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Eslanda Robeson at LSE

*In 1933 Eslanda Robeson embarked on a course in Anthropology at LSE, which fuelled a growing interest in Africa, the British Empire, and the lives of African people in Europe, writes **Caroline Bazambanza**.*

Switching from Chemistry to Anthropology, Eslanda Goode Robeson began her studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) under anthropologist **Bronislaw Malinowski**.

Before arriving in London, Eslanda spent time in Paris, where she learnt more about both Francophone and Anglophone African cultures and histories. She would go on to produce an anthropological travel narrative titled *African Journey* (1945), emphasising the promising future of Africa and Africans globally.

Although she perceived the discipline as able to engage meaningfully with human existence, Eslanda's relationship with Anthropology was complicated. She saw how anthropological colonial ideology and agendas had fixed African people as "primitive", preventing freedom of governance.

During her time in Kabarole, Uganda, she asked people how they felt about the visiting anthropologists conducting fieldwork in their home country. Her interlocutors responded to these visitors with teasing and joking answers, reflecting the position of being "under study" and inverting power through viewing their questions as a game.

She was told by school teachers in Kabarole that the label of "backwardness" associated with African people was an imposition produced by Europeans to justify hierarchies and domination. Visiting Africa is said to have expanded Eslanda's racial consciousness, anti-facism, anti-colonialism, and support for gender equality.

At LSE, staff and students would sometimes call Eslanda "European", overlooking her African identity. She later wrote:



What do you mean I'm European? I'm Negro. I'm African myself... How dare you call me European! (Robeson in Umoren, 2018:47).



This denial of her African identity influenced Eslanda's travels to Africa. She wanted to meet people like her on their home ground to understand their experiences and strengthen her knowledge. Getting a visa was not easy. Eslanda felt white people in Africa did not want educated black people to travel and see the world, or African people to see black people from Europe or America because of the dangers this encounter might pose to colonial administrations.

Eventually, she managed to travel with her eleven year old son Pauli to South Africa on SS Winchester Castle, leaving from Southampton Harbour. Upon arrival, Eslanda noticed frightening similarities between South Africa and the American South during Jim Crow, a time of strictly enforced racial segregation.

Witnessing the precursors of apartheid in South Africa framed Eslanda's Pan-Africanism, a perspective stressing solidarity and collaboration amongst all people of African descent, no matter where in the world they live.

During her time at LSE, she strongly refuted ideas of "African primitivism" and fostered a political position of shared African humanity. *African Journey* is dedicated to "the brothers and sisters, who will know what I mean". In the book, Eslanda also records the observations of her son, Pauli, bringing to life the entanglements of travel, identity, motherhood, and academia.

Eslanda studied alongside **Jomo Kenyatta** at LSE, an anthropologist also supervised by Malinowski. Like Eslanda, Kenyatta was passionate about the fight for African freedom and anti-colonialism. In 1963, Kenyatta became the first President of independent Kenya. A close friendship was also fostered with Zora Neale Hurston, the American anthropologist and novelist who wrote *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* (2018) with whom she exchanged letters.

Eslanda saw the limits of academic research, turning to journalism after completing her studies. Returning from London to the US, Eslanda established the International Committee on African Affairs (ICAA) with her husband, Paul Robeson.

Read more

Hurston, Z (2018). *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"*. New York: Amistad Press.

Raiford, L (2017). *Migrating the Black Body: The African Diaspora and Visual Culture*. Washington: The University of Washington Press.

Robeson, E (1945). *African Journey*. New York: The John Day Company.

Umoren, I (2018). *Race Women Internationalists: Activist Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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