

HISTORY AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S IN AN ANTIQUE LAND

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ABSTRACT

There are two main narratives in Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*. The first consists of the narrative of an Indian slave and his Jewish master in Indian and the Middle East during the 12th century. The second narrative is constructed around the author's experiences as an ethnographer in an Egyptian village in the 1980s. These two narratives embody a triangular relationship between historical reconstruction, ethnography, and literary text. This paper explores aspects of this triangular relationship. It also explores the main opposition to emerge in the text between the "medieval" and the "modern". The medieval world which the author evokes becomes the basis of a critical perspective on modernity and in the polemic of the text the term "medieval" is shorn of its pejorative connotations.

The main historical narrative in the text is the reconstruction of the stories of Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant who travelled between the Middle East and India during the 12th century, and of his Indian slave, Bomma. The material used by Ghosh for this reconstruction is the so-called Geniza connection. He charts the history of this body of archival material from its inception in the geniza (or storehouse) of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo to its formation as the Taylor-Schechte collection at Cambridge University. It is on the basis of the fragmentary remains of Ben Yiju's letters and their references to Bomma that the author pieces together the personal narratives of two of the main characters of the text.

KEYWORDS: Bomma ("The Slave of MS. H.6"), Ben Yiju, Medieval Egypt, Geniza, Magavira, Mowlid

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, we have seen a new genre of writing novel, that of combining the recipes for novel-about-writing-a-novel. One might call it the romance of the researcher, in which the latter stands in for the old quester-hero, following the lure of a fragmented text into distant times and places. The personal adventure of the quester in these stories (I think of recent ones by Umberto Eco, Julian Barnes, Antonio Byatt, Paul Auster, Margaret Drabble, Bharati Mukherjee and V.S. Naipaul) is a fictional ploy to frustrate the discursive bind which always confines our world.

Amitav Ghosh, like Byatt, Naipaul, Mukherjee and David Lodge, is an academician, in search of a past full of romance but history, also. The method of all these novelists is the same: to dive deep into some text or archives to discover some remote past, to find some connexion with the present. Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*, if deconstructed, is steeped in history and social anthropology. The first is spun around ancient Indo-Arab trade links where history and myth interweave and which are further elaborated in a prologue of notes.

With history begins social anthropology. Clifford Geertz writes about the impact of anthropology, the science, upon History, the Discipline. In his perspective and revolutionary article titled "History and Anthropology", Geertz gives a fine distinction between these two subjects. He says: "There seems to be some historians. . . , who think that

anthropologists. . . present static pictures of immobile societies scattered about in remote corners of the inhabited world, and some anthropologists. . . who think that what historians do is tell admonitory, and-then, and – then stories about one another episode in Western civilization: ‘true novels’ (in Paul Veyne’s phrase) designed to get us to face-of outface—facts.”¹ Another quarrel, according to some, is about Big and Little. Historians write and act big and anthropologists write of small, well-bounded communities. Historians accuse

anthropologists of nuancemanship, of wallowing in the details of the obscure and unimportant, and to anthropologists accusing historians of schematicism, of being out of touch with the immediate. . . of actual life.²

Or perhaps it is about High and Low, Dead and Living, Written and Oral, Particular and General, Description and Explanation, Art and Science.³

. . . To the historical imagination, ‘we’ is a juncture in a cultural geneology, and ‘here’ is heritage. To the anthropological imagination, ‘we’ is an entry in a cultural gazetter, and ‘here’ is home.

. . . What has undermined them has been a change in the ecology of learning that has driven historians and anthropologists, like so many migrant geese, onto one another’s territories⁴

These geese turned vagrant by such inducements are not limited to anthropologists and historians. They have been joined by others, novelists and literary theorists among them. Amitav Ghosh is one such novelist. Written as a “history in the guise of a traveller’s tale,” *In an Antique Land* is at once a travelogue, a detective story, a romance with a lost world, and an anthropologist’s attempt to write a dialogic ethnography.⁵ It is not a text that is immune from some of the slippages of what we now commonly recognize as the Orientalist imaginary, but its participation in that discursive economy is calculated, ironic, or as Ali Behdad might put it, self-consciously belated.⁶ One way of describing the book is to suggest that the two main narratives interwoven here are those of anthropology and history. The anthropological narrative is that of Ghosh going to two villages in the Nile Delta in Egypt, the first time for almost a year in 1980-81 to conduct fieldwork related to his doctoral dissertation. And then again briefly in 1988 and 1990. These later visits are arguably those of a writer less invested in the formal profession of academic anthropology and more those of someone seeking to reconnect with a community of friends left behind. They are also the visits of a writer who has, in the intervening years, found a renewed interest in the historical connexions between Egypt, the subject of his study, and India, which is, as passports often say, his “country of origin.” It is at this juncture, then, that the historical narrative enters the frame. For, in addition to being an ethnographic memoir, *In an Antique Land* is also the story of Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant active in the India trade in the twelfth century. In its simplest form, Ben Yiju’s is the story of a man originally from Ifriqiya who came as a trader to Manglore on the Malabar Coast sometime before A.D1132 and lived there for nearly two decades.⁷ He seems to have had a female slave named Ashu whom he manumitted in 1132. It is likely that he married Ashu and had two children with her. As far as his business interests are concerned, he is known to have had a factory in the area that worked with bronze goods, and we also know that his overseas trade was primarily handled by a slave whose name and identity are subject to debate.⁸ There is evidence that in 1149 Ben Yiju went to Aden, a major gateway on the trade route between India and Egypt, and that at some point thereafter he moved to the city of Fustat, known today as Old Cairo.⁹

If the anthropological narrative is based on Ghosh’s own fieldwork, the historical one is based on an extraordinary triumph of chance over will, of luck over intent. Medieval Jews believed that it was sacrilegious to destroy any piece of

paper that might have the name of God inscribed upon it. Rather than allowing such papers to be destroyed naturally by the elements or by accidental fires, Jewish communities in a variety of places deposited such documents in a special chamber in the Synagogue called the *Geniza*. Soon, what was meant to be a practice related to documents of a religious nature was extended to almost all documents written in the Hebrew script, which came to be considered holy in itself.¹⁰ Secular documents, like trade records, everyday correspondence, deeds of manumission, and the like, were all thrown into the *Geniza* for proper, religiously sanctioned burial at a later date. Through what might have been an act of sheer negligence, one such *Geniza* was never properly emptied, discarded documents collecting in it over a period of several centuries. The history of the discovery of this storehouse of documents—the Cairo Geniza—and the resultant scramble for its contents, is part of the larger politics of knowledge that Ghosh invites us to consider.¹¹ The reconstruction of the story of Ben Yiju is based mainly on documents found in this, shall we say, dustbin of history.¹²

For much of our knowledge of the world of Ben Yiju and the Cairo Geniza we are indebted to the formidable work of S.D. Goitein. Born in April 1900 in a small village in Bavaria, Goitein pursued his studies at Frankfurt University, where at the age of twenty-three he completed a dissertation entitled “Prayer in the Qur’an.” Moving to Palestine thereafter, he became in 1925 the first instructor of Islamic studies at the newly opened Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The research on the traditions of the Yemenite Jews that Goitein initiated at this post continued to resonate in his later work on the Cairo Geniza. In 1957 he moved to the United States to fill the chair in Arabic studies at the University of Pennsylvania and in 1971 was appointed as a long-term fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. It was in the United States that he concentrated on studying the materials from the Cairo Geniza, and by the time of his death in 1985 he had completed numerous studies on the life and times of the people associated with it.¹³ His crowning achievement was the six-volume study *A Mediterranean Society* (which, by my rough calculations, exceeds three thousand pages), but he also wrote a book entitled *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts Through the Ages* (1955) and edited a volume, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, both of which are of immediate interest to readers of Ghosh.¹⁴

Goitein’s work makes a prominent appearance in Ghosh’s book and is supplemented by the work of numerous scholars who are cited in the last few pages of *In an Antique Land*. Our project in this article is to draw on some of this scholarship in order to examine the political as well as aesthetic tensions in Ghosh’s imaginative reconstruction of this older world and especially his attempts to link it with our own contemporaneity. It should be clear by the end of this exercise that the point is not to criticize Ghosh’s fidelity to the historical record but rather to understand the dynamics of what might be called the “production of history” in a nostalgic mode.¹⁵ We will suggest that the all too common structural affinity of such nostalgia with discourses of purity and authenticity is challenged in Ghosh’s narrative, where cultural, racial, and economic hybridity, mixture, and exchange appear as privileged terms. A central part of our project is to track, in both the historical and anthropological accounts, the political valences of these alleged mixings and to question what other processes they may elide. Since the writing of nostalgia is as much about the forgetting as the remembrance of the past, we will attempt to foreground what it is that the text “forgets” in its desire to weave a nostalgic narrative. In the final analysis, like most commentators on Ghosh’s text, I find the text’s nostalgia both appealing aesthetically and inspiring politically. What is evident in *In an Antique Land* is that, despite its alleged mystery, the slave Bomma’s identity, first as an Indian man and, moreover, as one who comes from a lower-caste, non-Sanskritic community is a necessary and enabling fiction for Ghosh. Unlike the scholarly venue of *Subaltern Studies*, where Ghosh expresses no personal preferences, his sense of delight in having finally discovered a subaltern presence who is in many ways the “other”—the lowest of the low—is not hidden from the readers of the longer narrative. It is only such a subaltern who, outside of the

grasp of a majoritarian Sanskrit fold, would have shared with his master Ben Yiju an affinity for “the hidden and subversive counter-image of the orthodox religions” (263) of his time and invested in practices such as exorcism cults, magical rites, and the visitations of saints’ graves and shrines. Ghosh writes, “It was probably those inarticulate counter-beliefs, rather than the formal conversion that Bomma probably had to undergo while in Ben Yiju’s service, that eventually became a small patch of level ground between them: the matrilineally-descended Tulu and the patriarchal Jew who would otherwise seem to stand on different sides of an unbridgeable chasm” (263).

The fact that the world of the Cairo Geniza exhibited a significant degree of religious syncretism is of great interest to Ghosh. The most literal form of this syncretism, he suggests, may well be seen in the language of the *Geniza* documents themselves. Ben Yiju “and his friends were all orthodox, observant Jews, strongly aware of their distinctive religious identity,” writes Ghosh. “But they were part of the Arabic-speaking world, and the everyday language of their religious life was one they shared with the Muslims of that region: when they invoked the name of God in their writings it was usually as Allah, and more often than not their invocations were in Arabic forms, such as inshaallah and al-hamdulillah” (261). In addition, the close proximity of the religions meant that Judaism in Egypt would soon see the influence of Islamic Sufism, and the practice of worshipping at the shrines of saints would become common to both the Jewish and Islamic communities. Ghosh contends that such syncretic practices were, over time, policed, and with the advent of modernity their histories were erased. In such a context, any residual syncretism evident today is to Ghosh a privileged site of political resistance itself—and particularly of political resistance to the repressive state. For instance, Ghosh celebrates the folk narratives that he hears in Egypt about the saint Abu-Kanaka, whose grave is said to have resisted any efforts by the government to build a canal through it, and again the story of the Bhutta shrine in Mangalore, which has similarly put in check the construction of a road from the city of Mangalore to its new port. Ghosh sees in these narratives a popular critique of the ideologies and practices of state-sponsored “development”.

Within a few years of that day the knell had been struck for the world that had brought Bomma, Ben Yiju and Ashu together, and another age had begun in which the crossing of their paths would seem to unlikely that its very possibility would all but disappear from human memory. . . . Unable to compete in the Indian Ocean trade by purely commercial means, the Europeans were bent on taking control of it by aggression, pure and distilled, by unleashing violence on a scale unprecedented on those shores. . . . As always, the determination of a small, united band of soldiers triumphed easily over the rich confusion that accompanies a culture of accommodation and compromise. . . . Soon, the remains of the civilization that had brought Ben Yiju to Mangalore were devoured by that unquenchable, demonic thirst that has raged ever since, for almost five hundred years, over the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. (288).

The modern world created in the globalization process initiated by European expansion is thus presented in terms of a crucial historical loss of communicative bonds and the emergence of a new, capitalist mode of ordering social life that has become hegemonic all over the world. When Ghosh (in his capacity as visiting young scholar in Egypt) gets into a heated argument with the village Imam of Nashawy, they both appeal to concepts of modernity, rationality and technological efficacy—a communicative strategy that the autobiographical narrator interprets as the ultimate victory of “the West”:

At that moment, despite the vast gap that lay between us, we understood each other perfectly. We were both travelling he and I: we were travelling in the West. . . . I was crushed, as I walked away; it seemed to me that the Imam and

I had participated in our own final defeat, in the dissolution of the centuries of dialogue that had linked us: we had demonstrated the irreversible triumph of the language that has usurped all the others in which people once discussed their differences. We had acknowledged that it was no longer possible to speak, as Ben Yijuor his slave, or any one of the thousands of travellers who had crossed the Indian Ocean in the Middle Ages might have done: of things that were right, or good, or willed by God; it would have been merely absurd for either of us to use those words, for they belonged to a dismantled rung on the ascending ladder of Development. Instead, to make ourselves understood, we had both resorted, I, a student of the 'humane' sciences, and he, an old-fashioned village Imam, to the very terms that world leaders and statesmen use at great, global conferences, the universal, irresistible metaphysic of modern meaning ... I felt myself a conspirator in the betrayal of the history that had led me to Nashawy; a witness to the extermination of a world of accommodations that I had believed to be still alive, and, in some tiny measure, still retrievable. (236-7)

He began to scratch his head, thinking hard, and then he added: 'But if I die there you must remember to bury me.' (237)

The two narrative strands in *In An Antique Land* – the story of the vanished medieval trade world of the Arabian Sea and Ghosh's experiences as a visiting scholar in Egypt – are thus not quite as detached as a first casual glance might warrant; rather, they are linked by a number of structural mechanisms in the text that allow the preoccupations of each of them to resonate in the other.

First and foremost, there is, of course, the narrator's presence in both strands. His account of the scholarly adventures he embarked upon in order to bring back to life the shared world of medieval India, Arabia and North Africa has the same autobiographical protagonist as his story of his experiences of contemporary life in rural Egypt, and it can hardly come as a surprise that both narrations refer to each other by highlighting parallels or contrasts. His own presence as an Indian in Egypt, and his knowledge of the rich previous history connecting both countries, act as performative counterweights to the assertion that all traces of that history are irretrievably lost forever.

A second feature linking present-day perceptions of modernity and the reconstruction of a vanished life-world lies in the presentation of the medieval protagonists as complex individuals. This is not achieved by a simplistic exercise of fictional "presentism" that negates the specific characteristics of a medieval perception of the world, but rather by means of a focus on private life, including features such as marital problems, alcoholism, family relationships and problems with business partners, all of which contribute to familiarize the medieval protagonists to a present-day reader. This familiarization technique is further enhanced by imaginative excursions that fill in fictional details (such as Bomma's probable alcoholic excesses or Ben Yiju's relationship with his wife) where the existing historical documents provide only very scant information.

Thirdly, the text itself provides numerous examples of traces of the culture of compromise and accommodation in the contemporary world, despite the historical cataclysm that broke off direct continuities from the medieval to the modern world. While some of them (such as the documents from the Cairo Geniza) are available only to a handful of scholars, others have become part of popular culture – such as the strange syncretic deity the narrator discovers in a Hindu temple in Mangalore and muses upon in the following manner: "The past had revenged itself on the present: it had slipped the spirit of an Arab Muslim trader past the watchful eyes of Hindu zealots and installed it within the Sanskrit pantheon" (274). Yet others are to be found in the astounding resilience of cities like Mangalore that do not simply live in the shadow of a great, but irretrievably lost past:

Mangalore does not treat its lost history as a matter of crippling melancholy: it has always been a busy, bustling kind of place, and today it is again a thriving, relatively prosperous city. Its ancient connexions with the Arab world have bequeathed it a more useful legacy than a mere collection of artefacts: thousands of its residents are now employed in the Persian Gulf, and its suburbs are awash with evidence of the extravagant spending of its expatriates. (245)

A fourth characteristic linking the anthropological account of a distant past with the lived experiences of the present consists of the common focus on the predicaments of transcultural life in both narrative strands of the text. Once again, the text does not suggest that there are direct continuities between medieval and modern perceptions of culture, religion and social life; yet the practice of living between cultures that countless people around the Arabian Sea practised centuries ago remains fascinating for a globalizing world where individuals are faced with an increasingly larger range of cultural options. Just as Salman Rushdie in *The Moor's Last Sigh* attempted to assess what today's world might learn from the "Alhambra"-model of medieval multiculturalism in Moorish Spain,¹⁶ Ghosh highlights the humane characteristics of the trade world of the Arabian Sea, where religions such as Islam, Judaism and Hinduism – that are today locked in perennial and often violent conflicts in many parts of the world – coexisted and interacted in a transcultural regime that gave rise to a host of surprisingly pragmatic compromises. The very language in which Ben Yiju wrote his letters (Judeo-Arabic, "a colloquial dialect of medieval Arabic, written in the Hebrew script," 101) testifies to the transcultural features of this world, as do Ben Yiju's networks of trading partners that encompassed people from various Indian ethnicities and religions as well as Muslims and Jews from North Africa and Arabia and that "appear to have been wholly indifferent to many of those boundaries that are today thought to mark social, religious and geographical divisions" (278). Ghosh suggests that "the peaceful traditions of the oceanic trade may have been, in a quiet and inarticulate way, the product of a rare cultural choice" (287) – a pragmatic preference for transcultural negotiation that may well turn out to be a major asset in coming to terms with the global ecumene of culture in the 21st century.

Finally, the accounts of present-day village life in Egypt and of Ben Yiju's medieval peregrinations are both characterized by a decidedly non-Western perspective on the modern world. This perspective is not formulated in the ideologically charged language permeating much of contemporary postcolonialist discourse, where modernity is often equated with a catastrophic, malevolent Western project, and culture and literature are habitually evaluated in terms of their resistance potential against a "globalization" perceived primarily in economic terms.²¹ Instead, it unfolds as a much more pragmatic attempt to explore what experiences of late modernity are like outside the industrialized nations of the West: living in the global ecumene of culture, the text suggests, is possible (or, indeed, unavoidable) in a wide variety of places, and transnational (as well as transcultural) processes take many forms, not all them related to the conflicting relationship between "the West" and "the Rest."

This concern emerges strongly in the account of the narrator's ongoing confrontation with Egyptian village life. At first the narrator thinks of the people he encounters primarily in terms of cultural difference, a position subtly ironized by the text itself, for example, in the account of the narrator's initial fantasies about high standards of female modesty that make him shy away from looking women into the face in the streets—and make his female neighbours, whom he fails to greet, wonder about Indian standards of civility. On his return a few years later, the narrator finds the village totally changed by an all-encompassing network of transnational connexions: in the wake of the first Gulf War fought thousands of kilometres away between Iran and Iraq (where labour has become scarce because of the war effort), and the money they transfer back to the village economy has dramatic effects on social life. The new transnational connexions between Egypt

and Iraq (“it was as if the two nations had dissolved into each other,” 293) open up unexpected chances, but also entail unforeseen existential risks: in the wake of the Second Gulf War fought after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, many migrant workers from the village suddenly find themselves caught in the turmoils of war.

In an article Ghosh says: “Muslim extremists in the Middle East are contemptuous of the traditional Sufi tariqas that have so long been a mainstay within popular Islam; the political leadership of the Hindu extremist movement treats traditional mendicents and ascetics as a source of embarrassment.”¹⁷

Anthropologists do not merely note down facts of what they observe; rather, they construct accounts of their experience of other people’s experience. And these accounts “are thus, fictions; fictions, in sense that they are something made, something fashioned—the original meaning of fiction—not that they are false, unfactual, or merely ‘as if’ thought experiments.” Geertz says: “In the end, it may be in a deeper understanding of the ‘and’ in History and Anthropology’ accouplement that progress lies. Take care of the conjunctions and nouns will take care of themselves.”¹⁸ Amitav Ghosh, *In An Antique Land*, has taken not only nouns but the conjunction also. This feat marks him off from other Indian novelists writing in English.

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2. Ibid., PP.321-22.
3. Ibid., P. 322.
4. Ibid., P. 324.
5. Ibid., P.334.
6. Ali Behdad, *Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*, Durham, N.C., 1994, 1-17.
7. The name “Ifriqiya,” from which the word “Africa” is derived, refers to the area in North Africa that roughly corresponds to present-day Tunisia.
8. Indeed, one of the major elements of Ghosh’s narrative is the detective work he undertakes to ascertain the slave’s identity.
9. See S.D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, Princeton, N.J., 1973, 185-206, for biographical details on Ben Yiju and for his correspondence with business colleagues and relatives.
10. S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols, Berkeley 1967-93, 1:14-17.
11. The latest document Goitein records noting is an 1879 divorce bill from Bombay; *Mediterranean Society*, 1:9.
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All Quotations are from Amitav Ghosh’s *In An Antique Land*, New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1992