

Phillip Tobias: Anthropologist and mentor (1925–2012)

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The death of Phillip Valentine Tobias on 07 June 2012 marked the end of an era in the study of physical anthropology and human origins in South Africa. Although he had been officially retired since 1990, Tobias continued his research and writing well into his 80s and I think it would be safe to say that his ideas and academic output influenced every scholar of physical anthropology – not only in South Africa but across the world.

Born in Durban in 1925, Tobias initially trained as a medical doctor, graduating in 1950, but he chose an academic rather than a clinical career. His name is inextricably linked to the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, where he completed both his undergraduate and postgraduate training and was Professor of Anatomy from 1959 until 1990.

Tobias preferred to be regarded as a human biologist rather than a palaeoanthropologist.¹ It is in the area of human biology that Tobias launched his research career in the early 1950s, working first in genetics. His doctoral studies were on the description of chromosomal variations in mammals – in an attempt to better understand human heredity. An opportunity to visit the Kalahari with the French Panhard-Capricorn Expedition in 1952 launched him into the study of the living Khoesan peoples of southern Africa. As head of the Witwatersrand University Kalahari Research Programme, Tobias was responsible for a number of multidisciplinary expeditions to study the San. Data on the San in particular demonstrated an increase in physical stature between the first measurements of their heights at the turn of the 20th century and those gathered during the Kalahari Research Programme in the 1950s and 1960s. Measured heights of Black cadavers in Johannesburg taken in the same years showed a progressive decrease in stature over the decades of the 20th century. Whereas the San of the Kalahari grew taller and their lives (at least as expressed by enhanced growth) were better, the Black people of urban Johannesburg suffered from a loss of stature over time, indicating less than optimum growth rates. Tobias amplified this into a broad theory of positive and negative secular trends. The correlating factor was nutrition affecting populations of differing wealth and poverty.² His studies of southern African peoples brought him to the broader issue of race about which Tobias has been an implacable debunker of myths, especially those that have ranked intelligence of human races.^{3,4,5}

Palaeoanthropology was the field in which Tobias earned his greatest international fame. As an anatomist of great skill and knowledge, Tobias was responsible for the description and evolutionary interpretation of a wide range of human fossils from ancient Australopithecines to relatively recent human ancestors. While attending the 4th Pan-African Congress of Prehistory and Quaternary Research at Leopoldville in 1959, Louis and Mary Leakey offered him the opportunity to describe their newly excavated 'Zinjanthropus' fossil cranium. This began a long association between the Leakeys and Tobias which resulted in the full monographic description of both *Australopithecus boisei*⁶ and *Homo habilis*.⁷ The 1960 discovery of the first few *Homo habilis* bone fragments at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania was heralded by Louis Leakey as the earliest sign of the genus *Homo*, but it was not until 1964 that Tobias felt that enough fossil specimens had been discovered to warrant the formal description of a new species. In that year, he, Leakey and John Napier described *Homo habilis* for the first time.⁸ Back in South Africa, Tobias continued the earlier work on the fossil sites at Sterkfontein, Makapansgat and Taung. The fossils derived from these sites and the context of their discovery has provided data for literally dozens of postgraduate student projects, many of them under Tobias' supervision.

There is another side to Tobias that did not primarily involve the man of science. From his earliest student days Tobias fought against the rise and influence of apartheid. As president of the National Union of South African Students in the late 1940s, Tobias, both as a student leader and afterward as a young lecturer, championed the idea of non-racialism in South African universities and argued that Wits had to retain its 'open' status even after the slamming of the door against students of colour in 1959. Despite threats and surveillance, Tobias wrote and spoke out against apartheid. During his tenure as Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Tobias and his



colleagues challenged the South African Medical and Dental Council (SAMDC) whitewash of the doctors who had failed to treat Steve Biko in the days before his death. The court case launched by Tobias forced the SAMDC to reverse its position and acknowledge that medical practitioners had collaborated with the apartheid police. The object of Tobias' action was not to punish the perpetrators, but to force the medical community to resist the machinations of the apartheid state by honouring the Hippocratic Oath.

Tobias' vision of human rights was consistent throughout his career. He, like a number of other South African archaeologists and human palaeontologists, was excluded from the World Archaeological Congress in Southampton in 1986. Although currently seen as a major plank in the opposition to apartheid, the cultural and scientific boycott which resulted in the exclusions was vigorously opposed by Tobias⁹. There was no inconsistency in this approach. By opposing the boycott, Tobias was not supporting apartheid. He was warning that such activities would damage the already fragile university structures in South Africa by increasing the emigration rate of scientists and damaging the speed of recovery once apartheid finally expired. To Tobias, the goal was always the vision of a non-racial South Africa where both the value of science and human rights lived side by side. Even after the dragon of apartheid was slain, Tobias kept his sense of justice and led the negotiations for the return from France of the remains of Saartje Baartman on behalf of the South African government.¹⁰

Tobias will be remembered in the books of historians as a scientist and opponent of apartheid, but there is another even more important domain in which his influence has been felt. An outstanding and inspiring lecturer, Tobias was first and foremost a teacher of medical and science students. Thousands of students have been exposed to his love and enthusiasm for the study of human origins. Generations of medical students visited the site at Sterkfontein during Tobias' classes on human evolution in the medical programme, giving them a time depth in their perspective of medicine which is not normally part of the curriculum. His influence was even greater on the science students who were trained by him as undergraduates and postgraduates – over 30 students earned doctorates under his supervision. These students are his academic children, and these offspring have given him many academic grandchildren. This contribution is perhaps his foremost importance, as each of these protégés has carried his message on to their own students. Not just his ideas on human evolution, but also his love of humanity and his sense of justice.

My own first contact with Phillip Tobias was in 1973 when I applied from my home in Canada to do postgraduate studies under him in Johannesburg. He took a gamble when he accepted me, a zoologist with very little anthropology in my background, but I am pleased to say that his venture paid off and I am still here teaching my own set of South African students to add to his metaphorical academic grandchildren. From Tobias I learned to listen to my students because they can teach me as much as I can teach them.

Tobias finished his career with over 1300 publications, honorary degrees from multiple institutions, national awards and the unending respect of colleagues, whether they agreed with his scientific arguments or not. Tobias the man is gone, but Tobias' legacy will be with us for decades to come.

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Teachers and students of palaeoanthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1977: (from left to right) Fred Grine, Raymond Dart, Ivan Suzman, Ron Clarke, Phillip Tobias, Alan Morris (photo: P. Faugust).