

AFRICAN MEMOIRS

I

JOHN MIDDLETON (1921–2009)

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On 27 February 2009 John Middleton died in New Haven, Connecticut, a week after falling and striking his head; he had never regained consciousness. He had taught a seminar on Africa at Yale University earlier on the day he fell. After his death *Media and Identity in Africa* (2009), a volume newly co-edited with K. Njogu, was published. So John died still teaching and creating and with future projects in mind. He never believed in retirement and this is certainly how he would have wanted to leave us.

John Francis Marchmont Middleton was born in London on 22 May 1921. He graduated (majoring in English Literature) from the University of London in 1941. His first experience of East Africa was shortly after this when he served there for three years in the Army during the Second World War. He returned to Britain keen to become an Africanist. He studied anthropology at University College London, and on the advice of Meyer Fortes transferred to Oxford (Exeter College) where he got his doctorate in 1953. Evans-Pritchard was his supervisor, but it was clear that the greatest influence on his work was Fortes. The power and originality of John's dissertation lay in his views of how belief was used in local strategies for power and authority, which were traced through developmental cycles of kinship. His greatest achievement was *Lugbara Religion* (1960), based on his dissertation. This seminal classic was a tacit and powerful revision, even a rebuttal, of much of the work then going on at Oxford.¹ John's other most significant books are *The Kikuyu and Kamba of Kenya* (1953), *Land Tenure in Zanzibar* (1960), *The Lugbara of Uganda* (1965), *The Study of the Lugbara* (1970), *The World of the Swahili* (1992), and (with Mark Horton) *The Swahili* (2000) – together with co-edited, pioneering collections of original essays such as *Tribes without Rulers* (1958) with David Tait, *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa* (1963) with E. H. Winter, *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa* (1963) with John Beattie, many collections of articles on Africa and social anthropology, and an encyclopaedia of African studies. He also published over seventy essays on African ethnography and social issues, and numerous reviews.

¹For a long discussion of the importance of this work, see my Introduction, pp. ix–xliii in the third edition, LIT Verlag for the IAI, London, 1999.

John became one of the most influential Africanists of his time, mostly because of his writings but also because of his wide influence as a teacher, his administrative service at the International African Institute and his editorship of its journal, *Africa*. John's most significant teaching posts were in Anthropology at the University of London (1956–63, 1972–81), as founding chair of the Department of Anthropology of New York University (1966–72) where he was appointed on the recommendation of Margaret Mead, and as Professor of Anthropology at Yale University (1981–91, and then emeritus). John also taught in South Africa and at the Universities of Northwestern, Oregon and Virginia in the United States. He was always bitter that he was required by law to retire, especially since that law was soon changed and one could then teach as long as one was able. To keep busy he continued to teach part-time at Yale and steadily elsewhere in the United States, as well as in Britain, France, Germany and West Africa. John was a great teacher, especially in graduate seminars and as a personal mentor. He was also a tireless and valuable scholarly correspondent who wrote regularly to a huge number of his former students and colleagues. He maintained contact with an amazing range of Africanists all over the world. His lifetime ties with the International African Institute further enhanced this network.

John wrote a great deal on the Lugbara but also became an authority on the East African Swahili and related coastal peoples. In 1976–7 when his wife, the anthropologist Michelle Gilbert, began fieldwork in Ghana, John returned to research in West Africa, where he had briefly worked earlier (1962–4 in Nigeria). He published some of this West African material, but his great ethnographic love was East Africa, first in Uganda with the Lugbara, then Swahili in Zanzibar (1958) and on the Kenya coast (1986–1991).

John was a deeply complex and charming person. I have never encountered another so able to charm such a wide range of people. He was especially beguiling to women, all types, from students and clerks to tough scholars and jaded administrators. I watched him beguile women as different as Margaret Mead, Phyllis Kaberry, Barbara Pym, Laura Bohannon, Sally Chilvers and Lucy Mair. At John's memorial ceremonies held in his home in Connecticut, it was a number of women who took charge of the proceedings. My favourite anecdote about John's charms is not exactly true. In Barbara Pym's memoirs, surprisingly her only reference to John, whom she knew well from their many years with *Africa* and the IAI, was that he once appeared at work sporting a seemingly new, tightly furled umbrella which Barbara was convinced he had been given by some woman admirer (John's umbrellas were never neatly furled). When I (several others told me they had done the same) mentioned this to John, he strongly denied any such thing. We all observed that Barbara's remark was true 'in spirit' even if not in fact. On this same note, I cannot resist also recounting how one day John dragged me across London to Wormwood Scrubs prison, picking up a large bunch of daffodils on the way. He told me that an Igbo inmate needed 'cheering up'.

John wrote well and was an invaluable critic of one's writing. He loved arcane and abstruse words. He told me his favourite was *syzygy*, though he found little opportunity to employ it. John's conversations were never dull. He was a master of anecdotes, many quite diverting and some quite bawdy. He had a keen sense of the absurdity and endearing preposterousness of human conduct. John had an ironic view of human relations which he saw as ever surprising and promising, yet also deceptive. Once at an academic convention a fellow Africanist asked him if he knew Peggy Harper (now deceased) since both she and John had once been at the University of Ibadan. Without a pause, John replied, 'I never knew Peggy Harper, but I was married to her for three years.' John was never happier than when he could recount some saga that combined human foibles, especially delusory obsession and foolhardy misconduct stemming from some consuming and quixotic passion. I could never get over how many people he knew, including some colleagues, who had revealed such experiences to him. John enjoyed intellectual matters, but he was also bemused by the *louche*. He knew ordinary people with epic though seedy dramas – or at least these sometimes seemed almost epic as John recounted them. Like Hitchcock, he could also spot the sinister and disturbing in ordinary people and things around us.

John knew about a great many surprising and unrelated worlds. He was good discussing Trollope. He also knew an immense amount about the early jazz that flourished in New Orleans, Kansas City and Chicago in the era before the Second World War. He knew rare recordings, singers and instrumentalists that I had the greatest difficulty tracking down. Unfortunately, I could never prompt his interest in anyone recent, not even John Coltrane or Eric Dolphy, though he did tolerate George Shearing and Marian McPartland, maybe because they were British. John loved scouting out food shops and dining out, and in New York and London this could be terrific. He was a good cook and fondly procured and prepared any food he was surprised that one did not know and might like. He cooked me my first salsify. He roasted a superb goose stuffed with prunes.

John had marvellous, sometimes outrageous tales about the colonial era. Like Evans-Pritchard, he disapproved of much of colonialism though he recognized it as an inevitability. That did not, however, lead him to miss the amusing absurdity and weirdness of the interpersonal relations in the colonial encounter. That was clear to me the very first time I met John. That was in 1957 when he, Ed Winter and I (then a mere graduate student) took a long trip through northern Tanganyika so Ed could show John ethnic groups which he had never seen before, the Iraqw, Barabaig (Tatoga), Mbugwe, Nyaturu and the ever-elusive Hadza. I found that John's observations about the local Europeans and Asians we encountered brought out even more of a sense of exoticism and curiosity than did his sharp observations of the Africans.

John was a mine of good advice. We corresponded sporadically after I returned to the United States in 1959 and more frequently after I

began working on my dissertation at Oxford. By the time I returned to Africa at the end of 1961 we wrote often. John was especially sage at pointing out the dangers and difficulties I might encounter at Oxford, a mire of petty vendettas, frustrated ambitions and parochial obsessions. John deeply loved Oxford and had many close friends there, yet the university never seemed on his side. Because he was the best African ethnographer and scholar of his generation of Oxonians, I found it puzzling that Oxford never paid much attention to him. Yet I believe John was fortunate in this neglect since the intellectual and social environments of great cities like London and New York were where he could be most inspired and stimulated. John loved great cities and great city life, whether London, New York, Paris or Lagos. John liked little-known, eccentric buildings, odd street alignments, shops specializing in bizarre goods, quirky but deeply knowledgeable sales-clerks, foreign neighbourhoods where alien languages were spoken and exotic goods and tastes encouraged. When we were both at New York University, he pointed out a shoe-shop window that in part clearly catered to foot fetishists, a treat I had missed even though I had walked by the store countless times. In London he found a water-closet with a glass water-tank with goldfish that sank and soared in the tide of every flush. There was little of such myriad, exotic and exciting city ways to be found in Oxford, and still less in New Haven.

At John's memorial service, many recited hilarious and sometimes daunting accounts of his famous or infamous 'shit list', the names of those whose poor scholarship, toadying to the *status quo*, self-seeking pandering to the trendy, or some other more personal offence had earned his wrath or contempt. Luckily for some, John's views about who should be on the list were mercurial, names being added and dropped constantly. Sometimes I was just as shocked that someone ever got off the list as I was mystified how someone got on it. All this would sound petty, except that it often illustrated an appealing personal quality in John. He was deeply impassioned about scholarly affairs, about anthropology and history, about Africa, and about manners and 'form'. There were few occasions when anthropology and Africa and scholarship did not enter John's everyday concerns and take on importance. Academic passions were not matters about a job, how one earned a living, but about what one was and what counted most in the record of one's life. I tried to keep that in mind when John's judgements about his 'list' sometimes infuriated me.

John Middleton grew out of a tradition of anthropology and academe that sometimes seems to be fading, though happily many of his former students would seem to disprove this. I want to believe that those who knew him and his work will urge new students and others to read his writings, not only because they tell us so much about how Africa and Africans were (and in many ways still are), but because a perceptive reader will also find John's own ways of investigating, and of thinking and feeling, not far from the surface. These writings are the best way to remember John. Those travelling the English countryside have another. Many years ago John fondly pointed out the hill bearing the ancient

Great White Horse as we travelled in southern England. It has now been re-chalked and refurbished, an awesome site for John's scattered ashes.

II

'CULTURAL OFFICER' AT HOME AND ABROAD: OLOYE ADEBAYO OGUNRINU OGUNDIJO, 1939–2005

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Editor's note: This combined memoir by Paulo Farias and Oladejo Okediji continues the journal's theme of local intellectuals in Africa. Bayo straddled academic and popular fields. He was the author of several books, a research consultant and mediator, a practising diviner and university employee, a traditional innovator and local cosmopolitan. We are fortunate to be able to publish here the reflections of Mr Oladejo Okediji, the celebrated Yoruba novelist and playwright, on Bayo's life and death; the memoir as a whole is based on the long and close friendship of all three people.

ON THE CAREER OF A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL TEACHER TURNED *ORISA* PRIEST

P. F. de Moraes Farias

His friends addressed him as *Oloye* (Titleholder) and as Bayo. He was deeply rooted in the world-views, folk classifications of living beings, healing practices and social mores of modern urban forms of Yoruba culture. These are of course widespread cultural forms, which constantly cut across the hypothetical divide between what counts as 'popular culture' and what is classified as 'elite culture' or 'academic culture' in contemporary Yorubaland. They, and the social-networking practices and hierarchical conventions accompanying them, largely shaped Bayo's assumptions and attitudes throughout his life. At the same time, as his career demonstrates, he was a man of initiative and insight, quick to detect new paths and eager to take them.

For many years, at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, he held the position of cultural officer in the Institute of Cultural Studies, where the 'academic' and 'popular', and the 'modern' and 'traditional' dimensions of Yoruba culture intersect. In Nigeria he published books in Yoruba and English, which are compromises between different