

## MEMOIRS AND BIOGRAPHY

**Merrick Posnansky. *Africa and Archaeology: Empowering an Expatriate Life.***

London and New York: The Radcliffe Press, 2009. xii + 275. Maps. Illustrations. Acronyms and Abbreviations. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. \$55.00. Cloth.

Exile creates commitments that enrich the host as much as the stranger. In his candid and instructive memoir, Merrick Posnansky writes, “In many ways I have always seen myself as an outsider looking in, which is perhaps the penalty for being an expatriate without a specific community” (85). From his childhood in an Orthodox Jewish family in pre-WWII Britain through his career at UCLA teaching and writing about Africa, Posnansky felt a gaze upon him. But the feeling of being watched nourished a personality and scholarly talent driven to contribute.

In *Africa and Archaeology*, personal revelation complements the critical gleanings of a scholarly life arcing across the entire history of the guild’s engagement with Africa. After working and learning alongside Louis and Mary Leakey, Bill Bishop, Desmond Clark, and other figures from the colonial phase of African archaeology, Posnansky in 1958 became the curator of the Uganda Museum, which led to deep engagement with Makerere University in Kampala, where he remained until 1967. During that extraordinary period in the history of Uganda (and the rest of Africa), Posnansky helped found the first center for African studies at Makerere. He excavated (and sometimes re-excavated) at many important sites in the central Great Lakes region, including Bigo and Bweyore. He developed a curriculum in African prehistory, art history, and archaeology, among the very first courses in these subjects taught in Africa. In 1961 he and his wife, the late Eunice Lubega (a Muganda educator and the first African woman to graduate from an African university—Makerere University, 1955), drove from Uganda to Southern Rhodesia. Needless to say, a racially mixed couple touring colonial Africa was not a common sight, although Eunice and Merrick felt the least racial tension in cosmopolitan Ghana, where people drew less on racial categories to construct hierarchy and cultural difference.

Liberalism’s universalist ideals run through Posnansky’s life, born from sober reflection on the limitations of identity politics in the nourishing of a moral imagination. As a young student at Nottingham in the 1950s, exploring what he felt was his Jewish identity—not yet an inflexible one—Posnansky came to understand that Jews were perfectly capable of prejudice, “even after the horrors of the recent war” (96). In 1991, caught in a racialized culture war over the directorship of African Studies at UCLA, he stepped down as director of the James S. Coleman African Studies Center after only two years at the helm.

Posnansky’s liberalism meant two things for African studies. His students on three continents learned the importance and complexities of fieldwork, in which one contributes as much as one extracts. It also seems

to have limited his scholarly publishing, as he was mostly committed to building institutions through investing in the social relationships that make them live and breathe. He preferred the challenges of community and the opportunities of learning about other fields to the demands of solitude required for every major publication in a scholar's curriculum vitae.

Consider Posnansky's long relationship with the village of Hani in northwestern Ghana. It is the village nearest to the mediaeval town of Begho, which from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century was a booming cosmopolitan entrepôt at the crossroads of forest and savannah. Between 1970 and 1998, with the support of the University of Ghana at Legon, Posnansky excavated at the site of Begho and conducted ethnographic and oral history research in Hani, working with Ghanaian students and faculty and a shifting group of international students and scholars. Even throughout the taxing period between 1979 and 1984, when drought and economic collapse afflicted the country, he trained students, worked with the village's royal and clan leaders to enhance health care infrastructure, was enstooled as the *ahohohene*—"chief of the foreigners"—and helped raise the profile of Hani in the eyes of Ghanaian politicians.

Such long-term commitment is rare today as African studies research has grown into a multisited and shorter-term enterprise. Although the digital and cell-phone revolutions make research more efficient, students of Africa today still work in a generally resource-constrained environment, often vulnerable to the vicissitudes of structural and military violence. Posnansky's book shows how working under difficult circumstances is mitigated by investing in the social life of the host community. *Africa and Archaeology* demonstrates that a life well lived integrates the personal and the social.

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