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Jan Vansina

Author:

David Newbury – Smith College in Northampton, MA, USA

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University of Hradec Králové
Philosophical Faculty

JAN VANSINA (1929–2017)

David Newbury

Jan Vansina, a pioneering historian whose vast corpus of work transformed our understanding of African history—and the history of many other areas—died on February 8, 2017, in Madison, Wisconsin. He was 87.

Trained in Belgium and Britain as both a medieval historian and a social anthropologist, Vansina began his work in the Belgian Congo in 1952, where he worked among the Kuba peoples of south-central Congo. From his work among the Kuba he published six books, ranging from linguistic studies and ethnographies to historical works on various periods of Kuba history. That fieldwork also served as the foundation for five other books of broader scope on the region, as well as for the insights that fundamentally altered the discipline of history in the late twentieth century.

While working with Kuba elders, he came to realize that their oral testimonies not only provided accounts of the past, but when carefully analysed could be subjected to the same rigour of analysis that applied to all other historical sources. Reinforcing these insights by later work in Rwanda and Burundi—his second major pole of fieldwork—Vansina published a work that transformed the field, by dramatically expanding the source material of the discipline and by bringing into scholars' understanding of historical process whole classes of actors hitherto neglected in historical analysis—colonised people, peasants, women, workers—all those omitted from the archives of written records on the past. The insight that these people have histories too—indeed, that all people have histories—and the inclusion of these people as historical actors in their own right, reconfigured historians' understanding of the past in dramatic ways.

The work which opened such portals for historians was *De la tradition orale. Essai de méthode historique* (1961, later translated as *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, 1965). In it, he set out a complex typology of oral sources and proposed a set of rigorous

analytic approaches for assessing them. His main goal was to establish that oral sources could be rigorously analyzed and therefore must be treated as historical sources equally with written documents. Such an assertion, boldly made, was not without controversy, attacked both by those who denied that oral sources could be used as credible historical sources and by those who saw the analytic rigour proposed—central to Vansina’s claim to historical validity—as too constraining, too mechanical, and too dependent on the model of a fixed chain of transmission, as a sort of “documentary analogue.” Taking account of these commentaries Vansina revised his original work, publishing *Oral Tradition as History* in 1985, and vastly expanded the “disciplinary tool-kit,” to bring clarity and depth to the understanding of oral sources. In over 25 books and many scores of scholarly articles, he explored a wide range of disciplines for their contributions to historical knowledge as well—linguistics, archaeology, ethnography, art, and religion among them.

Such work brought him to explore broader topics as well as deeper time perspectives, including *Paths in the Rainforest* (1990; on the history of the societies of the equatorial forest), *The Children of Woot* (1978, on Kuba precolonial history), and *How Societies Are Born* (2004, on West Central Africa before 1600). But he also kept up with both theoretical and analytic aspects of oral sources, especially in the fields of personal and social memory. Such work led to greater acuity in his treatment of written sources, and from such evolving interests came several classic works: *La légende du passé* (1972, on Burundi), *Le Rwanda ancien* (2001, on precolonial Rwanda; later published in English as *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*, 2004); and *Being Colonized* (2010, again, on the Kuba). In short, by his productivity, his disciplinary depth, and the astounding intellectual range of his prolific publications, Vansina influenced the work on wide areas of precolonial Africa (and many other areas) in many fields, not least in terms of the extensive debates his work initiated. He was, in short, a towering presence in the field.

Yet his influence was not defined by his scholarly production alone: he also mentored and inspired a wide range of students, having served as advisor for more than 50 PhD dissertations at the University of Wisconsin at Madison alone. In addition, he also corresponded with many other students in Africa and Europe, and he inspired and counseled numerous others—both academic colleagues and

others interested in these issues. Alex Haley, for example, consulted frequently with Vansina as he worked on *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976). Although the two differed significantly on matters of method and content, Haley always acknowledged Vansina's openness and generosity with his time and insights.

The same characteristics marked Vansina's relations with his students, among whom his "rapid response" was legion: he would often return long papers the next morning, sometimes to the exasperation of the students, who sought a little "distance" from projects that had taken over their lives. But his comments were always about sources, methods and arguments; they were never personal. His restless intellectual mind, his lively engagement, and the enthusiasm with which he approached the people and the topics he addressed were all legendary.

Born in Antwerp, Belgium on September 14, 1929, the seventh of the twelve children of Dirk Vansina and Suzanne Verellen, the young Vansina came of age during the German occupation of the country, which meant he was separated from his family for long periods of time as he was moved frequently from school to school. His experience in war-torn Belgium and his later research in Africa are vividly portrayed in two memoirs: *Through the Day, Through the Night* (2014), on his childhood in Belgium, and *Living With Africa* (1994), on his academic preparation in Belgium and Britain, his subsequent research in Africa, and his academic life in later years, primarily at the University of Wisconsin, where he arrived in late 1960 and taught until his retirement in 1994. Over that time, and continuing long after his formal retirement, and often in invisible ways, his energy, his good will, his deep understanding of disciplinary methods, and his intellectual range and agility flowed through the many students and colleagues with whom he had worked in the dramatically changing fields related to scholarship on Africa.

To be sure, his work evoked debate, discussion, and sometimes passionate controversy—initially from those who resisted the transformations in the scope of history which his work proposed, and later from those who felt such proposals were too schematic or did not go far enough. Nonetheless, his published work provided the central reference point for both those seeking to extend his work and those who disagreed with such perspectives.

Vansina received numerous honours and distinctions over the course of his career. He twice won the African Studies Association's Melville Herskovits Prize for the best book in African Studies. He was also an early recipient of the African Studies Association's Distinguished Africanist Award, and toward the end of his life he was awarded the American Historical Association's Award for Scholarly Distinction (2014). He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1982, from which he quietly resigned when the group failed to denounce the use of torture during the presidency of George W. Bush, and to the American Philosophical Society in 2000.

He leaves behind Claudine, his wife of 62 years, and their son, Bruno, both of Madison, Wisconsin, as well as many former colleagues, students, and friends on several continents. And most importantly, he leaves behind a changed historical discipline, marked in many ways by his own dedicated scholarship—though never, he would be the first to argue forcefully, through his work alone.

List of major books by Jan Vansina

- 1961 *De la tradition orale. Essai de méthode historique*. Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale.
- 1965 *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. (Translated by H. M. Wright). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- 1962 *L'Évolution du royaume Rwanda dès origines à 1900*. Bruxelles: Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, Classe des Sciences Morales et Politiques, Mémoires in-8; N.S. 26(2).
- 1965 *Les anciens royaumes de la Savane. Les États des Savanes méridionales de l'Afrique Centrale des origines à l'occupation coloniale*. Traduit par J. Taminiaux. Léopoldville: Institut de recherches économiques et sociales (Collection d'études sociologiques 1). 2nd ed. Kinshasa: Presses Universitaires du Zaïre, 1976.
- 1966 *Kingdoms of the Savanna*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. French translation 1965.
- 1966 *Introduction à l'ethnographie du Congo*. Kinshasa: Université Lovanium/Kisangani: Université libre du Congo/Lubumbashi: Université officielle du Congo/Bruxelles: Centre de Recherche et d'Information Sociopolitiques (Éditions Universitaires du Congo).

- 1972 *La légende du passé. Traditions orales du Burundi*. Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale (Archives d'anthropologie 16). 11 maps.
- 1973 *The Tio Kingdom of the Middle Congo, 1880–1892*. London/Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 1978 *The Children of Woot: A History of the Kuba Peoples*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- 1984 *Art History in Africa*. London: Longmans.
- 1985 *Oral Tradition as History*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press/London: James Currey/Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya. 1st ed. 1965.
- 1990 *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. French translation 1991.
- 1991 *Sur les sentiers du passé en forêt. Les cheminements de la tradition politique ancienne de l'Afrique équatoriale*. Traduit par Martial Treslin. Louvain-la-Neuve: Centre d'Histoire de l'Afrique/Mbandaka (Zaïre): Aequatoria (Enquêtes et documents d'histoire africaine 9).
- 1994 *Living with Africa*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- 2001 *Le Rwanda ancien. Le royaume Nyiginya*. Paris: Éditions Karthala (Hommes et sociétés). ill. 2nd ed. Paris: Éditions Karthala 2012.
- 2004 *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya Kingdom*. (Translated from the French by the author). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press (Africa and the Diaspora).
- 2004 *How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa Before 1600*. Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press.
- 2010 *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880–1960*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press (Africa and the Diaspora).
- 2014 *Through the Day, Through the Night: A Flemish Belgian Boyhood and World War II*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

