

MONICA WILSON 1908–82

An appreciation by David Brokensha

Monica Hunter Wilson died on 26 October 1982. Born of missionary parents at Lovedale, Eastern Cape Province, she studied history and anthropology at Girton College, Cambridge. She had early connections with the International African Institute, being one of the distinguished group of scholars whose African fieldwork was sponsored by the Institute in the 1930s (others included Meyer Fortes, Hilda Kuper, S. F. Nadel, Margaret Read and Godfrey Wilson). Her first fieldwork, among the Pondo of South Africa, took place 1931 to 1933; the other major fieldwork, among the Nyakyusa of south-west Tanzania, was done 1935 to 1938, with a re-visit in 1955. In 1935 she married Godfrey Wilson, with whom she collaborated on field studies and publications, until his death while serving in the army, in 1944.

Monica Wilson taught at Fort Hare from 1944 to 1946, at Rhodes University from 1947 to 1951, and was Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town from 1952 until her retirement in 1973. Audrey Richards's 'Appreciation' of Monica Wilson in the Whissen and West 1975 *festschrift* volume provides more biographical details, as does the obituary in *The Times*, 1 November 1982. Her best known work is the series of four Nyakusa books—*Good Company*, *Rituals of Kinship*, *Communal Rituals* and *For Men and Elders*—and the several related articles. Here I record some personal remembrances and point to some of the themes which recur throughout her work.

I first met Monica in 1946 at Fort Hare, where she introduced me to Professor Z. K. Matthews and his wife Frieda. 'Z.K.' was one of the leading Africans of his generation and Monica later edited his autobiography describing him as 'a man with a shadow . . . a man of dignity and authority'. In 1947 I became one of Monica's first students at Rhodes University, and one of many whose lives have been touched by her teaching and her personal and moral stature. (Others who were her students include Max Marwick, Peter Rigby, Bengt Sundkler and Archie Mafeje.) What I remember most were her exacting professional standards, combined with a compassionate, gracious and understanding nature. An invitation to a Sunday dinner at her home was always a special occasion, given Monica's unusual combination of sense and sensibility. Knowing how much such informal meetings meant to me at a formative period, led me, much later, regularly to invite my own students home. On one occasion in 1970 Monica (then visiting the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford) gave an informal seminar at my home, which showed she had lost none of her remarkable ability to reach out to students.

Monica's publications were characteristic of the best of her generation; she spent long periods in the field, acquired linguistic competence, and tried to let the people speak so that their actions and values could be understood through their own interpretations. All her writings demonstrate methodological rigour, and all her data are presented with clarity and precision. E. Adamson Hoebel, reviewing *Good Company*, wrote: 'Would that all ethnological field reports were as well written . . .

here is sound science presented with literary craftsmanship.' Monica has always been a pleasure to read. She paid constant attention to history and effectively used varied historical sources. The books all include a number of cases, or 'social dramas' as Victor Turner called them, ranging from thirty-eight in *Good Company* to sixty-six in *For Men and Elders*; these sometimes whimsically titled incidents – 'An angry wife spoils the fishing', 'A runaway daughter and a famous bull' – are essential parts of sophisticated analyses. Each of the Nyakyusa works focusses on a particular aspect of social organization: the unique age-villages; leadership and sanctions; the effects of 'the breath of men' on a chief's behaviour; and, especially, on ritual and symbolism. Her detailed account of the main beliefs in traditional Nyakyusa religion, namely survival of the dead and their power, medicines and witchcraft, to which is allied 'the breath of men', is one of the best analyses of religion and ritual that we have. She knew that 'evil is a reality which must be interpreted in one fashion or another in every cosmology'. Her enduring interest in the study of witchcraft began with her Pondo ethnography and the famous question, asked by the anguished schoolteacher whose child had died, 'granted that typhus is carried by lice, who sent the louse?' (*Reaction to Conquest*, p. 274).

Among Monica's main interests was 'the analysis of social change', which was also the title of the book she wrote with Godfrey Wilson. Of all her books this is probably the most difficult and uneven but (especially the concept of types and consequences of increases in scale) I have found it useful as a field tool, in analysis of data and in teaching. But more important than this early formal statement is her constant refusal throughout all her publications to ignore changes: 'To treat of Nyakyusa villages as if missions, or the Administration, or migrant labour and coffee export did not exist would simplify, but distort our analysis' (*Good Company*, p. 17).

'In this masterpiece Monica Wilson sums up the distilled wisdom of forty years of mature reflection on a great ethnography', wrote Aidan Southall of *For Men and Elders*. She examines changing relationships, between generations (especially fathers and sons), and between husbands and wives, always stressing the complex, diverse and zig-zag nature of change, and always taking into account *all* relevant factors, social, economic, religious and political. Monica's first *Africa* article (1933), an early harbinger of her broad view of social change, dealt with the status of women; she avoided any dogmatic conclusion but emphasized the 'opposite tendencies arising from the complex economic and social changes' (p. 276). She was constantly, in all her writings, concerned with the role of women, and in *For Men and Elders* she analysed some of the early Christian women whom she describes as 'beginners' – the insiders who accepted changes – and, following Mr Pickwick, as 'eccentricities of genius' – women who 'had the courage and imagination to be eccentric' (176).

During the 1970s many of the classic ethnographies were criticized, with various degrees of validity, on the grounds that the ethnographers had misreported what they saw, or had not understood what they observed. Monica, who was among those criticized, replied in a 1975 letter to *Africa* (45(2): 202–5) in which she competently and courteously demolishes the speculations and defends her own analyses. 'I saw age-villages with my own eyes . . . I listened to the laughter of Nyakyusa men when I told them that Englishmen were sceptical of the existence of age-villages and argued there *must* be a kinship base.' However, Monica herself was not at all territorial about the Nyakyusa, as is demonstrated by her excellent relations with the Leiden

anthropologists, especially the late Jan Konter.

I turn next to Monica's writings on South Africa, although the earliest publication preceded the Nyakyusa work. *Reaction to Conquest*, based on her doctoral dissertation, was published in 1936 when Monica was twenty-eight years old. This book, one of the first systematic and comprehensive ethnographies of a South African group, was unusual in other respects, as Monica looked not only at the Pondo in what were then called 'reserves', but also at those in towns and those working on white-owned farms. The last two categories were then much neglected, for there had been few urban studies and almost none on the 'natives on European farms'; indeed even today there is a mere handful of books. Two-thirds of the book is devoted to Pondoland itself; she describes economic condition, social organization and religious and magical beliefs in the town as well as on the farms, making comparisons of the three areas and between Christians and others, and between the more and less 'traditional' in the towns. This last theme was later elaborated by Philip Mayer and others. Later Monica made comparisons on a broader scale, between Nyakyusa and Pondo, especially in her important 1951 paper on 'Witch beliefs and social structure'.

Monica continued her interest in urban studies with the publication in 1963 of *Langa*, co-authored with Archie Mafeje, which examines an African township in Cape Town.

Monica Wilson made two other important contributions to South-African studies, the *Keiskammahoek Rural Survey* (in which she collaborated with others on what must be one of the most useful and comprehensive of such surveys), and the *Oxford History of South Africa*, which she co-edited (with Leonard Thompson) and to which she also contributed several major chapters on the frontier, hunters and herders, the growth of peasant communities, accounts of the Nguni, and the Sotho, Venda and Tsonga. These chapters are significant in two ways: first, they represent the best sort of anthropologically informed history, with a lucid, insightful explanation of the anthropological analysis of process; she also stresses the need for 'patient disentangling of the links between economy, language, political structure, kinship structure, forbidden foods or symbolic associations' (as criteria for classification) in order to understand the history of Africa. Second, they plead with scholarship and passion the cause and views of Africans, so much so that BOSS (the Bureau of State Security) declared that the volumes were 'consciously aimed at disturbing race relations in the crudest manner' (1975: 11). Her earlier writings, even the very choice of title, *Reaction to Conquest*, had created suspicion among the security police, but to the end of her life Monica persisted in speaking out. 'For the academic, the pursuit of truth is an absolute obligation from which nothing absolves him', she wrote in *So Truth be in the Field*, and implemented this conviction in steady criticism of government policy and of historical myths, especially 'the egregious myth that whites occupied an empty land . . . and the myth that before the whites came, South Africa was in a constant state of turmoil'. She insisted that 'scholarship implied a scrupulous regard for facts', and never hesitated in stating her interpretations; as early as 1936 she described migrant labour as 'the single most destructive force in our society'. (It must have been gratifying to Monica that one of her sons, Francis, who has specialized in migrant labour, is Professor of Labour Economics at the University of Cape Town.)

As one who was born in South Africa, I was acutely aware, especially as a student at Rhodes University, of what seemed to be three options: stay in South Africa and be silent, a course we indignantly rejected; stay and speak out; leave and live elsewhere. As one who chose the last course, I have great admiration for those, like Monica, who stayed in South Africa without sacrificing their integrity. A key to Monica's strengths is in her Scott Holland lectures, *Religion and the Transformation of Society*, where she writes 'as an anthropologist and a Christian'. Monica sent me a copy, writing, 'I hope you do not find it too personal. It seemed impossible to stand aloof this time'. I am glad she made the decision to declare the source of her strength, love and courage. She was interested in the role of Christianity among both Pondo and Nyakyusa. A 1937 *Africa* article, 'An African Christian morality', examines the effects of traditional religious sanctions on the Christian community', and both *Communal Rituals* and *For Men and Elders* analyse the role of Christianity. As a believer Monica had a deep understanding of Christian precepts and ideals, but she was always a very professional anthropologist: her faith illuminated and in no way impeded her anthropological observations and analyses.

In preparing this appreciation I looked over many of Monica's writings, and was struck again by her wisdom, good sense and clarity. She was one of the major African ethnographers.

The last time we met was several years ago at her home in Hogsback. I remember long walks with conversations about trees and birds, farming in the Ciskei, recent changes in rural Tanzania, and Californian students. Each time we met she showed a keen but critical interest in what I was working on, for she pushed others, as she pushed herself, to strive and to speak the truth.

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We record with regret the deaths of Professor Meyer Fortes and Professor Jan Voorhoeve. Obituaries of both scholars will appear in the next issue of *Africa*.