

Andrew Bank and Leslie J. Bank (eds) *Inside African Anthropology: Monica Wilson and her Interpreters*

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013

374 pp

ISBN 978 1 10702 938 5

£55.00

This is a quite excellent and important edited volume. The book sets out to challenge the “official history” of anthropology in southern Africa by explicating the role of Monica Hunter Wilson’s African research assistants in the production of her ethnographies. Resisting the exhausted trope of anthropology’s “hidden colonialism”, Wilson’s relationships with her key assistants Godfrey Pitje, Livingstone Mqotsi and Archie Mafeje are presented as fundamentally collaborative (though not always fully acknowledged) and the knowledge produced out of these relationships characterised as “much more complex than simple dualistic models allow” (p 6). Wilson is depicted as helping nurture a “vibrant insider ethnographic tradition” via the African anthropologists who she helped train and researched with (p 5). Andrew Bank’s opening chapter argues for the importance of her childhood socialisation by her missionary parents, cut from the cloth of liberal Scottish missionary Christianity, and her schooling at the racially mixed Lovedale mission in shaping “the openness with which she related to African research assistants” (p 38). Bank shows how Wilson moved in relatively cosmopolitan and left wing circles (her friendship with the Egyptian nationalist, Munira Sadek, and South African leftist intellectual, Eddie Roux, feature prominently) when she attended Cambridge University. Her liberal inclinations and interest in social change in Africa were nurtured in these social circles, leading her to focus her intellectual energies on social anthropology.

Andrew Bank's second chapter on the "intimate politics of fieldwork" elaborates on the "thoroughly collaborative" nature of the fieldwork Wilson conducted with her African research assistants in the Eastern Cape during the first two years of the 1930s. Bank highlights the ways in which Wilson in a standard practice at the time to shore up ethnographic authority largely wrote this intimacy and co production out of her most celebrated monograph, *Reaction to Conquest*. More interestingly, Bank suggests that Wilson's key research assistants for her East London fieldwork powerfully shaped her declension view of the social and cultural consequences of urbanisation for African communities.

This point is demonstrated at greater length in Leslie Bank's chapter "City Dreams, Country Magic" where he re reads Wilson's East London field notes to show how her reliance on respectable mission educated research assistants and informant networks resulted in ethnographic accounts preoccupied with the moral aspects of "detritorialisation", which was so different to the view of urban African life in Ellen Hellmann's *Rooiyard*.⁶ Wilson's field notes reveal that she and her research assistants asked informants about their dreams, but they made no appearance in her actual published writing on East London. Bank convincingly suggests that if Wilson had drawn on this material, she might have developed a more complicated view of the relationship between the rural and the urban in shaping the identities of her informants.

The African "interpreters" at the heart of the book are least present in Rebecca Marsland's chapter which discusses the relationship between Monica and her husband Godfrey Wilson in the context of their ethnographic research in Tanzania. Godfrey's exceptional linguistic ability was a great aid to his fieldwork, but Marsland also identifies a gendered division of ethnographic labour, with Godfrey more at ease in masculinist beer drinking spaces than Monica, who focused her energies on more reserved forms of observation in feminised spaces of home and education. After Godfrey's death by suicide at the end of World War Two, Monica began the three decade "labour of love" of turning hers and Godfrey's Tanzanian research into their "Nyakyusa trilogy"; monographs which he dominates despite her authorship. It was, Marsland argues, an exercise in "curious self effacement", through which, ironically, she becomes a less visible "interpreter" in her own right. Andrew Bank, Sekiba Lekgoathi and Timothy Mwakaseke's chapter discusses the critical role of Leonard Mwaishumo as one of the Wilson's key Nyakyusa research assistants. He is depicted as an "insider ethnographer" who produced a significant body of "vernacular texts" in the field, which powerfully shaped the character of the Wilson's published work.

Sean Marrow's chapter explores Wilson's time at Fore Hare Native College at the close of World War Two, charting her relationships with African faculty there (like Z.K. Matthews, whose autobiography she helped compile after his death) and some of her most prominent students. Wilson was appointed at Fore Hare when its brand of Christian liberal paternalism was still largely intact. Shortly after the war, she and her African students could still hold out some hope of African academic advance. Marrow's chapter is the first of three successive chapters focusing on African students whom Wilson trained, but whose academic aspirations were ultimately blocked by white supremacy. Marrow's focus, Godfrey Pitje, showed immense promise (the research for his Masters degree included

6. E. Hellman, *Rooiyard: A Sociological Study of an Urban Native Slum Yard* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1948).

pioneering ethnographic work on sexual education among the Pedi) but his advancement within academic circles was repeatedly frustrated by racism. Leslie Bank writes about Livingstone Mqotsi's trajectory from promising Wilson protégé to exiled school teacher in Zambia and England.

Andrew Bank and Vuyiswa Swana write about Wilson's collaboration with Archie Mafeje, perhaps the most well known victim of racism in apartheid era universities. The emphasis here is on demonstrating the importance of Mafeje's "insider" knowledge to their *Langa* monograph.⁷ Perhaps most interestingly, in the decades that followed, Mafeje very deliberately tried to distance himself from the liberal mode in which *Langa* was written. Initially, however, he was very positive about the project in private correspondence with Wilson, and more sympathetic towards respectable African elites in Langa than the youthful rebels he later embraced. The authors correctly call for caution about "projecting too confident and assertive an intellectual identity for Archie Mafeje" back into the early years of his collaboration with Wilson.

The penultimate chapter by Chris Saunders and Sean Marrow reflects on the relationship between anthropology and history in Wilson's work. Like other anthropologists of her time, she appears to have been convinced that an anthropological approach was the only way to study history in Africa, but she appears to have never lost her early interest (she initially studied it at Cambridge) in history. Her special interest in archaeology led her to playing an important role in refuting apartheid's hoary "empty land" myth. Her close relationship to Leonard Thompson was particularly important as they undertook their *Oxford History of South Africa* project, driven by their liberal commitment to break with settler historiographical traditions to incorporate South Africa's black majority into the history of the country, with an emphasis on "interaction".⁸

The discussion of behind the scenes negotiations on the production of the *Oxford History* contains some surprises: Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore, two key revisionist critics of the liberal tradition, were considered as contributors. Saunders and Marrow underline the ways in which the *Oxford History* circulated influentially within liberation struggle networks. The general emphasis is on arguing for the important and underappreciated contribution of the two volume project to moving South African historiography forward, in large part precisely through her pioneering (and prescient) bringing together of anthropological and historical approaches.

The closing chapter re examines the role of research assistants in anthropological research, though largely through a reflection by Pamela Reynolds on her own fieldwork experience in this regard. Reynolds goes over the familiar ground of ethical debates which featured centrally in the "self reflexive" turn within anthropology over the last few decades. These are fraught questions, which the previous chapters address largely through detailed empirical explication of the complexity of relationships between Wilson and her assistants. Reynolds takes a more philosophical approach to these questions, which this reader found rather less enlightening than the more fine grained studies contained in the rest of the volume. No doubt the chapter reflects the diverse disciplinary backgrounds of the

7. M. Wilson and A. Mafeje, *Langa* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1963).

8. M. Wilson and L.M. Thompson (eds), *The Oxford History of South Africa*, 2 volumes (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985).

Book Reviews Boekresensies

participants in the original conference out of which this volume emerged, but it is perhaps not the strongest note on which to conclude an otherwise excellent book, which makes an important contribution to the intellectual history of South Africa. Clearly written, well edited and handsomely illustrated (with the exception of some grainy photographs) the book is highly recommended.

Stephen Sparks
University of Johannesburg