

Breaking barriers in white society and Eurocentric

African archaeology: East Africa 1956-67

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In this talk I want to cover three interlinked themes, firstly a little of my own personal history as a Jewish archaeologist venturing into East Africa at a time when being Jewish in tropical African archaeology was somewhat peculiar, and secondly I want to briefly introduce you to Jewish life in tropical Africa some 50 years ago and thirdly I want to tell you about the beginnings of African archaeology as a recognizable discipline at a time when most western scholars still believed Africa was the "dark continent" and had no history. I shall conclude by giving some brief thoughts about the current state of Africa, which alas is still largely a neglected and misunderstood part of the world.

I realize that this lecture is meant to be about some aspect of the Jewish experience and from the start it is difficult to know whether many of the various activities, of which I will speak, are the actions of committed Jews or whether the religion or ethnic background of the persons concerned mattered in any way at all. It is possible to list people who were regarded by themselves, or by others, as Jewish but whether this background affected their actions in any way is a matter for conjecture. I always regarded myself in some ways as different, marginal, as an expatriate, never completely at home in the society in which I dwelt. I came from Bolton that had a very small Ashkenazi orthodox community of around 30 families. In this sense the context of small immigrant community was the important factor. We kept to ourselves, I was the first member of my family to go to College and socially we mixed in a tight circle of family and congregants. Going to University in 1949 was both liberating and at times concerting. Though I lived for most of my time in what I would now refer to as a dorm, I kept to a non-meat kosher diet till I went to

Africa in 1956. My social activities were restricted by my fervent wish to retain my Jewish identity. Synagogue and the small Jewish social centre in Nottingham dominated my life. Jews in England in the 1940's and 1950's were still divided among themselves, I was always conscious of how Jews from big centres like London, Leeds and Manchester were more self-confident and outgoing than Jews from small communities like Bolton. Though going on to Cambridge opened up new horizons, I found myself pursuing archaeology, a discipline that Jewish students had ignored perhaps because at the time they, and certainly their parents, knew little about. Cambridge was still male oriented, around 9 men to every 1 woman, and dominated by students hailing from public schools. I went to Africa, because there were job opportunities and secondly because I wanted to break away from my sheltered British life to experience a wider world.

I arrived in Kenya in 1956 when the active phase of the Mau Mau insurrection was winding down. On my first weekend I visited the Nairobi schul and was taken home for dinner. Curiously Nairobi was the largest Jewish community in which I had lived till then. It was a relatively prosperous community that boasted a new synagogue and a relatively new community hall. The two largest and oldest hotels were Jewish owned. Nevertheless Jews were not fully accepted, neither the Nairobi nor the Muthaiga Clubs accepted Jews as members. Sir Ernest Vasey, Minister of Finance in Kenya, as late as 1957, had his club membership revoked as he had married a Jewish woman. Oxbridge graduates dominated the administration of the colony. Of the 499 members of the Nairobi congregation in 1957 none were in Colonial administration, more than 30% were in commerce and other activities that covered the whole array of normal white occupations even including "white hunter". Protestantism was clearly the established religion and economic status was racially based with Britons as Administrators, Asians as the shop-keepers and clerical class and Africans at the bottom. Similar stratification extended to economic life so that towns had European bomas with housing in subsidized segregated areas whilst Africans, who received the fewest services and the smallest remuneration, normally less than a tenth or twentieth of White workers, had to travel the farthest to get to their work from unsubsidized suburban slums. The small Jewish community in Nairobi was significant. Jews were originally kept from

such activities as farming and as a result gained prominence as hoteliers, haulage contactors, land-owners and merchants in the city. Though small in numbers they were at times more influential than the vocal white farmers who were often in debt. Lord Delamere in particular, a leading figure in settler society was challenged when it came to business acumen in the inter-war period when self-reliance was at a premium. In 1956 Nairobi had a Jewish Mayor, Israel Somen, who had ten years earlier been President of the Hebrew Congregation for a record 4 years.

Jews in Africa, many of whom had arrived from Europe in the inter-war years as refugees, settled in towns like Leopoldville (now Kinshasa), then capital of the Belgian Congo, Nairobi and in Northern Rhodesia. They held views akin to the prevailing White population. White wives, known as Memsahibs, walked around with keys to prevent their house-boys stealing the sugar or similar commodities. House boys and baby nurses lived in sub-standard housing adjacent to the main residences. Most Europeans lived at a higher standard than they could have expected in the countries from which they came and held very strident views about Black identity and inferiority. In 1957-8 when I dined with Jewish friends I was involved in constant argument about imminent "uhuru" or Independence. Though the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan had spoken of the "winds of change" blowing through Africa, most white inhabitants believed that it would take 50 years for Africans to be ready to rule themselves. In fact Independence came to East Africa between 1961 and 1963. The daughter of the President of the Jewish Congregation had left a promising career as a student at Edinburgh University since she was unable to accept the growing numbers of African students at British universities and face their acknowledgement by other students as equals to white students.

With independence many Jewish residents left Africa and even in big centers, like Nairobi, numbers declined for several years at over 10% per year. Sadly one community that completely disappeared was the Indian Bnei Yisrael that had come from Mumbai or Cochin. Never fully accepted by either the Jewish or Indian communities in East Africa, they sought asylum in Israel where older members found it hard to adapt to a new language or younger members lost their cultural coherence and often their moral integrity.

The community with which I was eventually most involved was that in Kampala, Uganda where there were less than a dozen families, a few in the University, some in commerce and finance, others from overseas consulates and occasionally someone in Government service but not in administration. Jews were a rarity in Colonial administration. Most officers came from a select number of British public schools particularly Marlborough and Wellington. The Jewish community met in private homes and only held services for High festivals. The last service I conducted was for Kol Nidrei in 1962 that also happened to be the eve of Uganda's Independence. We had our largest attendance ever as various dignitaries like Yigael Allon, the Deputy PM of Israel, several European ambassadors and Professor Melville Herskovits of Northwestern University, the doyen of American African Studies, attended. We never convened again as the focus of Jewish activities in Uganda (and in many other countries after Independence), became the Israel Embassy. The Israelis held communal seders, provided Hebrew schooling, Passover matzos and other facilities. They did not provide Kosher meat and I continued personally to get meat by train from Nairobi every Friday until 1962. We also held our own seders at the University of Ghana where I went in 1967 with various participants providing resources that made for a "pot-luck" but a very communal event. The last seder I convened in Ghana was in 1989 at which each of the couples had one partner who was non Jewish. One feature of racial intermarriage in Africa has been the longevity of such relationships. In more than a half a century I have known of no divorces.

Uganda is known in Jewish history for two unrelated features. Firstly it is noted for having a small African Jewish population, the Bayudaya that lives around Mount Elgon on the borders of Kenya. Its origins are well documented, a Muganda chief, Semei Kakungulu, a prominent general in the religious wars at the end of the 19th century in Buganda, felt that by the 1900 Uganda Agreement he had received a raw deal. He no longer felt he was respected nor sufficiently compensated and moved away with his followers to eastern Uganda. He wanted something different from the accepted Church of Uganda and when a Jewish merchant came by his area in the 1920's he decided to change his religious affiliation to Judaism and carried his people with him. His flock was small and poor but gained strength in

the Independence era when Israeli officials became interested, when American researchers “discovered” them and finally when publicity led to material help and invitations for religious leaders to visit from concerned American congregations. Unlike the Ethiopian Falasha, whose roots go back two thousand years, the Bayudaya are a modern phenomenon and acceptance in Israel is somewhat surprising since African Americans who became Jewish because they also felt unwelcome by American Christian Churches, emigrated to Israel as Black Hebrews and were not accepted.

Uganda is also remembered because in 1903, Joseph Chamberlain, then British Colonial Secretary, suggested to Theodore Herzl the Zionist leader the possibility that part of the Uganda Protectorate could provide “a refuge for Jews of Russia”. The proposal barely passed the 6th Zionist Congress in Basle in August 1903 and in 1904 a committee of three, including a foreign office representative, went to Kenya and spent 3 months touring the prospective area that later became part of the Kenya White Highlands. They argued against the area as being unsuitable for mass settlement and in 1905 the 7th Zionist Congress, after Herzl’s death, rejected the proffered land. There had been an anti-Semitic outburst from white settlers in Kenya and the *East African Standard* argued against “alien Jews”, “people of that class” and using the land as a “playground for philanthropists” who would be an “obnoxious hindrance” to better relations with native populations.

Though it is possible to quote the names of many Jews who have made notable contributions to Africa, I want to briefly comment about the contrasting histories of four particular prominent administrators. Each faced different circumstances, their Jewish background impacted them as individuals and they took different ways out of what could have been major problems. None of them rose through the ranks of their company or colonial service; all were selected on their merits. The first is Wulff Joseph Wulff who was briefly acting governor at the Danish head quarters fort of Christiansborg on the Gold Coast 1841. At that time the other principal European stake-holders on the Gold Coast were Britain and Holland. Eventually Britain bought out its competitors and Christiansborg in Accra became the administrative head quarters for successive British Governors and Ghanaian heads of state. Wulff went out to the Gold Coast, then thought of as “The

White man's grave", because he was ambitious. Though Denmark was a liberal country, that gave full citizenship to its Jewish population in 1814, Wulff felt the constraints forced on him by his religion. There were glass ceilings for Jews of ability. He came from an orthodox family, the grandson of the Chief Rabbi of Copenhagen. Largely because expatriates didn't last long on the coast, either dying from tropical diseases or were repatriated, Wulff gambled with the averages stayed for 6 years and advanced to the top. He remained when he should have returned home, married a local woman and became the ancestor of a progeny of Wulff's who to this day venerate his grave in the ancestral home he built across the road from the fort.. Wulff steadfastly refused to convert and clearly negated his chance to be buried in the Danish cemetery. He was the archetype of the marginal man.

Dr Eduard Schnitzer was very different. He was also ambitious but sought to advance by avoiding discrimination. Like Wulff he escaped from an environment that did not offer the right opportunities for his talents. Born in Breslau, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where anti-Semitism was rampant, he came from a family that had converted for convenience. Schnitzer became a successful society doctor in Albania and eventually moved to Alexandria where he caught the attention of Charles Gordon who was the Governor of the Sudan, nominally Ottoman but basically under Egyptian control. Schnitzer was a scholar, natural scientist and born linguist who retreated from society. He was an introvert, escaping from open association with other Europeans. The Upper Nile was his *forte*. He kept up a lively correspondence with church missionaries in East Africa, collected natural history specimens for German museums and wrote numerous articles on natural history and ethnology for learned societies in Europe but never ventured away from his chosen milieu. He wrote a lot but he was also a superb administrator, agronomist and diplomat. In 1879 he succeeded Gordon as Governor and became Emin Pasha. Islam was a cover rather than a conviction. He managed a huge area, visiting chiefs unexpectedly and travelled constantly. The local chiefs never ganged up against him. By the mid 80's he was exporting 35 different food commodities down the river. This is an area, now Northern Uganda and the South Sudan, where there has never been a successful food economy since Emin's time. His administration ended in 1888 at the Dufile military station that I

excavated in 2006. Henry Morton Stanley led a relief expedition, never requested by Emin, to save him from the Mahdist uprising further down the Nile that had captured Khartoum and killed Gordon. Though Emin's small army repelled the Mahdists, their first defeat, he nevertheless went down to the coast as Stanley's trophy only to be killed in 1892 by Arab slave traders in the Congo while in the service of the German East Africa Company. He was perhaps the best informed and humanistic of the great explorers of the 19th century, more empathetic than Richard Burton, and certainly more self reliant, a better scientist, and more effective than David Livingstone. Because of his Jewish origins the Germans never included him in their pantheon of colonial heroes nor did the British who regarded him as a defector to the Germans.

The third administrator I want to introduce is Matthew Nathan who became the Governor of the Gold Coast in 1900. He certainly regarded himself as Jewish, all his family were observant Jews and three of his brothers also achieved high positions, one in the Caribbean and one in India and were also awarded knighthoods. He blended in – a confirmed bachelor, he was the platonic friend of many society ladies, including at one time the daughter of the British Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour. In the colonies where he was also Governor or acting Governor, in Sierra Leone, Natal and Hong Kong, he avoided the swirl of social activities that so often attended leadership particularly when there was a Governor's wife. As a bachelor he was able to avoid most of the established church activities that were normally routine for representatives of the Crown who was Defender of the faithful. I have termed him a consummate assimilator because he avoided confrontation, never renounced his religion that to him was less important than his role as a British overseas administrator.

The most remarkable of the four administrators that I've chosen, the one who displayed the most humanistic of approaches and had the most lasting impact on Africa and the World was undoubtedly Sir Andrew Cohen, Governor of Uganda from 1952-57. He was the scion of the first English Ashkenazi family. A big man, he was larger than life in what he did. He was regarded as Jewish, was areligious in his behaviour and by his achievements helped many others. He did not come from the Colonial Office but from the British Civil service and had served as deputy UK representative at the UN. He cut himself off

from the stuffy, traditional life of the colonial office staff and prided himself as having visited every district in Uganda. Many scholars and contemporaries thought of him as the principal architect of African Independence. Always interested in developing local participation, he respected diversity and brought people of different ethnicities and economic backgrounds together. He initiated the first inter-racial club in East Africa, the Uganda Club, where my wife, Eunice, and I were married in 1961. Had we had a son he would have been called Andrew. Always interested in advancing Higher Education he targeted awards for or initiated various institutes for overseas research when he was later Permanent Secretary of the Ministry for Overseas Development.

I felt the shadow of Sir Andrew as soon as I came to Uganda. Uganda was where Africans had achieved their greatest advances in eastern or central Africa. It was under Sir Andrew Cohen that the first African district commissioners were appointed and several deputy ministers held important portfolios including Yusuf Lule, a Muslim, to whom the curator of the Uganda Museum reported. Lule, who had taught my wife at school, later became the first African University Vice Chancellor, again my boss, and was the President of Uganda who succeeded Idi Amin. I became the youngest council member of the Uganda Club and was given the responsibility for organizing social activities including a monthly dance at which I met Eunice who besides having been the first African woman to graduate in either eastern or central Africa, had studied in Oxford and when we met she was working for the Church Missionary Society. It had been expected that she would become the first Ugandan Headmistress of the oldest girl's' missionary boarding school in Eastern Africa. Many of our closest friends were missionaries, both Anglican and Roman Catholic. Our marriage was both inter-racial and inter-faith. The latter had been common in East Africa and it was interesting that the Jewish Minister of Nakuru, the Reverend Lichtenstein, who had conducted the first Jewish service in Berlin, after the liberation by the Soviets, was in an interfaith marriage. His wife, also from Germany, had literally saved his life. Nakuru had the second largest community in Kenya, mainly made up of ex-refugees who had been sent to Kenya during the war. It also boasted a custom-built synagogue. Our marriage was the first inter-racial marriage to appear on the front page of the *Uganda Argus*, Uganda's national newspaper. The

archbishop of Uganda had invited Eunice and I to dinner to talk us out of marriage. It was revealing that Rabbi Julius Carlebach of Nairobi did not try to talk us out of intermarriage and suggested that if we worked at our marriage it would succeed. Carlebach had a distinguished career after Nairobi as a sociologist, primarily at Sussex University.

On a personal and family level bridging the faiths was more difficult than bridging the races. Many Ugandans found it difficult to separate being Jewish from either the beliefs they retained from their study of the Old Testament that the Jews of today were similar to those in the Bible or their knowledge of Israel that in the 1960's was regarded as model to emulate and which had many practical African development projects. I was often thought of as an Israeli. The hatreds of inter-war Europe never reached Africa though after 1973 attitudes changed when Israel crossed the Sinai to invade a fellow African state and when Africans realized the injustices associated with the occupation and colonization of Palestinian land. Inter-faith and inter-racial marriage accelerated in the 1960's and certainly in Uganda our example was quite important as the independence era brought a climate of acceptance. Our visit to the Rhodesias in 1961 and first visit to the United States in 1966, however, brought home to us the realities of racial divides. We felt far more accepted as a couple in Uganda and Ghana than we ever found in the United States.

I have recently been reading *Jacob's Gift* by Jonathan Freedland, who I gave a previous Goodman memorial lecture, in which he explains how his upbringing gave him a philosophy of life, a basically Jewish philosophy. I was also in the Habonim as a boy but my own philosophy was probably developed because of my memories of the Second World War and the Holocaust rather than my interest in Israel. I was active in World Government movements at university. I saw divisions based on religions, nationality and social class as being deleterious. I believed in the brotherhood of humanity. My early years in Africa exposed me to misconceptions of colonialism; the Imperial ideas of divide and rule and of the dangers of paternalism. For me anthropology represented a way of understanding why people were different whilst archaeology provided the time scale for cultural history. Universalist ideas broke down divisions including the language of colonialism with its emphasis on "tribes", "native" and primitive. The aspirations of African socialism had an instant appeal,

an appeal to a struggle for dignity backed by a worthwhile history and a productive and happier future. Like many I believed in civil and universal human rights. My early yearnings took me to Israel where in 1960 I was put off by Israeli particularism. Israel though a model to others seeking to advance, was as exclusive as is the present American Exceptionalism. As I travelled I explored societies different from those that I had been brought up in and I crossed barriers in my marriage and discovered how different peoples were similar to each other in their reactions and innermost feelings. It was apparent to me that culture was transmitted rather than biologically inherent. My career as an archaeologist going back in time reinforced my universalist ideas. In many ways my universalist approaches made me a secular Jew.

I came to Africa as an archaeologist. At the present there are numerous missions, from different European countries, North America, Japan and recently China, conducting excavations throughout Africa. There are departments of archaeology in more than half of the major African universities but in 1956 this was all a mirage. The only trained archaeologists in eastern Africa in 1956 were Louis and Mary Leakey. Louis was a charismatic man but difficult to get along with. He never trained a single African scholar. There had been an archaeologist in Uganda but he had left after only a year since he felt there was nothing to discover. Tanganyika (now Tanzania) established an antiquities service in 1957. Monuments had been observed, finds discovered largely by amateurs who had other jobs and whose background knowledge was sometimes limited. The biggest problem in 1956 was placing the sites within a chronological sequence. Interest lay largely in the Stone Age, in which artifacts, similar to those found in Europe, led observers to use a Eurocentric terminology. There was rock art from Tanganyika as well as from southern Africa but there were theories that they were the work of stone-age artists who had ultimately come from Europe via north west Africa and the Saharan massifs.

Based on European studies, human existence was squashed within a 600,000 year time-span. Most developments beyond a primitive foraging economy were thought to have spread from north-east Africa and the Nile valley. Anything involving stonewalls as well as farming activities, state systems and kingship were ascribed to movements from Ethiopia and the Nile Valley. Even in the university college there

were no courses on early Africa. This was an era when Africa was denied its history and this was very much a racial bias. Europeans considered themselves as being at the top of the social and economic strata, whilst Africans were at the bottom. This of course was a form of social Darwinism. History was taught from the top downwards. Children in Anglophone Africa were taught British history about Richard the Lion Heart, Tudor Queen Elizabeth and Queen Victoria with heroes like Francis Drake, Bonnie Prince Charlie and the Duke of Wellington. The parents of school children were urged by missionaries to give their children good Christian names like Alfred, George and Wellington that had never appeared in any bibles.

The 1960's and 70's witnessed dramatic changes starting with the initiation of new dating techniques first radio-carbon dating and later potassium argon dating for more ancient deposits, There were numerous discoveries of African fossil hominids that facilitated both the realization that the break with the great Apes was more recent than hitherto supposed and demonstrated a clear sequence of evolution within Africa over a span of possibly 6 million years. From the few fossils in 1960 there are now literally thousands of finds the greatest number being from eastern Africa and Ethiopia. Palaeo-anthropologists speak of two movements out of Africa, the first from around two million years ago to the more recent one of modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) perhaps around 100-50,000 years ago. Following my own example at Makerere College in Uganda, archaeology has been taught on a regular basis in African universities from 1962. Farming with antecedents possibly in Ethiopia or parts of the Sahara was established by 2000 BC with the use of African staples like millets, sorghum, teff and barley. Iron working was certainly fully established by the end of the first millennium BC and trade from the East Coast was bringing in glass beads and presumably textiles and ceramics from the Persian Gulf and later China after AD 500. Using both oral histories and Archaeology State systems are being identified and the use of stonewalls for terracing or buildings is seen as a local development rather than any diffusion from the Nile valley.

None of these innovations has anything to do with the religion of the scientists but one can certainly claim that the straitjackets, in which the social sciences were bound until the 1960's, was relaxed by

scholars who had an acceptance of the African genius for asserting their own identity, by scholars who were able to link what they found in Africa to their perspectives of global history.

I want to briefly conclude by saying a few words about present day Africa in general. In 1960 there were many in the west that refused to accept that Africans were capable of discovering their own roots. The late 1960's brought civil wars such as that in Biafra, and coups in Ghana, Benin, Togo and many other countries. By the 1980's the pessimistic views about Africa were pervasive even UN agencies spoke of the lost decades when the clock seemed to be moving back. Though there are now human tragedies of unbelievable proportions in areas like Somalia, repressive regimes as in Zimbabwe, corruption and fiscal irresponsibility in Nigeria and the continual slaughter of millions in the Congo, there are grounds for guarded hope. No continent has been free of problems in the past ten years; Haiti, Honduras and Columbia come to mind in the Americas, Bosnia and Kosovo in Europe, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, the Yemen in Asia. Basically I am an optimist about Africa but I will leave you with two power points that summarize my views. My optimism hails from witnessing how far Africa has come in 50 years. In my own profession I could never have conceived of the advances in university education and the discoveries currently being made. Whereas we had a handful of expatriate archaeologists working in Africa now we literally have hundreds with higher degrees obtained from Africa institutions. Africa is in touch with the IT age in a big way, for instance 75% of individuals in Ghana have mobile phones. Oil is coming on tap in Ghana and Uganda whereas in places like Syria, the Yemen, Egypt and Bahrain the oil is drying up. Situations change quite rapidly and I can easily foresee both the Congo and South Sudan confounding critics and being mineral and oil powerhouses within 10 years. The entry of China, bemoaned in the United States, is a force for the good. They are investing in mining and communications. In my own line there are two teams from China working in Kenya discovering the landing and trading places of Zheng Ho, the greatest mariner of all time. Africa is making its mark in the world with its music whilst in sport many major football teams in Europe have one or two African players. As in Europe where some of the new energy and economic gains are coming from such countries as Poland or in the Americas where Brazil is making the run, in Africa the gains are coming from

countries such as Botswana and Ghana not Kenya and the Ivory Coast that were once the darlings of the West.

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