

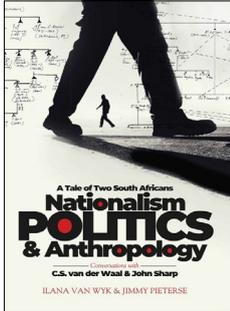


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A Tale of Two South Africans – A review

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Nationalism, politics and anthropology: A tale of two South Africans: Conversations with C.S. van der Waal and John Sharp



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The Tale of Two South Africans: Nationalism, Politics & Anthropology: Conversations with C.S. van der Waal & John Sharp is at once a biography and a meticulous intellectual ethnography. Written by Ilana Van Wyk, Associate Professor in Anthropology at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Stellenbosch University, and by Jimmy Pieterse, Doctor of Anthropology at the University of Pretoria, this book focuses on the history of anthropology in South Africa, through the experiences of two key anthropologists in the late 20th and early 21st centuries: C.S. 'Kees' van der Waal and John Sharp, both of whose careers spanned decades of apartheid rule as well as the first decades of democracy in South Africa.

The book emanated from a project to explore the knowledge of older anthropologists in Africa, who reach the compulsory retirement age of 65, often at the height of their academic careers and their power as scholars. As Francis Nyamnjoh, the principal convenor of this project, writes: 'The socio-political context of knowledge production, circulation and transmission should be systematically factored into anthropological analyses, theory building, and methodologies' (p. xiv). This is precisely what the book does in exploring anthropology's history in South Africa, particularly its contribution to debates about disciplinary approaches and theoretical bases.

The book examines the discipline of anthropology in the apartheid years through a focus on the establishment of *volkekunde*, which assigned 'an overwhelming explanatory power to the phenomenon of ethnicity, which it conceiv[ed] in the narrowest, most rigid terms possible' – terms that echoed apartheid racial and ethnic definitions.¹ The book traces the rise of *volkekunde*, which can be found in a German tradition that flourished before and during the Second World War and which centred *ethnos* as a core principle. Rather than simply study the discipline from the outside, one of the two key protagonists in the book, C.S. 'Kees' van der Waal, was trained in *volkekunde* at the University of Pretoria by the 'discipline's' most imminent disciples, P. J. Coertze and his son R. D. Coertze.

In conversation with van Wyk, the book traces van der Waal's eventual alienation from *volkekunde*:

I had to concede that the differences between Black and white cultural and technical performance were due to the differential access that each population had to education and capital. There was thus no justification for separate development or apartheid. My assumption that there were essential differences, a racist assumption that undergirded volkekunde, changed in that one moment. It was a massive and lasting paradigm shift. (p. 126)

The book's second protagonist, with Pieterse as interlocutor, is the social anthropologist John Sharp. In contrast with van Wyk's conversations with van der Waal about his academic development, his early and later academic career, and his eventual and powerful break from *volkekunde*, Sharp's intellectual journey was starkly different. He was centrally involved in the intellectual project to critique apartheid through anthropological research. After the Universities of Cape Town and Cambridge, Sharp returned to South Africa to critique and dismantle the system from within. As an academic at the University of Cape Town, Sharp was central to intellectual shifts in the anthropology department, from 'Radcliffe-Brownian structural functionalism and Lévi-Straussian structuralism as the predominant paradigm in the anthropology of the 1980s' to *exposé* anthropology, which sought to expose the ways in which concepts such as culture were abused to legitimate the apartheid regime (p. 106). In addition to writing about these concepts, social anthropologists 'also focused on exposing the injustices of apartheid through detailed ethnographies of change and social production (Gordon and Spiegel 1993).'²

Rather than position *volkekunde* as solely an alien project, wholly distinct from social anthropology and in the thrall of apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism, van Wyk and Pieterse seek to track *volkekunde*'s emergence and evolution within the South African academy. While avowing the political complicity of *volkekunde* with apartheid, as well as the poverty of the 'discipline's' theoretical framework, van Wyk and Pieterse, as well as Sharp and van der Waal as their interlocutors, do the more difficult work of exploring the (wrong-headed) rationale for *volkekunde*, and seek to trace its emergence and evolution in South Africa, including the alignment of a leading *volkekundige* with the *Kolege ya Bana ba Afrika*, and his self-styled attempts to make the *Kolege* a constituent college of the University of Pretoria as a way to build its educational offerings to the same standards as those offered to white, Afrikaans students.

The text also explores Sharp's perhaps politically unpopular doubts about presenting *volkekunde* and social anthropology as 'two separate developments' in South Africa's intellectual history (p. 170). Particularly in the first half of the 20th century, the book provides examples of leading *volkekundiges* 'addressing the same sorts of questions as their social anthropological contemporaries and arriving at answers that were in certain respects not poles apart'. Sharp states that attempts to represent *volkekundiges* as 'another species of being' is 'to simplify a complex reality' (p. 171), and the book explores uncomfortable parallels between the two 'disciplines'.

Aside from these fascinating discussions and intellectual pursuits, what the text offers is a history of anthropology in South Africa from those who have lived it. It will be of interest to anyone working in intellectual history, as well as in ethnographic biography and epistemology.

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