AN INTERVIEW WITH ALVIN W. WOLFE

By Kevin A. Yelvington

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Alvin W. Wolfe made a number of important contributions to applied anthropology throughout a career lasting nearly 50 years. Born in Nebraska in 1928, he joined the US Army in 1945 where he received training in Japanese language and culture, as well as participating in the armored and the airborne corps. Using the GI Bill he enrolled in the University of Nebraska where he majored in anthropology and English, graduating in 1950. He became interested in archaeology by working in a museum under the direction of archaeologist A.T. Hill. To learn more about the other fields of anthropology, he enrolled at Northwestern University where he did dissertation fieldwork among the Ngombe, of the then-Belgian Congo, in 1952-53 under the direction of Melville J. Herskovits. In 1954-55, he was the Logan Museum Teaching Fellow at Beloit College, from 1955-57 he taught at Middlebury College, 1957-61 at Lafayette College, 1961-68 at Washington University in St. Louis, and from 1968-74 at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. In 1974, he joined the Department of Anthropology at the University of South Florida (USF) in Tampa, as part of the first Master's program in applied anthropology. He became the program's internship coordinator, and he participated in the establishment of the first Ph.D. in applied anthropology in 1984. In Tampa, he became active in social and medical service organizations, especially those involving the poor, children, families, and the elderly. He retired from USF as Distinguished Service Professor in May, 2003.

Wolfe was president of the following anthropological professional associations: the Society for Applied Anthropology (1978-79), the Society for Urban Anthropology (1985-86), where he was founding editor of *City & Society*, and the Southern Anthropological Society (1991-92). Together with H. Russell Bernard, Wolfe was the founder of the International Sunbelt Social Network Conference, and co-organizer of most of its annual conferences (1981-1993). He has written extensively on the employment and training of applied anthropologists.

This following interview was conducted on August 5, 2003, in Tampa, Florida. The author thanks Debbie Roberson for her assistance and Jeanne Simonelli for her encouragement.

Kevin A. Yelvington: George M. Foster (1979:213) once wrote about applied anthropology that his principal teachers "had rather turned me against it" (The Institute of Social Anthropology. In *The Uses of Anthropology*. Walter Goldschmidt, ed. Pp. 205-216. Washington, DC: AAA). One of your principal teachers was your major advisor, Melville Herskovits. How do you go from being a Herskovitsian to being one of the principal architects of the academic institution of applied anthropology? Was Herskovits against applied anthropology as it seems? Is the Herskovitsian paradigm incompatible with applied anthropology?

Alvin W. Wolfe: Herskovits did not like an organized applied anthropology. I think that's the best way to put it. He didn't think it was appropriate to have something like the Society for Applied Anthropology. I believe it was because he thought that would influence their thinking and cause them to be less objective in their evaluations of things because they would be paid for accomplishing certain tasks. He of course did what we could now call applied anthropology in some respects. In his work with the State Department. He never worked as far as I know in anything secretive. He trained Foreign Service Officers who were going to Africa, for example, because he thought that was the best thing to do. If you're going to send people to Africa they should be knowledgeable about Africa. That kind of thing. And of course he worked tirelessly against racism, both nationally and locally. He was at Northwestern University, and Evanston was virtually a segregated city. African Americans could not live on the east side of the railroad tracks, and even to be there was difficult. He had a constant battle with the city officials.

It always seemed to me that anthropology was a meaningful science—a meaningful discipline, whether it is a science or not could be left to argue

later. And I always wanted to be in a field that was meaningful to human beings in the present and in the future. I never had any trouble with Herskovits on this. He didn't support my work when I was studying the mining industry of Africa, because that became very political—and, probably, because I gave it an evolutionary spin. He didn't take political positions, except on racism and on Africa generally. African cultures had a value of their own and they should not be denigrated. Africans had every right to govern themselves. He thought that when other people were saying "Oh, it'll be 200 years before Africans are ready to govern themselves." He never felt that. Every culture, he felt, that is, the people who lived according to that culture, were capable of running their own affairs. He was very much anti-colonial. See, after my fieldwork in Congo, I got very interested in the fact that Congo was not becoming independent. This was 1960, when all other African territories were becoming independent, when the winds of change were sweeping southward from the west coast, and from the east side also. But it stopped at Congo. Since I had done fieldwork in the Congo I was very much interested in it, and I knew something about the Belgian colonial administration. Actually, I knew quite a bit because after a year of fieldwork among the Ngombe in the Belgian Congo I spent one year studying Belgian colonial policy at the University of Louvain in Belgium. So I knew how they were thinking. And they were not thinking independence, I can tell you that! I began to study the mining industry. I was surprised to learn the extent to which they were all interlocked, all the way from Congo southward into South Africa. I was writing about this in 1960. I was writing about how the mining industry was controlling and had political impact there. That didn't go down well with the mining industry. There was a thing called the African American Institute. Its face to the public was the scholarly interest in the study of Africa. It had as its backers the mining industry. Some of the papers I wrote got into that stream. The American government was very much upset with what I was writing; they learned about it not through my publications but through things that I had written that were not being published. In one particular case, especially, this paper that described the mining industry as an evolutionary system at a higher level of integration than we had seen before. Their network system was almost unbeatable. That paper was supposed to be published in *Human Organization*. A new editor gave it to a friend of his to read because he knew his friend was interested in this aspect of Africa. This fellow showed it to F. Taylor Ostrander, the assistant to the chairman of American Metals Climax, one of the companies invested in the system. He didn't like it at all. He said "Don't publish this." And they did not publish it. One of the major African-related American financiers, Clarence B. Randall, President Eisenhower's main international financial advisers, and then Kennedy's as well, gave a speech in New York to the African Affairs Society of America, which was essentially the mining industry, saying that there was a two-man team in the United States trying to bring down the West in Africa. And the two-man team was one assistant professor of anthropology at Washington University (me) and the other was Reverend Michael Scott who was the spokesperson for the South West Africans in the United Nations. Scott had read some of my stuff and he must have spoken about it in the United Nations. That really bothered these people, these financiers. And so Randall accused us of trying to bring down the West. And they were afraid we would be successful. I don't know of any other anthropologist who was doing anything like that. And that's the kind of situation where I said Herskovits did not really support me. He didn't say I was wrong, he just would not do anything to push that while I thought it was the most important thing in the world.

KAY: What is it about your childhood and upbringing that made you attracted to anthropology?

AWW: I really can't trace anything. I come from a large family. My mother had seven children. All of them older. I was the youngest of seven. My father left home when I was three months old and never came back until many years later. And so we were left on welfare. At that time now—I was born in 1928—so there wasn't much welfare. There wasn't any government welfare until [Franklin] Roosevelt came in. I don't see there anything that led me to anthropology. My experience in the Army was very interesting. I went into the Army at 17, into the Army Specialized Training Reserve Program, ASTRP. Which took young men before they would be drafted, this was during the war, 1945, before the war was over. I joined this ASTRP because it offered college training. I wanted to go to college. I was a good student. I shared the valedictory at my high school. And so I got chosen for that opportunity and I took it. I started out studying engineering, which I liked. But because of my grades or something they offered me the opportunity to transfer out of engineering into Japanese language school. This was before the end of the war, so they expected to need a lot of interpreters and Americans who spoke Japanese in order to deal with Japan which would be occupied. So I transferred into that and went to the University of Minnesota. And as a part of that training there were cultural courses as well as language — culture and history. I found that very interesting. Then the war ended while I was in that training. They discovered that many Japanese spoke English very well and they were perfectly willing to cooperate. There was no problem over there, no need for interpreters. So the graduates of our school, this language training program, were being sent to Texas to guard Japanese prisoners of war! We were in cohorts, and the cohorts ahead of us were writing back telling us how horrible the situation was in Texas. I figured, "How could I get out of this?" So I volunteered for the regular Army to get out of going to Texas. I had to sign up for two years. I was young and very anxious to have some action. So I volunteered for the armored corps. But

as soon as the training was over they assigned me to an office. But I didn't want that. So I volunteered again. This time the only route open to volunteering was airborne. So I volunteered for airborne training and got sent to Fort Benning. I can't really say I enjoyed airborne training. It was really tough. But it was exciting all right. On my first real jump out of a plane I broke my leg. This was late 1946. I was in the hospital at least four months. That was a very interesting experience partly because that was the very beginning of integration in the Army—they began it in hospital situations. They were doing pilot integration. I had never been that close to people of other races, although in the Japanese training we had some Japanese-Americans with us who were escaping from the internment camps by signing up for service. So I got some cross-cultural experience that way. When I finished I went back to the University of Nebraska under the GI Bill. I was in a pre-law curriculum which at Nebraska involved courses in the Business School. That I did not find interesting whatsoever. I needed a job and I got a job with the Nebraska State Historical Society Museum. The director was A.T. Hill, who was the most prominent archaeologist in Nebraska at the time. He had worked a lot with the Pawnee, not just archaeology but also ethnography, or rather ethnohistory, with the Pawnee—interviewing older Pawnee. He was a good teacher. He would force me to learn about these specimens. In those days the museums were just full of specimens. My main job was to clean the cases and keep everything orderly. He believed in education all the time. When I'd come in on Tuesday he would take me to one case and he'd explain everything. Then when I came back to work a couple of days later he would test me on it. So I learned quite a bit, became interested, took an anthropology course as a junior, and was sold on it immediately. And then I took as much anthropology as I possible could.

KAY: How did you get to Northwestern?

AWW: When I was at Nebraska as a student I was 100 percent archaeology. I loved archaeology, and its ethnohistorical aspect, but I didn't like what they called ethnology, the study of cultures alone. I liked the things, and I liked especially the digging. I knew I had to go to graduate school; most of us in my class were told that Michigan would be a good place to go to graduate school because it had an excellent American archaeology program. But I knew that if I went to a place that had a good archaeology program I wouldn't learn the rest of anthropology. Also I enjoyed Herskovits's book *Man and His Works* (1948, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.). So I thought "That's where I want to go to school, where I can study with that gentleman, and I won't be bothered by my love of archaeology because Northwestern doesn't have any archaeology." I went and visited him and told him I wanted to study there. I think partly because I was Phi Beta Kappa and so forth he thought I could do it. He must have been thinking "This guy knows a lot of archaeology. I could use that around here." Although he didn't have it in his program, Herskovits was a four-field person. He gave me an assistantship right away and I had to teach archaeology, which was very tough for me. I got along well with Herskovits and the others there. Dick Waterman. Bill Bascom. Francis Hsu was most impressive to me.

KAY: Were you interested in Africa per se before going there?

AWW: No. No interest in Africa. I gradually got interested because of the program and Herskovits was obviously an Africanist and African Americanist. Herskovits made Africa interesting. I was there only from 1950 to 1952, bachelor's to field-ready. I must have taken a heavy load. And so it was time to go to the field. He helped me find a place to work. I wanted to go, like other anthropologists at that time, where nobody else had been. That was pretty easy, because anthropologists had been nowhere in Congo. Most of Herskovits's students had worked in the west coast. But nobody had been in the Congo, except Alan Merriam. Merriam was traveling around all over Congo, recording music. Musicology was his thing. We had that little bit of contact. Herskovits was making contacts for me all the time and he made the arrangements to get permission to go to the Congo. And then I had to find where to go. And Herskovits knew well the director of the Musée du Congo Belge, which was outside of Brussels. Frans Olbrechts. He helped me a little bit. I began to study all that was known in the Congo. I wanted to learn something about how some societies change more rapidly than others do. Continuity and change. So we decided to study a people who had some elements of their population who were not in close contact with Europeans and others who had more contact with Europeans. I ended up with Ngombe because they did have that kind of a situation. I was most interested in adding to the ethnographic literature, understanding these people, and within that trying to make a comparison of Ngombe in two different locations.

KAY: Your wife Barbara certainly went with you. Where did you meet her and what has she meant for your anthropology?

AWW: I met her in classes. She was an undergraduate student at Northwestern at the same time I was a graduate student. And we met and became friends. We had a little group of anthropologically-interested students that did everything together. And then she graduated and went out to California, working with Hazel Hitson Weidman who became a very top medical anthropologist. When I got my fieldwork plan ready Barbara decided she wanted to go along. So we got married! She was very helpful in the field, obviously. She interviewed the women in great detail.

KAY: After fieldwork you go to Louvain in 1953-54. And then you start teaching at Beloit College.

AWW: Andrew Whiteford was the chair of the department and the director of the museum. I had that experience at

Nebraska; I knew a little about museums, displays. That was a hard job. Whiteford—we all called him Bud—is a hard worker himself and he expects his faculty to work hard. As I recall, he used to teach four courses a semester *and* be chair of the department *and* director of the museum. He worked hard and he was able to get a lot done. He had a way of accomplishing a great deal and he expected everybody else to do that too.

KAY: And so you and Barbara end up babysitting for your future departmental chair Linda Whiteford and her brothers and sister!

AWW: That's right. And it was fun.

KAY: Then there was the time at Middlebury.

AWW: I was at Middlebury with Dennison Nash. He was at that time more a sociologist. But he moved gradually in his career toward anthropology. He was a wonderful scholar and he was a great colleague there. It was a joint department, sociology and anthropology.

KAY: When is it that you get involved in applied anthropology?

AWW: I could go back to Beloit, a little incident that was quite meaningful. I had to go to the dentist. And so I asked the Whitefords who was a good dentist and they told me Dr. Heggy. I made an appointment to see the dentist Dr. Heggy. Between the time I made the appointment and going I heard that African Americans could not get any dental treatment in Beloit, Wisconsin. So I called Dr. Heggy. I talked to his assistant on the phone and said "I understand that Dr. Heggy does not treat blacks." And she said "Oh, I don't know" and she went and talked with him I guess. And after a few minutes she came back and said "You're a faculty member at Beloit College aren't you?" I said "Yes." And she said "Well, normally we don't but in your case we will." So when I went, both the assistant and the doctor expressed great surprise that I was white. And that was the subject of a long discussion while I was being treated. So I decided to do a little study of that problem. Even though I was busy, busy, busy at school, I did a survey of all the African Americans in Beloit. Maybe forty households or seventy households. And I visited every one of them and asked about their dental treatment. And I found that nobody had been treated in Beloit. Most of them had not had dental treatment since they left Mississippi some years previous. A few had had it in a more industrial town just south of Beloit. That was a bit of applied anthropology I'd say. And I never published it. It's too bad.

At Lafayette College, even though my pay was better than it was at Beloit or Middlebury, it was still not good enough to live on. So I got a summer contract with the housing authority. They were trying to clear slums in Easton, Pennsylvania. The slums were on the lowlands close to the river and going up the bluff a little bit. In order to get this federal money they had to prove that they could house the people that were moved out because of the slum clearance, find some way of relocating them. So I was to do the survey that was to prove that. As I recall it was a house-to-house, not a sample survey. And so I visited every slum house in Easton, and they were all occupied by African Americans. I followed the boundaries that they had set for the slum clearance and they went way up the bluff to the top of the bluff where the houses were middle class blacks. But it was all black. They had identified as slums for clearance all the places in Easton where blacks lived. So I did my surveys and reported that there was no way that they were going to be able to house all those people in Easton. They would have to move out of Easton. And that probably was the plan. That bothered me a lot. And so I joined the local NAACP to help them work on a housing plan and I became the housing chairman of the NAACP in Easton. I didn't see that as much different from anthropology. I don't remember talking about it as applied anthropology but that is basically what it was.

Washington University opened up for me. By that time I was getting interested in the African political scene and the mining industry and wrote about some of those things. Both John Bennett and Jules Henry, who were the two top anthropologists at Washington at that time, and Alvin Gouldner, who was a sociologist who was very anthropologically oriented, were all interested in this work I was doing. And actually Gouldner helped me publish that piece that I was having trouble publishing elsewhere (The African Mineral Industry: Evolution of a Supranational Level of Integration. *Social Problems* 11(2):153-164, 1963.). That's how it got in there when it was eventually turned down by *Human Organization* — not for reasons of quality, but for political reasons, I'm sure. Bennett was very active in the Society for Applied Anthropology at that time. He had something to do with arranging for me to give an address to a plenary luncheon meeting at a meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology in, like, 1962. And Margaret Mead was there at that session, as was the editor of *Human Organization*. I gave this talk on the mining industry in Africa, and on the political economy, and Margaret Mead was very much impressed with it and said "You've got to publish this." Everything she said was said with great emphasis. So, I think it was arranged right there that that would be done. It would be published in *Human Organization*. But it never was, as I've said.

KAY: I wonder if you can explain for this audience your idea of the "supranational?" We talk about globalization now, but it seems like this is the kernel of this idea of globalization.

AWW: I had to put this in an American context because that was the one that was operative at that time. Americans thought that corporations were competing with one another because we had things like the anti-trust laws and this system seemed to protect us from monopoly. And I think Americans had the idea that that was the way it was all around the world, that these big companies were competing with one another and that there was a

market. But what I saw when I looked at these companies in the mining industry of Africa was that they were all very closely related. They were not competing. They were helping one another and reducing their risks by joint ventures. That's the most important thing. And they all had interlocking directorates. In that period, 1960 to 1965 or so, I showed that in many ways. My view on this was that by doing this in many different countries they were operating at a level above those national state systems. Why that should have shocked anybody or why it should be ignored by anthropologists I couldn't figure out. Gradually I got to thinking, anthropologists, as well as other scholars, had long thought of the state as being the ultimate in evolution. You know, we went through bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and we arrived at the state level. The state was it. They never looked beyond that.

KAY: What got you interested in networks (The Rise of Network Thinking in Anthropology. *Social Networks* 1: 53-64, 1978)?

AWW: Several things. One was certainly the recognition of the connections in the mining industry. The corporations connected to one another in many ways. Interlocking directorates is one. Joint ventures is another. The only way to see that is as a network. That was much enhanced when I was studying urban poverty. I had a contract with the Office of Economic Opportunity/War on Poverty, from 1966 to 1968. We were studying the urban poor in St. Louis. There had been studies, mostly by sociologists, of black poverty in St. Louis. And there was a desire on the part of the OEO to find out about white people in poverty. Our method was to identify the poorest white precinct, the Soulard area of St. Louis. It wasn't known as a community, but in the Soulard area, you'd expect those people to form some kind of community. But we found out when we looked carefully at their relationships with one another, their relationships really went back to the rural areas from which they came and, chronologically going forward, to the areas in which they would move if they worked their way out of poverty, into the less poor areas. Their social system had to include the rural areas and the non-Soulard areas in St. Louis. So we had to look at it as a network rather than as a bounded community.

KAY: In 1974 you come to USF from the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. You came here at the behest of Gilbert Kushner who had just had approval to start the Master's program in applied anthropology—the first one anywhere—and you became the director of internships. What did that entail?

AWW: The reason I was chosen I think was that I had done a lot of urban work by that time. Not only in St. Louis but then in Milwaukee, working with students in urban settings. That's what the idea was here. But, further, this was a period when academic jobs for anthropologists were scarce. So even the AAA was interested in figuring how we could employ trained anthropologists. Gil Kushner and I had both been at the 1972 AAA conference on employment where we considered such things and the idea of internships was just arising. Kushner had the idea of building internships into the training program itself. And I don't think that had been done elsewhere in anthropology. I had some interest and some experience that seemed to be in that direction. That seemed to be a moment in history when it was the right thing to do. It involved my making contacts in the community in organizations and agencies where we thought anthropologists could have a role. And we had to explain what anthropology was and, usually, what it wasn't. That is, that anthropology was more than what those representatives of the agencies and organizations thought it was. That's the way we placed people. They were almost universally accepted. They almost always did a good job. There were a few that were failures, but nothing so bad that it dampened our spirits in these 29 years. We've had more than 250 graduates in this period and every one had to go through an internship because it was required.

KAY: What was your role in establishing the Ph.D. program here in 1984?

AWW: The Master's program was established in 1974 and it proved so successful: to the faculty, our judging of it, to people who came in from outside evaluating it. We were able to get a National Institute of Mental Health training grant for $5 million or something for a five-year program, from 1976 to 1981. That made it look to administrators that it was a financially successful thing too. We got a lot of national attention. So many people—the Board of Regents, university administration, college administration—thought "Well if it can be successful at the Master's level, why not do it at the Ph.D. level?" Gil Kushner saw this as being a good thing at the Ph.D level as well. There were votes in department meetings, but I don't think the faculty was as enthusiastic about the Ph.D.-level program as we had been about the Master's. I don't know of any of us, except Kushner, who were enthusiastic about it. Still, I think it's turned out to be successful.

Our concern was that it would distract from the Master's program which was genuinely successful and was unique when it started. But others have imitated it since then, or taken cues from it and done their own Master's program which are all successful as far as I know. I don't know one of these applied anthropology programs at the Master's level that has failed.

KAY: Are our graduates successful as well?

AWW: Oh yes. We used to regularly do surveys of our graduates and ask, among many other questions, what their salary is. I remember, looking at the graphs showing the salaries, and they were doing much better than the faculty that taught them. Much better.

KAY: What are some of their occupations?

AWW: Those that are doing very well financially are mostly in administrative

positions of some kind, like county administrators, county planning administrators, mostly urban planning. But many others are in the health and human services fields. Of course health and medicine occupations have been well paid in the United States, since the 1930s. The AMA has seen to that. We've had a lot of people out of nursing to come in and get an M.A. in applied anthropology. Some have gone into administration and planning in the private sector, for example having to do with retirement communities.

KAY: You recently retired. Yet I know you are going to stay active. What are you going to do in your retirement?

AWW: I've got a few things I have to finish up from the past, but I have some other things that are going into the future. One of these is a study of the structure of the network of 600 agencies and organizations in the Tampa Bay area. You can see how that is related to my work as internship coordinator, but also to the interest that I have in children and families. It's a difficult thing to do. I'm using certain network techniques such as a regular equivalence algorithm to find the structures in any set of entities that aren't deliberately structured from the outside.

The other thing is the health and human services area. This is what I have been studying here in the Tampa Bay area for 29 years through the internships and watching all the interns. I was appointed to the district Health and Human Services board in 1993, which led to service on the statewide Health and Human Services Board, which tried to organize all of these things all over the state. Since 1998, there's been an attempt on the part of the state administration to privatize as much as these public services as we can. And that has led to the dismantling of the state system including these Health and Human Services boards. If you get rid of all of those, who is going to evaluate what's going on? With all of that abolished, they are relying on private contracts with private agencies to do these things. It's going to be a mess. So when they abolished these Health and Human Services boards, some of us who were on the statewide board when it was abolished decided to establish a not-for-profit agency called the Florida Health and Human Services Board, Inc., to keep an eye on these things, to advise, even though we're unwanted, to try to perform some of those functions that are necessary. It comes down to two things really. One, to try to interest communities in getting involved in the services that are provided to them. The second thing is to emphasize the importance of integrating these services.

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INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, A SOURCEBOOK

Editor: Tom Greaves

The rights of indigenous societies to control access and use of their cultural knowledge is an issue of global scale, debated in the United Nations, in the biodiversity and human rights movements, within the pharmaceutical industry, in government and private corporations, among the social and applied scientists, and most importantly, among indigenous leaders. The *Sourcebook* offers both cases where indigenous groups have asserted these rights, and analyses of the legal and political context. It is intended to be useful to indigenous leaders reviewing their options; to advocacy groups for indigenous rights, human rights and biodiversity preservation; to policy specialists; and to scholars. The *Sourcebook* provides a consolidated source of very current information on the rights of indigenous peoples with respect to the use of their cultural knowledge.

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