

## THE WANDERING ANTHROPOLOGIST

John Middleton

200

I am a social anthropologist. One of the problems of the discipline, in the context of talking about one's intellectual or emotional "trajectory," is that it is not taught in schools. One might say that one is a physicist because she or he enjoyed physics in school, but this cannot apply to an anthropologist (even though anthropology seems to me to be one of the most valuable subjects for children that I can imagine). So I adduce serendipity as one reason that I decided to become an anthropologist. But what was this serendipity? Obviously, most of the things that I experienced as a child, adolescent, and adult have influenced my decision to become and remain an anthropologist. But what were those things?

My father was a civil servant, one of the commissioners of the British Inland Revenue, so we had to live in or near London. We lived in what is now part of North London but was then a small village, with cattle in the streets and so on. My father vanished every morning into a different society, the great city, and returned every evening to our semirural one. He himself came from a small and remote village in the center of England. (It remains small and remote today, with a population of little more than a couple of dozen families.) His sister's husband owned a local farm, and I used to spend three months a year there as a member of a very small community, away from my usual home. Although my father had been born there and his parents still lived there, it was totally different from where I lived most of the time.

Although my uncle's nephew, I worked as a laborer, and the ambiguities of this situation struck me very early. I did not know whether I was a real inhabitant or merely an annual visitor, a kind of landowner or a kind of farm laborer. I still occasionally meet old men with whom I worked as a child and teenager, and we never know whether we are friends, quasi-kin, or strangers. The village was a virtually self-contained settlement: the only things of everyday importance that came from outside were tea, coffee, most clothing, and medicines. Virtually everything else, including

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The late **John Middleton**, was a social anthropologist, educated in Great Britain and interested mainly in Africa. He carried out research projects among six very different societies, including politically uncentralized ones, kingdoms, and both Christian and Muslim peoples. In all societies he experienced basically similar problems of local and kinship organization, wealth, power, and poverty, despite the differences of size, degrees of colonization and Westernization, and of course their own internal histories. In this short essay he tried to show that he always made research and teaching decisions largely by chance rather than by rigorous planning. He found that his views of the societies that he studied have essentially been similar and go back to contradictions in social identity within the communities in which he lived from childhood to the present. He held university posts in Britain, South and West Africa, the United States, and Germany, including a ten-year appointment at Yale. Although formally retired in 1991, he was able to offer an annual class on Africa by courtesy of the Koerner Center, which he said saved him from the isolation of retirement. He died on February 27, 2009.

everyday food, was made or grown there. Many people of the village were fed by my uncle, because the men worked for him: they were paid little in money but mostly in food. For nine months of the year I lived away from it, but for the other three I was virtually a full member of this insular society, or so regarded by myself and others. The differences between my two homes made an impression, a query, that is still part of me and in many ways presaged my later life as an anthropologist.

Meanwhile, I attended a boys' day school. I specialized in Latin, French, and German and was taught history by people who talked not about kings and queens but about social class and revolutionary movements. I learned how different communities had worked and still worked in the wider world. I realize now how little I knew as a boy, but at least I acquired an idea of a single world composed of myriad small communities, all filled with differences, contradictions, and ambiguities.

In 1938 I went to University College London. My father could not afford Oxford or Cambridge, but I was given a Latin scholarship to UCL, a far better place for someone without much money and lacking the snobbery of Oxford of the time. After the war began in 1939, the college was evacuated to Aberystwyth, on the coast of Wales, the site of one of the colleges of the University of Wales. In those days, local people spoke Welsh, an almost impossibly difficult language, and I learned enough to hold simple conversations. Aberystwyth was another small and fairly remote community. Its people were totally different from mine, yet I could in a sense belong with them by trying to speak their language: people accepted it as a sincere effort to fit in. As a result, I was always aware of ambiguity of status and of how other small communities were quite different from my own and yet alike in so many ways, with similar contradictions and ambiguities.

I took a bachelor's degree in English language and literature, partly because during the war, when we were waiting to be called into the armed forces as soon as we had a degree, there seemed no future and so no need to worry about a degree that might immediately give us employment. In 1942, after three years' postponement, I was called into the Army. After a year at Sandhurst, Britain's West Point, I was made an officer. I was not a good one, however, and was soon transferred to East Africa, where I was to spend four years. First I served in a battalion of the King's African Rifles – now, I suppose, recalled as a dangerously colonialist institution. Then I was moved into Army education, first as an instructor of Swahili and later as inspector of the education given the troops. The commander of the Army in eastern and central Africa, Gen. Sir William Platt, a man totally ignored in the history books, ordered that the African soldiers, being in the British Army, should be so treated and made literate and English-speaking. We achieved this aim, so that at the end of the war a quarter of a million literate African men, with some knowledge of English, were “released” into the region where few other men, and almost no women, could read or write. I was fully occupied in this education for some years and traveled widely into the rural areas of eastern Africa, from which almost all the soldiers came.

I was stationed first in Madagascar, then in Mauritius, then in Madagascar again, then in Kenya. I moved as I had done in England, from one community to another, living among people of completely different races, languages, and economies. Yet my knowledge of Swahili, the lingua franca of East Africa, gave me entrée everywhere. I had chances to observe the extraordinary complexities and variations of these hundreds of communities, yet it was clear that they were all similar. I learned a great deal about “everyday” African societies, problems, and the sense of hopelessness in the modern world.

My experience of these peoples, although not very deep, gave me knowledge of their poverty. It is easy to see them sentimentally, even romantically, but they were poor, often almost beyond belief. The women worked hard in their fields and houses, bringing up children without health care and usually with little food. The men also worked hard in the fields and with their livestock. Many young men were away as soldiers or as laborers on European farms (mostly in Kenya, an unpleasant colony). Local people coped with hardship by their traditional institutions of mutual help, generosity, and sense of shared kinship and history that lay at the base of village life. When later I returned as an anthropologist, I was never to overlook the poverty, and all my work was built upon its centrality.

After the war I returned to University College London. I thought of taking a degree in classics but soon decided on anthropology, a discipline of which I had then hardly heard. The year 1946 marked the beginning of the boom in anthropology in Britain; some universities, especially Oxford, Cambridge, and UCL, expanded their departments of anthropology to include coverage of Africa. The Colonial Office realized that the end of the British Empire was coming and that they had a great deal to learn, so they encouraged work in any discipline relevant to Africa, Melanesia, and elsewhere. Because people like myself took advantage of this development, we have often been called “colonialist jackals” and so on by ignorant and biased academic critics. In fact, we had no other way of doing anthropology. The department I joined, at UCL, was newly chaired by Daryll Forde. Originally an archaeologist and geographer, he was a superb scholar who had done research in Brittany, the American Southwest, and southern Nigeria.

I had only the first year with Forde. I wanted to take Egyptology as my required minor subject (most of my fellow students took psychology), but could not fit it into our timetable. Meyer Fortes, who taught at Oxford and was both a child psychologist and one of the greatest of all anthropologists, suggested that I move to Oxford. (In those happy days one could move easily, as all universities in Britain were free to veterans.) I was interviewed there by Edward Evans-Pritchard, who decided that my degree in English and four years’ experience of eastern Africa were the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree in anthropology. (Thus could decisions of acceptance be made at the time.) I could therefore spend two years on the B.Sc. (a library degree equivalent to the master’s degree), then take the doctorate and so save two or three years in all.

So I moved to Oxford and took a B.Sc. with the third Africanist there, Max Gluckman, a very great scholar from South Africa who was also a lawyer and a Marxist. I wrote a thesis on land tenure in eastern Africa, which fitted my then preferences excellently and gave me solid training in social anthropology.

For my doctorate, I decided to study the Lugbara people in northwestern Uganda, with Evans-Pritchard as my supervisor. In those days such research took two years in the field, followed by another year or two writing the dissertation. I was given funds by a peculiarly British institution, the Worshipful Mystery of Goldsmiths in the City of London, one of the guilds or livery companies of the City, who gave their money to education. My proposed research was approved by the Colonial Office, as it had to be at the time, and I went out to Uganda with a research grant equivalent to nine hundred dollars, just enough to live on for two years. The Goldsmiths also paid my ship's passage out and back.

The research for my doctorate made me into an anthropologist and changed my life.

I reached Uganda at Christmas 1949 and was told by the central administration in the capital, Entebbe, that no one there knew much about the Lugbara and the West Nile District where they lived, in the far northwest corner of the country. I went there as soon as I could and found the local administrators, all British, welcoming and helpful. The district commissioner approved my moving out into a village some thirty miles from his headquarters. The local administration comprised the commissioner and two assistants, a medical officer, agricultural and labor officers, and a police officer in command of twelve African policemen. This team administered some six hundred thousand people, of whom a quarter of a million were Lugbara.

I spent a little over two years in Uganda, with a five-month break back at Oxford in the middle. The Lugbara were unrelated to any other peoples in eastern Africa, spoke a Sudanic language unintelligible to the rest of the country, were small-scale farmers, and were desperately poor and what was usually called "backward." Their West Nile District was closed to visitors and administration was virtually nil. The men had to have six shillings or so a year to pay the government tax, which they would earn by selling their labor to African and Indian plantation owners in southern Uganda. The men wore cloth as shirts or shorts, the women nothing except bunches of pubic leaves and beads. They were "primitive" and poor – and the most psychologically subtle and generous people I have ever met.

The two and a half years I spent among the Lugbara were the most momentous in my life. I was alone, living in a small house (without doors and so open to anyone) at the edge of a village a mile from the Uganda-Congo border. I had to learn the extremely difficult tonal and virtually unwritten language. I had to find helpers ("informants") and friends among people whose older women, at least, had never seen a European. The men were always armed with spears and used them, and at first women feared that my evil eye would harm their babies. Because I carried no weapons, I lacked political power and was not considered a "real" European. I was intensely

lonely yet surrounded at all times by people interested in and curious about me. I was seen as *sui generis*, a generally agreeable stranger who seemed to harm no one.

Although the Lugbara have had no kings or indigenous chiefs, they have had priests of many kinds. Because religion was central to their lives, I concentrated on that aspect of their culture. I was interested in how they organized their society and made order among themselves by religious means rather than by the use of force and what we might loosely call legal sanctions. Their everyday lives and conversations centered around beliefs and practices in witchcraft, sorcery, the interplay of good and evil, the roles of God, spirits, and ancestors of many kinds. Essentially, they were trying to deal with chance. I did not go there to study “religion,” but ended up doing so because the people talked of little else. By teaching me their culture, the Lugbara people told me that they made me into an adult, a person, out of an at first childlike and ignorant nonperson. Much of this development came with learning their language, ordinary behavior, courtesy, and morality. The process was never complete, however, as I neither married there nor fought with spears and arrows. I widened my narrow knowledge of people not as a tourist but by immersing myself in the life of the Lugbara, as far as I could and they permitted. I could have “gone native” (as some anthropologists and others have done), but then I could not have observed and learned. Since I left the Lugbara, half a century ago, I have remained conscious of having become partly Lugbara: a tourist does not do this but merely seeks the exotic. I had to translate one culture into another; an anthropologist is pointless unless he or she does this and unless he or she writes or teaches about it.

I returned to Oxford in 1952 to write a dissertation supervised by Evans-Pritchard, was given the D.Phil. degree in 1953, and in 1960 published a book titled *Lugbara Religion*, although it was actually about what might be called micropolitics. Evans-Pritchard was the greatest of all social anthropologists. He had worked first in the southern Sudan among people who were culturally close to the Lugbara, a series of kingdoms known as Azande. In 1935 he had published *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, in which he showed once and for all that long-held views that Africans and others were “savages,” incapable of rational thought, were incorrect and that people such as Azande and Lugbara were as rational in their thought as ourselves. Evans-Pritchard revolutionized the study of anthropology and comparative religion. I owe him much.

The early 1950s were the great days of British social anthropology. There were many superb teachers, such as Evans-Pritchard, Meyer Fortes, Max Gluckman, M.N. Srinivas, and Louis Dumont in Oxford and Daryll Forde, Raymond Firth, Edmund Leach, Lucy Mair, and Audrey Richards in London. Alfred Radcliffe-Brown was still alive, although Bronislaw Malinowski had died during the war, here at Yale. We students were unusual, too—not so much in ourselves but because of our experiences during the war. I was almost thirty years old, not the more usual eighteen or so, and my contemporaries had all been in the Army, the Navy, the wartime fire brigades, or

some other branch of service. We were not merely young undergraduates eager to learn from our elders; in experience and thought, we were far closer to our teachers than most students are today. We hear much of the myth that at Oxford most teaching was done in pubs rather than classrooms. This is merely a sentimental report of close personal teaching by discussion rather than by class lecturing. We found it easy to see our own futures in the same terms as the careers of our teachers, who were more colleagues than elders and who had, like ourselves, lived in poverty-stricken, small-scale societies elsewhere. Our own careers were very much a continuation of theirs.

After receiving my degree I had a post – sadly, for a year only – at Birkbeck College of the University of London. Birkbeck was an evening college that catered for mature students who held ordinary jobs during the day. They were not trying to become research anthropologists, which helped me remove myself from the ivory towers of Oxford. I then spent two years in South Africa, substituting for Monica Wilson at Cape Town and then at Rhodes University. This widened my personal experience of a different society, one then drifting into full apartheid and filled with contradictions and ambiguities of very different kinds than I had seen before. I did some field research in a small rural “Cape Coloured” Christian settlement known as Genadendaal, or “The Valley of Grace,” a type of community outside previous anthropological knowledge. I learned enough Afrikaans to work there but have never published on it.

I returned to England in 1956 to teach for eight years at University College London, again with Daryll Forde as professor. It was then that I began publishing my Lugbara research, both as articles and as a book. I also coedited a collection of essays by various colleagues on uncentralized African societies; *Tribes without Rulers* was the first of several volumes I have edited on witchcraft, spirit possession, and other topics. Rather than rush into publishing, I waited for several years and then began with a book on religion instead of reworking my doctoral dissertation into a comprehensive account of a particular society, as most anthropologists did. This enabled me to think through my own experience and thoughts without haste, and I believe *Lugbara Religion* was better for it.

In 1958 I was offered a research project to study land tenure among the non-Arab population of the sultanate of Zanzibar. Five years later, I undertook a study of Lagos, Nigeria, concentrating on Igbo immigrant dockworkers rather than the entire city – an enormous place that I could hardly envisage as a single society. In Zanzibar I spoke the local language, KiSwahili, which I already knew well; in Nigeria I spoke English, as could all the dockworkers I met. These two societies or communities were totally different from any others I had studied: the former were Sunni Muslims and resentful subjects of a brutal Arab sultanate, the latter mostly Christians and grievously exploited workers for Yoruba companies in a Yoruba city. In Lagos, I offered a course on anthropology at the local university, with several hundred students who taught me much about modern Africa.

I went to Nigeria because I had been offered a position at Northwestern University, which necessitated that I remain outside the United States for two years before becoming eligible to receive a permanent visa. After two years at Northwestern, I moved to New York University as chairman of a new department of anthropology, with enough money to hire a faculty virtually from scratch. I realized that this was an opportunity that might never come again. I got to decide what kind of anthropology the department would emphasize, what courses would be taught, and so on, all of which I found enjoyable. Moreover, the experience gave me a clearer understanding of what anthropology was all about and how it related to other disciplines. Before long, the department was thriving, with a faculty of fifteen and several hundred students. (NYU then had both a graduate and two undergraduate schools, the former open only in the evenings.) Our “godmother” adviser was Margaret Mead, who supported me magnificently even though she did not care for my kind of social anthropology. Living in New York City also enabled me to see how important anthropology could be, both for students of many backgrounds and for the general public. I presented television courses on Africa to largely African-American viewers and, in general, gained a wider perspective on the academic scene than I could have anywhere else.

After six years at NYU, I decided to return to England, mainly for personal reasons. I was offered the chair of African anthropology in the University of London, tenable at the School of Oriental and African Studies. The University of London had perhaps the best anthropology department in the world. It was a delightful place with a delightful chairman, Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, who had worked in various parts of India. The School of Oriental and African Studies had some four hundred faculty and fewer than twelve hundred students, at least half of them from Asia and Africa. Now I could widen my views of the entire anthropological world, instead of limiting myself largely to Africa.

I also returned to Africa for more research, this time on a small and still functioning kingdom in southern Ghana, with a traditional king and a largely Presbyterian and Pentecostalist Christian population, virtually all educated by long contact with a Swiss mission. I never learned much Twi, one of the two local languages, because English was widely spoken. (My main helper, the son of a former king, asked whether I preferred to converse in English, Latin, Greek, or German—a long cry from what I had encountered among the Lugbara.) I stayed in Ghana for a year and published a few papers on missionary conversion. I was not alone but with my wife, Michelle Gilbert, and my situation was very different from that among the Lugbara twenty-six years earlier.

Finally, I returned to the United States and came to Yale. Again, I was able to return to Africa to yet another society, the northern Swahili of Lamu, on the coast of Kenya. (In Zanzibar, I had worked with the southern Swahili.) Initially, I went for a year, returning later for several summer visits. The Lamu people have been merchants since the ninth century—not traders but intermediaries in the long-distance trade

between Africa and Europe in the West and Arabia, India, and Indonesia in the East. As such, the Lamu have mediated between widely different economies and religions. Theirs has thus been a very different society from the others I have known, in many ways the most unusual of all. I am still publishing on them, mainly on their history, and so widening the kind of anthropology that has always interested me. I still hope to return to them in the future.

I had to retire in 1991 and was lucky enough to be invited to teach in Germany for two years, at the universities of Frankfurt and Cologne. Last year, the Koerner Center gave me a new class, on African society, which has been both a comfort and an encouragement to keep thinking. I am grateful for it.