Abayudaya: The Jews of Uganda by
Jeffrey A. Summit

Exquisite Photos And Music Of Uganda's Jews

Told with captivating images, an evocative text, and haunting music on a CD, here is the remarkable story of a courageous group of rural African people who converted to Judaism eighty years ago and, despite ensuing hardships, have stuck by their faith. The six hundred members of the Abayudaya (Children of Judah) community living in a remote area of eastern Uganda lead a life devoted to traditional Jewish practices. They observe the Sabbath and holidays, attend services, follow dietary laws, and cling tightly to traditions in their small mud and brick synagogues. Surrounded by Muslims and Christians, facing poverty and isolation, these people have maintained their Jewish way of life for four generations since the initial conversion of their tribal chief Semei Kukungulu in 1917. Even during Idi Amin’s reign of terror, when synagogues were closed and prayers had to be held in secret, the Abayudaya did not abandon their beliefs. Richard Sobol is the first photojournalist to document this newly discovered Jewish community’s way of life and to relate their heroic story. His sensitive portraits and moving landscapes depict everyday life, from caring for children to struggling to grow food. He shows their day of rest on the Jewish Sabbath, as well as their religious celebrations and rituals. His intriguing text, including extensive interviews, chronicles the story of this community from its conception to the present. Supplementing Sobol’s images and text is a CD filled with powerful music and songs from services recorded by ethnomusicologist Jeffrey A. Summit, who has also provided an essay examining this unique mix of African and Jewish sounds. Other details: 100 full-color illustrations

My Personal Review:
Richard Sobol has just come out with Abayudaya: The Jews of Uganda, an exquisite volume of photographs with text about this remarkable group, and a CD of Abayudaya music is included in a pocket attached to the back cover. The music was recorded and annotated by Rabbi Jeffrey Summit, an ethnomusicologist at Tufts University.

Those of us who have lived and traveled in sub-Saharan Africa universally bemoan the fact that our pictures cannot capture the color and contrast, the rhythm, the unique beauty that is Africa. Richard Sobol, a seasoned pro, has captured the essence of these African scenes as few
others can (Carol Beckwith comes to mind). Views of the Ugandan
countryside and towns, of Abayudaya prayer and study and feasting, of
women washing dishes and carrying water and preparing food, of elders in
contemplation, of adults and children at play, of vendors of colorful
housewares, of stunning posed portraits - it's all there, and each photo is a
masterpiece.

And Sobol's 18-page essay about Abayudaya history and life and
Jewish practice is a fine summary for those who have not been introduced
to this unique community before.

Summit has written a five-page text to introduce the CD, which is
entitled Abayudaya Music of Worship and Celebration. This essay is both
informative and poignant. It reviews the various influences on Abayudaya
music - Zulu music, church and Salvation Army music, Bantu folk music,
Western visitors, and Nairobi (Kenya) synagogue melodies - often learned
from recordings or the radio.

Summit recorded this wonderful sampling of Abayudaya music in
informal sessions in Uganda in 2000 and 2002. The first half of the CD
includes unaccompanied traditional hymns and psalms, some dating back
20 or 30 years, one composed by the community's founder, Semei
Kakungulu, in the 1920s. The annotations themselves make fascinating
reading. One note explains that Psalm 136, heard on the recording as a
responsive "reading" with soloist and chorus, reminds the community of
the downfall of Idi Amin since it recounts God's deliverance with the splitting of
the Red Sea. A particularly precious rendition is Rena bat Esther's solo in
Psalm 121, used by the Abayudaya to provide strength and comfort when
a person is ill. This is one of the few compositions on the CD by a female
composer. Another woman's composition is the melody to Psalm 130,
which is sung repeatedly during a burial while shoveling earth and filling up
the grave. Women seem to specialize in consolation.

Twagala Torah ("We Love the Torah") is a charming children's song
composed by one of the youth leaders of the community, Moses
Sebagabo. The text, in Luganda, English and Hebrew, is sung by
Abayudaya children who attend public school.

The more upbeat second half of the CD features guitar
accompaniment by Gershom Sizomu and electric keyboard by John Mark
Nkoola, musical director of the Abayudaya high school. In an interesting
contrast, Summit placed the a cappella rendition of Psalm 136 in the first
half and the electric version of the same psalm in the latter half. J.J.
Keki's song "Ali Omu Yekka" ("My Only One") sounds like a standard love
song: "I have one chosen one. I only have one love. I'm warning those
others, don't come near me, she's enough...." But Summit points out that
the Torah is the object of the songwriter's love, and the song is a veiled
warning to Christian and Muslim proselytes in Uganda!
John Mark Nkoola wrote a modern song about the feeling he has when somebody has died. The words are particularly poignant in this place where deaths from AIDS and malaria are not uncommon: "The time has come. We must be going back where we have come from, to dust... When I think about death, I become afraid. I wish I had somebody to explain why this happens. Perhaps I may settle my mind. Let us enjoy life... Enjoy life in the right time, place and with the right people before you disappear like a shadow."

A few of the selections were heard on the community’s first recording, "ShalomEverybody Everywhere!" produced by Kulanu with the Abayudaya in 1997. It is particularly satisfying to hear the beautiful, mature voice of Rachel Namudosi, in "Adonai Mukulu" ("God Is Great"). We heard her lovely child’s voice on earlier recording. Happily, more recordings are in the works.

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