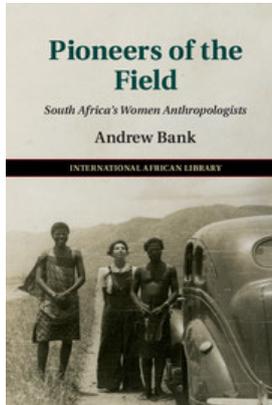


Let us now praise famous women: Revising South Africa's foundational anthropology narrative

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Pioneers of the field: South Africa's women anthropologists

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AUTHOR:

Andrew Bank

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REVIEWER:

Karen Tranberg Hansen

AFFILIATION:

Department of Anthropology,
Northwestern University,
Evanston, Illinois, USA

EMAIL:

kth462@northwestern.edu

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Women played prominent roles in founding anthropology in South Africa, according to historian Andrew Bank, yet their contribution has been nearly written off in conventional accounts of the founding fathers of the discipline. Winifred Tucker Hoernlé, Monica Hunter Wilson, Ellen Hellmann, British anthropologist Audrey Richards during her years at Wits (1938–1940), Hilda Beemer Kuper before she emigrated (1961) and Eileen Jensen Krige were far more influential in establishing the discipline than has been recognised. With the exception of Kuper and Richards, these women remained in South Africa and developed the discipline from within, under adverse intellectual and political circumstances. Spanning a century (1985–1995), their lives and scholarship unfolded against the backdrop of the institutionalisation of apartheid, which has complicated their legacy. Viewed largely by later generations as functionalist in theoretical orientation and conservative in political outlook, their contribution to the study of changing South African society has been marginalised.

Bank revises and complicates this drab narrative, piecing together well-known and previously unavailable details about the personal and intellectual lives of a group of women trained or influenced deeply by Winifred Hoernlé, who held the first university position in anthropology in South Africa at Wits. Praising her unusual gift as a teacher, her scholarship on social and cultural change, her work on social causes and welfare, and her sociability and humanity, they present Hoernlé as the 'mother' of South African anthropology in their recollections. Instilling joy in field research, she sent them all to the London School of Economics to participate in Bronislaw Malinowski's fieldwork seminars. As the mentor and role model, Hoernlé turned their focus to urban and applied anthropology in a liberal and humanist vision of society and race relations.

For his account, Bank draws on an impressive body of sources, including the women's scholarship, publications and writing, some of it unpublished field notes and papers, from public and private sources, including correspondence, photographs, interviews and communications with relatives. The chapters identify background experiences that shaped personal outlooks and analyses published and unpublished writings, often revealing little-known sides. Ellen Hellmann left no personal papers at all, yet Bank weaves together an extraordinarily engaging account based on her public life and personal interviews – what is in fact my favourite chapter.

Building up the Anthropology Department at Wits, Winifred Hoernlé introduced the new theory of structural-functionalism in British social anthropology to South Africa through her collaboration with A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1923–1925). She had conducted research among the Nama in German South West Africa before World War I, returning during the early 1920s to do pioneering urban fieldwork in the Windhoek location. She and Radcliffe-Brown worked actively together, so much so that Bank makes the case for co-production in some of Radcliffe-Brown's seminal essays. During her tenure, anthropology in South Africa was transformed as Hoernlé and her 'daughters' undertook field research for their investigations of cultural tradition and social change in urban as well as rural settings. Following her resignation in 1937, Hoernlé's second career made her a leading activist in social welfare programmes involving white, Indian and African women and she promoted women's rights and liberalism in organisations at national level.

Bank's focus on Monica Wilson's relationship with Hoernlé adds fresh perspectives to an anthology about Wilson and her interpreters, which he co-edited recently (2013). Wilson received her anthropology training at Cambridge. During her research in Pondoland (1931 and 1932), Hoernlé advised her about fieldwork and helped her find funding. As their relationship became close, Wilson became Hoernlé's 'intellectual daughter.' Bank foregrounds Christianity as the distinctive feature of Wilson's anthropological identity as well as a theme in much of her scholarship, noting her turn toward history in later work. His discussion of her three-decade long university career demonstrates her significant involvement in university politics as the first, and only, woman in the university senate at the University of Cape Town.

Ellen Hellmann is best known to anthropologists as author of the pioneering urban study of an African slum-yard in Johannesburg (Rooiyard) conducted in the 1930s but published only in 1948. Her Jewish background shaped her empathy for the marginalised and influenced her Jewish and anti-apartheid political activism. Bank's close reading of both her unpublished doctoral thesis on education and African township youth and the published report reveals an innovative field researcher, pioneering the documentation of youth culture. Her later achievements as a fieldworker and author of essays on urban issues and race relations, popular and scientific, have not been well recognised, perhaps because she followed an activist rather than a university-based career, associated for years with the South African Institute of Race Relations.

The biographical studies of Audrey Richards bypass her three years at Wits, which also go unmentioned in historical accounts of anthropology in South Africa. Showing her role in consolidating the liberal vision established by Hoernlé, Bank describes her developing an anthropology that was ethnographically inspired, practical and applied as well as theoretically oriented. In addition to getting students into the field, while at Wits she also wrote several essays based on her work on the Bemba of Northern Rhodesia. Emphasising intellectual friendships, Bank notes her promotion of the work of young women anthropologists, characterising her as the 'surrogate mother' of South African anthropology.

Hilda Kuper and her husband Leo left South Africa to teach at the University of California in Los Angeles in 1961 because of their left-liberal politics. After describing her early urban fieldwork in Johannesburg and historically oriented scholarship in Swaziland, Bank focuses on a lesser-known aspect of Kuper's work – her creative writing.

Showcasing her substantive ethnographic fiction and poetry, he offers a detailed appraisal of her changing fiction, its relation to fieldwork and her own background. He reminds us of the research she conducted in Indian communities in Durban in the late 1950s that rarely is mentioned in accounts of South African anthropology. Her Jewish identity shaped her sympathetic relations with Indian women. As one of the most prolific anthropologists of her generation, Kuper taught and mentored a new generation of women anthropologists, both in South Africa and the USA.

Because of her long career in anthropology at South African universities – although she retired in 1970 she remained active much longer – Eileen Jensen Krige is ‘the university woman’ in Bank’s account. Trained as a teacher, she became Hoernlé’s first student, undertook urban fieldwork in the 1930s, and, along with her husband Jack, she conducted fieldwork among the Lovedu, which resulted in a co-authored book. Bank remarks on her innovative methodology and her close relationship with Simeon Modjadji in half a century of collaborative field research. Like Hoernlé, Krige was very active in social welfare projects. Through writing about African women and social change, she left a legacy of feminising the discipline and promoting the careers of African, Indian and white women students.

In his conclusion, Bank agonises over anthropology’s amnesia: why the contribution of these women has been written out of the male-dominant canon in the history of South African and British functionalist

anthropology, their works viewed as ‘tribal’ and historically static, and their politics supportive of segregation and apartheid in South Africa. He argues the opposite: that their lives and works demonstrate a profoundly humanist endeavour against the backdrop of the institutionalisation of apartheid policies from the late 1940s onwards when the politics of racism and Afrikaner nationalism hardened. Representing the liberal-functional tradition in South Africa, their works dealt with the changing relationship between tradition and social change, thus taking account of history. Balancing personal lives and public careers, they might not all have published conventional fieldwork-based monographs and scientific articles in disciplinary journals, yet they pioneered urban field research and pursued applied and welfare projects involving diverse racial groups. Most of them were highly innovative in methodological terms. While not active in the feminist movement, they advanced South African feminism by their focus on women, promoted the status of women in male-dominated universities and public life, and pursued more applied work in and beyond the university than their male peers. Hoernlé inspired them to work on welfare and anti-apartheid campaigns in a shared passion for anthropology. While liberalism may translate differently in the North, South Africans are likely to weigh in on this important book from a variety of angles. And to be sure, anthropologists, historians and African Studies scholars in South Africa and elsewhere will find much to ponder in this well-written and meticulously researched study of six women who shaped South African anthropology in profound ways.

