

1987

REVIEW ARTICLE

REMEMBERING AGNES WINIFRED HOERNLE*

Robert Gordon, University of Vermont

December 1985 marked the centenary of the birth of Agnes Winifred Hoernle, a person widely referred to as the "Mother of Social Anthropology in South Africa". Witwatersrand University Press have commemorated this occasion by republishing a number of her essays and papers. The selection and editorial work was done by Peter Carstens, who also contributes a lucid general introductory essay which places Hoernle and her work within the context of South African anthropology.

By all accounts Agnes Winifred Hoernle was a remarkable person. After obtaining a first-class honours degree in philosophy at Cape Town, Hoernle (nee Tucker) proceeded to Cambridge where she read anthropology and psychology. She showed early promise as an anthropologist. A visiting Cape academic wrote to the Principal of the South African College in 1911 urging him to offer her "a lectureship in African Anthropology and Ethnology... She would do it very well, and I think make a reputation for herself and the College in that subject" (cited in Robertson nd: 623). After two years at Cambridge, Winifred Tucker travelled to Germany and France where she broadened her knowledge of experimental psychology and sociology. On her return to South Africa in 1912 she undertook three months' fieldwork in the Richtersveld. Marriage to A.F. Hoernle took her to the cold academic climate of Harvard, where health problems led to her returning to the Witwatersrand in 1920. An academic appointment followed in 1923 and she was to remain on the staff of the University of the Witwatersrand, training such luminaries as Gluckman, Hilda Kuper, E. & J. Krige, until 1938 when she resigned. Thereafter, she worked in public life, serving in senior executive positions in the South African institute of Race Relations, the Penal Reform League, the Child Welfare movement and the Indian Social Welfare Association. She was regarded as a remarkable person of undisputed intellectual ability and moral integrity. Not only had the journal *Bantu Studies* dedicated an issue to her in 1935 but

Witwatersrand University awarded her an honorary Doctorate of Laws in 1949 for her services to ethnology and to the community at large, while the Race Relations Journal published a special homage to her in 1955 to commemorate her 70th birthday.

Mrs Hoernle was a woman who made her mark both academically and as a social reformer. This collection shows quite clearly that she was a theoretical innovator who laid a solid foundation on which the likes of Radcliffe-Brown and Schapera could build. Many notable South African ethnographies (with the exception of the works of Monica Wilson) were written by students who had received their grounding in social anthropology from her. The extent of this achievement can be appreciated when it is realized that even though ethnology/anthropology theses in Afrikaans outnumber their English language counterparts by some two and a half to one, a decent Afrikaans-language ethnography has yet to be written.

In this review I want to examine two questions which arise out of the publication of this volume: Was Hoernle indeed the "mother of social anthropology in South Africa" as Carstens suggests, following Krige and Krige (1942?) or is such a claim simply part of our rather Anglocentric discourse? Secondly, what message (if any) does Hoernle offer a younger generation of South African social anthropologists struggling to deal with major ethical contradictions. To answer these questions it is necessary to locate Hoernle within the history of the rather peculiar Southern African anthropological discourse.

Contrary to popular mythology, anthropology did not begin with the appointment of Radcliffe-Brown to the Chair of Social Anthropology at Cape Town in 1921 (Kuper 1973; Monnig 1964; Strydom 1974).¹ Such a view of the history of the discipline, blocks out the roots of the scientific discourse of oppression in which anthropology played such a prominent part. We need to probe further back in time.

In the early days of professional anthropology in South Africa there was close co-operation between English and Afrikaans anthropologists and indeed *Volkekundiges* translated the title of their discipline as 'social anthropology'. Ironically, a cursory survey of anthropology curricula shows that the syllabi at Afrikaans universities were more universalizing and less particularistic than that of their English compatriots. According to Gluckman, Schapera's famous statement in 1935 to the effect that

the missionary, administrator, trader and labour recruiter must be regarded as factors in the same way as are the chief and the magician (Gluckman 1975:24)

marked the watershed. Equally important, undoubtedly, given the small number of anthropologists, was Hilda Kuper's devastating critique of Stellenbosch University's P.J. Schoeman's Swazi research published in the very issue of *Bantu Studies* which specially honoured Winifred Hoernle.

If we justifiably accept that Agnes Winifred Hoernle was the mother-figure of South African anthropology then surely Theophilus Hahn served as its rather seedy godfather. Born of missionary parents in Namibia, he was the first South African to undertake a doctorate on the indigenous languages of Southern Africa (Halle 1870 on the grammar of Nama) and more importantly, the first person to publish material under the explicit rubrics of ethnography (1867) and *Voelkerkunde* (1870). Back in precolonial Namaland after his studies, he set up shop as a trader and soon found that the practice of anthropology had many advantages:

As far as I have to do with the natives, I can say that they don't give me much trouble but the reason is this: They all believe, in this country, that because I take observations, and make collections, and held a raad with the Captain of the Veldschoendragers, that the Government sent me in as an official person; of course I leave them in their belief (Palgrave 1877:xxii).

Returning to Cape Town, he was appointed Government Philologist from 1881-3. During this time he, like many other people, was an ardent champion for the institutionalization of Anthropology in South Africa. In 1877 the Governor of the Cape, Sir Bartle Frere, gave the first annual presidential address to the South African Philosophical Society, and chose as his topic "The Native Races of South Africa" (Transactions Vol 1, 1877). Among the first offshoots of the South

African Philosophical Society he hoped would be an ethnological section examining both the physical and intellectual characteristics of the natives. Paying tribute to the important work of Bleek he stressed the importance of savage ethnology, and suggested questions which he hoped these budding ethnographers would address. These included, firstly, why were indigenes so attached to their own customs and arising out of this, two further areas of concern. These were why were indigenes, comparatively speaking, so conceited and loyal to their chiefs? (which he argued on the basis of available evidence was the result simply of their desire for rule). Secondly, Frere was concerned about the whole question of the 'indestructability of the natives'. The Bantu, he opined, were indestructable and thus research had to be done on "their capacity for improvement and accommodating themselves to the more powerful northern races" (1877:xxiii). Hahn and Frere represent the roots of an important aspect of contemporary South African anthropology. Today the largest single employer of anthropologists is the South African Defence Force where 'applied ethnology' is all the rage.

Shortly afterwards an ethnological and folklore section was established with Hahn as secretary. In 1878 the *Folklore Journal* edited by Lucy Lloyd was founded. It was the first periodical to be devoted to ethnology² and folklore in South Africa and published stories in the indigenous languages with an English transcription. Unfortunately it did not last longer than the first two volumes.

The point about this failed attempt to establish ethnology in South Africa on an institutional footing was that the vast majority of contributors to this journal were German missionaries. Indeed, while the British were busy pacifying unruly 'natives', German scientists had made South Africa their field of ethnography.

W. H. Bleek, for example, described Fritsch's *Die Eingeborenen Sud Afrika's: Ethnographisch und anatomisch beschreiben* (1872), which was based on 3 years' fieldwork as the most thorough regional survey in the world. Fritsch was followed by luminaries like Passarge, von Luschan and Poch.

But it was in the field of African philology that Germany led the world. In part this was the product of German missionaries working

in British colonies. Being foreigners, they were not as mobile as their English counterparts and stayed at one station for long periods of time. Faced with both English and the indigenous tongue as foreign, they opted to learn and concentrate on mother tongue education. They were generally acknowledged to have been better linguists than the liberal and more philanthropic English missionaries (Eiselen 1957).

By the 1920s the acknowledged African language experts were Meinhof in Hamburg and Westermann in Berlin. Both came from strong missionary backgrounds and both were major proponents of mother-tongue education. It was thus not surprising that when young graduates from Afrikaans universities proposed to continue their studies in 'Bantuology' they should go to Germany, especially if they had a German or missionary background or both. Thus the young Werner Eiselen and N.J. van Warmelo proceeded to Hamburg in the twenties, and in the thirties they were followed by Engelbrecht, van Eeden, Ziervogel and Westphal. While much has been written on the ideological impact of those turbulent German years on impressionable young Afrikaner students, I think that the striking similarities between the colonial policies which the Nazis proposed to implement once their colonies were returned (see *Race Relations News* January 1939) and those enunciated later by SABRA, has more to do with a common German mission background than Nazi policy per se.

As du Toit explains it:

The German missionaries... had for many years debated the choice between *Einzelbekehrung* or 'single conversion' and *Volkschristianisierung* or 'national Christianisation', based on a conflicting interpretation of Matthew 28 verses 19-20... Does this, they asked, refer to individuals or to people as ethnic units? Should converts be isolated, or should the community, the village, the tribe, the nation be dealt with as a whole? One of the strongest early proponents of the *ethne* translation as referring to people as ethnic units was Gustav Warneck. In his *Evangelische Missionslehre* (1902) he discussed this in great detail and came to dominate German missionary thinking. His influence on work done in South Africa is well documented (du Toit 1984: 622).

The secretary of the Berlin Missionary Society, Siegfried Knak was a major proponent of this approach. In addition, German missionary theology of the interwar years advocated the *Volkskirche* doctrine (Moodie

1975:273). We need to remember this milieu in order to appreciate the magnitude of Agnes Winifred Hoernle's achievements.

In 1912 the young Winifred Hoernle returned from her studies in England and Europe and gave a series of lectures in Cape Town on "A Survey of some recent tendencies in Anthropology and their relation to African Problems".³ These lectures are remarkable for their elucidation of what I would regard as the basic principles of Social Anthropology. Thus at the end of her first lecture which surveyed the English, German and American schools, she ended with a plea:

"Too long have we neglected the study of native races from the pure scientific point of view, and, even if we thought we could afford to neglect this, urgent practical problems were arising around us, and would continue to arise, and we should be driven in self-defence to consider the most primitive races around us from their point of view".

Her second lecture dealt with "Primitive Races of South Africa and their relation to the Soil" which apart from showing a remarkable grasp for ecological variables is a finely grained controlled comparison which sought to answer the question why the Bushman had become extinct while the Bantu had survived. Unlike later *volkekundiges* who *still* argue that it is because of their inherent mental capability (Coertze 1973), Hoernle located her explanation firmly within the realm of social organizational features. Her third lecture betrayed her psychological studies and dealt with "Mental Characteristics". In this lecture she firmly argued the position that primitives were the same as civilized people in all essential mental processes and pointed out the need to use indigenous categories when studying psychology. Indeed, from the perspective of these lectures it could possibly be argued that the later influence of Radcliffe-Brown on Hoernle with its pretentious pseudo-scientific rhetoric might indeed have been regressive and stunted the growth of a Southern African anthropology.

She was the first trained female social anthropologist in the world. Her fieldwork, limited as it is by today's standards, was a revolutionary experience for her.

"It was from her Hottentots and from her friend and counsellor !Amatis that she first came truly to appreciate that the common humanity which all human beings share is greater than the cultural differences which make them dissimilar" (Hellmann & Whyte 1955:2).

In these terms then, the claim that she was the mother of a humanistic-oriented social anthropology can be sustained. Indeed, so strong was her belief that anthropology had to serve humanity that she was later to continue the fight for human rights outside academic life. While she echoed many of her colleagues in the thirties in trumpeting the virtues of enlightened colonial administrators using 'scientific anthropology', she was not entirely convinced of administrative uses of anthropology.

Indeed, one of the reasons why she did not publish much which can be conventionally defined as anthropological was because of her involvement in affairs which she believed would enhance the quality of life of the majority of South Africans. This had various consequences, some of which we have already touched upon. One important academic innovation which resulted was that her students undertook the first urban anthropological research in the world (Hellmann 1935 published 1948 and E.J. Krige 1936).

With her husband, she was a prolific writer of memoranda which were submitted to various Commissions of Enquiry and these activities have recently given rise to the charge that the Hoernles played an important role in elaborating the ideology of Apartheid (see e.g. Rich 1984). However, when one examines the actual minutes of the evidence which they submitted it is clear that the image of the state bureaucrat gullibly accepting the Hoernles' advice needs to be corrected. Consider for example the way in which they were greeted by Holloway, the Chairman of the Native Economic Affairs Commission

In this propaganda that you have handed in, you take the line that scientifically we have no evidence of inherent racial intellectual capability but that they are the product of social heritage. (Minutes of Evidence: p. 9183 on file at University of South Africa)

Sometimes the manipulation was much more subtle as in the slotting of the SA Institute of Race Relations evidence to the Tomlinson Commission just prior to that of the pro-Apartheid South African Bureau of Racial Affairs (SABRA) so that the SABRA experts could refute critical points raised by the SAIRR evidence. In sum, it is clear that Nationalists used the 'liberals' more for additional post hoc justification of their policies than for enlightenment and they often took a perverse delight in citing

English-speaking liberal anthropologists completely out of context. A single example must suffice: In his 1953 Hoernle memorial lecture Radcliffe-Brown cuttingly pointed out the patent absurdity of even considering the possibility of letting blacks develop along their own lines since their own "traditional systems" had been "hacked to pieces and not much of it could be reconstructed" (*The Star* 23/1/1953). Yet the Tomlinson Commission (1955) delighted in citing a passage of his *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (1952) as a key concept to justify segregation.⁴ Despite frustrations like this, Hoernle persisted. To paraphrase Alexander Leighton, the Hoernles were used by politicians like a drunk uses a lamp pole, more for support than illumination.

The two people who most profoundly influenced Winifred Hoernle's thinking and intellectual development were her husband, R.F. Hoernle, and her old Nama friend !Amatis. According to Ellen Hellmann and Quintin Whyte:

"Together with her husband she formulated those basic liberal standards and values to which her adherence has been unshakeable; through !Amatis came that realization of a common humanity from which stems her unwavering belief in the immense potentialities of all human beings" (Hellmann & Whyte: 1955:4).

Perhaps the most serious short-coming of this volume lies in the selection of essays and in this the editor undoubtedly betrays his own belief that there is a distinction between 'academic work' and 'applied' or 'political work'. This is indeed unfortunate because not only is this distinction based on arbitrary value-judgements but it is also probably false. Some of Hoernle's best work, in my judgement, lie in the various memoranda she wrote. With a little research and editorship some specimens of these could easily have been included. But even without further research it is a pity that the editor's classic liberal biases prevented him from including Hoernle's spirited "Alternatives to Apartheid" which was a rejoinder to Eiselen's "The Meaning of Apartheid". Eiselen was an Afrikaans-speaking anthropologist who is commonly seen as the "Architect of Modern Apartheid". While anthropology was used to justify apartheid it is also crucial to appreciate the fact that anthropology was also used to oppose apartheid from its very inception. Indeed, with all the current talk about "Post Apartheid society" this article

speaks strikingly to current issues with insights which are still valid. More is the tragedy because I think that Hoernle's strengths as an anthropologist lay not only in her academic treatises but also in her involvement with the social issues of her day. The fact that she left the sheltered employment of a university to confront these issues might indeed be the message this volume brings to young social anthropologists struggling to deal with the ethical issues of professional anthropology in contemporary South Africa. Perhaps the most crucial intellectual insight of Hoernle was precisely that academic anthropology in South Africa is irrelevant? I would hope that Hoernle be remembered not only for her 'academic' works but also for the moral stance she took, and in this sense this volume does not do her justice.

NOTES

* Review of A.W. Hoernle. *The Social Organisation of the Nama and other Essays*. Edited by P. Carstens. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand.

1. Indeed he only attracted 5 students beyond the first year and only one, Schapera, went on to do an MA.
2. It also contained a posthumous plea by W. Bleek for the establishment of an anthropological institute.
3. Undated and filed as Cape Times Bushman clippings, S.A. Public Library.
4. A point overlooked by Strydom in his Teutonic study of Radcliffe-Brown.

REFERENCES

Coertze, P. J. ed.
1973 *Inleiding tot die Algemene Volkekunde*. Pretoria.

- du Toit, B. M.
1984 "Missionaries, Anthropologists, and the Policies of the Dutch Reformed Church" in *Journal of Modern African Studies* 22 (4): 617-32.
- Eiselen, W.
1948 "The Meaning of Apartheid" in *Race Relations Journal* 15 (3): 69-86.
- 1957 "Duitse Sendingwerk in Suid-Afrika en die Bantoevolkeise" in *Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Rasse-aangeleenthede* 8 (3): 113-120.
- Frere, B.
1877 "The Native Races of South Africa" in *Transactions, Philosophical Society of South Africa* Vol. 1.
- Gluckman, M.
1975 "Anthropology and Apartheid: the work of South African Anthropologists" in Fortes, M. & S. Paterson, eds. *Studies in African Social Anthropology* Academic Press: New York.
- Hellmann, E. & Q. Whyte
1955 "Introduction" in *Race Relations Journal* xxii (4) (special issue: Homage to Winifred Hoernle) 1-5.
- Hoernle, A. W.
1948 "Alternatives to Apartheid" in *Race Relations Journal* 15 (3): 87-99
- Kuper A.
1973 *Anthropology and Anthropologists*. London: Allen Lane.
- Monnig, H.
1964 "The Development of Anthropology in South Africa" in *Africa Institute Bulletin* 2: 35-41.
- Moodie, D.
1975 *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Palgrave, H. C.
1877 *Report of his Mission to Damaraland...* Cape Town: Government Printer.
- Rich, P.
1984 *White Power and the Liberal Conscience*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Robertson, H. M.
nd *Great Mother of Faculties* manuscript history of UCT.
- Strydom, S. L.
1974 'n *Analise en Evaluering van die hydrae van A. R. Radcliffe-Brown op die gebied van die Sosiale Antropologie*. MA University of Stellenbosch.

NOTICE: This material may be
protected by copyright law
Title 17 U.S. Code