

In recent years, Sir Jack Goody has published a series of essays (2002, 2003, 2004, 2006: 154–79) criticizing Norbert Elias's theory of 'civilizing processes'. In all of them, Goody – himself a West African specialist – makes clear that his disagreement with Elias dates back to their acquaintance in Ghana. The date is highly significant for it is unlikely that Goody's opinions of Elias's ideas were initially formed by his reading of Elias's publications. There were also important differences between them in their approaches to theories of long-term social development. Despite appearances to the contrary, Elias and Goody have in fact much in common intellectually. Goody is one of the most historically orientated of anthropologists, and many points of contact with Elias are evident in his work on literacy (1968, 1987), food (1982), or *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977). Both swam against the ahistorical current of their respective disciplines and both rejected the old notion of 'progress'. Elias's fault is that occasionally his formulations may appear to give the opposite impression. Goody's fault, perhaps, is that – in spite of his own historical perspective – under *any* model of a structured *process* he suspects there lurks a vision of *progress* and of European superiority.

Key words

civilization ■ Norbert Elias ■ Jack Goody ■ *Naturvolk* ■ progress

IN RECENT years Sir Jack Goody, doyen of British social anthropologists, has published a series of essays (2002, 2003, 2004, 2006: 154–79) criticizing Norbert Elias's theory of 'civilizing processes'. In all

of them, Goody – himself a West African specialist – makes clear that his disagreement with Elias dates back to their acquaintance in Ghana during the two years (1962–4) when Elias, after his formal retirement from the University of Leicester, served as Professor of Sociology at the University of Ghana, Legon. The date is highly significant. It is unlikely that Jack Goody's opinions of Elias's ideas were initially formed by his reading of Elias's publications – for the very good reason that at that date there hardly were any in English.¹ A good deal therefore hinges on conversations between the two men more than 40 years ago, to which, alas, Goody is the only surviving witness, and on the impression that Goody formed then, which has no doubt coloured his subsequent reading of Elias's work.²

Goody recounts that, soon after arriving in Ghana, Elias let it be known that he favoured closing down the Department of Anthropology at the university in favour of the expansion of sociology.³ But underneath such incipient struggles over academic territory lie much more important disagreements about theories of long-term social development. Sociologists and anthropologists – but particularly anthropologists of Goody's generation, whose thinking was dominated by an awareness of the role that their discipline had played in the operation of the British Empire – have shied away from general models of social development, let alone 'progress'. Elias too was aware of that legacy, and was careful always to avoid the pitfall of thinking in terms of 'progress' in its Victorian sense – '*Es gibt Fortschritte, aber kein Fortschritt*',⁴ he remarked – but it did not scare him away from recognizing the need for models of the sequential orders to be found in the long-term development of human society. Elias recognized his use of the term 'civilization' provoked opposition, as indeed did the use of several other related terms, including 'evolution', 'social development', and even 'growth', all of which are central to Goody's disagreement with Elias.

Emic and Etic

We argue that, despite appearances to the contrary, Elias and Goody in fact have much in common intellectually. Goody is, for instance, one of the most historically orientated of anthropologists, and many points of contact with Elias are evident – to those willing to see them – in, for instance, his work on literacy (1968, 1987), food (1982), or *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977), to mention only a few of his books. On the other hand, it is reasonable to speculate that not only did Elias probably give a misleading impression of his views, but also that Goody would not have been the most sympathetic listener. One leading anthropologist has observed that modern anthropological training largely consists of putting up large red notices reading 'Wrong way, go back'.⁵ In the early 1960s, Goody was already a most distinguished anthropologist, and would have absorbed the modern anthropological ideology, or the anthropological tradition as he himself calls it; that would almost guarantee that he would approach the very word 'civilization' with some caution.⁶ The ideology would also contribute towards the sense of puzzlement with which Goody reports his much later reading of *The*

Civilizing Process, and to the apparent contradictions he finds in it. For example, Goody notes that Elias was fully aware of the harmful use made by colonialists of Victorian notions of developmental scales from the ‘primitive’ or ‘savagery’ through ‘barbarism’ to ‘civilization’. Yet he seems to find it difficult to reconcile that with Elias’s observation – which he quotes several times – that the concept of ‘civilization’

expresses the self-consciousness of the West. . . . It sums up everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or ‘more primitive’ contemporary ones. By this term Western society seeks to describe what constitutes its special character and what it is proud of: the level of *its* technology, the nature of *its* manners, the development of *its* scientific knowledge or view of the world, and much more. (2000: 5; italics in original)

The two are in fact easily reconciled. Goody fails to see that Elias is implicitly drawing a distinction between ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ concepts, especially with reference to ‘civilization’ and its cognates. Obviously, Goody himself could not but be perfectly familiar with the distinction (see Goody, 2004: 198, 210), but he fails to spot its employment by Elias. He rightly recognizes that Part One of *The Civilizing Process* (entitled ‘On the Sociogenesis of the Concepts of “Civilization” and “Culture”’) is essentially an ‘emic’ study in the sociology of knowledge. But he fails to notice how, in Part Two (‘Civilization as a Specific Transformation of Human Behaviour’), Elias switches to investigating ‘civilization’ as an etic or technical concept, describing and attempting to explain the factual changes in behaviour and feeling that Western European people had come to label ‘civilized’ and to regard proudly as something finished and unproblematic. Part One concludes:

Unlike the situation when the concept was formed, from now on nations came to consider the *process* of civilization as completed within their own societies; they came to see themselves as bearers of an existing or finished civilization to others, as standard-bearers of expanding civilization. Of the whole preceding process of civilization nothing remained in their consciousness except a vague residue. Its outcome was taken simply as an expression of their own higher gifts; the fact that, and the question of how, in the course of many centuries, civilized behaviour had been attained is of no interest. And the consciousness of their own superiority, the consciousness of this ‘civilization’, from now on serves at least those nations which have become colonial conquerors . . . as a justification of their rule . . . (Elias, 2000: 43; italics in original)

This passage signals the shift to an etic level of investigation, concerned with the factual changes in behaviour that came to be regarded with such collective self-satisfaction. In the course of his documentation of changes in ways of eating, handling urination and defecation, spitting, nose-blowing and the rest, Elias is fully aware of the arbitrary element in what came to

be regarded as superior and inferior. In the middle of his famous discussion of table manners, Elias suddenly interpolates an ‘Excursus on the Modelling of Speech at Court’ (2000: 87–9), to make explicit the entirely arbitrary element in the social judgement of taste. Which of two semantically identical phrases – *un de mes amis* as opposed to *un mien ami*, for example – came to be regarded as ‘smelling of the bourgeois’ is quite arbitrary,⁷ and this illustrates a more general principle at work in how social standards of behaviour change from generation to generation.

Of course, Elias has to take a major share of the blame for the misunderstanding into which many besides Goody have fallen. He could hardly have written ‘Here I am switching from an emic to an etic level of investigation’, because the terms did not come into use in anthropology until a couple of decades later (see Harris, 1968: 568–604; Headland et al., 1990). It would have helped if he had *consistently* used quotation marks to denote the emic sense – as he does in one instance in the passage quoted above. He was not, unfortunately, consistent in doing so. Nevertheless, the distinction between Elias’s ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ use of the term ‘civilization’ is always clear in context to the careful reader. Even so, as he recognized at the time, it might have been better if he could have found a different word, a word other than ‘civilization’, to denote the underlying factual processes of change with which he began to deal in Part Two. He did try to do so, as he recounted shortly before his death in his reply to the critique mounted by Hans-Peter Duerr:⁸

I could have looked around for less ideologically-charged terms for long-term changes of behaviour standards, or tried to free the concept of civilization from its ideological burdens and transform it into an ideologically neutral term with the aid of appropriate documentation. I did cast about for other possible expressions but did not find any that were more appropriate. Finally I decided to develop the concept of civilization into an ideologically neutral, fact-based term in conjunction with abundant empirical documentation. At the same time I wanted to develop it into a key concept of a theory of civilizing processes.

In keeping with this intention, I devoted the first part of my book essentially to the earlier, predominantly ideological development of the two terms ‘culture’ (*Kultur*) and ‘civilization’ (*Zivilisation*). This enabled me, in the following chapter and then in the concluding part, ‘Towards a theory of civilizing processes’, and in other books later, to present a fact-oriented, ideologically cleansed concept of civilization. (Elias, 2008 [1988]: 8–9)

Something that is definitely difficult to reconcile with that statement, however, is Goody’s most damaging allegation about Elias, repeated in each of his essays, that Elias thought of the Ghanaians as a *Naturvolk* – as more spontaneous, ‘natural’, unspoiled by ‘civilization’ than 20th-century Europeans had become. It is possible, though unlikely, that Elias used it unguardedly in conversation. Goody’s most explicit assertion is that Elias ‘developed “a deep liking for African culture” in a way that for anthropologists strongly

resembled the attraction of 19th-century writers to the *Naturvolk*, a category that even included the ancients' (2006: 175). In other words, it is Goody, not Elias, who is invoking the word *Naturvolk*, but then everywhere else Goody *projects* this usage on to Elias. For instance, he writes (2002: 402) 'I believe my impressions are fully supported by looking at his autobiographical account of his experiences in [Ghana] and of his encounter with *what he referred to as "naturvolk"*' [our italics] or, again, 'Elias's attitude to what he called *Naturvolk* when he visited Ghana and encountered the native population' (2006: 164). Nowhere does Elias use the term *Naturvolk* or any English equivalent in his writings – certainly not in print, and so far as we can establish not in any of his unpublished papers either.⁹ Of course, it is possible that in conversation Elias may have expressed himself extremely badly and seriously misrepresented his own ideas. But if so, it is entirely at odds with the pattern of his thought from his earliest to his last writings. He was indeed much fascinated by the idea of 'nature' throughout his life, from the precocious 1921 essay 'Vom Sehen in der Natur' [On seeing in nature] (Elias, 2006a: 5–22), through his discussion of the cult of 'nature' in courtly circles in *ancien régime* France (2006b: 225, 242–4, 247, 259, 268) and his late essay 'On Nature' (2009a) to his last book, *The Symbol Theory* (1991) – but his argument was always exactly the opposite of that attributed to him by Goody. Human ideas of 'nature' or a 'state of nature' were always socially constructed, and were often associated with images of an idyllic, but actually never existent, past. They often represented the 'wishful dreams' of social strata who had been increasingly subjected to 'civilized' constraints, groups whose relative social independence and power were diminishing: the appeal of nymphs and shepherds to *ancien régime* courtiers, but also of Wagner's medieval knights and craftsmen to the 19th-century German bourgeoisie (Elias, 2006b: 238), or of the Wild West to 20th-century urban Americans (Mennell, 2007: 137–8).

Goody is quite certainly right that, when he arrived in Ghana in 1962, Elias was trying to make sense of what he observed in terms of the theory of civilizing processes that he had formulated from European evidence. In *The Theft of History*, Goody's central objection is to many Western authors – not just Elias – who 'have made stabs at a comparative approach, always starting from and returning to their western European base'. That, he says, is 'not how comparison should work sociologically'. Rather, he suggests, 'what is needed . . . is an *analytic grid* against which the variations can be plotted' (2006: 292; our italics). Surely that is unrealistic: such a grid does not descend fully formed from heaven. To try to make sense of new experience in terms of old is a normal intellectual process; even an anthropologist does not go into the field with a mind that is a *tabula rasa*. Elias did not simply take European history and social development as a yardstick from which all other cultures merely deviated. On the contrary, far from seeing the European pattern as the standard from which other societies deviated, in attempting to 'present a fact-oriented, ideologically-cleansed concept of civilization' Elias was trying to find more general processes that underlay

sequences of social change wherever they occurred. This is most clearly obvious in Part Four of *The Civilizing Process*, entitled ‘Synopsis: Towards a Theory of Civilizing Processes’. The key idea is the lengthening of chains of interdependence, together with the more problematic question of whether such longer chains also lead to ‘functional democratization’ – meaning relatively more equal power ratios at each link in the chain. Subheadings indicate aspects of the most general underlying process: ‘the social constraint towards self-constraint’, the ‘spread of the pressure for foresight and self-constraint’, ‘diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties’, ‘the muting of drives: psychologization and rationalization’, ‘shame and repugnance’.¹⁰ As his later writings amply demonstrate, Elias knew that, if these really are general processes, they need to be observed at work in non-European as well as European contexts. In this final section of *The Civilizing Process*, Elias is clearly moving towards the kind of ‘analytic grid’ that Goody advocates.

It equally follows from Elias’s processual perspective, however, that such a framework or ‘analytic grid’ can never be fixed for all time: it remains simultaneously theoretical *and* empirical, and always has itself to be tested against and constantly modified through exposure to empirical evidence. Here, Goody’s views seem a little ambiguous. In *The Theft of History*, he criticizes the use of static concepts such as ‘feudalism’, but still wants his ‘grid’ to provide a fixed frame of reference:

To affect [*sic*] a valid comparison would involve using not predetermined categories of the kind of Antiquity, feudalism, capitalism, but abandoning these concepts to construct a sociological grid laying out the possible variations of what is being compared. (2006: 304)

In other words, Goody appears to share Elias’s hostility to what, when writing in German, Elias called *Zustandsreduktion* to denote the conceptual reduction of processes to static entities.¹¹ In writing about literacy, criticism and the growth of knowledge, Goody, too, attempts to ‘set aside radical dichotomies’ in favour of ‘specifying particular mechanisms’ that ‘relate specific differences to specific changes’ (Goody, 1977: 50).¹²

Nevertheless, Goody has particular problems with the connection that Elias draws between sociogenetic and psychogenetic processes, or what Goody refers to as ‘vectorial transformation over time both of society and of the personality’ (2002: 403). Elias places emphasis throughout his work on ‘developmental processes in a specific direction’. Goody’s stance appears to be that he does not dispute that such ‘vectorial transformations’ can be discerned in economic and technological development – in what Marxists would call ‘the base’ – but he does not believe they can be observed in the areas of culture or personality. He notes that archaeologists are accustomed to dealing with general social transitions, such as from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic, which can take place in the same sequence but at different times in different societies, but they ‘tend to look for explanations . . . in terms

either of external communications or else of structural similarities arising internally from a parallel situation’.

Anthropologists on the other hand often resort to vague indications of cultural change, and historians to ‘mentalities’. In my view, this latter is dangerous territory for these scholars. . . . Explanation based on culture or on mentalities may be misleading if it leads automatically to conceiving difference, which may well be temporary, in a permanent frame. (2006: 302)

In other words, Goody’s stance on such questions resembles that of Alfred Weber (1935, 1998 [1921]), who admitted that a direction of development (Goody’s ‘vectorial transformations’) could be found in matters social and technological, but not in what he termed ‘culture-movements’.

In contrast, Elias (who was once a student of Alfred Weber’s) does argue that ‘structural similarities arising internally from a parallel situation’ give rise to similar psychogenetic and cultural developments in directions that can be empirically observed and established. The reason why Elias, in *The Civilizing Process*, chose to study matters of ‘outward bodily propriety’ was that these are problems that *all* human beings have to deal with. There is no zero-point of ‘civilization’ in these matters; *all* societies have some rules – social standards – about how they are to be handled, and there is no such thing as an ‘uncivilized’ society. On the other hand, the lifetime point of departure is always the same: human babies are born in the same physical and emotional condition everywhere, at all times and places, and have been ever since the species took its present form at least 50 millennia ago. So differences and changes in the social standards governing adult practices of outward bodily propriety are in principle easy to trace – at any rate, easier than changes in such other questions as standards of self-constraint over impulses to violence, which Elias sees as following a related track, and which are in fact a more central concern of his theory of civilizing processes. As a final provocation, Elias elaborates what he calls the ‘sociogenetic ground rule’, by which he means that ‘individuals, in their short history, pass once more through some of the processes that their society has traversed in its long history’ – a statement that for anthropologists rings alarm bells about ‘ontogeny’ and ‘phylogeny’. Elias immediately goes on to explain that:

This expression should not be understood to mean that all the individual phases of a society’s history are reproduced in the history of the civilized individual. Nothing would be more absurd than to look for an ‘agrarian feudal age’ or a ‘Renaissance’ or a ‘courtly-absolutist period’ in the life of individuals. All concepts of this kind refer to the structure of whole social groups.

What must be pointed out here is the simple fact that even in civilized society no human beings come into the world civilized, and that the individual civilizing process that they compulsorily undergo is a function of the social civilizing process. Therefore, the structure of a child’s affects and consciousness no doubt bears a certain resemblance to that of ‘uncivilized’

peoples, and the same applies to the psychological stratum in grown-ups which, with the advance of civilization is subjected to more or less heavy censorship and consequently finds an outlet in dreams, for example. But since in our society every human being is exposed from the first moment of life to the influence and the moulding intervention of civilized grown-ups, they must indeed pass through a civilizing process in order to reach the standard attained by their society in the course of its history, but not through the individual phases of the social civilizing process. (2000: xi)

These, of course, are old and general theoretical disputes: anthropologists, sociologists and historians do not dispute that accepted modes of social behaviour have changed over time. Nor is there any dispute that different periods and different kinds of society have been associated with different outlooks, worldviews or mentalities. For example, among historians Johan Huizinga's investigation of the worldview of the late Middle Ages (1955 [1924]), with its opening chapter on 'the violent tenor of life' has been influential,¹³ notably in the *Annales* school's concern with *mentalités*. Nor, on the whole, is the question of *correlation* between social structures and the psychological make-up of people involved in them controversial. This has been discussed throughout the history of sociology, as witness Ferdinand Tönnies, Georg Simmel, or Louis Wirth writing about psychological and cultural traits associated with the transition to urban life, or the history of anthropology, where the 'Culture and Personality' school of anthropologists investigated the correlation between social organization and personality structure in many societies, with an emphasis on how members of various cultures *differ* in their personality structures or habitus.

Occasionally it has been argued that there is no such connection between social and personality structures:

There simply is no discernible correlation between linguistic complexity and the level of material 'advancement' of different societies. This fact in itself would indicate that there is unlikely to be any general differences of psychic organization between oral cultures on the one hand and 'civilizations' on the other. (Giddens, 1984: 241)

Giddens was surely pandering to the *Zeitgeist*. Of course, if one looks at human beings from a sufficiently high level of abstraction, they and their societies can all look alike. All human societies past and present, for example, have facility in the use of language and in the control of fire. Similarly, if one chooses a very low level of abstraction, the differences between human groups are so numerous that any pattern is lost in a mass of detail. Kluckhohn and Murray struck a commonsensical note when they remarked that every person is in certain respects (a) like all other people, (b) like some other people, and (c) like no other person (1948: 35).

Broadly speaking, then, correlation is not the problem. What causes hackles to rise is the proposition that there is a consistent long-term *direction* or *trend* – interrupted, of course, by many short-term fluctuations – in

the social behaviour and psychological make-up of European people. Still more provocative is the idea that, because of 'structural similarities arising internally from a parallel situation', people of other cultures, other times and other places have been and are following a broadly similar track; the problem here is that it implies that some people are further ahead and others further behind on this path of development. This has led to angry debates.¹⁴ The proposition sounds reasonable if expressed in the words of Johan Goudsblom, that with increasing social complexity and longer chains of interdependence, 'more people are forced more often to pay more attention to more and more other people' (1989: 722). When Elias couches it, as he often does, in terms of different and changing patterns of 'superego formation' or 'conscience formation', to many social scientists it appears less acceptable.

The central misapprehension shared by nearly all of Elias's critics, including Goody, is that Elias saw people at later stages of social development as having simply *more* self-control in some quantitative sense. Far from it. Elias always emphasized the capacity for extreme self-control seen, for instance, in Native American warriors not flinching under torture (2007b: 122–4), or in the extreme abstinence of some medieval monastic communities (2000: 100). Goody gives another excellent example of the Japanese imperial court, where elaborate codes of conduct imposed very great self-constraint, even though – unlike the court of Louis XIV studied by Elias in *The Court Society* (2006b) – it ruled an area that did not extend much beyond modern Kyoto. In these cases, high levels of self-control arise from strong *Fremdzwänge* – external constraints, constraints by other people – imposed through face-to-face encounters within a close-knit circle of immediate associates.

The point is not that there is *more* self-constraint at later stages of development, associated with 'longer chains of interdependence', but that it is somewhat different in its character and operation. The strength of external constraints may vary from one society to another. But the thrust of Elias's theory is about processes of *change*: the argument is that the increasing webs of interdependence spun by state-formation, the division of labour, economic growth and other 'structural' processes exert pressures towards increasing foresight and a change in the balance of controls; the relative weight of self-constraint over the impulsive resort to violence (among other things) increases, and becomes 'more automatic', 'more even', and 'more all-round'. 'More automatic' is self-explanatory: people become more deeply habituated to do certain things with less need for conscious reflection. 'More even' refers to the diminution of the temperamental volatility that, before Elias, historians such as Huizinga (1955; see also Mandrou, 1975) identified in people of the European Middle Ages. While not denying that there can be long-term changes in 'affect' or temperament, Goody is sceptical about the evidence for such changes both in the absence of written records and in the case of reliance on textual evidence alone (2006: 171). 'More all-round' refers to a trend for social standards

of self-constraint to apply more uniformly to all aspects of life and to all those with whom one has to deal.

Nor, as Goody admits, did Elias consider that Europe was always further along in a civilizing process than other parts of the world. Elias would certainly admit that the civilizing process was also happening in China (although this country is mentioned only four times in the course of this long book) (Goody, 2006: 166). There are, as Goody observes, only four passing references to China in *The Civilizing Process*, although there are more scattered through Elias's later writings. In fact, Elias used to remark that the Chinese had undergone the longest civilizing process of all, and that in his vision of the imaginary ideal society of the future 'the Chinese would be a large ingredient'.¹⁵ It is perfectly true that Elias wrote no extensive discussion of China, or of any other part of Asia. But science is a social process, and other scholars in the 'figurational' research tradition stemming from Elias have explored civilizing and decivilizing processes in the wider world beyond Europe.¹⁶

If, as we argue, Elias, like Goody, was seeking an 'analytic grid' for the comparison of different societies (albeit a processual rather than a static grid, for the dimensions of which Elias uses the term 'yardsticks'), the most controversial and difficult questions concern the nature of the yardsticks. Goody would – we infer – have no problem with measures of such 'vectorial' processes as the division of labour, lengthening chains of interdependence, or the monopolization of the means of violence, which constitute one axis of Elias's model of civilizing processes; but he does clearly object to the idea of there being vectorial processes in 'conscience formation', which constitute the other axis. The nub of the problem is simple, and Goody as usual puts his finger on it, commenting on Elias's remark (2000: 157) that more revealing bathing costumes presuppose a very high standard of drive control:

Why does that observation apply to us and not to the scantier clothing of simpler societies? Indeed when one examines the problem of increasing constraints from a different angle, the notion of a general progression disappears, although there may have been changes towards stricter or laxer controls over time. (Goody, 2006: 169–70)

The answer, however, is not simple, and may not have been perfectly clear even to Elias himself when he made his quite tentative comments in 1939 about what he already glimpsed as a process of what later came to be called 'informalization' in the West.¹⁷ The essential point, however, is that Elias did *not* propose 'the notion of a general progression' at the level of specific matters of outward bodily propriety for humanity as a whole. Feelings of shame and embarrassment, for instance, and the consequent measures of self-constraint, obviously do not arise from nakedness in itself. They are generated by the social *process* of changing social standards of feeling and behaviour. That is why, paradoxically, in saunas in northern

Europe, it is possible for naked people to be embarrassed by the presence of clothed people (and for the clothed people to be embarrassed by their clothedness). As in the case of the modelling of speech, there is an element of randomness in what over time comes to be designated socially more acceptable and what less. Beneath surface differences, however, underlying processes of ‘conscience formation’ may be moving in a consistent direction – it may still be true that with lengthening chains of interdependence, ‘more people are forced more often to pay more attention to more and more other people’.¹⁸

The issues at stake between Goody and Elias are perhaps best seen if we now return to Ghana and to Elias’s writings on West African art. They demonstrate Elias’s comparative technique, and also suggest what Goody objects to in it.

African Art

There is no denying that, in comparison with Goody, Elias in 1962 was a complete novice as an observer and interpreter of Ghanaian society.¹⁹ He must have been conscious of this himself. Among his papers, there are extensive typescript notes about his reading on Ghanaian society, though not many of them appear to have reached the stage of being drafts intended for publication. He drew upon these notes to a limited extent in *Involvement and Detachment* (2007a [1987]) and in *An Essay on Time* (2007b [1992]). But in his lifetime he published only one short essay on African art, in the form of a brief introduction to the catalogue for an exhibition of his collection that was mounted at the Leicester City Art Gallery in 1970 (Elias, 2009b). One other, longer, essay has been published posthumously (2009c). Goody is dismissive of Elias’s collecting of such art – it was something that tourists and visiting businessmen also did when local people came selling from door to door. But Elias bought them just because he liked them:

I was fairly familiar with the work of the great masters of contemporary European art and was struck by the strange kinship which some of the African pieces bore to these trends in non-African painting and sculpture. My own taste lies very much in that direction and I was delighted to be able to acquire in Africa sculptures, many of which I found artistically satisfying, and for me often novel in conception – as one says – at prices I could afford. Most of the contemporary [European] art which I liked was decidedly beyond my reach. (2009b: 201)

He recognized that he brought with him no expert knowledge specifically of African art:

I could rely entirely on my own taste, but my taste so far as African figures were concerned was at first untrained; I made mistakes – that is to say, I was misled by the novelty of the artistic experience with regard to its intrinsic quality. To assess this quality needs time. Some visitors to this exhibition may find that too. It requires a certain training of one’s perception. At first I bought

a few figures only every now and then; I had no intention of starting a collection. After I had some figures in my house for a month or two I began to be able to distinguish differences in their artistic quality. I learned while I went along. (2009b: 201)

Then, Elias recounted, he gradually became more discriminating in his judgement, and he discovered that he could distinguish four broad types of traditional African sculptures, although, of course, there were no sharp dividing lines and the types shaded into each other. He described the four types as follows:

1. relatively old ritual objects;
2. relatively new ritual objects;
3. objects derived from the former categories, and still made by traditional craftsmen with a relatively high standard of craftsmanship, though not for any known purpose or person in their own village circle, but for unknown, largely European buyers;²⁰
4. the same as 3, but produced more quickly with a declining standard of craftsmanship and artistic quality. (2009b: 201–2)



Figure 1 Yoruba mask

Source: Photo: Gerard Holzmann. Courtesy of the Norbert Elias Foundation and the African Art Collection.

It is clear that he was implicitly drawing comparisons with Europe. Stage 3 is probably conceived as bearing some resemblance to changes that took place in European art in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance.²¹ Stage 4 is even more clearly influenced by Elias's thinking about kitsch, the subject of one of his earliest essays, 'The Kitsch Style and the Age of Kitsch' (2006a [1935]: 85–96). But writing a more elaborate essay (2009c) five years later (and more than ten years after leaving Ghana), Elias revised his schema or 'analytic grid' in the light of his further observation and reflection. The distinction between relatively old and relatively new ritual objects was stressed less: the visual pattern to which the craftsman worked might have changed substantially or very little over the space of a century, and for that reason 'the question, "How old is this piece?", when applied to a piece of African art, therefore does not have quite the same significance which it has when applied to a piece of European art' (2009c: 210). And stage 4 was now associated not with kitsch but with the work of African artists trained in art schools in Africa or the West rather than learning through apprenticeship to a traditional craftsman. The boundaries between the stages are fluid, but what is common to both versions of Elias's conceptual scheme is that this is seen as a developmental sequence, and the underlying direction of development is the same in both.

From this point, Elias's argument takes a turn of the kind of which Goody seems to disapprove. He asks how it is possible that craftsmen's art produced in a social setting characteristic of an earlier stage can have strong resonance in the very different social setting of a later stage of social development, and 'can be received there as art in a completely secular sense of the word on an equal footing with individualized art' (2009c: 212). He raises, in other words, the problem of the relative autonomy of art from its original social setting, which makes it possible for human beings to respond emotionally to works of art created under social conditions very different from their own. So, perhaps fulfilling Goody's expectation, much of the rest of Elias's essay is concerned with how Europeans and Americans came to appreciate the art of West Africa. Until fairly recently, they did not. African art was to be found in ethnographic museums rather than art galleries. Elias quotes Bernard Berenson, writing in old age as late as 1953, who still championed the old view of the trajectory of European art as being one of progress in the pursuit of 'lifelikeness'. Recognizing African art as a considerable influence upon European 'modern art', Berenson denounced the work of African craftsmen in the same breath as his bugbear, Picasso. Even Ernst Gombrich (1962) had not emancipated himself fully from these assumptions. It was not, however, merely individuals whose perception was blocked, but whole social groups, so that, from the late 19th century onwards, European artists had a substantial struggle to emancipate themselves from the tastes of social elites, something that was achieved through a restructuring of art markets. And the growing appreciation of African art was one strand in that European struggle.

But what was the nature of the affinity between African art and the 'modern art' of Europe? Here Elias turned back to discuss in detail a Yoruba mask in his collection:

The face is dominated by the enormously enlarged bright eyes that watch you, by two strong front teeth and the small, somewhat beak-like nose. The forehead has completely disappeared. Its place has been taken by a long red crocodile neck . . . (2009c: 243)

After sketching the ritual use of this mask in the town from which it came, Elias then takes a turn to which Goody – one may infer – would object. An observer might not *like* the vision of the mask, but it is difficult to remain emotionally indifferent, not to respond to it. The mask, says Elias, carried its message to the level of elementary fantasies – to the level that Freud called the ‘unconscious’ – where ‘all people are more alike’.

In a way, the mask – all teeth and eyes that watch you – is reminiscent of Freud’s description of the early and therefore – in contemporary European societies – more deeply buried layers of people’s conscience which watch and bite – *Gewissensbisse*, the gnawing conscience – and the crocodile’s head underlines the association. If one needs a title, one might call it IMAGE OF A SUPEREGO. (2009c: 223; capitals in original)

Here, finally, the link in Elias’s thinking with his theory of civilizing processes – developed through studying *European* history – becomes apparent. The mask, and many similar ritual objects, originated in a small and relatively self-contained village state in West Africa, marked by much higher levels of insecurity and incalculability in everyday life, where it played its part in strong external constraint on the steering of people’s behaviour and feeling. The classical tradition of European art took shape in the context of larger-scale states, increasingly internally pacified, with ever-lengthening chains of interdependence that imposed on people a more demanding standard of habitual self-constraint over their impulses. It was that which for a long time blocked the response to African art on the part of European elites. Elias says that Europeans’ response to traditional African art now contains a grain of nostalgia, but their perceptions were unblocked by the struggle of ‘modern’ artists in Europe to break out of the old conventions of taste, which can be seen as part of a wider process of informalization that marked the 20th century.²²

There is thus nothing of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’, ‘better’ or ‘worse’, in Elias’s thinking about European and African art, but it is couched in terms of ‘earlier’ and ‘later’ phases in processes of social development that *both* Europe and Africa experience. The central puzzle for Elias is the apparent similarity between the artistic products of West Africa in earlier stages of its development and those of the most recent period of European art history, and the similarity of the response of Europeans like himself to both. Although this may confirm Goody’s charge that Elias (like Needham, Braudel and others) constantly refers back to Europe, it seems to us that this kind of comparison is of great value in itself, and works as a more flexible kind of ‘analytic grid’ in suggesting what processes to look for in the art of China, Japan, India or anywhere else on the globe. Furthermore,

we think it is a perfectly legitimate ethnographic enterprise; the central task of ethnography, in the end, is to make the culture of one group of people intelligible to another.

Conclusion

It would be idle to pretend that Goody and Elias could ever have seen perfectly eye to eye with each other. Nevertheless, to switch anatomical analogies, it is a pity that they got off on the wrong foot with each other back in the early 1960s. They could surely have had more constructive conversations and found more basis for agreement than, in the event, they did. Both swam against the ahistorical current of their respective disciplines. The dismay that Elias expressed at 'the retreat of sociologists into the present' (2009d [1986]) was the same dismay that led Goody to reject the exclusive emphasis on fieldwork that Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard brought to anthropology (as Chris Hann shows in his essay in this collection). Both Goody and Elias reject the old notion of 'progress'. Elias's fault is that occasionally his formulations may appear to give the opposite impression. Goody's fault, perhaps, is that – in spite of his own historical perspective – under *any* model of a structured *process* he suspects there lurks a vision of *progress* and of European superiority.

Notes

1. Elias certainly did not always assist his own cause, needlessly delaying the publication of translations of his work; see Mennell (2006). Until after his return from Ghana, Elias's only book was *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, published obscurely in 1939.
2. Those of us who knew Elias later in his life can easily imagine that, in mere conversation, he would not have conveyed the subtleties and nuances of his thinking. He often came out with brilliant and memorable *aperçus* to illustrate particular points, but was less good at explaining in conversation the overall architecture of his thought. When he did so, he could sometimes sound arrogant. That is one reason why British social scientists who knew him before the flood of publications towards the end of his long life appear consistently to have underestimated his intellectual stature.
3. In conversation with Stephen Mennell, Goody remarked that he thought Elias was lonely in Ghana. If so, loneliness may have had an adverse effect on Elias's 'presentation of self'.
4. 'There are progressions, but no progress.'
5. Joel Kahn, in personal conversation with Stephen Mennell.
6. Goody does use the term 'civilization' himself, but often in quotation marks, and certainly not in Elias's very specific technical sense: his usage is more in line with the conventional sense associated with the growth of cities or with large-scale culture areas.
7. In this point, there is a distant flavour of De Saussure and of Lévi-Strauss. Otherwise, Elias had little in common with Lévi-Strauss beyond them both having taken an interest in table manners (Lévi-Strauss, 1978).

8. The German anthropologist Duerr has written five volumes (1988, 1990, 1993, 1997, 2002) under the overall title of *Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozeß*. In essence, he attempts to demonstrate that there is no discernible pattern of development in matters of shame, and that feelings of repugnance of the sort that Elias studied in European history are either universal or randomly distributed among cultures. See the counter-critique of Duerr's work by Goudsblom and Mennell (1997).

9. Elias's voluminous papers can be consulted at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv (DLA), Marbach am Neckar, Germany.

10. Another sub-heading, 'the courtization of warriors', would seem to refer to a possibly specifically European process, although a similar term – 'the taming of warriors' – used by Elias elsewhere (2000: 387–97) clearly does not.

11. After long discussion with Stephen Mennell, he agreed to this word being translated as a 'process reduction' (see Elias, 1978: 111–22).

12. Goody does not refer to Elias's essays (2007, 2009e) on the sociology of knowledge and the sciences; in our opinion, he would have found much that was congenial to him. 'The Fisherman in the Maelstrom' (Elias, 2007a: 105–78, but written around 1980), like Goody's *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, is concerned to develop a non-dichotomous conception of pre-scientific and scientific thinking.

13. On Elias's relation to Huizinga, as well as Max Weber and Freud, see Goudsblom (1980).

14. Notably at the 1981 annual conference of the Dutch Sociological and Anthropological Association. For a summary of that heated dispute, see Mennell (1998 [1989]: 232–4).

15. Elias in personal conversation with Stephen Mennell.

16. There is no adequate and up-to-date bibliography of such studies, though some earlier examples are discussed in Mennell (1998 [1989]: 237–41), and many others have been reported in *Figurations*, the biannual research newsletter of the Norbert Elias Foundation (<http://elias-i.nfshost.com/elias/figs.htm>) published since 1994.

17. Thanks especially to the very detailed studies by Cas Wouters of changing manners in the USA, Britain, Germany and The Netherlands since 1890 (culminating in his two books, Wouters, 2004, 2007), there is now massive evidence in favour of informalization being not a reversal but a continuation of civilizing processes – in the West – in a slightly different form; see also Elias's subtle conceptualization of differences between European countries in *The Germans* (1996: 23–43).

18. A more detailed discussion of the problem of yardsticks can be found in Mennell (1998 [1989]: 228–41), and Mennell (1996).

19. Goody writes: 'I got the impression that he knew very little about the continent and its people, and had read almost nothing on the subject . . . I emphasize this was a personal impression, he was the very opposite of an ethnographer, at least of Africa and of "other cultures"' (2002: 402).

20. Elias was especially interested in objects of this type. That probably explains why, when the collection was valued by 'experts' after his death, they decreed that it was of little value. It is probable that they placed a higher value on the stage 1 and 2 objects. One may ponder, however, whether that in itself is not a curious form

of ethnocentrism – they would probably value European objects of the corresponding stage much more highly.

21. See Bram Kempers (1992) for a study, in the spirit of Elias's thinking, of this period of European art history.

22. Elias was writing in 1975, before the start of the long-running discussion of 'informalization'.

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