

Parenthood in Africa after Esther N. Goody

Volume edited by Yazid Ben Hounet & Marie-Luce Gélard

Journal des Africanistes

Call for papers

In 1982 - almost forty years ago - Esther N. Goody (1932-2018) published the groundbreaking *Parenthood and Social Reproduction. Fostering and occupational roles in West Africa* (Cambridge University Press). It drew together the main results of her anthropological research, beginning in 1956, on the family, childhood (particularly adolescence), the delegation of parental roles, and the socialization of children in West Africa. Goody attributes five functions to parenthood, each of which she defines and then analyses: conceiving children, raising them, educating them, giving a name and a social status to the child, and exercising certain rights over the child¹. For her, the circulation of children and delegation of parental roles in West Africa increases as a function of the age of the child and the mode of social organization. Young children circulate less than adolescents, and children in segmented societies are less separated from their parents than in more centralized and hierarchical societies. She argues that the movement of children follows the logic of social reproduction and access to the labor market: in complex societies with greater specialization of the workforce, children are often placed in apprenticeships outside the family or with distant family members.

¹ In the chapter « Les fonctions de la parenté et le champ de la parentalité » of his summary essay on kinship (*Les Métamorphoses de la parenté*. Paris, Flammarion, 2010 [2004]) Maurice Godelier adds two more functions: 1) certain categories of kin have the right and duty to exercise certain forms of authority and pressure on a child and to expect certain behaviors from the child; 2) the prohibition, depending on the degree of kinship, of sexual relations, heterosexual and homosexual, with the child or other intimate forms of behavior.

When Esther N. Goody began her research in social anthropology in 1956 under the supervision of Jack Goody at the University of Cambridge², the concept “parenthood” had existed for just over a century (according to the OED the term first appeared in 1853). The French term *parentalité* would not make an appearance until 1961 in an article written by Paul Racamier, with Charles Sens and Louis Carretier³. The English term had been employed by Herbert Spencer in his 1861 book *Education. Intellectual, moral and physical*⁴. The term “parenthood” had a strong resonance among Anglo-Saxon intellectuals and researchers. Some authors, following Herbert Spencer, drew upon social Darwinism and utilitarianism to promote a eugenic approach to the family⁵. By contrast anthropologist Elsie Clews Parsons took a critical feminist and radical approach to the term, questioning social conventions relating to the family (marriage and filiation in particular), and promoting a parental contract - a theory of parental ‘responsibility’ leaving men and women free to cooperate within the family, to define roles by themselves and for themselves (provided that children be brought up according to minimum requirements standardized by the state)⁶.

Although the term had long been used within British social anthropology⁷, the concept of kinship had come into much greater use. If the concept of kinship encompasses the whole

² They were married during Esther's PhD research in Northern Ghana in 1956-57. Keith Hart, 2018 « Obituary. Esther Newcomb Goody (1932-2018) », *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 34 N°2 (April) : 25-26.

³ Racamier, Paul-Claude, 1978 « À propos des psychoses de la maternalité », in Michel Soulé, éd., *Mère mortifère, mère meurtrière, mère mortifiée*. Paris, ESF Éd. (« Les milieux éducatifs de l'enfant ») : 41-50.

⁴ Spencer, Herbert, 1861, *Education. Intellectual, moral and physical*, New York and London, Appleton and Company.

⁵ Cf. Ben Hounet, Yazid, 2014, « La parentalité des uns... et celle des autres », *L'Homme* n° 209 : 121-141

⁶ Cf. Ben Hounet, Yazid, 2017 « L'anthropologie et le concept de “parentalité” chez Elsie Clews Parsons », *L'Homme*, 222 : 5-34.

⁷ Bronislaw Malinowski wrote at least three texts on parenthood as a mechanism at the basis of marriage, kinship and social structure. Malinowski, Bronislaw, 1929, « Kinship », *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th Edition, vol. 13, pp. 403-409; Malinowski, Bronislaw, 1930, « Kinship », *Man*, Vol. 30 (Feb.):19-29; Malinowski, Bronislaw, 1930, « Parenthood – the Basis of Social Structure » in *The New Generation*, edited by V. F. Calverton and S. D. Schmalhausen, New York: Macaulay, pp. 113-168 (included in B. Malinowski, 1962, *Sex, Culture and Myth*, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. New-York: pp. 42-88). Isaac Schapera and even more Meyer Fortes, both trained by Bronislaw Malinowski, also took an interest in the theme and published studies on the subject based on surveys carried out in Africa. Fortes, Meyer, 1938, « Social and Psychological aspects of education in Taland », Supplement to *Africa* Volume xi, No. 4: 5-64. Fortes, Meyer, 1949, *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi*, London, Oxford University Press; Fortes, Meyer, 1951, « Parenthood in Primitive Society », *Man*, Vol. 51 (May): 65. Schapera, Isaac, 1940, *Married Life in an African Tribe*, London, Faber & Faber.

family including in particular past generations, the concept of parenthood is oriented towards childhood and future generations. It problematizes the question of the family and the delegation of parental tasks beginning with the socialization of children; their mobility and/or circulation; their acquisition of skills, knowledge and know-how; and the protection of their interests.

In elevating the question of parenthood, Esther N. Goody influenced researchers working in Africa (Suzanne Lallemand, Erdmute Alber, Cécile Leguy in particular) but also elsewhere. Her work has been significant in enabling a comparative and relational approach to family dynamics so central to analyzing recent transformations in the family. We see this in research from the 1990s onwards on aspects of family life and parenthood including divorce, blended families, adoption, single parenthood, LGBT families, grandparenthood, gestational surrogacy, child placement, etc.

Since the publication of Esther N. Goody's work, two additional phenomena need to be taken into consideration to understand the dynamics of contemporary parenthood in Africa and elsewhere: first, the effects, linked to globalisation, of the transfer of norms. The adherence of several African countries to the New York Convention on the Rights of the Child is an example of this. But other external norms and standards have been proposed and adapted to different African contexts notably via NGOs. Secondly, the emergence of experts in parenthood and parenting including psychologists, social workers, humanitarian association actors, and so on. In addition to parents and the constellation of people playing a parental role for the child, it is indeed necessary to integrate the plurality of actors who support, guide, judge and negotiate the exercise of this parenthood. This is a relatively new phenomenon in Africa, which has grown in importance over the last three decades alongside the development of community associations and family support programs.

Although this volume takes an anthropological perspective as its point of departure, it is intended to be multidisciplinary. It will bring together empirical works (anthropology, sociology, history, educational sciences, linguistics, etc.) **inspired by the work of Esther Goody** and focusing on African societies and/or African diasporas.

Schedule

Contributors are invited to submit an article proposal of approximately 2,500 characters, accompanied by an illustrative bibliography. The abstract will present the issues raised by the article, the materials used and the methods for collecting these materials.

Proposals, in English or French, should be sent **by 15 March 2021** at the latest in the form of a word file **to the following two addresses:**

yazid.ben-houet@ehess.fr

mlgelard@yahoo.fr

Authors will be informed of the status of their proposals by **15 April 2021**.

Selected papers must be submitted no later than **15 October 2021**.