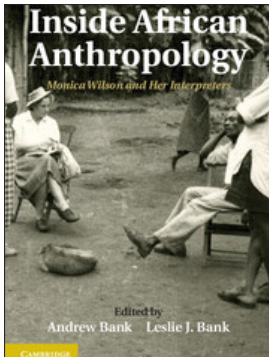


Whose knowledge? The politics of scholarship in South(ern) Africa: A critical review of *Inside African Anthropology*

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Monica Wilson and
her interpreters



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In this review, I raise the critically important issue of scholarly knowledge production among a range of scientific disciplines, particularly those in both the humanities and the sciences that rely on extended periods of fieldwork, through a critical reflection on the book by Andrew and Leslie Bank on the impressive work of the late Professor Monica Wilson. The Bank brothers have put together an important and impressive collection of chapters devoted to two critical issues: in part an initial assessment of Monica Wilson's work over her entire career, but more critically, a perspective of her interpreters – her field assistants and students, as well as various political interlocutors, friends, colleagues and of course her family, particularly her father. The book traces a chronological, perhaps a genealogical, intellectual development of Monica Wilson, alongside that of her many co-workers, in the production of a series of books, journal publications, presentations of various kinds and talks of hers. It begins with her Cambridge days – where she converted from studying history to anthropology, through to her fieldwork in Pondoland and East London and then her years of fieldwork with her husband Godfrey Wilson in Tanzania, and later to her work in Lovedale, Fort Hare and Rhodes University and finally her move to the University of Cape Town. The key focus of the book is on her co-workers and co-producers of anthropological knowledge. In the southern African context, this book is a full-length, but by no means exhaustive, exploration of an important second-generation ancestor of the discipline of anthropology and its consolidation in universities such as Fort Hare, Rhodes and Cape Town. The book is in large measure based on the Monica and Godfrey Wilson archives at the University of Cape Town, the significance of which lies squarely in the intimate connection between the personal dimensions of ethnographic research and the institutionalisation of research at a university.

The book mainly devotes itself to the collaborations and engagements with her field assistants. These collaborations and engagements hinge on two central concepts: the 'insider' (and surprisingly less on its opposite the 'outsider') and 'interpreter'. The book also contributes to a now well-developed field of interest related to the fieldwork assistants, the language teachers and interpreters. In many instances they were the equivalent of the ethnographers. In what follows is a review based around these three concerns: being an insider, and by implication, an outsider; the relationship to interpreters; and the research and knowledge production relationship as a developing field of enquiry.

Monica Wilson was an insider as well as an outsider in her various personae. The insider-ness relates to her intimate knowledge of the Eastern Cape: where she lived and was educated (Chapter 1), where she imbibed the missionary zeal of her parents (Chapter 1) and where she undertook her first major fieldwork (Chapters 2 and 3). Some of these 'insider' issues that concern her own worldviews need much more amplification. For example, the relationship between the missionary vision to change the world, albeit to a Christian one, with which she grew up and its relationship to her anthropology are important. By this I mean not the superficial idea that there was this influence – it is unmistakable – but how did that idea of missionary-induced social change translate or mutate over time and imbricate itself in her work. This question is important because there is a literature in South Africa that is not sympathetic to missionaries. And indeed this sentiment is captured in the often repeated phrase: 'When the missionaries came they had the Bible and the land was ours: now we have the Bible and no land.' That Wilson in many ways symbolises the acceptance of a benign missionary influence, needs much greater interrogation than the book gives.

As a developing fieldworker, despite her intimate knowledge of the Eastern Cape, she was an outsider. There were limits not only as a female anthropologist in the 1920s and 1930s that she faced both at Cambridge and in South Africa, but also as a fieldworker who required the intervention of a range of people, such as her father, other missionaries, priests, shopkeepers and their wives, mission educated English-speaking African clerks and quite importantly black politicians, such as Dr Walter Rubusana and Clements Kadalie, to ease her way into fieldwork and to protect her. Clearly her relationship with her father and his network was vital to her initial fieldwork, notwithstanding her own actual field research.

She was very much the insider who chose to stay in South Africa to continue her academic career here, within the confines of racial discrimination and its institutionalisation in apartheid, and to support and nurture her students and field assistants to carve out their own academic and other careers (Chapters 6, 7 and 8). That she chose to do so was a political and personally courageous decision of significance: a commitment to advance a scholarly enterprise in a country well known for strong streaks of anti-intellectualism mixed into a cocktail of racial prejudice, ethnocentrism and white superiority. Indeed, she was well aware of the way in which racial prejudice and apartheid marginalised and discriminated against her black students and colleagues and her insider fights against universities' acts of discrimination and prejudice, in particular the University of Cape Town, are well known. That she supported her black students and colleagues and engaged in research and debates with them earnestly was in contrast to some of her white colleagues and speaks volumes of her commitment to the development of a black intellectual class. This insider-ness is highlighted sharply in relation to Archie Mafeje (Chapter 8), Leonard Mwaishumbe (Chapter 5), Godfrey Pitje (Chapter 6) and Livingstone Mqotsi (Chapter 7). Yet the list of those of her white students that she trained brings into sharp focus the uneven and structurally unequal access to universities, research resources and the possibility of publication and the proportionately different scholarly success: Berthold Pauw; Max Marwick; Peter Carstens; Peter Rigby; Jean Comaroff; John Comaroff; Colin Murray; Martin West; and Pamela Reynolds (p. 5), all of whom are, or were (some have passed on), highly respected

academics at well-known universities both here in South Africa and internationally. Yet the question may be asked as to who were the insiders and outsiders? The white students that passed through Wilson's lectures and supervision were also insiders of a kind, benefitting immensely from the insider privileged position of their class and race. Mafeje, Mwaisumo, Pitje and Mqotsi might well be insiders of African anthropology, a small coterie of Wilson's well-known black research assistants and students that pales by comparison. The contrast is dramatic and the insider politics of not just southern African anthropology, but of every scientific discipline at South African universities needs to be explored, which, surely, is the implication of quoting Nancy Jacobs' work on the research assistants in the field of ornithology. This brave book begins that journey of exploration and documentation for anthropology, as Andrew Bank states, in departure from the 'official' history. It should be the case for every scientific discipline in South Africa.

As a seasoned academic within the rapidly changing political environment in the 1950s to 1970s, Wilson confronted the narrowing alternative spaces that she and public intellectuals like her could take advantage of in the gathering menace of apartheid. This is not to question her personal, intellectual and academic integrity: she rejected attempts by the Institute of Race Relations to recruit her as a spy on her assistants; she provided sustained and persistent support for academics such as Mqotsi and Mafeje despite the seeming hopelessness in the face of state opposition and brutality and the cowering stance of universities in the face of government pressure (Chapters 7 and 8). It is rather a context of the constraints and limits she faced and over which she had little control but she fought against and provided what space there was to continue, and perhaps even expand such scholarship. One may question if being an outsider under such circumstances was a disadvantage? Some theorists have argued that the marginal or liminal position of the outsider or stranger is an advantage. What then might such an outsider position have been to Wilson's favour and that of her interlocutors? The possibility of being both an insider and an outsider in relation to what she could and could not do for her students and colleagues is clearly demonstrated in the book, but needs greater amplification as an example of the political economy she had to contend with and the severe constraints she operated within in the institution of the university. This is well beyond the 'personal' and 'experiential' motifs that guide the substance of the book's chapters. Probably further research in the Wilson archives is required and perhaps a re-assessment of the conceptual tools to interrogate those archives. Such research, as I have suggested above, is vital to the South African intellectual enterprise going into the future.

The definition of the word 'interpreters' and characterisation of the political and social context in which Wilson and her interpreters worked as variously colonial or neo-colonial, as well as segregation and apartheid are relevant. To quote Leslie Bank:

Our use of the concept 'the interpreter' takes its cue from a public lecture that Monica delivered in Grahamstown in 1972, the year before her retirement. She began by pointing out that the first interpreters in the southern region of our continent were Africans, not colonists. These were the bilingual Christian converts who had learnt literacy and communicative skills on mission stations and then worked as translators. (p. 7)

This quotation has a number of reference points in the entire book. However, I draw attention to it by way of a few examples. Suppose we treat the Wilson archive as the anthropologist Anne Stoler¹ has done the Dutch colonial archives: to be read against and along the grain, as an ethnographic fieldwork site of inquiry. Clearly, if this archive was an ethnographic study of anthropologists going about ordinary everyday scholarly practices, here is the collective ethnographer (editors and some of their co-writers) adopting the emic position of the 'natives', that is to say the analyst adopting somewhat uncritically the position of the informant. This is a thread in the book where the editors treat Wilson very much in awe, that is to say a little less critically than might otherwise be the case. While I do not want to take away from the fact

that her interpreters were in fact bilingual Christian converts, I do want to raise three issues that arise from this perspective. Firstly, that the first interpreters were indeed indigenous or non-Europeans. But they may not have been all Christian converts. If we take a conventional date for the beginning of colonialism, the Dutch settlement at the coast in 1652, the first interpreters were certainly not Christian converts. Secondly, it is quite clear from all the chapters that in Wilson's writings there is the almost unstated presumption of an undifferentiated category of 'pagan' in opposition to Christian, or at least the point of departure from which modernity, symbolised by Christianity, is measured. And being Christian is the elemental criterion of positive social change. Even as Leslie Bank suggests she was more interested in actual social groupings than social categories (p. 195), these presumptive ideas are apparent throughout the book and perhaps this is an underlying assumption in her oeuvre. Certainly, a public lecture a year before her retirement in which she foregrounds Christian converts suggests that this is the case. Perhaps more research in the archive is needed to test this hypothesis. Thirdly, by extension and implication, the categorisation of people into exclusive groupings: Christian/non-Christian; European/non-European; colonialist/non-colonialist; pristine traditional 'tribes'/modernised groups. Such indeed may have been the kind of dominant binaries that were pervasive for most of the 20th century social science, and which Wilson incorporated into her oeuvre, but such exclusive categorisation of people – an analytical separation of reality – does not prevent actual hybridisation and the way in which the ideas and actions of Christian missionaries, Hindu ascetics, liberals, socialists, communists, nationalists of various sorts, Muslim clerics, Jewish migrants and refugees, amongst a host of other influences, have co-mingled creating a rich mosaic of ideas and their variable reception among people in southern Africa. Such categorisations as Wilson operated with tend to privilege a Western Christian missionary perspective and silence and make hidden the multiple acts of engagement, translation, interpretation and mediation that make it possible and often necessary to act in the world of the slaves, proletarianisation in the 20th century or that of immiseration and vast and deepening inequalities in the 21st century. That she used Christian converts, or perhaps more accurately mission-educated African assistants, consistently in all her fieldwork sites (in South Africa and Tanzania) who also occupied a particular segment or class position that distinguished them from the 'poor and dirty' (p. 86) lends another, and in my view, significant perspective on her ethnography. Indeed, the meta-theoretical frameworks with which she used, whether of the 'one history', 'culture contact' or 'single economy' variety, did not pay much attention to hybridisation/creolisation or transnationalism or indeed to the question of class, income and racial hierarchy – aspects that would have occupied the minds of Archie Mafeje and Livingston Mqotsi. One quite startling example on the question of racial and class hierarchy is the questionable acknowledgements by presenting her store trader hostess and key informant as a 'white woman of Scottish ancestry' (a vague label that might well apply to Wilson herself) in her first monograph *Reaction to Conquest* while her notes and PhD thesis have her as a woman of 'coloured blood'. I am never sure what to make of these kind of remarks that clearly exist in the minds, words and reactions of many people, apart from its racist connotation, and that the social category of people labelled 'coloured' are usually considered a result of an ahistorical biological 'mixing of blood', a popular imagined accidental miscegenation, whereas the other social or racial categories in South Africa are defined and privileged in various ways by their historical, cultural, ethnic, language, national or geographical origins. It is perhaps best that we learn from Wilson's logical and empirical inconsistencies on these matters and come to terms with our hybridised or creolised class-based past and present.

Apart from these historical omissions and theoretical lacunae, there is the question of why she shifted in her acknowledgements of her field interpreters over time, from the mere acknowledgement in the co-production of important ethnographic insights to her openly stating towards the end of her active career where her debts lay. Borrowing from James Clifford², Leslie Bank argues that the conventions of the 1930s ethnographic authority – the immersed and accomplished linguistically agile ethnographer whose knowledge and authority of the people studied

is virtually unquestioned – dictated the acknowledgment but also forcefully the exclusion of her debt to fieldworkers. It seems to me that Wilson later in life acknowledged to her credit the error of this thinking. And in this she was in advance of anthropologists in the rest of the world.

Further, while it is well known that she was an amazing teacher, superb supervisor, and hard-nosed disciplinarian on matters of rigorous research (Chapter 10), she was equally a patient listener to her students and research assistants and always willing to engage in debate (Chapter 6). That we should have more scholars like this in South Africa shouldn't be debatable. Wilson provides the model of what an excellent or ideal university scholar should be. It is worthy to note she was less patient with inefficient university bureaucrats, and here one can only speculate on how she would, albeit in her retirement period, have received and reacted to Professors Ramphele and West, anthropologists and VC and DVC, respectively, at the University of Cape Town in the recent past.

Yet there is uneasiness with this comfortable vision of the ideal scholar and mentor, that Wilson provided the intellectual stimulus for that small group of black anthropologists who learnt their craft from her. Mafeje, Mqotsi and others shared the intellectual tradition of the Unity Movement which would have steeped them in their rich tradition of reading not just socialist classics and that of their leadership such as Isaac Bangani Tabata (also a Lovedale student in the 1920s) whose writings also describe the conditions of peasants and workers in the Eastern Cape, and Benjamin Kies, but others such as Benjamin Farrington, whose work on 'classical' Greece and Rome was as much a class analysis of traditional societies, and Nosipho Majeke (Dora Taylor) on the ambiguous role of missionaries in conquest. Of course it is still to be explored and explained why and how it is that these insights were or were not applied to their ethnographic work in South Africa. Was this the Marxism that Wilson objected to in her engagements with Mqotsi and Mafeje? More importantly, is there a gap between the politics of people such as Mqotsi and Mafeje with the Unity Movement background and their anthropology inspired by Wilson? Is there a kind of theoretical and ideological dissonance or schizophrenia between the reception of Europeanised socialist theories and anthropological theory? Is there a nativism aspect to 'insider anthropology'? Are there unresolved contradictory perspectives between a fluid modernity embedded in the socialist project and a kind of anthropology that wished to capture the 'tradition' before it disappears? Wilson's anthropology was scholarly and political and probably missionary inspired, but her politics operated without deep resonance and organisational reach to the people she studied. Did Mafeje, Mqotsi and Pitje and others have this luxury, given their involvement in liberation politics? Did their muted and extinguished academic careers in South Africa force upon them lesser alternatives? Can one really speak of an insider anthropology which always seemed to create faltering pathways and eventually cut short black academic life?

I wish to point to where Leslie Bank questions the concept of hidden colonial context of anthropology to examine Wilson's work and her interpreters. He in particular rejects Sanjek's³ formulation of the relationship between anthropologists and their field assistants as 'hidden colonialism'. He suggests that such a formulation is inadequate and rather shifts the focus to the 'experiential' (p. 14), to 'the view from the tent'⁴ on the grounds that it provides for an assessment of the agency of such interpreters. Indeed Bank places considerable value in using Clifford's distinction between three kinds of ethnographic writing – inscription, transcription and description (p. 125) – to emphasise the active role of Wilson's interpreters. While this provides illumination for Monica Wilson's writing or the way in which she produced her monographs and journal publications, it assumes that there is a university or research institution where these kinds of writing culture or society can take place for a group of emerging black anthropologists. I would suggest that for anthropologists such as Mqotsi this was more absent than possible, and that the very university itself, as a learning and research institution in South Africa, can be an alienating place for black scholars. In this sense, the insiders of African anthropology are very much the outsiders in the formal institutional arrangements of tertiary education and research.

The exploration of the relationship between university trained anthropologists and their various assistants is not particularly new in the discipline of anthropology. At least since the 1980s, Stocking⁵, Sanjek⁶ and Clifford⁷, among others, have been focusing on the relationship between anthropologists and their assistants, and in doing so have explored a number of different dimensions of this relationship, including the very important question of how anthropologists relate to the people they study, how they access information and generate data and how such data are written up. Ethnography, or more correctly ethnographic writing, consists of a range of research methods and techniques; written down observations; headnotes and field notes; anthropologists' journals; diaries; surveys that were undertaken; interviews; reflections on the personalities of fieldworkers and the particular predilection for a set of methods that are consistently used; the ways in which the observation, the interview and the act (and the kind or type) of writing takes place; the ways in which the observation and the interview are being observed by 'the natives'; the break/rupture or disrapture of the everyday practices; the act of writing field notes and so on. I have indicated how Clifford^{2,3} has distilled these insights into three kinds of writing and how that has been fruitfully used to illuminate Wilson's writing. Others have raised a host of other issues that have now been explored and analysed around the mystic and 'authenticity' of fieldwork, or participant observation, and the very act of being an influence in the lives of people has come under scrutiny. Indeed the very presence of an anthropologist, despite the myth of not disturbing the everyday, or even a significant ritual or celebratory event, is in fact an introduction of social change. For example, a refusal to consume food (the anthropologist has food taboos which need to be explained); or does one turn away when violence against a child or woman takes place? Does one protect a would-be victim of rape while engaged in participant-observation? How indeed does one react to police brutally suppressing a protest against low wages, or demands for legitimate political or social rights? All of these issues are now painstakingly dissected in the anthropological literature, and in many cases are cast in various posturing, theoretical, methodological, political and seriously personal, moral and ethical dimensions. Indeed, in many cases ethnographic research now raises serious ethical issues in university research committees that consider research proposals, as Reynolds observes in her chapter, and wonders whether Wilson's research proposals, as it were, would muster a nod of approval from a university research ethics committee today (Chapter 10, p. 318).

In South Africa, this kind of reflection on the ethnographic authority, least of all on fieldworkers and their contributions, has hardly begun, although there have been attempts in the past to point to the insider aspects of anthropology such as Lekgoathi's^{8,9} work on Isaac Schapera's fieldwork among the Tswana.

In some respects, only an inkling of these kinds of issues had been vaguely anticipated in the debate between volkekunder and liberal/radical anthropology in the 1980–1990s in an axis that seemingly bifurcated anthropology in this country. Wilson's insider anthropology as it is described in this book is not an exposé anthropology – it is not the high moral colouration and pedantic outrage of the Marxist inspired anthropology of the 1980s. It exposed rapid changes in people's lives through detailed description, but did not make an obvious posture. What might be the reasons for this? Perhaps a deep concern to describe accurately and articulate a scientific view – it was her belief in fieldwork, the truth of fieldwork, and its enduring value. The enduring value of her anthropology has become the historical and ethnographic record of necessity in any research in the Eastern Cape or Tanzania, rather than the record of theoretically inspired politically correct research. Of course we now know that even fieldwork is structured and informed by a range of issues – epistemological, political and personal, and in South Africa colonialism, racial segregation, discrimination and apartheid was central. For the South African academy this points to the lingering criticism levelled at anthropology (as it should be for any scientific discipline) as a colonial discipline, rather than one which currently questions the assumptions upon which we operate in our organised forms of social life in our actions, norms, representations and institutions (apart from philosophy – but that is another issue).

But this book should stimulate much more examination of anthropology and its history, particularly that of the field assistants. At least we know that the ethnographers in the Native Affairs Department not only used bilingual local elites such as teachers to gather information through questionnaires, but also offered their own interpretations. That both Wilson and the Native Affairs Department relied on local elites to do their fieldwork and carry out surveys and interviews says much about the less than ideal Malinowskian-type ethnographer in South Africa.

Despite my criticisms of the book, *Inside African Anthropology* is an extremely important book because it brings to light the once 'hidden' relationship between Monica Wilson and the field assistants and some of the students she had. It also serves as a model for which other disciplines (physical, health and humanities sciences) need to explore their own complicities. The book places emphasis on the 'experiential' – the practice of fieldwork or ethnography, and the downplaying of the structural context. Such an approach shows the complexity of these relationships and by implication shuns a simplistic notion that it was a one-dimensional 'hidden form of colonialism', or that it provided in an equally simplistic way the space for an indigenous intelligentsia to emerge. Indeed, these relationships were far from being equal: they were also often intimate, personal and fruitful, but that should not negate that they were probably also paternalistic, dependent, sometimes strained and difficult. Monica Wilson might have thought they were among equals as scholars, but these relationships were riven with the hierarchies of race and racial prejudice that emerged daily and which in its exteriority and interiority, outside of anthropology and inside the discipline within the university, prevailed and continues to prevail in its various forms. This is not to say that Monica Wilson was a racist, certainly not in crude and obvious ways, nor implicitly so, but she was situated in that structural and contextual racism that Max Gluckman^{10,11} so brilliantly

exposed in his 'situational analysis' and which we still find ourselves embroiled in today.

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