

# Heselon Mukiri

## First Native African Archaeologist

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It is somewhat difficult to write about an individual who appears in the available material only as one in the shadow of a 'Great Man'. In this case, the 'Great Man' is Louis Leakey and the figure in the shadows is his long time Kikuyu assistant, Heselon Mukiri.

Even in his name Heselon appears in this shadow role. He signed his name 'Hezoron'. But in the literature he appears as 'Heselon'. In part Cole explains the difference by indicating that 'L' and 'R' are interchangeable in Kikuyu. This still ignores the fact that Leakey and others have established their way of spelling the one thing a person can spell anyway he likes – his name.

Louis Leakey lived an unusual life long before the part which would bring him world-wide recognition. As a boy he lived in the African bush (his parents were missionaries). He spent much of his spare time with Kikuyu boys his own age. At 13 he even took part in some of the initiation ceremonies and was recognized by the Kikuyu as a member of the Mukanda age group. Heselon Mukiri was also of this age group.

In 1926 when Louis Leakey returned from his studies at St. John's, Cambridge and started on his first expedition in Kenya, he hired many Kikuyu of his age group to assist with the digging at the sites to be sampled. Heselon Mukiri was among them.

During the 1934-35 4th expedition, a geologist described Heselon as a 'treasure'. His opinion of some of the other native excavators was not as complimentary.

By 1943 Heselon Mukiri had advanced to the position of leader of Leakey's Kenyan work force. At this point Leakey was working at Olorgesailie, which is an area covered with Archeulian stone tools and has been identified as the site of successive camping areas. At this time, in addition to the Kenyan force, Leakey was able to make use of the labor of a team of Italian prisoners of war (captured in Ethiopia).

Cole describes Heselon at this time: "Undisputed boss, as always dignified and rather unapproachable but with a well-developed sense of humor, he was respected by the others. Few could rival his eye for a fossil or his skill with plaster of Paris." Further testimony to his ability was the fact that the Leakeys could leave the Olorgesailie site entirely in his hands, visiting occasionally to check progress and to plan further strategy.

In 1948 Heselon was part of the Rusinga Island expedition. In June he participated in the excavation of *Proconsul africanus*, which had been discovered by Mary Leakey. (Kenya,

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Uganda and Tanzania, 2.50sh Scott No. 179 May 2, 1967) (Note: Proconsul has been subjected to various interpretations. Louis Leakey immediately claimed it an ancestor to man. At least for a time he seemed to have won general support for this assertion. Then Proconsul was moved into the classification of being an ape ancestor. Richard Leakey indicates that it may be the ancestor of the modern chimpanzee. There is some evidence that Proconsul is moving again. First there is the 5sh stamp in Kenya's 'Origins of Mankind' set (Scott No. 215 January 16, 1982). In answer to one of a number of questions, Mary Leakey made the following suggestive answer: "(The) (P)osition of Proconsul is being re-evaluated on account of new materials.")

When it came time to apply for the excavation permit in 1949, Louis Leakey asked that Heselon Mukiri be ranked as a member of the Kenya Miocene expedition. This would exempt Heselon from the prohibition on excavation by 'natives' without the presence of the permit holder.

On the one hand this was only a regularization by Leakey of a procedure which had been going on for several years. On the other hand for 1949 in an English colony this was not your ordinary happening. Thus, Sonia Cole is undoubtedly correct in indicating that Heselon Mukiri was the first 'native' permit holder.

Heselon would continue active with the Leakeys over the next twenty years. One area of this work was at Olduvai. Among the many lower Pleistocene fossils found were many pigs. Two of these were named for Heselon: *Mesochoerus heseloni* and the earlier *Promesochoerus mukiri*.

In the fateful season of 1959 when the question of where to begin digging in Bed I arose, Heselon almost led the Leakeys off in a direction different from the one we know. He had found a fragment of a lower jaw with one molar. It was obviously hominid. This low site in Bed I became the target area but it was decided to delay digging pending the imminent arrival of a film crew. While this hold was in effect, Mary discovered 'Zinj' and the rest is history.

In April 1961, excavation began at Fort Ternan. Most of the work here was supervised by Heselon. Among the finds were two fragments of the upper jaw of a primate and a lower loose molar. On the basis of these finds Louis Leakey launched another controversy by naming a new species *Kenyapithecus wickeri* and proclaiming it as 'approaching Homidae'.

The number of finds at Fort Ternan continued to grow reaching about ten thousand. Many were entirely unknown previously. One was an adult rhino about the size of a donkey. Another was a giraffe relative with antler-like appendages. Here also were found

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the earliest antelope fossils south of the Sahara.

Heselon retired in 1968. The National Geographic Society, which had been financing the Leakeys, presented him with a diploma and \$1,000. Heselon's speech indicated the importance to him of the friendship of the Leakey family.

When Louis Leakey died, Heselon was still alive. However, he missed the funeral because of a confusion in times with the transportation.

Considering Heselon's importance to the work of Louis Leakey, it is good to learn that he is to be found on that busy archaeological stamp Tanzania Scott No. 14 (1.30sh December 9, 1965). Heselon Mukiri is standing in front of the top excavation.

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