

OBITUARY

ABNER COHEN (1921–2001)

Although Professor Abner Cohen, who died in May 2001, moved to Oxford only after he had retired, he was a stimulating presence on the Oxford anthropological scene for the fifteen or so years we had the pleasure of his company. A regular attendee at many seminars, but particularly the ISCA departmental seminar and the Ethnicity and Identity seminar (organised by Shirley Ardener, Jonathan Webber, and others), he demonstrated acute anthropological insight in his comments and questions, even in the last year or so, when he was often confined to a wheelchair and was losing his speech. Together with his wife Gaynor—who tirelessly chauffeured him from seminar to lecture to seminar—he was also a frequent visitor to Queen Elizabeth House, the University's development centre and home to the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research on Women, of which he and Gaynor were great supporters.

Abner was born in Iraq in 1921 and moved with his family to Israel after the war, where he became an inspector of Arabic-medium schools. In the 1950s he came to Manchester, where he met both Max Gluckman, who became his doctoral supervisor, and Gaynor, who became his wife. In the early 1960s he moved on to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and remained there until he retired, becoming Professor of African Anthropology in 1972. After initial fieldwork in Israel (*Arab Border Villages in Israel*, 1965), followed by extended periods of research in Nigeria (*Custom and Politics in Urban Africa*, 1996) and Sierra Leone (*The Politics of Elite Culture*, 1981), Abner conducted fieldwork on the Notting Hill carnival (*Masquerade Politics*, 1993) and finally on Welsh chapels. Perhaps best known for his work on ethnicity and the cultural dimensions of politi-

cal action, in fact his work covered a broad range of themes and topics central to the discipline; his most challenging theoretical work is perhaps his essay *Two Dimensional Man* (1974), in which he reconciled the paradoxical yet observable facts of social change and social continuity through a theory of the mutual engagement of power and symbolism. He was rightly suspicious of what he saw as ill-founded psychologizing, though with his insistence on facts, presented through the extended case-study, and with his clear and direct writing style, one can see a line of continuity through Gluckman and back to Malinowski. But he always transcended the dull solidity of some classic British empiricism with a refreshing and stimulating intellectual creativity. He also avoided whimsy and the further reaches of linguistically persuasive but intellectually vacuous speculation. I remember him once fixing me with a stern eye and reading out a jokily casual aside in a manuscript I had given him to comment upon; he neither criticised it nor asked me to explain it, but I could tell he disapproved (I still retained the remark nonetheless).

Abner died on 13 May 2001; five weeks later, on a clear and fresh June day, his family and friends organised a celebration of his life at the Taylor Institute, Oxford. Reminiscences and episodes of his personal, family, and professional life were presented by his friends David Patterson and Humphrey Fischer, and by his friends and anthropological colleagues Lidia Sciama, Lionel Caplan, and David Parkin, each speaker introduced by one of Abner and Gaynor's children: Tammy, Simon, and Sara. The Institute's lecture hall was full to capacity, with many Oxford and London anthropologists present. Afterwards, Queen Elizabeth House served as a venue for an excellent and informative photographic exhibition that documented Abner's life, professional and personal. An obituary by David Parkin appeared in the *Guardian* (25 May), and another by Pat Caplan can be found on the ASA website at <<http://les1.man.ac.uk/asa/Abner%20Cohen.html>>.

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