Toon-ing out the New Yorker's Obama cover, B3

Northland Forum

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The Abayudaya, a group of Jews in Uganda, lived in near-isolation from the rest of the Jewish world until being "discovered" in the 1990s. Since then, international groups have sought to help the Abayudaya and assimilate them into the greater Jewish community.

This month, News Tribune editorial page editor Robin Washington had the opportunity to visit them and witness the effects of international aid — both good and bad. What he saw sparked a question:

Can efforts to save a culture destroy it?

ROBIN WASHINGTON

ABOVE: Young members of the Abayudaya gather in Nabogoye Village.

FAR LEFT: Rabbi Gershom Sizomu (far left) and his mother participate in his installation ceremony July 10 near Mbale, Uganda.

LEFT: The village Internet cafe.

PHOTOS BY ROBIN WASHINGTON / NEWS TRIBUNE

NABOGOYE VILLAGE, UGANDA, JULY 10 — The crowd of three hundred includes Muslims, Christians and Jews. Before them, African dancers from the village high school perform. Politicians come to the stand and speak for much too long, while clerics from across the valley and the world offer their praises and prayers. It's a joyous, historic day.

"I believe that human beings have a lot in common. What divides us is just very little," says the man they have come to celebrate, newly ordained Rabbi Gershom Sizomu. A graduate of American Jewish University in Los Angeles, he is the first black African to complete a western rabbinical school, returning to his village after five years of study. It's the culmination of years of longing by the Abayudaya — Uganda's Jews — to connect to the wider Jewish community.

And now that they have done so, it may be more than they bargained for.

Once totally unknown to the larger Jewish world, the Abayudaya are the result of a proselytizing effort gone awry a century ago. Given a Christian Bible, their founder, Semei Kakungulu, invariably described as a chief and a king, elected to embrace the Old Testament and throw off the New. When missionaries objected, telling him he'd then be a Jew, he found his calling. He spread his new religion to his subjects and though still isolated, acquired Hebrew liturgy and texts but without the associated European music. Substituting their Lugandan harmonies, their spirituality blossomed, and devoutly and quietly, endured until the regime of Idi Amin.

Like Muslims, Uganda's Jews suffered the dictator's wrath, and many shed the religion in fear. When Amin was toppled in 1979, only about 300 of 3,000 Abayudaya still practiced.

Since then, their ranks have grown to about 900 and they've been "discovered." Numerous Jewish organizations have sent delegations to record their music, provide aid, and — though they were as Jewish as could be — officially convert them. Seeking a bond to the wider Jewish world, the Abayudaya consented.

"We want to be connected," says Sizomu, who I first met in the U.S. as he was beginning his rabbinic studies. "We don't want to be isolated as a small Jewish community."

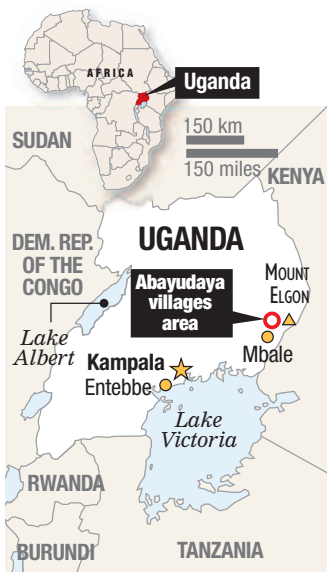
The same is true for other Africans. While on the trip for Sizomu's installation ceremony, five Conservative rabbis from America perform the conversions of about 250 others, from Kenya, Nigeria, and elsewhere in Uganda. Africa, it seems, is becoming Jewish.

But with connection comes contamination. As the celebration week's Sabbath services get under way, prayers begin with full participation as Lugandan melodies rise. It drops off, however, when Sizomu asks the American rabbis to take over and European music prevails. And when the lead passes to one rabbi who — there's no other way to put it — is tone-deaf, participation falls off completely.

I'm not the only one who notices.

"For Africans, music is very much part of the language. It's a part of the prayer as much as the words," says Rabson Wuriga, a member of the Lemba tribe of Zimbabwe and South Africa, who came for the event. Unlike the Abayudaya, the Lemba do have a genetic connection to Jews — a DNA study has established one — but they have no interest in officially converting.

I can't say I blame them. Lecturing on the grass outside the synagogue, Rabbi Bradley Artson, the American Jewish University dean, elucidates some arcane points of rabbinic law. *A woman has the right to demand her husband satisfy her at least once a week,* he says. *A man who beats his wife is committing a sin against Torah* — a remark received in uncomfortable silence. And *a man who so sins may be punished by flogging.* Useful medieval European philosophy perhaps, but questionable when applied to 21st century Ugandans eking out life by 19th century means. And when a woman asks about divorce, he replies academically, seemingly oblivious that her question is anything but. (I twice ask Artson for an interview; both times he puts me off until it's time to leave the country.)



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Visitors aren't the only ones making cultural blunders. Most responsible for bringing the Abayudaya to the attention of the broader Jewish world is Kulanu, a U.S. based group self-described as "dedicated to finding and assisting lost and dispersed remnants of the Jewish people." After making initial contact in 1995, a rabbi affiliated with the group recounted the Abayudaya's strict observance of Torah precepts on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered."

Fascinated, host Robert Siegel wondered, "Are they Jews?"

"No," the cleric replied sharply.

"It was a big mistake," founder Jack Zeller now says of his Kulanu's former association with the rabbi, acknowledging the remark may have done serious damage by promoting the idea that black Jews, no matter how devout, are impostors.

But Zeller defends subsequent aid efforts, pointing to projects such as a coffee-growing collective. Kulanu isn't alone. Another organization — the San Francisco-based Institute for Jewish and Community Research — has poured many times the resources into the community, including the very high cost of Sizomu's five-year rabbinic education. Most significantly, the institute built a medical clinic and drilled a community well, eliminating the daily kilometers-long treks for water. Muslims, Christians and Jews all share in these resources.

(A disclosure: The institute funded my trip to Uganda, as well as travel expenses to attend its annual think tank in San Francisco. I am also the recipient of its first Be'chol Lashon media award and have agreed to administer the prizes.)

Yet the institute too has made its missteps, building an Internet cafe of little use to the community, with an intermittently working satellite dish.

"The Internet cafe was a mistake," concedes the institute's Diane Tobin. Her goal, she says, is projects that will be self-supporting, such as a guesthouse catering to the many foreign visitors.

"[The Abayudaya] are not asking for handouts. Basically our goal is for them to be sustainable."

Samson Wamani, the community's medical director, whose education was paid for by yet another American Jewish benefactor, agrees. "There needs to be a needs assessment," he says, before money is plopped down on another dubious project. And though he won't say so aloud, it's obvious that rancor between the American groups is splintering the community.

So would the Abayudaya, now practically a Disneyland to an endless stream of visiting Westerners, have been better off undiscovered?

Physically and materially, no, says Wamani. In the malaria-infested region, the clinic and well have saved lives and brought advantages, and with that a much improved standing among their Christian and Muslim neighbors.

"It used to be a shame to say you were Abayudaya," he says. "Now, you are proud."

But their spirituality has been diminished. "Before the outsiders came, our Judaism was very strict. We became diluted." The Westerners, he says, "didn't teach us by example."

A personal exception for Wamani is Willie Portilla of Duluth, a St. Mary's-Duluth Clinic physician and former Temple Israel president who visited the Abayudaya last winter. Wamani shadowed Portilla, who was performing volunteer cleft palate surgeries elsewhere in Uganda. When I mention Portilla's name, Wamani melts.

"Willie!" he exclaims. "He is such an inspiration to me. He has such a warm heart."

Wamani, it happens, is coming to Chicago next month. With two Duluth connections, perhaps he could be encouraged to make a brief trip north. Maybe we can launch a local aid project.

Or not — and leave it to those who know what they're doing.

ROBIN WASHINGTON *is the News Tribune's editorial page editor.*

Samson Wamani, the Abayudaya medical director, and his motorcycle — and helmet.

Think Duluth's roads are bad? Think again.

I don't want to hear any more complaining about Duluth's lousy streets. Try getting around in Uganda.

There's a paved highway — or better, a two-lane game of chicken, with relics of the losers dotting the roadside — running from the capital city of Kampala to Mbale. To get to the villages it's mostly dirt roads pockmarked with craters, some the size of a bus. Around them drivers navigate a sea of adults, children, very small children, livestock, bicycles, motorcycles, buses, trucks and cars, driving on the British-legacy left except when there's no left left. Then it's the game of chicken again.

Want to get somewhere? The most common way is to find someone with a motorcycle, negotiate a price, and hop on. That worked fine for me on one occasion until my ride ran out of gas. Then it was three on a bike a colleague of mine hired. Safe? Absolutely not. Alternative? Walk.

A former Time magazine staffer, Peter Bird Martin, often described American foreign correspondents as traveling with a soft rump, their reporting colored by bruised posteriors. Guilty as charged.

"Three-quarters of [Uganda's] surgical wards are motorcycle fractures."

SAMSON WAMANI

What else could I think about as the seat's spoiler banged the base of my spine? How I escaped without a hernia is beyond me.

Not everyone is so lucky.

"I've lost three friends in half a year," Samson Wamani, the Abayudaya medical director, told me. "Three-quarters of [Uganda's] surgical wards are motorcycle fractures."

Yet it's the cheapest and easiest way to get around, he said, and Wamani himself rides one — a recent acquisition that allows him to see 10 more patients a day. Before, he bummed a ride or walked between villages. Showing off his bike, he also displays a helmet; one of only three I saw in the entire country. I practically hug him in relief.

Duluth is in the first world, not the third, so of course we expect more and should. We pay taxes and in exchange we want good roads.

But we don't have people dying when ill-equipped vehicles fall apart on unpaved moonscapes, or when drivers take crazy chances at passing and lose. Really, we have nothing to whine about.

ROBIN WASHINGTON