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White Masculinity in African Historical Studies

Larissa Schulte Nordholt

When I started working on African historiography in 2016, I was an outsider to the study of the African continent.ⁱ At the same time, my profile as a privileged white woman from a wealthy country in northern Europe was not significantly different from that of many Africanists. Interacting with both peers and seniors in the field, I sometimes noticed a certain shared sense of thrill-seeking and a cultivated need to impress upon new researchers the hardships of ‘doing fieldwork’ in Africa. My colleagues seemed to present themselves as hardened travellers – getting malaria was almost a badge of honour rather than a health-scare. I started wondering whether these anecdotal observations of mine might say something about the history of African studies, a field that has largely been populated by white researchers throughout most of its lifespan.

Specifically applying the concept of white masculinity within the history of African history could help us critically examine the historical positionality of lived perspectives that have often remained hidden from view. ‘Whiteness’ and ‘masculinity’ represent the ‘unmarked’, being both ubiquitous and the perceived norm. As Dorothea Sturkenboom has argued elsewhere in this yearbook, this intersection of categories calls for an awareness of the plurality of ‘masculinities.’ *White masculinity* is one such intersection that offers a promising avenue for research as it brings into view the normative invisibility of both categories in their interaction. To make white masculinity *visible* therefore, is an exercise in situating those who inhabit it as historical subjects in order to better understand particular dynamics of power.ⁱⁱ

White masculinity, moreover, impacts the creation of (academic) knowledge. Knowledge stemming from white masculinity has at times been totalizing because those producing it were not necessarily aware of the fact that their observations were situated.ⁱⁱⁱ It was specifically within the context of fieldwork within anthropology that the white male researcher was placed as a knowing subject opposite an ignorant (black) object.^{iv} Increasingly since the 1970s, the anthropological discipline has been self-critical of this methodological production of a racialized ‘Other’ and the subsequent creation of a discourse based upon perceived truths emanating from the creation of such a binary of ‘same’ and ‘other’, specifically in an African colonial context.^v It is, therefore, crucial to consider the place, if any, of a similar self-critique of ‘othering’ from a white male perspective in the formation

and development of the discipline of African history.

This piece explores how *white masculinity as concept* may allow us to recognize forms of privilege that have emerged from modern twentieth-century colonialism to influence history writing itself.^{vi} I will use the example of two Euro-American researchers of Africa to begin to explore the concept of white masculinity as it functioned within African history as a discipline. My observations on white masculinity stem specifically from my engagement with the autobiographies of the American historian Philip Curtin (1922-2009) and the Belgian anthropologist-turned-historian and famous specialist on oral traditions Jan Vansina (1929-2017), both employed by the University of Wisconsin at Madison and well-acquainted with one another. This piece should be seen as a tentative micro-history on the constructed autobiographical identity of these two scholars and is therefore concerned with the ‘fashioned’ self, meant primarily for outsiders and inhabiting a, partly, literary reality.^{vii}

Adventure

When seeking to explain on a personal level why they were attracted to African history as a vocation, alongside their wish to have an academic career, Vansina and Curtin emphasized their longing for adventure as young men. They neither explicitly mention their own racial position therein nor the relative privilege of being able to travel the world.

Vansina opened his autobiography by referring to ‘the flesh and blood of that adventure that African history was and is [...]’^{viii} He later identified his need for ‘high adventure’ as a reason why a research position as an anthropologist in ‘Belgian Africa’ seemed attractive at the start of his career in the 1950s.^{ix} Curtin, in his autobiography, mentions that the ‘discovery’ of ancient cities in Peru, ‘was a lot more fun than historical work in libraries.’^x Part of what drew him to study Africa had to do with the promise of adventure and ‘the fact that Africa was the least explored historically of the world’s major culture areas’, a statement that betrays eurocentrism because it exclusively takes into account Euro-American historiography.^{xi} In fact, the use of the word ‘explored’ itself is telling, as the *exploration* of non-European ‘culture areas’ was part of the rationale behind European colonialist expansion. Curtin, knowingly or not, emulated earlier ideas of colonial exploration and knowledge creation.

Travel played a major role in both autobiographies and is intimately connected to the enterprise and history of African studies from a white perspective. Curtin and Vansina reflect on travel very differently, however. In 1959 Curtin took a yearlong trip through Africa,

starting in Morocco and driving all the way to Kenya, an undertaking that was made possible by virtue of the absence of borders under colonial rule.^{xii} In his autobiography, Vansina mentioned this trip as the two met when Curtin visited Vansina at his home in southern Rwanda in 1959. Vansina noted that, besides taking note of the archival holdings of various European soon to be ex-colonies, Curtin was ‘obviously [...] also having a grand holiday.’^{xiii} The connection between travelling, academic research and holidaying is telling and indicates that the line between travel writing and academic memoir is often blurred.

In his memoir, Curtin alternates between comments on waning colonial regimes and observations about what may attract (implicitly white American) tourists to a place. This perhaps illustrates the lingering imperial ideology connecting academic research into (post)-colonial territories with the exoticism of travel writing about Africa from a white perspective.^{xiv} Curtin’s account of his trip is not devoid of stereotypical descriptions also to be found in travel reports from the 18th century onwards. Here the ‘seeing-man’ – a white European male often plays the role of passive, neutral, and unmarked observer, who nevertheless has to undergo a perilous journey for the sake of acquiring knowledge. Landscapes and the natural environment, including ‘natives’, play a big role in the travel accounts this ‘seeing-man’ produces.^{xv} In this vein, Curtin described friendly villagers (who appear ‘out of nowhere’), perilous river crossings, and of course, the ‘physical beauty’ of places visited.^{xvi} How Curtin describes his journeys is specific to a white male outsider. He constructs his role as an adventurer for a white American audience. Curtin does not reflect on his own position or the specificity of his experience. His racial identity remains unmarked.

Unlike Curtin, Vansina spent a considerable amount of time living and working in various African countries and regions, from Kuba country, to Rwanda and Kinshasa. It was a lived experience which he deeply valued as a researcher, having been trained both as an anthropologist and historian. Vansina adopted some of the methodologies and *métier* of the anthropologist and applied them to African history. For him, one could only become a historian of Africa through extensive contact with the people whose history one wanted to write about. This focus on fieldwork was a way to try to negate justifiable critique leveled against white researchers studying a continent they only knew from the outside. Whereas Curtin wrote about travelling to the continent looking for archival collections and holiday fun, Vansina fit himself more into the mold of an ethnographer.

Lyn Schumaker has noted that such self-fashioning was not uncommon for the first few generations of Euro-American anthropologists in southern Africa more generally who often legitimized their status as experts through demonstrations of intimate knowledge with

‘the field’.^{xvii} When placed in the context of his fieldwork with the Kuba, Vansina was aware, albeit somewhat superficially, of his racial and colonial identity in Africa and remarked upon the racism around him, comparing it to his experiences with German occupation during WW2. He also reflected upon how this might have influenced his evidence. Critiques of the methods of fieldwork as developed within and of anthropology regarding the creation of an ‘other’ were not absent in his memoir but remained somewhat implicit. Any cognizance of such criticism remains completely absent in Curtin’s autobiography.

Sickness

In Vansina’s memoir, physical sickness also emerges as a theme that functions to emphasize both the inherent danger of fieldwork for white researchers and the masculine nerve necessary to face that danger. Sickness was part of the process of becoming a hardened traveler and researcher or collector of oral traditions – for white historians of Africa at least, although this too remains implicit. Vansina called it the ‘effects of participant observation.’^{xviii} Physically, researching the Kuba was demanding precisely because Vansina was an outsider and he, therefore, like so many European men before him, contracted various illnesses against which the local population had already built immunity. Physical stress in Vansina’s autobiography seems to be part of his identity as a white male travelling through Africa. White masculinity here is anything but a stereotypical show of physical prowess but rather displays a remarkable vulnerability. Looking back on his time spent with the Kuba Vansina reflected on his ill health:

‘As a result of these afflictions I was reduced to a state of perpetual torpor by April 1954, induced by general anaemia. When I arrived in Luluaburg for a scheduled seminar meeting, I was checked in at the hospital there as an outpatient and walked around by the physicians, who were proud to show a specimen apparently lacking all vitamins!’^{xix}

He thereby impressed upon the reader of the memoir the idea that doing African history was dangerous and he courageous, but not without also acknowledging physical weakness and vulnerability. The presentation of white masculinity here is not without challenge to more traditional ideas of masculinity within scholarship. 19th-century European historians who connected their health to their scholarship did so by emphasizing physical strength. Good health, in that context, became a condition of epistemic success. Often the significance placed on physical strength and capacity was overtly connected to bourgeois masculinity and this is

certainly the case for Curtin.^{xx} The difference between the 19th-century historians and Vansina, who almost proudly describes his own illnesses, seems to hinge on the fact that it is not so much the overcoming of that illness or the strength necessary to get through it that he romanticizes, but, rather, the willingness to contract the illness in the name of scholarship in the first place. By concentrating on illness Vansina, however, also feeds into a stereotype of Africa as a place of disease and danger.

The concept of white masculinity then, helps us see how two Euro-American men, Jan Vansina and Philip Curtin, constructed their identity, in part by signaling shared features of white masculinity in an African context - adventurousness and daring. They also emphasized the otherness of their field of study to construct a 'self', in Curtin's case without recourse to a racial identity of his own. Yet, the case of Vansina shows that these classifications are neither unproblematic nor without tensions. Within the context of fieldwork in Africa, it seemed vulnerability could equally be a part of what it meant to be a white male in Africa. The absence of reflection on this context in Curtin's autobiography and concurrent presence of some reflection in Vansina's memoir has also shown in what way, if so, white masculinity remained implicit and unmarked in the self-presentation of white male researchers studying Africa. White masculinity, therefore, can be used as a lens that helps us to understand and perhaps also complicate the historical positionality of Euro-American research in the context of knowledge production about Africa during the waning of colonial regimes.

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ⁱⁱ Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 1-2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988) 2, 575-99, 587, 590.

^{iv} Of course, the 'gaze' towards 'the other' has never been unilaterally white. There have been historical cases where 'the other' was 'the whiteman', even if the focus of this particular paper is on the construction of whiteness from a white perspective. See Ira Bashkow, *The Meaning of Whitemen: Race and Modernity in the Orokaiva Cultural World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006)

^v V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 16-22 and Bernard Magubane and James C. Faris, 'On the Political Relevance of Anthropology', *Dialectical Anthropology* 9 (1985), 91-104, 92.

^{vi} Conversation with Rolando Vázquez Melken on 3 December 2020.

^{vii} Herman Paul, 'Introduction: Scholarly Personae: what they are and why they matter', in: Herman Paul (ed.) *How to be a Historian. Scholarly Personae in Historical Studies, 1800-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 1-14, 3.

^{viii} Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), IX.

^{ix} Vansina, *Living with Africa*, 7-8.

^x Philip Curtin, *On the fringes of history, a memoir* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 58.

^{xi} Curtin, *On the Fringes*, 70.

^{xii} *Ibid*, 102-26.

^{xiii} Vansina, *Living with Africa*, 71.

^{xiv} Cynthia G. Franklin, *Academic lives memoir, cultural theory, and the university today* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 88.

^{xv} Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 9

^{xvi} Curtin, *On the Fringes*, 113, 117, 121.

^{xvii} Lyn Schumaker, *Africanizing Anthropology: Fieldwork, networks, and the making of cultural knowledge in Central Africa* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2001), 44.

^{xviii} Vansina, *Living with Africa*, 25.

^{xix} Ibid.

^{xx} Falko Schnicke, 'Kranke Historiker: Körperwahrnehmungen und Wissenschaft im 19. Jahrhundert', *Historische Anthropologie* 25 (1993) 1, 11-31.