



REVISITING ISRAELI ANTHROPOLOGY AND AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGY: OUR “SPECIAL RELATIONS” #Palestine

written by Smadar Lavie
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Earlier this week the [American Anthropological Association](#)'s task force on Engagement with Israel-Palestine issued a 130-page report to assess whether the AAA should take a stand on issues of academic freedom and human rights in Israel and the Occupied Territories. The report was commissioned after a landslide vote at the AAA's annual meeting in 2014 in Washington DC. The issue for vote in DC was whether the AAA would even permit a public discussion on the possibility of boycotting Israeli universities' anthropology departments. Members of the Israeli Anthropological Association (IAA) who are also members of the AAA and attended the DC meeting joined forces with their U.S. supporters. Together they wished to gag any public discussion of the AAA on the academic boycott. They lost by a wide margin, therefore the task force on its diligent, disturbing report.

This is not the first time that attention is being called to the revolving door between Israeli anthropology, the Israeli regime, and the American Anthropological Association. In May 2002, the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow (MDR) and Ahoti (=Sistah, Hebrew), two NGOs focussed on Israel's intra-Jewish apartheid between the majority Mizrahim (=Easterners), Jews from the Muslim and Arab world, and the minority ruling Ashkenazim, held a demonstration at the annual meeting of the [Israeli Anthropological Association](#). Ahoti and MDR members distributed leaflets documenting the IAA's institutionalized racism toward Mizrahim and Palestinians. While Ahoti and the MDR do not focus on



justice in Palestine, most of their membership is located left of the Israeli political center.

No one had ever conducted a political demonstration at an academic association meeting before, let alone one at a serene mountainous resort, so our demonstration must have been a surprise for the well-heeled membership of the IAA. Their responses ranged from aggressive arguments to confusion to the usual flat denials that a group of people so conscientious of humanity could possibly take part in any apartheid practices, let alone between Jews.

Our demonstration lead to an initiative: the Coalition Against Apartheid in Israeli Anthropology (CAAIA). We joined forces with Mossawa, a Palestinian NGO based in Haifa, and [sent a complaint via registered mail with return receipt to the Israeli State Comptroller](#). Eleven years have passed, and we are still waiting for the State Comptroller to send us a reply. Shortly after we filed our complaint, the IAA appointed a Zionist, Moroccan mouthpiece as its chair.

At the time we received a warm welcome from Stacy Lathorp, the editor of Anthropology News (AN), the official newsletter of the AAA. For balance, the Moroccan mouthpiece and U.S-based Zionist anthropologists were given ample space on the pages of the AN to respond, and yet in later issues of AN Lathorp was gravely attacked for having given us space at all, and shortly thereafter she left her job. We ourselves were threatened with libel and tort lawsuits by members of the IAA who had collaborators inside our organizations. Despite that the facts were on our side, our organizations could not afford litigation, and thus we were forced to issue public apologies to members of the IAA. For the betterment of our communities' daily lives, we could not afford to allow the IAA to interrupt other projects. CAAIA operated solely on a volunteer basis and without any funding. It folded in 2007.

As the activism of the Anthropologists for Justice in Palestine inspires the AAA to take a vote over whether to boycott Israeli universities at the annual meeting in Denver in November 2015, now seems a good time to remember the role that



the CAAIA played as a forerunner. Below is the article that CAAIA published with Anthropology News in 2005.

The article was co-authored with the CAAIA heads of the initiative from Mossawa and the MDR. However, fearing for their livelihoods, they were afraid to include their names as authors. I was stranded in Israel between 1999-2007. The Israeli regime confiscated my Israeli passport, my gateway to enter and exit Israel. As a dual citizen I could not depart from Israel on my American passport. Due to my color and anti-Zionist politics, I was mainly unemployed, having been boycotted by Israeli anthropologists since 1993 (1). I had nothing to lose, were I to be sued, so we agreed that the piece would be published under my sole name.



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Israeli anthropology and American anthropology: our “special relations”

In March 2004 three registered NGOs, Ahoti (Sistah, Hebrew), Israel’s feminists-of-color movement; the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow; and Mossawa, the Advocacy Center for the Palestinian Citizens of Israel, filed an official complaint to Israel’s State Comptroller against anthropology departments in all Israeli universities.

Our NGOs advocate Mizrahi (Arab-Jews of Asian and North African origins) and Palestinian-Israeli human rights. The complaint was researched and co-authored by Yif`at Hillel, Nurit Hajjaj, Vardit Damri-Madar, Rafi Shubeli, Smadar Lavie and by the late Vicki Shiran, founder of Israel’s feminist-of-color movement.

In our NGOs’ complaint, we sought clarification on the almost complete absence of tenured Mizrahi faculty, and the total absence of Palestinian-Israeli



faculty in anthropology departments in Israeli universities. Such absences are in complete violation of any principal of equal opportunities employment.

Mizrahim and Palestinian citizens of Israel consist of about 70% of Israel's citizenry.

We also noted the total absence of Mizrahi and Palestinian-Israeli women in both junior and senior faculty positions in Israeli universities' anthropology departments, violations of our Mizrahi and Palestinian-Israeli intellectual and cultural property rights, and the complete absence of an ethics code for the practice of anthropology in Israel.

We argued that Israeli Ashkenazi (European Jewish) anthropologists have made social and financial gains through the appropriation of Mizrahi and Palestinian cultures. Sixty-seven percent of Israeli anthropologists study Mizrahim and/or Palestinians. Ashkenazim consist of about 30% of Israel's citizenry and over 90% of Israel's university faculty body.

The complaint juxtaposes the data about Israeli academic apartheid practices with data about the present gendered-ethnic FTE distribution in major US anthropology departments. It also reviews the careers and influential publications of Mizrahi and Palestinian anthropologists who, after being rejected by Israeli academia due to alleged "collegial incompatibility," have made names for themselves in Western European and US universities.

International and Israeli Responses

The Ahoti-Rainbow-Mossawa coalitional team emailed and faxed English translations of the complaint to the AAA, the [Royal Anthropological Institute of Britain](#), the [European Association of Social Anthropologists](#), and the Canadian Society for Anthropology and Sociology. The [Society for Cultural Anthropology](#) and the [American Ethnological Society](#), sections of the AAA, discussed the complaint this spring, along with the AAA executive board, as it continues to



generate ongoing discussion on the AAA Middle East Section's listserv. We now have over 700 subscribers to our monthly news updates.

The Israeli State Comptroller has yet to substantially address the concerns raised in the coalition's complaint, although he acknowledged its receipt.

Currently the Israeli Anthropological Association is developing an ethics code in response to the complaint, under the Association's chair, Meira Weiss.

We find this ironic given the benevolent colonialism of the so-called progressive edition of Israeli anthropology. Even those Israeli anthropologists who pose as radical – and as part of this pose have even expressed their support in our activism – actually preserve the master Ashkenazi-Zionist narrative of anti-Arab apartheid when deciding about their choice of departmental colleagues, whether in FTE allocations, merits and promotions. In some instances when our coalition has tried to address alleged issues of Ashkenazi ethnographic beneficence or institutional racism we have been silenced through threat of lawsuit. Yet our silence ought not be interpreted as evidence that such acts of racism do not exist.

US Anthropology's Role

In May 2004, UC Berkeley anthropologist [Lawrence Cohen](#) visited Israel as the keynote speaker of the Israeli Anthropological Association and the Israeli Queer Studies Group. Members of the coalition met with him on May 9 to discuss the reasons for the American-focused campaign, and to request further assistance. Cohen was generous with his time and ideas, and also suggested that we organize or consult with Native American activists. Nevertheless, he expressed the fear that by siding with equal opportunity anti-racist struggles outside the US, the AAA might appoint itself a cop of the world, so to speak, Bush-administration style. Considering the so-called “special relations” between Israel's and the US's white neo-conservative elites, however, such a fear is difficult for us to grasp.





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From the onset of the Mizrahi and Palestinian-Israeli anti-racist struggle, Israeli anthropology has been applied as an arm of governmentality to better suppress it and to design pacifying policies of cooptation. This was done through in-situ cross-cultural application of the works of Victor Turner or Talcott Parsons on our transit camps, neighborhoods and villages. Paradoxically, however, Israeli anthropologists cynically quote US anthropology from the 1960s on, focusing on the liberation struggles of women, minorities, immigrants, queers, and other subjects under post-colonialism. The coalition finds this an empty gesture of interpolation in order to sail through the anonymous review procedures of scholarly periodicals and grants.

A largely decontextualized version of US anthropology has dictated appointments, promotions, research grants and publications politicking of Israeli anthropology at least for the last two decades. For example, many endowed visitors invited to speak at annual meetings, seminars and to guest teach in Israeli anthropology departments are Ashkenazi Jews who are on the faculty of US Ivy League and elite universities. Non-Ivy-League and elite anthropologists are not considered worthwhile of invitation. Perhaps because about 85% of diaspora Jewry is Ashkenazi, these US anthropologists overlook the apartheid practices of Israel's academe.

After such visits to Israeli anthropology academics, US anthropologists are then requested to reciprocate with weighty career evaluation letters that decide the fate of Israeli anthropologists' merits and promotions, invitations for sabbaticals, and assistance in getting Israeli articles admitted to prestigious periodicals and edited US-based university press collections.

Israeli anthropologists get promoted in Israeli universities on the basis of English-language publications mainly in US periodicals. Academic English is not accessible to the majority of Israelis. The coalition worries that given the



monochromatic, elitist and insular composition of Israeli anthropology faculty, these scholars' English-language publications, written in the absence of any human subjects procedures, thereby provide a slanted view of Israeli society, and concurrently hurt the scientific reputation of academic US periodicals.

Through the public media, Israelis often learn about US intellectual interventions in sites of grave injustice outside the US, where the principals of human rights are at stake. The Ahoti-Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow-Mossawa coalition to end Israeli anthropology's apartheid merits AAA intervention and support.

Smadar Lavie is a board member of Ahoti (Sistah, Hebrew), Israel's feminists-of-color movement. She wishes to thank Rafi Shubeli of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow for his helpful comments and critique. The text on the relationships between Israeli and US anthropology is a summary of the Ahoti-Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow-Mossawa coalition's July 8, 2004, public meeting convened at the Rainbow offices in Tel Aviv to discuss and act around this particular topic.

(1) The circumstances for my confinement in Israel are discussed in my new ethnography, [Wrapped in the Flag of Israel](#) (Berghahn Books, 2014)

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