

Book Review – Pioneers of the Field: South Africa's Women Anthropologists by Andrew Bank

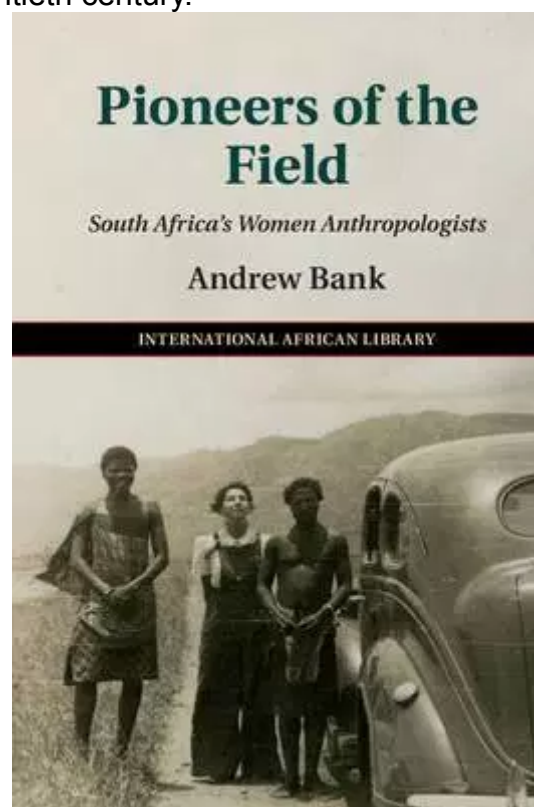
Anne Heffernan says this book represents an important contribution to the history of social anthropology by reclaiming the place of its foremothers.

Andrew Bank opens his new monograph, *Pioneers of the Field: South Africa's Women Anthropologists*, in the anthropology corridor of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). Bank describes this hallway as lined with a 'fictitious lineage' of portraits of the department's 'intellectual forefathers'. Among these, only one woman features- Winifred Hoernlé -, and Bank takes her as the symbolic anchor of his text. He sets out to argue for a new lineage – not just for the Wits Anthropology Department, but for the field of social anthropology in South Africa as a whole. Hoernlé sits at the core of his argument that – despite a canon composed of the work of men like A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, Isaac Schapera, and Max Gluckman – it was actually women who made the most important innovations in ethnographic fieldwork and in training students in social anthropology in South Africa during the early- and mid-twentieth century.

In this richly biographical text, Bank lays out the work and lives of six women, two generations of scholars who profoundly impacted the development of their discipline. Essays about Winifred Hoernlé, her successor as head of department at Wits(Audrey Richards), and four of her 'intellectual daughters' (Monica Wilson, Ellen Hellman, Hilda Kuper, and Eileen Krige) make up *Pioneers of the Field*, but this is more than a collection of biographies. Bank argues for each woman's lasting contribution to anthropology – through Hellman's pioneering of urban ethnography, and Kuper's early anticipation of the 'literary turn', for example. For each he analyses some of their key work, and implicitly makes an argument for rethinking what should be included in the canon of South African social anthropology.

Bank also investigates the personal lives and relationships of his subjects – correspondence and diaries make up a large part of his source material – and in his conclusion he argues that, collectively, they have given their field a humanist legacy. In this he argues against post-colonial critiques of African anthropology which have criticised perceived Eurocentric and static analyses of African cultures. Bank argues compellingly – with reference to their personal and political endeavours – that such critiques do a disservice to the legacy of these women anthropologists. They pioneered a deeper engagement with African communities than their contemporaries in other fields, and challenged conventional boundaries of sex, race, and class in their lives and in their work.

This is compelling, but if *Pioneers of the Field* has a fault, it lies in not acknowledging the racial privilege that facilitated the work these women did, even when that work involved challenging racial and sex-based boundaries. Africans feature remotely in the narrative – as research assistants, subjects, friends, and – more rarely – as colleagues, like ZK Matthews. Nonetheless, Bank is at some pains to distance his subjects from the colonial project, which made great use of anthropologists in many parts of Africa. Though he suggests that for five of them (excluding Richards) 'South African nationalism was central to their identities and scholarly projects' (p.275),



this was an inclusive nationalism – across racial and religious boundaries – very different from that of the apartheid project.



Traditional Zulu House in South Africa. Photo credit: John Atherton via Flickr (<http://bit.ly/2nGstPS>) CC BY-SA 2.0

I accept the argument that these women were not colonial enthusiasts, but I think Bank misses another facet of identity shared by all six women he analyses: the fact that they were all women of empire. Each (with the exception of Krige) was born, studied, and worked across various corners of the British Empire and beyond. India, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, South West Africa, Uganda, Tanzania, Swaziland and England all played important roles in the lives of these women and in their collective story. They were exceptionally well-traveled and well-educated, when neither was the norm for members of their sex. In arguing for the collective impact of women on the field of anthropology, Bank perhaps gives short shrift to how unusual these particular women were. They were among the first female students, and later lecturers, at Wits and at Cambridge University.

Many of them also pursued graduate studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). 'Still somewhat marginal, not entirely respectable, it [...] was more hospitable than the ancient universities to the ambitions of women.' (p. 157) Bank quotes Adam Kuper on the environment at LSE in the early twentieth century, but this could as easily apply to the discipline of anthropology as to LSE itself. Timing was critical in the birth of social anthropology. This nascent discipline emerged when white women were beginning to enter the academy for the first time. Many of them found a home in the new field, which was not yet dominated by men. Women were also seen to have a particular capacity to study women, and able to access social spaces that men were not. Given this confluence, Bank's argument for the role of women in building the discipline is, perhaps, unsurprising. That it has taken nearly a hundred years to be made is more so.

Before writing this review, I walked down the anthropology corridor at Wits, in which Bank opens his book. The portraits he describes have been taken down – reflective of a new historical turn at this institution. Student protests over the last two years and a movement to decolonise South Africa's universities encourage us all to reflect on the pasts of our disciplines, laudatory and otherwise. Whether a new set of portraits go up at Wits or not, in *Pioneers of the Field* Bank has made an important contribution to the history of social anthropology by reclaiming the place of its foremothers.

Pioneers of the Field: South Africa's Women Anthropologists. Andrew Bank. Cambridge University Press. 2016



Find out more about [Audrey Richards on the LSE History blog](#)

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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