

Reviews

Inside African anthropology: Monica Wilson and her interpreters by Andrew and Leslie J Bank

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Inside African anthropology offers a reappraisal of the work of Monica Hunter Wilson (1908-1982). In contrast to a dominant disciplinary history, which evaluates the achievements of Wilson and other anthropologists solely in terms of publications that contribute to a global corpus of anthropological knowledge, the authors of this volume foreground the significance of Wilson's engagement with African anthropology "from the inside" (Bank & Bank (eds) 2014: 3). As Andrew Bank writes in his introduction, Wilson was an "insider" in at least three respects. First, she grew up on the Lovedale mission station with a detailed knowledge of Xhosa language and culture. Secondly, she chose to remain in South Africa throughout her academic career – even after the turn to apartheid when other South African-born anthropologists of international repute took up jobs in Britain and the US. Thirdly, and most importantly, she developed complex and sustained relationships across racial boundaries with a variety of African "interpreters", including her research assistants and students. To develop insight into Monica Wilson as an "insider", the authors offer detailed attention to her personal background, interpersonal relations, and approach to research and teaching, drawing primarily from the Monica and Godfrey Wilson Papers at the University of Cape Town and oral history interviews conducted with former students and other contemporaries.

The book is divided into four parts organised around different stages of Monica Wilson's life, with lengthy forays into the lives of some of those with whom she shared it. Part 1, titled "Pondoland and the Eastern Cape", charts Monica Wilson's early development as a person and as a scholar. Highlights include Andrew Bank's discussion of the racially integrated environment in which Wilson was raised at Lovedale and Wilson's friends and mentors at Cambridge, all of which shaped

her interest in, and approach to anthropology. Also, Andrew and Leslie Bank's descriptions of the micro-social worlds, which Wilson inhabited during her doctoral fieldwork in Pondoland and East London (later written up and published in her seminal monograph, *Reaction to conquest*), are very compelling.

Part 2 turns to Bunyakyusa where Monica and her husband Godfrey Wilson conducted fieldwork over four years, collecting material that later became the basis of the "Nyakyusa trilogy" – *Good company* (1951), *Rituals and kinship among the Nyakyusa* (1957), *Communal rituals of the Nyakyusa* (1959) – and a later monograph, *For men and elders* (1977). Again, the text foregrounds Monica Wilson's relationships with others involved in her research and includes absorbing descriptions of the interplay between Monica and Godfrey during their fieldwork and following Godfrey's untimely death (presented by Rebecca Marsland) and of the Wilsons' relationship with research assistant, Leonard Mwaishumo (presented by Sekibakiba Lekgoathi, Timothy Mwakasekele and Andrew Bank).

Part 3 shifts from the field to the university, tracing Monica Wilson's career as a lecturer at Fort Hare, Rhodes and the University of Cape Town. Here the text focuses on Wilson's work as a mentor to young Black intellectuals, above all Livingston Mqotsi, Barney Pitje and Archie Mafeje, each of whose evolving relationships with Wilson are narrated in rich detail in chapters by Sean Morrow, Leslie Bank and Andrew Bank, respectively.

Finally, Part 4 addresses the topic of Monica Wilson's legacy from two perspectives, including Wilson's contribution to the discipline of history, as presented by historians Sean Morrow and Chris Saunders, and her approach to scholarship in general, as presented by her last graduate student, Pamela Reynolds.

In advancing these perspectives on Monica Wilson, *Inside African anthropology* intervenes in several literatures and debates. First, and most centrally, the book takes a position in the burgeoning scholarship on the history of research in colonial Africa. Following *Africanizing anthropology* (2001), Lyn Schumaker's seminal history of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, *Inside African anthropology* traces how one anthropologist and her interlocutors 'co-produced' knowledge. To this end, the book highlights both the extent to which Wilson's research assistants shaped her ethnographic texts and the extent to which Wilson forged successful collaborations with her research assistants and students. In developing these perspectives, the authors acknowledge that Monica Wilson's research in South Africa and Tanzania occurred within the context of colonialism and that colonial inequalities were symbolically reproduced through Monica Wilson's writing, which, following the norms of the day, compelled anthropologists to minimise the contributions of local research assistants in the name of asserting "ethnographic authority" (Bank & Bank (eds) 2014: 91-2). Nevertheless, to present the work of

Monica Wilson and other anthropologists as “hidden colonialism” (see Sanjek 1993) reduces the diversity of relationships that might evolve between them and their interlocutors to a generalised political system and occludes the many creative and mutually enriching dialogues which Monica Wilson generated with others across her career. These dialogues include the one which developed between Wilson and her then student Archie Mafeje, as they prepared their significant ethnography, *Langa: a study of social groups in an African township* (1963). As Andrew Bank notes, recent debates on this book have focused on who its ‘real’ author was, at the expense of seeing how the book was generated through complex interactions between Wilson, Mafeje and others (Bank & Bank (eds) 2014: 255–9).

In addition to addressing this central theme, *Inside African anthropology* touches on other hot topics in African history and historiography. For example, Lekgoathi, Mwakasekele and Bank’s chapter on Leonard Mwaishumo presents Mwaishumo as a “native clerk” – an important intermediary position in colonial African societies which has recently received attention from historians drawing from clerk life stories to unsettle the category ‘collaborator’ in African history. Sean Morrow’s chapter on Wilson at Fort Hare offers new insight into the past of that influential institution just before the turn to apartheid. That chapter and Bank’s chapter on Livingstone Mqotsi offer rich social histories of young Black intellectuals in the mid-twentieth century, highlighting how they understood South African society and how their careers were undermined by colonialism and apartheid. Finally, Saunders and Morrow’s chapter on Wilson’s historical work is an important intervention in the history of historiography itself. As the authors argue, Wilson fundamentally shaped the two-volume *Oxford History of South Africa* (1969) which she co-edited with Leonard Thompson, a text which drew from anthropological literature to place Africans at the centre of South African history for the first time. This text’s significance has been overlooked in the subsequent Marxist critique of South Africa’s “liberal historiography”, but it appears not to have been lost on Nelson Mandela, Neville Alexander and other political prisoners who accessed it on Robben Island (Bank & Bank (eds) 2014: 283–4, 295–6, 301–2).

In highlighting these points about the contribution of one woman working from “inside African anthropology”, the book inevitably suggests directions for anthropology’s future. With the exception of a few comments by Pamela Reynolds, the authors do not address this topic directly. Nevertheless, I will suggest one direction which seems to follow from the thrust of the book, namely that anthropology should focus attention on the way it generates knowledge through social practice. As the contributors to the volume make clear, Wilson’s accomplishments as an author of scholarly texts should not be divorced from her practices as a researcher, writer, teacher and, indeed, person. In written texts, anthropologists have often omitted important dimensions of their

practice – especially during the colonial era, when it was common to efface the human relationships through which knowledge was generated and to present research participants in an “ethnographic present” (for example, Fabian 1983). Nevertheless, through common training in, and experience of ethnography, anthropologists should be well positioned to reflect on the practices through which knowledge is produced, with all of the social relations they entail. Monica Wilson, as presented by her interpreters in this volume, offers one stunning example of the creative potential of such practices.

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