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“Found Tribe”

By Andrew Rice

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MBALE, Uganda—*Elim Pentecostal Church ... Faith Fellowship Church ...* The car bumped up the dirt road, past thatched huts and faded signs: *Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses ... Kaloli Lwanga Catholic Church ...* The Sunday morning sunlight shone softly against the naked rock face of the Wanale Mountains. I was on my way up Nabugoye Hill to visit the Abayudaya one last time.

Despite the hour, the road was alive with people. Many were on their way to worship: women wearing their best dresses, brilliantly-patterned with huge shoulder pads; a man in a suit, leading his son by the hand. Muslim men wearing kaffiyas pedaled their bikes down the hill to Mbale, the nearest town. Little children, enthralled at the sight of a white person, ran to the roadside to wave. “*Mzungu! Mzungu!*” they called out, their voices trailing off as the car passed by, “*How are youuuuuuuuuuu?*”

The car kept climbing, and the signs kept coming: *Christco Church ... Nabweya Cavalry Church ...* Scrawny goats scampered in and out of the road. I hung a sharp left at the dirt-floored Anglican parish, passed a water pump donated, the sign said, “*by the Africa Muslims Agency.*” The road narrowed. I stopped at a little brick building with a tin roof.

The sign in front of me read: “*Semei Kakungulu High School.*” Above the letters, someone had painted a blue Star of David.

A short young man wearing a white kippah on his head appeared. “*You are welcome!*” Rabbi Gershom Sizomu shouted down the hill. Other figures followed Sizomu from behind their tin-roofed synagogue. “*Shalom!*” they greeted me.

These were the Abayudaya, members of a tiny tribe of about 600 people. Little distinguished them from their neighbors around this hardscrabble area of eastern Uganda—except for one thing. They were Jews. Or at least they professed to be. Eighty years ago, for reasons involving scheming colonists, zealous missionaries, and a prickly warlord, the Abayudaya began practicing their own brand of Judaism on Nabugoye Hill. For generations, they worshipped their God in obscurity. But a few years ago, their story—a tribe lost in the Ugandan bush—captured the attention of a small but vocal group of American Jews. Eschewing their religion’s traditional suspicion of converts, the Americans had showered the Abayudaya with money, acceptance and publicity. In a few short years, the community had gone from being an isolated minority, hated by its neighbors, to a tourist attraction. They are, to my knowledge, one of the few Ugandan tribes with a website.

I walked up the hill, to the front of the synagogue. Its splintery wooden doors were etched with Jewish iconography: Stars of David, menorahs, torah scrolls. Sizomu and I shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. I asked him how the night had been—it was the Jewish festival of Sukkot, which is intended to remind believers of their time wandering in the desert, and he had spent the night outside in a makeshift tent covered with tree branches. He said he had slept quite nicely.

The Abayudaya practice an observant brand of Judaism. Until a few years ago, they were still following scriptural strictures—like the one that prevents men-

struating women from entering the temple—that most Jews abandoned hundreds of years ago. In fact, their rules were my reason for coming back. The day before, when I had come to see Sizomu perform Shabbat services, I had asked to take his picture. But after some spirited Bantu-language Talmudic discussions, he had refused to be photographed. Snapping a photo would break the prohibition against work on the Sabbath, he said.

Now, I guided him to the spot I had in mind for the picture. Sizomu asked to look at my digital camera. “I have one too,” he said. “Have you figured out how to get the pictures onto your computer?”

As the rabbi and I talked electronics, his brother Seth began to strum a guitar. Sukkot is a harvest holiday, a joyous celebration. Later on, Sizomu said, the tribe would be gathering to sing—in Luganda—some psalms set to music. They would perform some traditional African dances. And they would wave tree branches in the air as a sign of rejoicing. “It’s a thing the Bagisu do,” he said.

* * *

I had arrived in Mbale two days before to find the dusty streets filled with branch-waving Bagisu. The tribe is the predominant one in and around Uganda’s third-



Rabbi Gershom Sizomu (third from left) and members of his Abayudaya congregation, Sunday, Sept. 22, 2002. His brother, Seth ben Jonadav, stands at the far right with his guitar. The tribe was once regarded by its neighbors as “Christ-killers,” Sizomu says. Things have changed since the Americans discovered them. “I felt included, and that gave me the courage to continue with what we’re pursuing here.”

largest town, and the revelers were everywhere, dancing and shouting and rejoicing in their own harvest holiday.

It was circumcision season.

“Maybe we will see some of them,” Othieno said. The initiates would be hard to miss: adolescent boys coated chalky-white with flour. Othieno, my friend and guide, was from this part of the country. As he kept look-out, he explained the tribe’s rather grueling coming-of-age ritual. The boy dances through the streets, clad in little more than a loincloth. When he reaches the appointed spot, he stops. He stands with his arms outstretched and eyes straight ahead as the operation is performed. There is a mound of sawdust or sand to catch the blood. If the boy flinches or shows fear, the crowd jeers. And when the ritual is finished, he is a man. He begins to dance again.

As I nudged my car around Mbale’s central traffic circle, through the throng of happy Bagisu, I pondered, not for the first time, the complexities of Ugandan society. It’s a deeply religious country, fertile ground for born-again missionaries and native evangelists alike. Yet this devout culture coexists—often within the same person—with the vestiges of what existed before the Europeans came: polygamy, traditional medicine, a fear of sorcerers with malevolent powers.

Every person here is defined by a complex matrix of affinities and allegiances—political, regional, tribal, religious. Layer peeks from behind layer, like coats of paint

half-stripped from the walls of an old house. European missionaries painted religion over tribal customs; post-independence politicians covered parties over religious divisions. But at which layer does the genuine end and artifice begin?

This problem of authenticity was far from an abstraction to the Abayudaya. Discovered in the bush, the tribe had become a sort of test case for the question: “What is a Jew?” Sizomu and his followers had never had never thought to ask themselves that—they knew they were Jews. But it really concerned their western visitors. So the Abayudaya worked assiduously to prove they were “real.” They jettisoned old beliefs and adopted new ones. They learned a strange new language, Hebrew.

I was more interested in another question: “What is a Ugandan?” What linked the Abayudaya to the Bagisu, besides tribal dances and waved branches? And how had they come to take this curious religious detour? The answer would turn out to be anything but tangential to Uganda’s modern history. It lay in the life of a man, Semei Kakungulu, who could easily be called the father of modern Uganda. He was also the father of the Abayudaya.

Kakungulu was born in 1868, in an outlying area of the powerful kingdom of Buganda. He was a skilled elephant hunter, so good at the lucrative and dangerous trade that he won a minor chieftainship, and a place at the court of *Kabaka* Mutesa, Buganda’s king.

Mutesa’s thatched-roof palace, on Mengo Hill, was a treacherous place—a Jacobean revenge tragedy with spears. Secretive cabals competed for the *kabaka*’s ear. Kakungulu was an ambitious young man, brave and handsome. (In pictures from his youth, he bears a striking resemblance to Tupac Shakur.) According to his biographer, Michael Twaddle, Kakungulu quickly discerned which group was on the rise: the “readers,” literate young Christian converts. Kakungulu wanted in.

The white men had stumbled across Buganda a few years before, while looking for the source of the Nile. Now the place was crawling with gospel-preaching Europeans. British Protestants from the Church Missionary Society (CMS) had set up a mission house in Natete. French Catholic priests, known as the White Fathers, were building a cathedral in Rubaga. (All of these places are encompassed within the modern-day city of Kampala.) The two religions—along with Islam, brought by Arab traders a generation earlier—competed for converts among the Baganda.

Kakungulu began to steal over to the CMS mission house at night. There he

met a Scottish Calvinist named Alexander Mackay. Mackay was a stern type, Thomas Pakenham writes in his definitive history of the period, *The Scramble for Africa*, forever decrying evils of “cruelty, slavery, polygamy, witchcraft,” and, most revolting of all, sodomy. (Casual homosexuality prevailed at the *kabaka*’s court.) Inside the only two-story building in the kingdom, Mackay taught Kakungulu to read the Bible.

Kakungulu was a small victory for Mackay. What he was really after was the soul of the *kabaka* himself. He was trying to get close to Mutesa. So he had seeded the court with converts like Kakungulu. His faction, known as the *Wa-Ingleza*, plotted against the Catholic converts, the *Wa-Fransa*, the Muslims, and the old-guard *Wa-Bangi*, “pagan traditionalists who smoked hashish or bang,” Pakenham writes. The result, witting or not, was European-style religious strife.

After Mutesa died, his young successor, Mwanga, tried to push the foreigners out. He ordered a bishop killed and a group of young “readers” burned alive. Then he hatched a plan to lure all the foreigners and their converts onto canoes, to be marooned on a deserted island. The canoe stratagem failed, and in 1888 the Protestants, Catholics and Muslims allied to drive Mwanga from power. As soon as the *kabaka* fled, the allies turned on each other. A little Thirty-Years war broke out on the shores of Lake Victoria. The British, fearing the kingdom would fall into the hands of the French or the Germans if the Catholics won, intervened on the behalf of the Protestants. Uganda became a colony.

Kakungulu had distinguished himself as a *Wa-Inglezi* general, and he soon became a confidant of Frederick Lugard, father of the British policy of “indirect” rule of overseas territories, who by 1890 was the de-facto ruler of Buganda. Kakungulu was “absolutely loyal,” Lugard



Outside Mbale, a Bagisu boy and his friends run along the side of the highway. They were raising money from passers-by for his circumcision ceremony. The big day was just two days away, he said.

wrote. He was also arrogant and, at times, impossible to control. But he proved useful. Lugard and his successors sent Kakungulu off to subdue the regions surrounding Buganda. He marched east with British guns to kill his adversaries, and British missionaries to civilize those who survived. Where once Kakungulu was a less-than-complete convert, Twaddle writes, with his many slaves and multiple wives and his pot smoking, someone who had “embraced Christianity more from his admiration of the social system ... than from any inward conviction of its Divine truths,” as one contemporary put it, he was now known as “a CMS man and a rather fervent one.”

Kakungulu conquered a vast swath of eastern Uganda. In a place he named Nkoma, or “I stopped here,” he built an enormous palace modeled on the *kabaka*’s. He ruled as a king, and gained a reputation as a wise law-giver. In earlier times, this might have been the beginning of a new African kingdom. But the British decided it was time to rein in “Kakungulu the native collector and his horde of undisciplined fellows.” (As one colonial official so evocatively put it.) They appointed whites to oversee the king. The first overseer was a recently-promoted clerk, the second, a choleric Irishman who made no bones about his contempt for the “natives.” Kakungulu got the picture. He retired to his estate.

The British would call Kakungulu out of retirement to serve as the governor of a neighboring province. But in his absence, his kingdom deteriorated; he would return to find his ranks of followers dwindling and his palace razed, Twaddle writes, “in the interests of European hygiene.” Later, the British would seize a hill he owned in Kampala to build Makerere University. Kakungulu fought for compensation, but in the end, a British magistrate would award him a mere 28,000 shillings.

“When the missionaries arrived,” Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya’s first president would mordantly observe many years later, “Africans had the land, and the missionaries had the Bible. They taught us to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land, and we had the Bible.”

Kakungulu, embittered though he was by the loss of his land, was still reading his Bible. Reading it very closely. He became intrigued by the teachings of a new Ugandan sect, the Malakites. The Malakites had come across passages in the Bible that said the Sabbath was actually on Saturday. They read about patriarchs of old, who had hundreds of wives. They wondered why the missionaries said they could have only one. They found what they interpreted as prohibitions against the white man’s medicine.

Kakungulu became a biblical literalist. One day in 1914, he was on his way to a festival in Kampala. He was stopped at the Nile by British officials, who said he would have to be inoculated against the plague if he wanted to cross. “The medicine has no power, only God has that,”

Kakungulu is said to have declared. An Indian orderly grabbed his arm, and a scuffle broke out. That was it for the Anglicans. Kakungulu turned around, went home, and started his own church.

* * *

Gershom Sizomu had invited me to visit for Sukkot. But when I arrived in Mbale there was no answer on his cell phone. So Othieno and I tried to find the Abayudaya ourselves. Someone told us which dirt road went to Nabugoye Hill. At each little cluster of huts, we would stop, and Othieno would ask in Lugisu, the language of the Bagisu, where the Jews lived. People looked at us like we were crazy.

Eventually, someone told us to look around Semei Kakungulu High School. And that was how we eventually found them. A young man in a green embroidered shirt (a *kitenge*), came down from the top of the hill and shook our hands: “Shalom.” He said he was Seth ben Jonadav, Gershom’s brother. (Vastly generalizing, Ugandan families don’t share the same last name; surnames are chosen just as first names are.) Ben Jonadav invited us into the synagogue to talk. We didn’t have anything to cover our heads, so he retrieved a kippah, a small hand-woven hat, for each of us.

“You can buy one for ten,” he said.

“Ten thousand shillings?” I asked.

“No, ten dollars.”

The synagogue was filled with desks—they looked like they belonged in some one-room schoolhouse a century ago. The walls were lined with bookshelves. I surveyed their contents: Jewish prayer books, a worn set of the World Book Encyclopedia, a 1990 World Almanac. A worn Israeli flag hung from the pulpit. A Ugandan flag hung above it.

Ben Jonadav took a seat on top of one of the desks. Gershom had been detained in Nairobi, he said. Another brother, Joab Jonadabu Keki (J.J. for short), would be arriving shortly: “He is with some people from Holland. One of them is a journalist, too.”

I expressed surprise that there were other white people around. “They’re here every weekend, almost,” he said. The Abayudaya take all the media attention in stride—they seem, by this point, almost jaded by it. Just a couple of weeks before, for instance, a CNN camera crew had come from New York for Rosh Hashana to tape a feature story on the tribe. Neither Ben Jonadav nor any of the other Abayudaya seemed to think the gargantuan news network’s visit particularly extraordinary—in fact, no one even mentioned it the entire time I was there. (I only found out about the segment when it aired in early October.)

Ben Jonadav is 26, and teaches history at the high

school. So I asked him to explain to me the history of how the Abayudaya became Jewish. He began, of course, with Kakungulu.

"The man began to read the Bible very critically," he said. He began keeping the Sabbath on Saturday, and, in 1919, he ordered his followers to be circumcised. This caused a rift between him and the Malakites, who didn't like the idea of circumcision. "As soon as he saw people denying him," ben Jonadav said, "he said, 'Let me be Jewish.'"

He called his new church *Kibina kya Bayudaya absesiga Katonda*, or the "community of Jews who trust in the Lord." In the beginning, the Abayudaya numbered around 3,000 people. They were a diverse group of subtly varying Bantu extraction, and, over time, they came to think of their community as a tribe of its own.

Kakungulu, the patriarch, took to wearing a white



Semei Kakungulu was buried on a hill not far from the Abayudaya's synagogue. To the left of the grave stands his great-grandson, Joseph Serwanga. "We were brought up in that religion," he said, "[but] the language they use now is so different—that Israeli language."

robe, a white turban and a white beard. ("Like an ancient Jew, like Abraham," Sizomu later told me.) He propagated a book of rules and prayers based on the Old Testament. He set psalms to music. He created an Abayudaya worship service, loosely modeled on an Anglican one, conducted in an amalgam of Luganda and Hebrew. The center of it was the singing of the 32nd chapter of Deuteronomy, the Song of Moses, a passage Kakungulu held particularly dear. "That song is still sung by the Abayudaya," Keki told me when he arrived at the synagogue. "That is a tradition to us that I have not seen anywhere else."

Kakungulu died in 1928, and he is buried on a hill

not far from the Abayudaya's. Only a small honor guard was available for his funeral, Michael Twaddle writes, apparently because local British officials were annoyed by his "tendency in his very last years to refuse to move off the road whenever a British protectorate official's vehicle came along."

Difficult times lay ahead for the Abayudaya. "When Kakungulu died," Keki said, "the religion almost collapsed." Christian missionaries were teaching all the old canards about Judaism. Worse still, they required children to convert in order to attend their schools. People fell away. But a remnant of the Abayudaya continued practicing Kakungulu's faith, among them Keki's father. "He said, those with small minds join those big religions."

Keki, an affable, gangly man of 42, is the tribe's political leader, and probably the person most responsible for its resurgence after years of isolation and repression. When

he was a child there were perhaps 1,000 Abayudaya. It was a good time to be Jewish in Uganda. Israel had an embassy in Kampala. The ambassador, Arye Oded, heard about the tribe of Jews near Mbale, visited, and wrote about them. Then a young general came to power in a military coup: Idi Amin. At first, relations with Israel remained warm. (Amin had once received military training there, and there were rumors that the Israelis had engineered his rise.) Then, abruptly, Amin made friends with Muammar Gaddafi and kicked out the Israelis.

The Abayudaya were attacked as "Zionist" spies. Practice of their religion was banned. One of the tribe's synagogues was burned down. Many of the Abayudaya were harassed, imprisoned and tortured, including Keki's father. "They got him while he was praying in secret," he said. It took a large bribe,

several goats, to get him out.

During this period, Keki's brother Sizomu said on another occasion, "I remember my father and my family praying ... very silently. The prayers were centered around, first of all, get rid of Idi Amin." The prayers were finally answered in the spring of 1979, when Tanzanians, enraged by an attempted Ugandan invasion, counterattacked into Uganda and drove Amin from power. Kampala fell on April 10. Two days later, the Abayudaya celebrated Passover.

Years of repression had left the community battered and depleted. "Some people who were cowards, joined

those [other] religions," Keki said. They'd even lost their land. "This hill, during Amin's time, the Anglican church [nearby] wanted to take it over to establish its headquarters," he recalled. Keki, who was just 19, decided to take it back.

He had found a few dusty books lying around, brought by the Israeli ambassador years before. The older generation couldn't make much out of them, because they were in English. But Keki spoke the language. He read about modern Israel, and learned about a kind of communal farm, called a kibbutz.

"I organized the youth, those remnants that remained," Keki said. He planned a sneaky operation to retake Nabugoye Hill. The church was running a primary school on the property. Keki convinced the headmaster that he wanted to help expand it. The kibbutzniks began making bricks and digging a foundation. What they were actually building, however, was a new synagogue.

The Anglicans discovered the subterfuge and, in 1989, Keki and Sizomu were arrested. They spent four days in jail. "When we got out, we said, 'Let's go back,'" Keki said. So the kibbutzniks went to live on Nabugoye Hill. They weren't exactly squatting—land titles are very rare in the Ugandan countryside—but they weren't welcome, either. Things got rough. One night, a mob of Protestants came with guns. They barged into kibbutzniks' huts, only to find they weren't there. It was Sukkot, and they were in their tents, nervously watching the whole thing. The mob found two Abayudaya, and beat them senseless.

Finally, word of the feud filtered up to the Ugandan government. There was a new man in charge of the country, President Yoweri Museveni, and he had vowed to end Uganda's nasty sectarianism. The government told the Protestants to knock it off. That halted the strife. But it didn't change any hearts. The Abayudaya still had to put up with the venomous taunts from their neighbors.

"All the religions had to be against the Jews," recalled ben Jonadav. "They called us Christ-killers."

Keki excused himself, and went out to check on his Dutch guests. I decided it was time to go. It was getting toward sundown. Othieno and I drove back to Mbale.

We were ravenous, so we stopped for dinner at the Mount Elgon View Hotel. While we were eating, a white bus pulled up outside. A group of about two dozen people filed into the restaurant. One wore a t-shirt emblazoned with the phrase "Flagstaff Arizona Fire Department." Another's shirt simply bore a cross, and the word "Jesus."

"Church trip?" I asked the guy in the Jesus shirt. "Yep," he replied.

The scramble for Africa may be long past, but the

scramble for souls has never really stopped in Uganda. The missionaries did—and continue to do—a lot of good in Africa. They brought medicine and clothes, and built schools. They only asked for faith in return.

The Abayudaya weren't willing to give that. So by the early 1990s they were teetering on the on the brink of extinction, despised and desperately poor. What they needed, they decided, were some missionaries of their own. Before long, they were to find them.

* * *

I first met Gershom Sizomu on a frigid night in Tenafly, New Jersey. I had taken the bus out from New York to hear the "Ugandan Rabbi," as the flyer had so improbably put it. The bus let me off at the bottom of a long, steep hill. The higher I trudged up it, the bigger the houses got—from affluent to handsome to mansion. At the top was the Jewish Community Center of the Palisades. It was a long way from Mbale.

Twenty-nine people, most of them very old or very young, were sparsely clustered around the auditorium. Ray Kaplan, a retired electrical engineer, was introducing the speaker:

"There's a group of people practicing Judaism down there, they call themselves the Abayudaya. They've been practicing Judaism since 1919," he said. Kaplan, who as a young man went to fight in Israel's 1948 war of independence (his ship was stopped in Beirut and he spent the war imprisoned in the Bekka Valley), is now an officer in an organization called Kulanu, which devotes itself to ferreting out lost Jews all around the world. He was wearing a green Abayudaya kippah.

"He's the spiritual leader of the Moses synagogue, which is the largest synagogue of the Abayudaya community," he continued. "Just to give you an idea, it's about a four hour car ride from ..." He groped for the reference point. "My mind went blank ... the place the Israelis rescued ... Entebbe." The audience murmured. Entebbe, they knew.

Sizomu took the stage. He wore a colorful, Cosby-esque sweater, and carried an acoustic guitar. He began to sing a Hebrew song, "Himei Ma Tov," in a soft, lilting voice. On "Shalom Everybody Everywhere!" a 1997 album of the Abayudaya's music (available for \$15 from Kulanu's website), Sizomu says the song is meant to symbolize the tribe's unity with the rest of the world Jewish community.

When the song was finished, Sizomu told the audience about the Abayudaya. "We celebrate Purim, Hanukah, we celebrate bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah," Sizomu said. "And members of the community sent me here to request you come and visit. We feel that you are our brothers and sisters." Sizomu is 33, but looks even younger, and he

has a wide smile. The audience was quickly charmed.

“Do you have sects?” someone asked.

“You can call us reconservadox,” he replied. The audience laughed. “We are everything. We don’t have any division. We are everything and we are one.”

“In Uganda, is it a town that’s just Jewish?” asked a child wearing a gray t-shirt and glasses.

“We live in the villages. I don’t know whether you have an idea of a village. ... We don’t have running water. It’s one of the things I’m going to miss when I go back. Here, you just go in the bathroom and you command water to come.”

“Is your community growing or shrinking?” another child asked.

“Our community is actually growing. As I told you by the overthrow of Amin we were only 300, and now we have doubled.”

Someone asked, what do people think about Jews in Uganda?

“Jew is regarded as a Christ-killer in Uganda, he is regarded as a traitor,” Sizomu said. “All sorts of bad names are called a Jew. ... But the people in the community are very strong, and that is why we don’t go away.”

“Where do the torahs come from?”

“The torahs come from the United States,” Sizomu replied.

Indeed, it was friends from the United States who ultimately delivered the Abayudaya—and who had brought Sizomu all the way to Tenafly. Winning the hill back had been a boon, but the tribe was still in deep trouble in the early 1990s. Their numbers were tiny, their synagogue was only built as high as the windows, and there was no money to finish it. Then Gershom Sizomu took a trip to Nairobi in search of help. Suddenly, miraculously, the Abayudaya’s fortunes began to take a turn for the better.

Matthew Meyer, a Brown University student, was on a study abroad program in Nairobi at the time. One day, while he was worshipping at the synagogue, he looked around and saw, to his surprise, a black man. After the services were over, Meyer asked the man who he was, and why he was there. Sizomu told him.

Meyer wasn’t the first to “discover” the Abayudaya. Even in Kakungulu’s time, the tribe benefited from contacts with the people they called “white Jews.” One, remembered only as Joseph, met Kakungulu in Kampala when he went to contest the seizure of his land. Joseph visited, taught Kakungulu how to keep kosher, and gave

him a Hebrew Bible. (Unfortunately, none of the Abayudaya could read it.) Subsequently, other Jews passing through Uganda—merchants, engineers—encountered the tribe. One told the Abayudaya to stop baptizing their children. Another built a mikvah. In the 1960s, the Israeli Ambassador had come. He told them Jews didn’t sacrifice animals anymore, and promised more help from abroad. But Amin put an end to that, and the tribe had sunk back into obscurity.

Now, Sizomu was trying to end the isolation. “He showed me pictures,” Meyer would recall five years later in an article in *The Forward*. “[He told] stories of people praying in mud-hut synagogues, celebrating Jewish holidays, circumcising their sons and observing the dietary laws in agricultural villages isolated from the Jewish world.” Sizomu invited the American student to spend a Sabbath with the community.

Meyer returned to America with a sheaf of pictures and an amazing story about lost Jews. He raised money, through the Brown University Hillel, to complete their synagogue, and got his hometown congregation to donate a torah.

His story eventually made its way to a small organization called Kulanu, which was devoted to “finding lost and dispersed remnants of the Jewish people.” (In Hebrew, Kulanu means, “all of us.”) It was turning up remnants all over the place: descendants of the ten lost tribes in India and China; crypto-Jews in Brazil and Mexico, whose ancestors had been forcibly converted during the Spanish Inquisition; the Lemba, a tribe genetically related to modern Israelis that somehow ended up in South Africa. Inspired by the successful return of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, members of Kulanu were traveling the world to help these people “(re)join the Jewish community.”

In 1995, the group sent a delegation to visit Uganda. Members of Kulanu wouldn’t have called themselves missionaries—they don’t proselytize people without any connection to Judaism. But to the Abayudaya, they were little different from their Christian counterparts, and that was fine with them. “All these [other] religions had always had friends on the outside,” J.J. Keki said. Once Kulanu came, he continued, “our religion [became] really respected, because the other religions saw we had friends on the outside, too.”

Kulanu began funneling aid to the Abayudaya: money to help build Semei Kakungulu High School and the Hadassah Infant School; school books; religious texts; toys and soccer balls for the children; money for food when there was a threat of famine; money for candles (\$1,182 to be precise), so that every Abayudaya household could properly observe the Sabbath; money for scholarships, so that dozens of Abayudaya children could complete high school.

Kulanu’s activities remain quite controversial among

many mainstream Jews. “The major Jewish organizations,” said Karen Primack, a member of the 1995 delegation and author the book *Jews in Places You Never Thought Of*, “are not interested in helping the Abayudaya, because they say they’re not really Jewish.” The problem springs from one of the basic tenets of the faith—that Jews are not just followers a religion, but a chosen people. Inter-marriage outside the faith is discouraged, and joining it via conversion is very difficult. Many remain suspicious that the Abayudaya’s interest in Judaism arises out of a desire to emigrate to Israel, like the Ethiopians did. But the Abayudaya presented an even more difficult case than the Ethiopians—they didn’t claim to be lost, but rather to have found the religion on their own.

There was a feeling, Ray Kaplan told me, “of ‘what are you doing with a bunch of black Jews?’ among a lot of people.”

Kulanu’s solution to the problem was to teach the Abayudaya how to be “proper” Jews. Visitors instructed the tribe about the practice of Judaism. Sizomu was sent to Hebrew Union College in New York City, to pursue formal rabbinical study.

Finally, earlier this year, the Abayudaya decided they were ready to officially convert. A delegation of rabbis came from the United State and Israel to gauge the depth of their knowledge. Rabbi Scott Glass, of the Temple Beth-El in Ithaca, New York, a Conservative congregation, began the trip “skeptical” about the number of fit converts he would find.

“I think there was a preconception that these were a group of backwards, unsophisticated, illiterate, uneducated people,” Glass said, “because they hadn’t until very recently had any contact with the Jewish world.” But Glass and others on the trip came away deeply moved. “They were much more learned than we ever imagined.” In the end, the rabbis converted more than half of the 600 Abayudaya. The men underwent symbolic circumcisions and the women were ritually immersed in a nearby river.

“Now,” Sizomu told me, “I feel like we’re part of a big family of people doing the same thing.”

* * *

“*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha-olam ...*” It was Saturday morning, Shabbat. The cantor swayed back and forth as he prayed. The benches of the synagogue were full of men and boys wearing kippot and prayer shawls. Women sat in chairs along the left wall. The sun streaked in through cracks in the roof.

Sizomu stood behind the pulpit and the Is-

raeli flag, wearing a blue *kitenge* shirt and a white prayer shawl. He called for a song, Psalm 136. The congregation broke into a traditional African tune. “Oh, give thanks to the Lord for he is good,” they sang in Luganda. When the music stopped, the synagogue fell silent for a moment. I could hear chickens clucking outside.

When it came time to read from the torah, Sizomu called up one of the Dutch visitors, Sydney Leever. Leever went to the back wall, pulled the African-patterned cloth away from the ark, and removed the torah. He carried it around the synagogue. The congregation sang and, as Leever passed, put their hands to their lips and reached out to touch the scrolls.

Where once they were isolated, the Abayudaya are now almost spoilt by company. “Every year, there are more and more *mzungus* coming,” Seth ben Jonadav told me the day before. Most of the visitors were well-meaning, bringing money and encouragement. But there are a few unwanted guests, like the strange Americans who called themselves “Jews for Jesus.” There was the white man who brought his family to live in the hills, took an Abayudaya girl as a second wife, and told the tribe to forsake medicine. He was finally evicted after one of his children died of malaria.

Still, the Abayudaya remain enthusiastically welcoming. “You can see we are blessed with visitors from all over the Earth,” Sizomu said, as he began his sermon. “For the first time, from Holland, we have Shoshanna and Sydney.”

Sizomu apologized to the congregation for having



The Abayudaya at prayer in their synagogue. The Israeli flag hangs from the pulpit, the Ugandan flag above it. They practice a particularly observant brand of Judaism—no pictures on Saturday—but I didn’t know that when I took this photo.



After services, members of the Abayudaya mill about outside their synagogue. The tribe had no money to finish building the synagogue—until Sizomu met Matthew Meyer, an American college student.

been absent the day before—he had gotten a flat tire on his way back from Nairobi, where he had gone to negotiate for visas at the Israeli embassy. “We have hopes that two of our people will go to Israel,” he told the congregation, “and this time the hope is brighter than ever before.”

Then Sizomu meditated for a moment on the significance of the holiday. “We observe Sukkot in order to remember the departure from Egypt,” he said. “If we forget, we are doomed.”

After the service was over, the congregation went around back to the *sukkah*, or tent, the Abayudaya had built for the holiday. They ate salted bread and drank kosher wine, mixed with local beer brewed from bananas and pineapples. I struck up a conversation with Shoshanna DeGoede. She said she and Leever, her boyfriend, were spending a year traveling around Africa, and had run across the Abayudaya on the internet. DeGoede is a freelance journalist, and plans to write a story about the experience for a Jewish newspaper in Amsterdam. “Apparently no one in Holland knows about the Abayudaya,” she said.

Some of the Abayudaya’s outside friends worry about how all this new attention will affect them. Money has exacerbated the jealousies and rivalries that occur naturally within any community, one person told me. There are concerns, too, that in their zeal to gain acceptance, the Abayudaya might be throwing away their distinctive heritage. “I told them, it’s very important not to lose your traditions,” said Glass, the rabbi who went to convert them. “But yes, there is a risk, and that’s a risk that you always run whenever you have cultures touching.”

“Some people are pulling out,” Joseph Serwanga, Kakungulu’s great-grandson, told me. “I am a Jew. We were brought up in that religion.” But he said he doesn’t

go to the synagogue much anymore. “The language they use now is so different—that Israeli language.”

“I think we will be losing some of our original traditions,” Sizomu said, as we sat in the *sukkah*. He reached up to the roof, where a bunch of bananas were hanging, and plucked a few off for us to eat.

Which traditions? I asked. When he was a boy, he said, the Abayudaya still followed their own worship service, a variation of Kakungulu’s. That had changed. Over the years, too, they had dropped references to Jesus and other teachings based on the New Testament. There had been changes in the way bodies were buried. And the tribe had let go of some of its Old Testament laws: If someone touched a corpse, he wouldn’t be allowed in the synagogue; neither would a woman if she was menstruating; neither would anyone wearing shoes.

There were more practical sacrifices. “When these people came, they told us we couldn’t have polygamy anymore,” J.J. Keki said. “Now we’ve got a lot of girls without partners.” But all in all, Sizomu and his brother said these were small prices to pay. “We think that in order to be a part of the big family, we need to do like them,” Sizomu said.

How had becoming part of this family changed the Abayudaya? J.J. Keki gave me a neat explanation—call it the parable of the cows.

Cows are the coin of the realm in the Ugandan rural economy, the ultimate measure of wealth. So a few years ago, with the help of their new friends, the Abayudaya made a proposal to an American charity called Heifer Project International. It agreed to supply the tribe with a very practical form of foreign aid: free cows. And not just any cows, but big cows. (“Exotic cows,” Sizomu said.) They gave a heifer to anyone in the area who was willing

to take a short course from them about how to properly care for the animal.

Before long, the Abayudaya had become very popular. Keki, the onetime kibbutznik, ran for chairman of the local county council. He beat the incumbent, a Muslim, by 500 votes. "There were Muslims who gave me votes, there were Christians who gave me votes," he said.

The Abayudaya have become almost rich, at least by local standards. "Almost every child of us is now in school," Keki said. Four Abayudaya have now graduated from the local university. There are programs, with outside financing, to bring water and electricity to the village.

Recognition has given them confidence. Now, when the tribe members hear the old Christ-killer taunts, they defend themselves. "We're saying, 'Ok, then we're more powerful than your God,'" said Keki, the politician. "If you think Jesus is God, and then we kill him, you should come worship with us."

Most important of all, with such powerful friends, the tribe has come to believe it can never again be persecuted.

"Now we have also become a threat," ben Jonadav said. "We could kill you also."

Though it's still far from where it was in its heyday, the tribe has begun to grow again. So many now want to get in, Sizomu said, that the rabbi has to turn people away: "It's not like saying 'Who wants to be Jewish? Raise your hand.'"

I asked Sizomu what he had thought of New York. He said he had problems with the instruction at Hebrew Union College. "They were allowing doubts," he explained, "as if to undermine the Bible, like it was not written by a supernatural being but was just some book." But he was wowed by the city itself. "On Shabbat, New York becomes a Jewish city. I felt like I was in Israel," he said "I saw two Jewish people running for mayor—and one of them winning."

When Sizomu thinks ahead, he sees the Abayudaya creating their own little Jewish enclave. "I want the community to be able to live together," he said. "Maybe we will construct a town here on top of this hill." There might be a college: "Hebrew University, Abayudaya University," he said. But first, he said the community must become "economically independent."

"You can't serve God properly unless you have the means to do so," Sizomu said.

I wondered what Semei Kakungulu would have made of what had become of his tribe. So I said goodbye to



At the services, Rachel Namudosi (foreground) a young Abayudaya girl, asked Sizomu, "Why is it that we have so much love on Sukkot?" Sizomu replied: "God has given us the seasons to enjoy. You don't need to be gloomy twelve months a year. You need time to rejoice, to sing and dance and laugh." Afterwards, the congregation went back to the sukkah and drank kosher wine, mixed with beer brewed from bananas and pineapples.

Sizomu until the next morning, when I would come back to take his picture, and I drove across a narrow cow path to the yellow house where the founder of the Abayudaya had spent his last years. It was large, but hardly a palace, and it had grown dilapidated over the years.

Around back, where the residents were cooking lunch over a fire, I found Joseph Serwanga. He led me to a low building housing his great-grandfather's grave. Inside was a large stone slab, inscribed with Kakungulu's name, and a Star of David. A single spear stood in the ground in front of it. "That was his," Serwanga said.

Why had Kakungulu chosen Judaism, of all religions? Michael Twaddle writes that "Kakungulu's establishment of the [Abayudaya] community was the typical act of a spiritually restless man who was changing his religious views right up to the end of his earthly life." Others have theorized it was meant as a final stick in the eye of the British who had converted him, then taken his self-declared kingship, his palace and his land. Not surprisingly, the Abayudaya have a more spiritual view of the matter. According to the tribe's lore, Kakungulu the lawgiver fell in love with the five books of Moses, with their rigid ideas of law and order.

"But how can they be Jews?" Othieno, my African friend, had asked me the night before, over dinner in Mbale. "I thought the Jews were like a tribe. I am a Jopadhola. You can say you are Jopadhola, but you will always be American. A *mzungu*."

Othieno, in his Ugandan way, had instinctively un-

derstood the question: "What is a Jew?" That had gotten me thinking. Back in my hotel room, I found a copy of the Bible and looked up Deuteronomy 32, the Song of Moses, the passage Kakungulu held so dear. The song is Moses' last word to his people before he dies. In the desert, the song says, "the Lord alone led him; no foreign god was with him." I imagined the aging, embittered warlord, leafing through the missionary's Bible, reading the story of a chosen people—a tribe—wandering through the desert to find its promised land, and of a God who was both terrible and just. Was it so difficult to imagine that he had read those passages and heard echoes of his own life? Did he see a bit of himself in the figure of Moses: the patriarch who served the Pharaoh, and then rebuked him to lead his people into a new land? It must have sounded to him like a very African story.

What about Othieno's question: Were they really Jews? The Abayudaya certainly thought they were. Was that enough? The Song of Moses had warned, too, of trials to come, and the plagues God would send upon the Jews if they lost faith. "I think the song was a very good reminder to the children of Israel to be good, in order to avert the dangers in store for them," Sizomu had said. His people had passed that test. For years, unknown and persecuted, they had kept on practicing Kakungulu's faith.

"What makes a person a Jew?" Ray Kaplan said. "To me the Jewish people are a people who emerged 3,000 years ago, and stubbornly, despite all the murder and persecution and pogroms down through the ages, they managed to survive."

I walked out of Kakungulu's burial chamber, and looked down from his hilltop. Mbale looked like a toy city below. In the end, I thought, there was nothing terribly anomalous about the Abayudaya, at least from a Ugandan perspective. Sure, a few twists of history had left them practicing an alien religion. But the same went for almost everyone else in the country. Judaism wasn't any more or less native to Uganda than Anglicanism, or Catholicism, or Islam, or Mormonism, or any of the other myriad faiths people here have acquired, willingly or not, over the years. Ugandans had embraced these religions with uncommon fervor, and made them distinctly their own. In this respect, the Abayudaya seemed little different from their neighbors.

Were they losing something in the process of gaining the recognition and appreciation of outsiders? Perhaps, Rabbi Glass had said, "but basically, it's their right to decide what they want to do, what direction they want to go in." And if their connection to a group of people in wealthy countries had edged them a few millimeters up toward the poverty line, had helped smooth some of the religious tensions that were put

there in the first place by white people? Well then, as the Abayudaya would say, *mazel tov*.

My way back to Mbale happened to take me past the old Anglican church the Abayudaya had fought for so many years. As I went by, someone waved to me: a familiar face, Yahweh Mugaya. I had met him the day before at the synagogue, and had assumed he was Jewish. In fact, he said, he was a Protestant. He just worked as Sizomu's driver.

Nearby, a crowd of people had gathered to watch the local children play soccer, and Mugaya went and found someone for me to talk to: Dan Kasakya, a lay leader of the church. I asked him how the Abayudaya's neighbors felt about them now. "These days there is nothing like there was," he said. "That was all politics." He sends his children to Semei Kakungulu High School (it's open to people of all faiths), and he was much impressed by the cow initiative. "They are given to people of all religious sects," he said.

"No one can say anything bad about the Jews," Mugaya said.

As we talked, a crowd of little children had come to stare at the white person with the camera. Mugaya shooshed them away. I smiled apologetically. Later, as I got back into my car, they gathered around to wave and say goodbye.

"Mzungu! Mzungu!" they yelled, as I pulled away. "Shalom, mzungu!" □

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Yahweh Mugaya is a member of the Anglican church that fought the Abayudaya for control of the hill. (That's the church over his right shoulder.) He is also now Sizomu's driver. "No one can say anything bad about the Jews," he said.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **SOUTHERN AFRICA**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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