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978-0-521-36761-5 - *The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia*

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Studies in Literary, Family, Culture and the State

**The oriental, the ancient
and the primitive**

In *The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive* one of the world's foremost anthropologists looks in depth at kinship practice in Asia and the Near East, and continues the comparative survey of pre-industrial family formation undertaken in *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (1983) and elsewhere.

Professor Goody's findings cause him to question many traditional assumptions about the 'primitive' east, and he suggests that, in contrast to pre-colonial Africa, kinship practice in Asia has much in common with that prevailing in parts of pre-industrial Europe. Goody examines the transmission of productive and other property in relation both to the prevailing political economy and to family and ideological structures, and then explores the distribution of mechanisms and strategies of continuity across cultures. He concludes that notions of western 'uniqueness' are often misplaced, and that much previous work on Asian kinship has been unwittingly distorted by the application of concepts and approaches derived from other, inappropriate, social formations, simple or post-industrial.

JACK GOODY is a Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge.

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Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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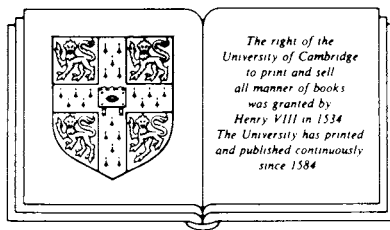
Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The oriental, the ancient and the primitive

Systems of marriage and the family in
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Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page viii
<i>List of tables</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
1 The nature of the enterprise	1
Theorising	8
Transfers, sale and incorporation	13
The plan	16
PART I CHINA	
2 The incorporation of women: marriage transactions and the continuity of the 'house'	21
Diversity and unity	26
A Yangtze village	29
A Yunnan village	34
The continuity of the 'house'	42
3 The lineage and the conjugal fund	52
Patriliney, widowhood and divorce	52
The structure and organisation of lineages	60
The lineage and the domestic group	66
Lineages and corporations in comparative perspective	69
The conjugal fund and family fission	79
Partition, the conjugal group and the lineage	86
4 Differentiation, hierarchical and regional	93
Mobility in the village	93
Hierarchy and marriage	97
Regional differences	104
Changes over time	110
Local variation in Taiwan	113

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36761-5 - The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage
and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi

Contents

5 Land, polyandry and celibacy in Tibet	137
Polyandry and partition	139
Celibacy and illegitimacy	146
The nomads	149
 PART II INDIA	
6 Marriage and the family in Gujarat (with Esther Goody)	160
Nandol	161
Marriage transactions	167
7 The high and the low	179
Divorce	184
Marriage transactions	185
Dowry and devolution in Hindu law	197
The celibacy of widows	201
Strategies of continuity	206
Age at marriage	207
Domestic groups	210
Hypergamy	214
Interpersonal relationships	219
8 The North and the South	229
Unity and diversity	230
Siblings and property in Sri Lanka	240
The North and South	250
Differences in relationships	261
Group differences	271
Demographic variables	273
Female autonomy and female property	283
9 Kinship and modes of production	290
 PART III THE NEAR EAST	
10 The abominations of the Egyptians	319
Incest and Egypt	319
Women and property	326
Wills	330
Explaining brother–sister marriage	332
Love and marriage	339

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36761-5 - The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage
and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents	vii
11 Jacob's marriages	342
Endowment through bride service	347
12 Marriage and property in the Arab world	361
 PART IV GREECE AND ROME, YESTERDAY AND TODAY	
13 The heiress in ancient Greece	386
14 Monogamy, property and control in Rome	397
Early Rome: forms of marriage	398
Law and change	409
Women and property under the Empire	415
The elementary family	420
Conjugal affection	423
Affection for children	424
Age at marriage	425
Hierarchical differences	426
15 Dowry, continuity and change in the eastern Mediterranean	429
A hill settlement in Albania	430
The Sarakatsani shepherds	434
Farmers in southern Greece	439
The endowment of women in time and space	443
16 Asia and Europe	465
Women as property	465
Women and property	468
Wider kin groups and the written law	478
Western and eastern families	482
 <i>Notes</i>	 488
<i>References</i>	508
<i>Index</i>	533

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36761-5 - The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage
and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Illustrations

Figures

1 Marriage transactions in West Town (after Hsu 1949:101)	<i>page</i> 35
2 Transactions in a filiaccentric marriage, West Town (after Hsu 1949:102)	47
3 A selective genealogy of the Lou (after Walton 1984)	66
4 Conjugal funds and economic fission	82
5 Sex ratios by district, for children aged 0–9, 1961 (after Dyson and Moore 1983)	280
6 Child/woman ratios, by administrative division, 1961	281
7 Oblique marriages	301
8 Jacob's marriages	348
9 Ruth's marriages	359

Maps

1 China	22
2 India	158
3 Map of the Indo-Aryan languages (after Trautmann 1981:7)	251
4 Map of the Dravidian kinship region (after Trautmann 1981:111)	253
5 West Asia	316

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36761-5 - The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage
and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Tables

1 Organisational features and types of Chinese lineage	<i>page</i> 61
2 High and low trends in China	98
3 Additional hierarchical variables in China	104
4 Regional variations in China	109
5 Status and unmarried women among the Khams	145
6 Hierarchical trends in religious practice in India	180
7 Hierarchical trends in family and marriage in Gujarat	182
8 Selected state-level indexes related to women's status and acceptance of family planning (after Dyson and Moore 1983:49)	278
9 North and South trends in India	311
10 Hierarchical trends in Arab communities	379
11 Hierarchical differences in ancient Greece	394
12 Suggested hierarchical differences in ancient Rome	427
13 The geographical distribution of mechanisms of heirship	470
14 Trends in the hierarchy of family variables	472

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36761-5 - The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

If we disagree with others we are not unquestionably wise, and they are not unquestionably foolish.

Article X of Prince Umayado's Injunctions

This book is not a work of scholarship in the usual sense. I am not an expert in the societies which I discuss; I have read a little about them but what I know is derived mainly from field studies that others have made, the results of intensive research which exhaust neither the spatial nor the historical dimensions. Part of my original interest stemmed from an attempt to understand why the particular groups I first studied in Africa differ in certain definite ways from pre-industrial Europe. Reading the accounts presented by my colleagues of the domestic domain in the major civilisations of Asia to extend the contrast to that vast region I was led to wonder whether there too, certain general differences might not be related, among other factors but in some significant way, to differences in the productive systems.

The development of the analysis of social organisation in Africa meant that many conceptual clarifications have been made in the study of family, kinship and marriage. Models based on those societies have often been adopted in the examination of Asian societies. While these models were sometimes more appropriate than those of European historians and sociologists, they created problems for the analysis of Asian domestic systems, which tended to be seen as more 'primitive' than they really were and therefore as more of an obstacle in the onward march of 'modernisation' than was actually the case, thus reinforcing the ethnocentric notions of Marx and Weber about the place of oriental societies in world history.

In concentrating upon a particular set of societies, I have of course omitted many others, including important states in East and South-east Asia. Of these Japan is the most obvious but to consider that fascinating society, influenced as it is by China in its technology, its literature and its religion, that is both by Confucianism and by Buddhism, would have taken

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-36761-5 - The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

us further afield with little compensating benefit. More important than the geographic omissions, I have neglected many topics that could reasonably be seen as falling within the rubric of family, kinship and marriage. This selectivity derives from a particular theoretical framework, or rather a particular set of interests and hypotheses, concerning the status of women in hierarchical societies. By hierarchical in this context I mean first of all those societies in which individuals and strata are differentiated with regard to rights in land as the basic means of production and as a central focus of prestige and status.

In my account of the family, marriage and kinship in Asia, I have tried to summarise and develop a break in the paradigm, or rather in several paradigms which were accepted in the past, not only by many anthropologists but also by orientalists, historians, scholars of all kinds, and which were also embedded in the folk wisdom of the West. In talking of breaking a paradigm, I am not thinking in terms of Kuhn's scientific revolutions, despite the terminology, nor yet in terms of the contribution of any individual, but of the process of reformulating knowledge, of building up on what has gone before rather than setting it completely aside. The reluctance to recognise the cumulative aspects of scholarship has done much to retard the social sciences, because it has led, or at least allowed, each generation to search for a new approach for its own sake. The result is a conception of a discipline in which one dominant ideological trend followed another in a series of periodic stages; just as Romanticism displaced Classicism, so Structuralism pushed aside Functionalism and Functionalism replaced Evolutionism.

My feeling then and now was that such discussions did not constitute the fundamental priority for anthropology, much less for the comparative study of human society in general. Indeed they were positively distracting since they diverted attention from the work that needed doing on another level of generalisation, utilising what Merton (1959) referred to as theories of the middle range but which might well constitute the upper limit of fruitful hypotheses in the social sciences.

In the search for such hypotheses European scholars have engaged in what has been in many ways a valuable exercise, namely the attempt to compare their material with the evidence from other societies, notably from India following the discovery of the close relationships among the body of 'Indo-European' languages. It made sense to explore further comparisons at the level of social institutions, and the researches of many individuals, of Maine, Fustel de Coulanges and, in this century, Dumézil, Benveniste and Westrup (to choose only a few) drew on this connection as a source of theoretical insight. At the time I began thinking about these matters, these approaches still had a dominant influence in the study of family, marriage and kinship in the ancient and oriental worlds. Since then different perspec-

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978-0-521-36761-5 - The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xiii

tives have taken shape. One important trend has been the attempt to link up with demographic studies and with family history, in which some of the major areas of discussion have been defined by historians and sociologists of later Europe.

This trend has again produced a number of advances in our knowledge, partly by serving to modify the framework of enquiry adopted by the Indo-Europeanists. But in the longer term we have to face the problem of wider comparison if we are to provide a satisfactory evaluation of our own material, let alone improve the state of the art.¹ I have tried to offer some pointers as to how this might be done in the light of the analytic field studies from various parts of the world that have been one of the major contributions of social anthropology, taking comparison beyond the linguistic framework (anthropologists are not too impressed with the overlap between language, race and 'culture') and looking more closely at some of the similarities that seem to relate to modes of production, modes of communication and other features that underlie the major civilisations of the Eurasian continent.

That immediately raises important sociological and historical problems about the earlier categorisation and periodisation of those major systems, for as far as the family was concerned, the gap between we, the West, and they, the East, was of course seen by nineteenth-century scholars as part of a broader set of differences. While my enquiry touches upon this question, I do not explicitly pursue the problem of categorisation in this volume; perhaps later.

Many would consider a comparative examination of Asian practices in the field of marriage and the family as foolhardy if not a foolish undertaking in itself, even for an expert. My excuse is first that I was drawn to such a consideration by my interest both in Africa and Europe, which led me to attempt to specify general similarities and differences. Secondly, the investigation is selective, both in terms of the features I examine and the societies I choose, the features being dictated by theoretical concerns with transfers within and between families, the societies by the need to concentrate on the major systems rather than peripheral tribal groups. But thirdly, I have been emboldened to continue because it was possible for me to consult many friends from many countries over time, sometimes through books, sometimes personally. While the general notions are mine, I have drawn heavily over the years on my association at Cambridge with Meyer Fortes, Edmund Leach, S. J. Tambiah, Nur Yalman and especially Esther Goody (who carried out most of the fieldwork in India and is co-author of chapter 6), as well as upon discussions with M. N. Srinivas, André Beteille, Kathleen Gough, Keith Hopkins, Moses Finley, John Crook, Arthur Wolf, Rubie Watson, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Vanessa Maher, Martha Mundy, Paul Sant

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Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cassia, Gene Hammel, David Sabeian and many others. Some have shown me unpublished material, among them Jerry Dennerline, Pat Ebrey, Hill Gates, Susan Greenhalgh, Susan Mann, Susan Naquin, Helen Siu and Janice Stockard for China, Nancy Levine for Tibet, Martha Mundy for Arab societies and John Crook for Rome. I am grateful to all of these, to many colleagues in France, as well as to the following individuals for reading chapters: Arthur Wolf (2–4), Anna Grimshaw (5), André Beteille (6–9), Declan Quigley (6–9), Keith Hopkins (10, 13 and 14), Harvey Goldberg (11 and 12), Martha Mundy (12), Sheila Murnaghan (13), John Crook (14), Paul Sant Cassia (15), Maria Couroucli (15) and Ernest Gellner.

For helping to process the manuscript over a long period of years I have to thank my many assistants including Wunderly Rich Stauder, Sarah Cattermole, Carolyn Wyndham, Antonia Lovelace, Sarah Horell, Janet Reynolds, Andrew Sargent, Hamish Park, Bill Young and Dafna Capobianco. I count myself fortunate in the very high quality of help I have received. For assistance with computing facilities, I am grateful to Janet Hall, with the publication of this volume to Richard Fisher of Cambridge University Press, and for the series to Michael Black and Patricia Williams. Part of the material presented here was given as a course of lectures to the Collège de France in Spring 1985 as the result of an invitation from Françoise Heritier-Augé. Very preliminary versions were delivered to undergraduates at Cambridge in earlier years. A variety of other academic institutions have offered me the facilities I needed to continue the study: the Smuts Fund and the William Wyse Fund of the University of Cambridge and Trinity College respectively, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Leverhulme Foundation, the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales of Paris, the National Museum of Ethnology of Osaka (Minpaku), Japan, the Whitney Humanities Center, Yale, and above all to the continuing facilities offered to me by St John's College and the University of Cambridge. Each of these bodies I thank for the support they have provided.

I have long been indebted to Asha and Suhrid Sarabhai and to the Sarabhai and Khilnani families more generally for their friendship which has provided Esther Goody and myself with the opportunity to try and understand, albeit superficially, some aspects of Indian life. That opportunity has enabled us to get to know the Sharmas of Nandol, East Africa and Leicester. I had the good fortune to spend a short time in Taiwan with Arthur Wolf and the personnel of the Academia Sinica; a three-month visit to Japan under the auspices of Takeo Funabiki and Shigehu Tanabe enabled me to learn more about East Asia at first hand, while I owe much to the efforts of Helen Siu and other friends from Hong Kong who helped me to understand something of the culture and history of South China. I have spent some two years in the Near East but only three months in an academic capacity. My

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978-0-521-36761-5 - The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xv

knowledge of the area has been mediated by my friendship, since undergraduate days, with Emrys Peters, as well as with Arabists of various nationalities, and especially with my former students, Vanessa Maher, Martha Mundy and Paul Sant Cassia. Modern Europe, except for the eastern Mediterranean, remains in the background of the present volume, but my understanding has clearly been influenced over the years by my friends, Peter Laslett, Tony Wrigley, and other members of the Cambridge Group, Alan Macfarlane, Martine Segalen and our neighbours in the Lot.

When I started this enterprise many years ago, I made use of what were then considered to be representative field studies. There were few synthetic works on marriage, the family and kinship for these major societies. Lévi-Strauss' masterly volume (1949), translated as *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, covered part of the field in a very stimulating manner. Since then some general studies of aspects of particular civilisations have appeared and I thank those authors whom I have plundered mercilessly (but usually with acknowledgements). On China there has been the book by A. Wolf and C.-S. Huang, *Marriage and Adoption in China 1845–1945* (1980), and the general review by H. D. R. Baker, *Chinese Family and Kinship* (1979), as well as much specialist material emanating from interdisciplinary groups in the United States, a very encouraging development and one in which I have been honoured to be asked to participate in a minor way. On India we are better endowed, with general works by Kapadia (1955), Shah (1974) and others, but apart from monographs I have made most use of Irawati Karve's *Kinship Organization in India* (1953) and D. G. Mandelbaum's *Society in India* (1970); however the social history of the family in the sub-continent has been little explored in the critical way that has begun to happen with China and Europe. My sources on other societies, in which I have been interested in particular topics, have been more restricted; for Tibet largely Carrasco (1959), Ekvall (1968) and Levine (1988), for ancient Egypt, Hopkins (1980) and Pestmann (1961), for the Arabs and ancient Israel, a variety of works but especially Peters (1990), Maher (1974) and Mundy (1979; 1982; 1988), for Greece, Finley (1955) and Lacey (1968), for Rome, Crook (1967a), Dixon, Saller and others. In none of these areas have I hoped or intended to be comprehensive.

One fact that encouraged me to continue with a seemingly unending task was the invitation from the editors to contribute an introduction to the *Histoire de la famille* (1986). I had long had in mind the need for a summing up of one of the few areas of enquiry where social anthropology had made any major substantive as distinct from an inspirational contribution to the comparative study of human cultures and societies, that is, in the study of kinship, family and marriage. While this encyclopaedia took a different form from the one I had envisaged, it nevertheless provided a unique and

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Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

valuable summary of the work that had been accomplished by a variety of scholars on various regions of the world, and this in turn was a useful check on my own more sporadic reading and more directed analysis.

Nevertheless this present study could never have pretended to be complete, nor was that the intention. New works come out more quickly than I can read the reviews; many of the old I have wrongfully neglected, even when they were written in the few languages I understand. But my aim has been the clarification of the analysis of some aspects of marriage and the family in the major societies of Eurasia and at the same time to point to specific similarities, at least at the domestic level, setting these in the context of a wider theoretical analysis and debate. This effort can be viewed as part of a wider scheme to redraw the lines of comparison in order to see earlier Europe in the same general frame of reference as earlier Asia, not only in terms of domestic groups, but also of proto-industrialisation, politics, religion, modes of communication and culture, that is 'high culture', more generally. Other writers have stressed similarities at the level of the tributary mode of production. My own understanding calls attention to a wider range of similarities at the domestic level which relate not so much to the modes of extracting surplus as to the productive processes themselves, though clearly these are not independent.

Transcription to Roman script

The transcription of Chinese script into Roman presents difficulties to the non-specialist since the Pinyin version, introduced on the mainland, provides a rival system to the earlier Wade–Giles method and to French variants. In addition, some of the words occurring in field studies are of local origin and may have no counterpart in a written form. Since I am not writing a specialist monograph for sinologists, I have not aimed at an overall rationalisation but have used the words as they appear in the works of the authors I cite and then tried, where possible to give the alternative transcription (p. = Pinyin). With the names of dynasties I have used the new forms; place names have generally been left as they are in current English usage but I have put the alternatives in brackets where I could identify them. Family names I have left alone. It is enough for most of us to individualise the older forms of Chinese names without complicating the issue by introducing new nomenclatures for Mencius or Mao.

Since they use an alphabetic script, Indian languages present fewer problems, except for the diacriticals. Some Indian scholars suggested leaving them out; I have included them where I could. The transcription of Arabic is more in flux than that of Indian languages and here again there is a problem

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978-0-521-36761-5 - The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xvii

of which European language the writer uses. I have simply followed my advisers.

Summary

The geographical scope of this book is straightforward but the thematic content is complex, more so than I had originally intended, especially as the review of Asian systems of kinship has led me to deal with the way a number of other topics are related to the main arguments. Fears that these central paths may be difficult to follow in the thickets of ethnographic data and their attempted explanations, in the development and qualifications of the various themes pursued over such a wide area, suggest that the reader may welcome a short summary. And it will make his journey easier if he bears in mind that, first, I am dealing with the ideas scholars have had about kinship in particular societies from a historical perspective and I am considering the systems themselves from a comparative standpoint; and secondly, that in speaking of Asian and European in contrast to African systems, the primary referent is not geographical but the very broad type of socio-economic organisation.

The enquiry pursues three interconnected topics which will be elaborated in the first chapter, namely, the primitivisation of the East (and of the historic past) and the need for a partial reconceptualisation of these systems of marriage and kinship in the light of the type of domestic production as well as of the nature of the religion and the mode of communication; secondly, the analysis of the way that the transmission of productive and other property is related to the political economy on the one hand and to the family on the other, as well as to the ideological structures; thirdly, the cross-cultural distribution of mechanisms and strategies of management and devolution, which leads to a modification of the extreme, Kiplingesque, version of the East–West divide, with its implications of what we and others could and can do to bring about the coming of the modern world.

In treating the first of these topics I have tried to demonstrate the similarities between certain features of the kinship systems of the major Asian societies and those of pre-industrial, Mediterranean Europe, with a view of taking them out of the category of primitive or even of Oriental societies as this has been understood in much historical, sociological and anthropological discussion. My alternative point of contrast has been with Africa where the type of agricultural production, the nature of technical and knowledge systems, and the oral mode of communication make for significant differences not only at the level of the political economy (the concepts of neither ‘feudal’ nor ‘oriental’ society being appropriate), but also at the level of family and marriage.

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Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

I have discussed this theme at two main levels. Following up an earlier account I have pointed out the way in which the existence of restricted land and of other productive resources in Asia poses different problems of access, management and devolution than one finds with the less populous societies of pre-colonial Africa, with their extensive, shifting agriculture. I have isolated a series of mechanisms and strategies of continuity and heirship which are found widely, though in different combinations, throughout Eurasia, and which help to organise the domestic economy and domestic life more generally.

The first of these to be examined is the nature of marriage transactions, which are seen as basically different from African bridewealth, even where described as 'brideprice' and held to involve the total incorporation of a wife in the family or lineage of her husband. Such notions are relics of nineteenth-century discussions which presumed a general shift from brideprice (or purchase) to dowry, and for the analysis of African systems of marriage have long been set aside in favour of 'bridewealth'. It is even more essential to set them aside for the more complex social systems of Europe and Asia, because of a number of additional reasons. While the sale of sexual, genitricial and other human services is a feature of many of these societies, the use of this term for bridal transactions in parts of Asia and earlier Europe (in contrast to the 'dowry' of more recent times and of the upper groups), and the notion that the standard marriage arrangement involved the sale of women (or men, for that matter) seem particularly inappropriate when in most cases the bulk of such payments are handed over to the bride, or serve as a gage or dower in the case of divorce. In other words such transactions are part of the process whereby women become endowed with property by other males and females, part of the broad pattern of devolution down the generations which is linked not only to the nature of the political economy but to the hierarchical position of a particular individual or group within it.

I have tried to investigate the nature and distribution of these hierarchical differences, which are not only of interest in themselves but are relevant to my thesis in two ways. Such differences emerge from the particular sort of stratification that characterises Eurasian societies, based as they are on complex agriculture in which the strata relate very differently to the system of production, in type of activity, in size of holding and in kind of access, that is, as owner, tenant or labourer. And they are manifest in both the economic and kinship aspects of the domestic domain where their very existence says something about the nature of family systems in 'advanced Oriental society'. But equally important are some striking similarities in the distribution of these differences among the various societies we are examining, suggesting that we are dealing not simply with features marking particular ideologies or cultures but structural factors which cross-cut socio-cultural boundaries in

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978-0-521-36761-5 - The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage
and the Family in the Pre-Industrial Societies of Eurasia

Jack Goody

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xix

significant ways. Moreover the similarities occur not only across the boundaries of those 'oriental' societies, but across those of the Near East and Mediterranean as well.

The direction of such an argument leads to a revision of aspects of the thesis of the Uniqueness of the West in relation to the rise of capitalism, not only at the level of the family but of the domestic and indeed the macro-economy. That is not a question pursued at great length. But the analysis requires us to modify the way scholars effectively, though not always deliberately, primitivise the kinship systems of the major Asian societies, either by the employment of concepts and approaches developed in simpler communities or by starting with questions derived from the study of post-industrial cultures.