



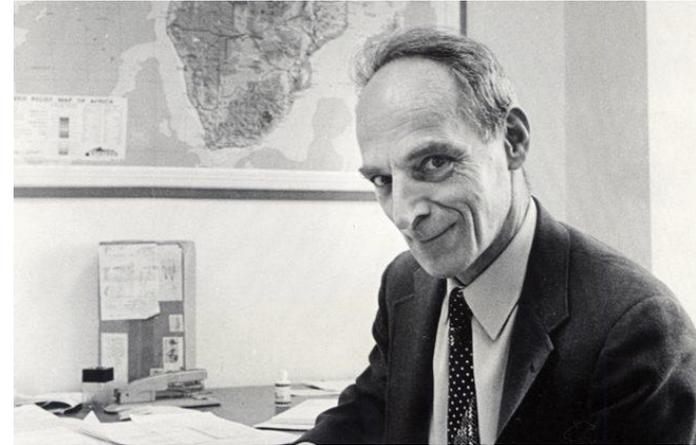
Oral History & "National History"

Week Nine Lectures



Jan Vansina - Oral Historian

- Born in Antwerp, Belgium, 1929 - Died in Madison, Wisconsin, USA, 2017
- Pioneer in the study of oral history globally, and more specifically, with regards to Central Africa (Congo, Gabon, Rwanda, Angola)
- Set down methodologies for reconstructing historical event using oral tradition and oral history.
- Long Time Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and was the founder and leader of their African Studies department, the first in the USA.



Vansina - "Oral Tradition and its Methodology"

- Vansina notes that most African societies south of the Sahara were not traditionally written societies (i.e. - they did not have a writing system).
 - And for those who did have a writing system, it was often only for royalty and the elite.
 - These societies were therefore "civilizations of the spoken word"
- A historian, then, who wants to write about the history of these societies and civilizations must have a deep understanding of the culture, speech, and language of said society.
- Historical knowledge about the "civilizations of the spoken word" must therefore be gathered through collecting and understanding oral tradition.
 - This is very different from the way that "normal" historians collect data (through rapid reading, data collection from written sources, and consultation of printed works).
- An "oral historian" must agree to work more slowly and reflect.
 - Note conflicts with current economics of PhD study in History.

Vansina - "Oral Tradition and its Methodology"

- There are many individuals who are carriers of oral tradition in a society, from ceremonially appointed griots, to priests and leaders, to the elderly.
- Vansina notes that while all forms of oral tradition and transmission may contain information, not all are of equal importance:
 - Vansina: "Any valid oral tradition should in fact be based on an eye-witness account. Rumour must be excluded, because although it certainly transmits a message, it depends by definition on hearsay. Hence its grapevine character. It becomes so distorted that it can only be of value as expressing a popular reaction to a given event. That too can give rise to a tradition when it is repeated by later generations" (143-144).
- Vansina privileges eye-witness accounts of historical events, but this nevertheless becomes difficult to obtain if the historical events are beyond living memory or collective memory (like more than 100 years ago).

Vansina - "Oral Tradition and its Methodology"

- Vansina notes the existence of "Fixed" and "Free" content in oral traditions, as well as "set" and "free" form in delivery. (p. 145)

TABLE 7.1 *Basic forms of oral traditions*

		<i>content</i>	
		<i>fixed</i>	<i>free</i> (<i>choice of words</i>)
<i>form</i>	<i>set</i>	poem	epic (poem)
	<i>free</i>	formula	narrative

Vansina - "Oral Tradition and its Methodology"

- Vansina notes that there are different ways of interpreting "fixed" and "free" oral traditions, partially due to the precise nature of "fixed" sources.
- Vansina privileges "fixed" forms of transmission because they are more precise, but he does note that "free" forms can still contain value, especially if there are complementary versions elsewhere.
- With that being said, Vansina states (153) that too much correlation among a community on a "free" form of oral tradition means that it might not be trusted; perhaps it just fulfills a need in the present society.
 - "Fixed" forms can be rehearsed, "free" forms cannot.

Vansina - "Oral Tradition and its Methodology"

- Vansina points out the difficulties of calculating time in a given society
 - First, family histories only tend to go back about three generations
- We must remember that the "form of time" is very important in constructing histories from oral tradition.
 - The cultural means by which a society tells time (and evaluates history) is important.
 - Local concepts matter: "Age-Sets" and "Initiation" matter.
- Oral historians, however, must try to create a chronology, because without a chronology, there is no historical narrative.
 - Oral tradition tends to give a *relative* chronology, expressed in lists or generation. This is often relevant inside the community, but it doesn't always relate the chronology to outside events.
 - Relative chronologies must be linked together with other accounts (whether from inside the community or outside) to form "absolute" chronologies. You do this by looking for *synchronisms*.
- In order to be a "proper" oral historian, you must have deep cultural and linguistic knowledge of a given society.

Vansina: "For Oral Tradition"

- Just as quickly as oral traditions became a new and innovative way of writing pre-colonial history of non-literate African societies, they came under attack.
- Some believe that Oral Traditions and Oral Sources are merely "signs" or "texts", not to be read scientifically or structurally for historical analysis, but rather read in the context of the transmitter himself/herself.
 - Perhaps oral traditions are more about the present day than the past
 - Collective memory theory and post-modernism often holds this to be true.
- Vansina defends Oral History and Oral Traditions as valid because of their possession of a "relative Chronology", which while it doesn't lend to "scientific" analysis (what does?), it can help reconstruct historical events.
- Oral traditions are not absolute, but they do contain evidence about the past.

Hadfield: "Can We Believe the Stories About Biko?"

- Hadfield takes the middle point in this debate between Vansina and Clarence-Smith/Braudelians.
 - She argues that it is possible to use oral sources to gain historical fact as well insight into *how* people remember things (something that is often more important than the facts).
 - This comes through critical examination of documentary sources to complement oral source, probing interviews further, and taking into account *emotion*.
- Hadfield met troubles trying to find written sources of the Black Consciousness projects. She realized that it wasn't just that the apartheid state had destroyed records, but also that the activists themselves strategically sought to avoid keeping a paper trail.
 - She therefore had to speak with people who had memories of the 1970s in the BCM

Hadfield: "Can We Believe the Stories About Biko?"

- She used various techniques to jog people's memories, such as showing them photographs or videos.
- Hadfield noted some of the difficulties in utilizing research assistants from politically-inclined institutions, such as the Steve Biko Foundation.
 - This may have "encouraged people to praise Biko more than they would have otherwise" (246)
- Because of Biko's "official" martyr status in South Africa, people's oral memories tended to deal with him more than other important figures in the movement.
 - Intersection of Nationalism and Historical Memory. Folks didn't want to go in opposition of the accepted narrative of "heroic history" (250)
- Taking seriously emotions, whether real or faked, and acknowledging the *way* people remember something is quite crucial in getting at certain facts and contradictions. This is examining Oral Histories Critically.

Reid, "History and Nation in Modern Africa"

- Richard Reid, just like in his previous article on the lack of "pre-colonial" scholarship in modern African studies, notes that the many scholars (especially on the African continent) selectively mobilize and/or ignore the "precolonial" and deep histories in their invocations of nationhood.
- Early African history writing of the 1960s seemed to mirror nationalist writings in Europe, particularly with the notion of "invented traditions" and "imagined communities". This was about looking to the past for the "seed" of nationhood; it was also meant to show that those "seeds" were often invented.
 - By the 1980s and later, history was looked at in a more suspicious lens on the African continent. Some, influenced by developmentalism, viewed studying history as irrelevant to economic growth or national identity. Some, believing that historical study could lead to "tribalism", thought history could destabilize fragile nations (243).

Reid, "History and Nation in Modern Africa"

- At many of Africa's 50th Anniversary Celebrations, there was little role for professional historians (African or otherwise). Part of this is reference to the financial hardships faced by African Universities in an Era of Structural adjustment.
- Nevertheless, there is a desire by many "new" African nations to find historical legitimacy for their Governments (South Sudan & Eritrea)
 - Note Namibia & SWAPO's history
 - This is often a more "modern" birth than is attributed in the Africanist literature of the 1950s-1960s, which sees nations born in Antiquity.
- It is important to recognize the developmentalist agenda in this; Africa is the *future*, not the *past*.