

Of words, tradition and things

Jan Vansina, *Paths in the rainforest. Toward a history of political tradition in equatorial Africa* (Madison 1990) 428 pp. ISBN 0-299-12574-2 The University of Wisconsin Press.

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Imagine that Caesar arrived in Gaul and landed in Britain in 1888, a mere century ago, and that your known history began then. You were not Roman, your language was not latin, and most of your cherished customs had no historical justification. Your cultural history was amputated from its past. Would you not feel somewhat incomplete, somewhat mutilated? Would you not wonder what your cultural heritage was before Caesar? Unimaginable? Yet this is the situation of the So in Zaire, whose record seems to begin only with Stanley in 1877.(xi)

The Royal Museum for Tropical and Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, must be one of the finest examples of what M. Bloch has referred to as 'evidence in spite of itself'.¹ For the museum gives us an excellent insight into the manner in which Africa was - and to a certain extent continues to be - conceived and thought of.

Until recently, the museum was a time capsule in itself, and as such, should have been encased in a monstrous bell jar and left for posterity. Until as recently as 1990, labels to the displays and showcases in the numerous halls read '~~Belgisch~~ Kongo' since efforts to scratch out *Belgisch* after Congolese independence (1960) were only marginally successful. Indeed *Ons Kongo* ('our Congo') still exists and this is perhaps best indicated by the museum guards who walk around in replicas of the uniforms worn by King Leopold's mercenaries in the Congo: blue ill fitting uniforms with gold epaulette, gold piping along the trousers and topped off by blue caps with a golden band. Display models of villages show the stereotypical contrasts between the primitive African past and corrugated iron colonial modernity. The primitive side of things is illustrated by showcases filled with a jumble of divining bones and statues, while the museum's halls are filled with enormous dug out canoes, stuffed elephants, and stuffed chimpanzee families. On the modern side of things exhibits seek to show the development of railways, mining and agriculture in Belgian Congo. Gilded bronze statues of wise old men and buxom ladies, entitled, 'België schenkt Kongo de welvaart' and 'België schenkt Kongo de beschaving', comfort and console downcast cherubic Africans. A glimpse of the reality of 'Ons Kongo' is provided in a vestibule where one finds an unlimbered cannon and a plaque listing the names of fallen mercenaries.²

The glory granted to these killers belies the fact that Tervuren has also produced the basis for what must undoubtedly be one of the very best

historical works written. For not only is Tervuren a beautiful museum, it is also one of the foremost centres in the world in Bantu language studies. As such it provided most of the source materials for Jan Vansina's beautifully written *Paths in the rainforests: toward a history of political tradition in equatorial Africa*; a brilliant threefold synthesis of method, story and historical theory. In contrast to the museum's emphasis on the unchanging primitiveness and barbarity of pre-colonial Africa, Vansina seeks to show the rich history of political innovation in pre-colonial Africa. Though Vansina notes that his published book is but an introduction, a third as long as originally intended and with only a fifth of its bibliography intact, it is a coherent whole and a dream to read. In the course of 400 pages Vansina details more than 5000 years of continuous history for an area the size of western Europe.

An engraving of a hanging rope bridge graces the cover of the book. The rainforest dwellers of central Africa who built these bridges used copious amounts of varying materials to build them. This image is particularly well chosen since Vansina constructs precisely such a structure, albeit figuratively, in *Paths in the rainforests*. Vansina's raw materials were the findings of a range of disciplines as diverse as linguistics, history, anthropology, archaeology and biology. Using what at first glance appears to be the most ephemeral and diverse of sources, Vansina spins, plaits and weaves together the most intricately textured ropes and cables of argument with which to create his bridge. A bridge that allows us to travel back in time, and which allows us to understand and view the creation, development and destruction of, what Vansina calls, 'the central African tradition'.

Vansina begins his work by lambasting historians and social scientists for believing, concentrating on and thereby strengthening, the cliché that the people of the equatorial African forests have preserved 'prehistoric civilizations' until our own day.⁽³⁾ These observers have believed and propagated the myth that inside equatorial Africa's stereotypical green hell there was no innovation, no change and therefore no history, as people were far too busy struggling to survive. In equatorial Africa, therefore, one finds perfectly preserved pristine 'wild men', culturally and materially no different to those being scavenged together by archaeologists in the Rift Valley. As typifying this fascinating hunt for exotic 'wild men', Vansina quite correctly notes the disproportionate amount of studies on Pygmies in the area, this to the near total exclusion of the other forest dwellers.^(3, 5) This hunt for primitive men is not confined to equatorial Africa. A sizeable proportion of social scientists and anthropologists have similarly concentrated on the Kalahari desert as a 'Palaeolithic Park'. In the 1960s people trained in primate studies were sent into the Kalahari to study Bushmen communities.³ Here, too, ways of life are alleged to have continued unchanged throughout time into the present. Here, too, people are seen as having been too busy surviving in an hostile environment and as a result here, too, 'the unlucky peoples ... have no history because they have never changed'.⁽³⁾ Even in the 1990s, in countless

research projects, students have been sent out to gather and collect the secret knowledge of the pristine Pygmy, Okiek, Dorobo and Bushman.

But, obviously, these people do have a past, the question is only how does one get at it? According to Vansina traditionally trained historians are not equipped to do this, since they concentrate on written records, archaeological objects, and oral memories. These do not provide enough material with which to recreate the pre-colonial African past. Therefore, 'One must look for other traces of the past. And there is a world of them. Every object we use, nearly everything we say, everything we do, and almost everything we think and feel carries the imprint of the past.' ⁽⁸⁾

In the 1960s Vansina was enormously influential in the development of a methodology with which the African past could be reconstructed from oral texts. In the current volume Vansina's major addition to our usual historical methodology is that of glotto-chronology and lexicostatistics. Taking his cue from socio-linguistics, Vansina considers words to be the tags that carry the imprints of the past: trace the origin of a word and one traces the historical development of whatever it refers to, be it object, activity, thought, or feeling. Trace the words that refer to everything related to an institution and one traces its existence.

In seeking the African past, Vansina relied heavily on the advancements made in African language studies, particularly in the reconstruction of proto-languages. Proto-languages are languages from which modern languages have developed. An example of such a proto-language well known to historians of the mediterranean world is Latin. In most of equatorial Africa, languages are spoken which descended from Proto-Bantu. In the second half of the nineteenth century already the interrelatedness of these languages became known. In this century Guthrie published his four volume *Comparative Bantu*, in which he traced the development of the languages of the Bantu language family from their common origin. Guthrie's monumental work has of late been refined by Meusen, whom Vansina relies on, and Vansina himself.

Through the statistical comparison of languages their relationship and descent can be indicated. This process is known as lexico-statistics. If we trace the meaning of a word through the languages which on the basis of lexico-statistics are most closely related, we will reach the point where the meanings started to diverge. Clearly at that stage a change in the societies took place, engendering the diverging meanings of the same word. By reconstructing an original society through the assembly of shared words one can then start to follow the changes and transformations of this society, and its offspring, as the meaning of its words changed and transformed. This is what Vansina has done for the languages known as Western Bantu.

Looking at the basic word stock of Proto-Bantu we can gather what was common in the world of the Proto-Bantu speakers. One such word is *-ganda, which was glossed as 'clan' by Guthrie. Vansina's own comment on the word reads as follows: 'The form is proto-Bantu, with the meaning

“House” or “settlement inhabited by a House.” It may be the oldest form designating this social unit still in existence.’ (269) In my own research area amongst Otji-Herero speaking people in southern Africa, the word *O/ozonganda* refers to a gathering of houses centred around a male family head. My office mate, whose research field is amongst Gikuyu speaking people, 5000 miles away, also has the term *Nganda*, with the difference that the term is used to describe an enclosure or hut where boys are taught during their initiation. Clearly both terms are related to the proto-Bantu **-nganda* as glossed by Guthrie and Vansina. Furthermore it is clear that at some stage in time the words carried an identical meaning. At some stage there were changes in the societies and the Gikuyu term *Nganda* acquired a different though related meaning to the word *O/ozonganda* in Otji-herero.

Vansina has gathered the words used to describe society in all its facets, from food cultivation through to housing and governance. He has traced the development and transformation of these words, how in some branches new words were introduced, how in other branches words were retained with slight meaning shifts, and how these changes and transformations reflect changes in society.

Having described in detail how one goes about reconstructing societies from words, Vansina engages in a long discussion as to the historical validity of the information thus garnered. Comparing the scholar, in this case himself, to a mosaicist or a pointillist painter, he notes that ‘He or she makes an image of the past by painstakingly fitting together small slivers of evidence exactly as tesserae finally yield a mosaic and dots of paint a picture. It is slow and tedious work, but the approach is incredibly fruitful and flexible.’ (31) And thus ‘upstreaming’ through time, from a baseline based on available written ethnographic evidence, Vansina begins his detailed description of the colonization, by the speakers of western Bantu, of the central African rainforests.

Contrary to the standard myth of the jungle as a never ending and unchanging mass of green where death is ever encroaching, Vansina details the multitude of varying ‘eco-tones’ existent within the Central African forests. Obviously each of these environmental conditions differently influences the ways in which people make a living, and thus Vansina situates and presents the environmental stage even before the forest was inhabited.

Around 5000 years ago, people living in what are now the grasslands of Cameroon discovered and learnt ways in which to become successful cultivators in a forest environment. These people were the first speakers of Western Bantu, whose life and society has been reconstructed by Vansina, using the processes of upstreaming and lexicostatistics. They were farmers of yams, legumes and palm trees, they had fenced and trapped yearly fields and they traded with specialized hunters and fishermen. These western Bantu forest dwellers had three overarching social and political institutions, which form the basis of the western Bantu tradition. These were the *house*, the *village* and the *district*. The houses and villages were headed by *Big Men*.

Having learnt how to survive in the forest, people moved into it until they were confronted by the next ecological barrier. Here they were held up for a while until new innovations, iron implements, the development of new edible crops in the small test gardens run next to the houses by women, or the introduction of new crops (such as the revolutionary banana), allowed people to move into areas hitherto only accessible to them as hunter foragers. The author describes how, in time, the whole of the central African rainforest came to be colonized by west African Bantu.⁴

But what bearing does all of this have on the topic of political tradition, as promised by the book’s title? According to the author, the colonization of equatorial Africa was possible not only through continual innovation in the material sphere but through continuous institutional innovation. Therefore, throughout the book Vansina details how with every changing circumstance the shared ‘equatorial tradition’ allowed for ways in which society could innovate and adapt successfully. Around the second half of the first millennium A.D., when the emigrant communities in equatorial Africa had attained population densities of around four people per square kilometre, new institutional transformations and innovations firmly rooted in the ‘equatorial tradition’ took place. (99) Vansina describes and details how Western Bantu societies, continually drawing on their shared tradition, transformed their societies throughout the regions of equatorial Africa. Dividing equatorial Africa into a number of varied regions, Vansina details how differing institutional innovations were implemented, whilst continually stressing that these institutional innovations were drawn from and founded upon the same tradition.

... traditions are self-regulating processes. They consist of a changing, inherited, collective body of cognitive and physical representations shared by their members. The cognitive representations are the core. They inform the understanding of the physical world and develop innovations to give meaning to changing circumstances in the physical realm, and do so in terms of the guiding principles of the tradition. Such innovations in turn alter the substance of the cognitive world itself. A tradition is harmed when it loses its ability to innovate efficiently. If the situation perdures, it will die. A tradition dies when its carriers abandon its fundamental principles to adopt those of another tradition. This happens only after a society has become aware of a state of major incongruence between the cognitive and physical worlds of its tradition, and is also aware of an alternative paradigm. Doubts about the reality of its cognitive world can then paralyze any attempt to repair the incongruence. (259-260)

Based on the changing continuity that is tradition, the equatorial Bantu societies (with the exception of Duala) were able to weather millennia of challenges. The equatorial tradition did not only accommodate challenges emanating from changing African society; for centuries, it also adapted to, and survived, the impact of non-African challenges such as the introduction of the Atlantic trade and later, the Slave trade to the coasts of equatorial Africa. At first, societies such as Congo, blossomed and grew in size, until they were subsumed and consumed in the new trade. (221-225) Yet, every time a structure was destroyed, the innovation to replace it - be it the matriclan, the House, or some association - was drawn from the wellsprings of the equatorial tradition. (236) Physical realities were continually understood and innovation employed by drawing from the cognitive core of the shared tradition. However, this core came to be increasingly under threat as European influence foreshadowed the destruction of the equatorial tradition. 'Ever since 1845 [mission] teaching had been undermining collective certainties of conceptual reality, thus piling mental uncertainty on top of growing physical uncertainty'. (235)

These uncertainties became all encompassing in the forty years from 1880 onwards, when equatorial Africa was colonized by European powers in a series of wars costing half of its total population. Quite rightly Vansina notes that, 'The violence and utter destructiveness of such colonial wars is often still misunderstood.'

The death of the equatorial tradition in the forty years following 1880, is one of the core arguments of Vansina's book. In these years, the implementation of colonial administration in equatorial Africa finally destroyed the equatorial tradition. Public divining and poison ordeals were banned in the name of Christian morality. In the minds of many Africans, this meant that witchcraft now ran unchecked and that public health was ruined. (246) New structures of centralized governance were introduced in the name of civilized administration. In the Belgian Congo the new administration dealt with the African population on the basis of a non-existent 'segmentary, hierarchical, patrilineal society' which did not then exist (and never had existed) in reality. Colonial administrators who could not find the existence of this society, physically regrouped the population to conform to it.

Vansina records that the equatorial tradition finally died in the 1920s, when it was killed by two simultaneous developments:

First in the realm of physical reality, the conquest prevented the tradition from inventing new structures to cope with a new situation. Instead the colonial government invented them. Its agents preserved some practices, but the whole structure made sense only in the cognitive realm of the Europeans, not in the equatorial tradition. This process was just the opposite of the dynamics current in the previous period, when novel foreign practices were justified in terms of the old tradition. Second, the

unforeseen and hitherto unimaginable events, of the colonial conquest had created a gulf between the physical and the cognitive reality in the equatorial tradition at the very time that its cognitive reality was directly challenged by foreigners, whose own success seemed to bolster their claims to cognitive superiority. As a result the cognitive part of the old tradition, its very core, went into an irreversible crisis. The people of the rainforests began first to doubt their own legacies and then to adopt portions of the foreign heritage. But they clung to their own languages and to much of the older cognitive content carried by them. Thus they turned into cultural schizophrenics, striving for a new synthesis which could not be achieved as long as freedom of action was denied them. (247)

Therefore, when freedom of action was once again granted to the people of equatorial Africa it was 'without the guidance of a basic new common tradition. Today that is still the situation, and the people of equatorial Africa are still bereft of a common mind and purpose.' Here we are confronted with the historically informed pessimism of Vansina, so different from the eternal optimism of a Basil Davidson. Elsewhere, the latter has noted that following the granting of political independence in the 1960s the people of equatorial Africa, and Africa as a whole, attempted to implement the nation state upon themselves.⁵ Although the current situation does not appear very encouraging, Davidson believes that the eternal struggle for freedom from the shackles of colonialism (of which the nation state is but yet another manifestation) will eventually succeed, whereafter Africa will blossom and bloom ready to take its rightful place in the world. For Vansina, equatorial Africa is a region populated by cultural schizophrenics who have been severed from their past, their rooting, their continually evolving plan of action, their tradition. Society will be unable to function as long as there is no new shared plan of action.

This is a bold statement. A statement, furthermore, that may be untenable in view of the rest of the book, since if anything becomes pertinently clear from Vansina's work, it is the ephemeral nature of that which is tradition. Tradition is defined as changing continuity, and although Vansina clearly details how societies extract their institutions and social being from these traditions, we are never in a position to clearly define what tradition is. Much like Heisenberg's law regarding the position and velocity of electrons in orbit around a nucleus we are left detailing the one whilst erasing the other. Given this ever-changing continuum Vansina's remarks on the final demise and death of the equatorial tradition are open to question. If, as Vansina notes, vestiges of the tradition were still present in the 1960s, - indeed informed social action - how are we to know that these vestiges have not remained? Is it possible that equatorial Africa is truly populated by cultural schizophrenics severed from their past? If this is indeed the case do we not once again have the dualism as portrayed in Tervuren? On the other hand, the use by Mobutu Sese Sekou of leopard skin hats and the central role accorded to leopards in

tradition is most surely not coincidental. Similarly elsewhere in Africa, perceived remnants of a past are fed into everyday activity. To what extent can one argue that this is not tradition, albeit changed, continuing to inform everyday practice in the 1990s?

Paths in the Rainforests will certainly be criticized for its reliance on the ability to ascribe absolute time to language change. As noted earlier, the derivation and descent of languages can be uncovered through the statistical analysis of languages. Through the application of a standard formula glottochronologists, Vansina among them, ascribe time to the statistical distances between related languages. According to Vansina the rate at which languages change is standard and quantifiable. However herein lies a contradiction since societal change (be it material or otherwise) requires new words, and thus *rapid* societal change requires a large amount of new words, and thus languages transform depending on the rate of change in a society. However differing societies change differently, some for instance, may remain fishermen whilst their neighbours become pastoralists. Clearly they will require different words to describe different activities, clearly the language of the pastoralists will change more than that of the fishermen, yet both fishermen and pastoralists have travelled through the same amount of time. Vansina argues that societal change can be traced through language change, fair enough, but assuming that there are no major material and immaterial innovations or introductions and therefore no societal change during a given period, does this mean that time then stood still? Obviously not, but it does indicate the difficulty one has in ascribing chronology to language change. However, Jan Vansina did not neglect to address this problem and as a true master of rhetoric he covers himself by admitting that glotto-chronology can be flawed. Further archaeological research will eventually either bear out or disprove Vansina's predictions.

Apart from detailing the Bantu migration into equatorial Africa, or the historical method used, Vansina's work, particularly concerning the importance of 'tradition' as an ever-changing continuity in African history, has important implications for our work. Vansina forces us to take a fresh look at the way in which we conduct research into the history of societies faced with colonial conquest. In this, Vansina asks us not to indulge in abstract fantasies as to the impact of colonial conquest. Instead, he commands us to search for that which did exist, starting from a stable background of theory, method and practice. Vansina once again emphasizes the necessity of learning the languages spoken by the people being researched in order to understand the context, the tradition from which these people were ripped. Only with this in mind we can hope to gain an understanding of why people acted as they did.

Decennia after his seminal works on oral tradition,⁶ once again Vansina has shown that he is able to extract history from what at first looks like nothing. Once again, it will be very difficult for historians to keep up with what Vansina urges them to do. Without a doubt, with the passing of time, the elegant bridge constructed by Vansina will be found wanting. Thankfully those

attempting to porter grand theories across will find the bridge sadly lacking, the varying strands, stalks and stems which were used to make up the ropes and cables of argument will, with the course of time begin to decay and the ropes and cables will begin to fray. During the course of time ropes will have to be replaced, but the bridge will stay, its basic structure unchanged. It is precisely in this that the strength of Vansina's book is to be found, as he has shown us how, through the use of the most diverse sources and fields, one can and should construct clear paths to the past.

Finally, in contrast to Vansina's advice on the work of some other people, I would like to urge that his *Paths in the rainforests* become standard reading for all those with an interest in Africa.

Notes:

1. M. Bloch, *The historian's craft*, trans. P. Putnam (Manchester 1954).
2. S.L. Hinde, 'Three years travel in the Congo Free State', *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 5 (1895) 426-442. In this article, detailed coverage is given of King Leopold's use of mercenary armies in the sacking of Nyangwe and Kasango. The two market towns, on the edge of the southern rainforests with populations of 25-30,000 and 60,000 respectively, which were destroyed with the express intention of redirecting the trade to the factories run by agents of the Congo Free State.
3. Adam Kuper, 'Post-modernism, Cambridge and the great Kalahari debate', *Social Anthropology* 1 (1993) 57-71; he refers to Gary Okihiro, *Hunters, herder, cultivators, and traders: interaction and change in the Kgalagari, nineteenth century* (Los Angeles 1976).
4. Vansina's incredibly refined discussion and detailing of the societies of the island of Bioko through time is particularly fascinating and in itself it forms a microcosm of what Vansina does (see pages 137-146).
5. Basil Davidson, *The black man's burden. Africa and the curse of the nation-state* (London 1992).
6. See Jan Vansina, *Oral tradition as history* (Madison 1985).