

'Living by Fluidity': Oral Histories, Material Custodies and the Politics of Archiving*

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INTRODUCTION

In 1992, in a dramatic address to the American Association of African Studies, the pioneering figure in the study of African oral traditions, Jan Vansina, identified what he considered to be a major challenge to African history which, if not met, would condemn African history to mediocrity and irrelevance in Africa itself.¹ It consisted of two parts: the wholesale transfer of European concepts into Africa around issues of no concern to Africans and a postmodernist attack on historical methodology. Remarking on the 'irrelevance' of Luise White's study of prostitution in Nairobi when Kenyan historians were involved in heated debate about the Mau-Mau, Vansina also criticised White's interview techniques and what he termed her 'sample selection', as well as the sampling done by Belinda Bozzoli in her study, *Women of Phokeng*. Citing instances of 'hasty' and 'shoddy' work he went on at length about the neglect of methodology. Vansina repeatedly addressed the work of David William Cohen, depicting it too as irrelevant, and as a profoundly foreign mode of inquiry² that both abandons the existing rules for the interpretation of evidence and eschews the possibility of historical truth. In 1995 an amplified version of Vansina's address appeared as a review article, 'Some Perceptions on the Writing of African History, 1948–1992'.³ The piece revealed more of the thinking that lay behind the seemingly gratuitous criticisms voiced at the annual meeting three years earlier.

In the article Vansina emphasised how, until the 1950s and the pioneering efforts of Oliver and Fage, and later himself, it was widely believed outside Africa that Africans did not write and that there were no sources for the reconstruction of African history. The great advance of that decade then was the recognition that 'written sources were not uncommon in half the continent, and that oral traditions were to give the insider's view on the past'.⁴ Academic historians of Africa were charged with the task of locating these sources, preserving them and 'enriching' them.⁵ With that came the 'transformation of a fledgling field into a professional speciality'⁶ within history, as well as the beginnings of a commitment to the creation of oral archives. In much of the article, Vansina was concerned to chronicle the advances made in African history in the 1960s, 70s and early 80s. Ruining the neglect of precolonial history in the later part of this period, he nonetheless

*Thanks are due to Nessa Leibhammer, Verne Harris and Isabel Hofmeyr, who commented on an earlier draft of this essay, as well as to the participants at the International Conference 'Words and Voices: Critical Practices of Orality in Africa and African Studies' held in Bellagio, 1997, where this essay was first presented.

1 My title is adapted from a key phrase in Isabel Hofmeyr's wonderful study, *We Spend Our Years as a Tale that is Told: Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chieftdom* (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Press, 1993), p. 54.

2 Vansina was here echoing Martin Chanock's comments reproduced as part of the 'Afterpiece' appended to D. W. Cohen and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo's *Burying S. M.: The Politics of Knowledge and the Sociology of Power in Africa* (Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 1992).

3 J. Vansina, 'Some perceptions on the writing of African history: 1948–1992', *Itinerario* (1995), pp. 77–91. See also his 'Lessons of 40 Years in African History', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 25 (1992).

4 Vansina, 'Writing African history', p. 79.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

celebrated new advances in knowledge of the African past, while indicating his anxiety about the 'triumph of theory'.⁷

For Vansina a turning point occurred around 1985 and was identified most closely with David William Cohen, whom Vansina described as 'the foremost champion of postmodernism'⁸ in African studies and as the promoter of the notion that 'culture and history are perpetually "invented" in the present. For Vansina, Cohen's work amounts to a denial that the writing of history is possible and an ignoring of 'elements other than the contemporary in the make-up of historical evidence and consciousness, a point too obvious to me', Vansina noted ambiguously, 'to belabor it'.⁹ When he refers to such a perspective as a 'cul-de-sac' in the very next paragraph it suggests that rather than thinking that Cohen's point was too obvious to be worth making, Vansina considered the arguments in opposition to Cohen's position to be so self-evident as to preclude any need for reiteration.

The debate between Vansina and Cohen has a long history that dates back to the 1977 publication of Cohen's study *Womunafu's Bunafu*.¹⁰ In that book, Cohen stressed the significance for precolonial studies of less formal oral texts than those on which Vansina's 1961 path-breaking study in oral historical methodology focused. Cohen pointed out that in Busoga, Uganda, there were no specialists charged with the responsibility for preserving historical information. Rather, '[t]o some extent everyone was involved in the preservation and transmission of historical information, though not necessarily consciously'.¹¹ Cohen's study showed that historical information flows not merely along the orderly chains of transmission identified by Vansina, but also 'through the complex networks of relationship, association, and contact that constitute social life'.¹² These networks suggested a form of historical knowledge quite different from the formal historical accounts marked by highly distinctive oral characteristics that Vansina had identified. What Vansina viewed as 'distortions' Cohen conceptualised as the essence of processes of historical memory. Vansina has since taken account in significant ways of some of the issues raised by Cohen, but continues to focus on the identification of the 'rules' that govern the formation of oral sources.¹³

More recently, Cohen has widened his critique beyond the consideration of oral memories of precolonial Africa to look at the popular production of history in other contexts. This trajectory culminated in his position paper prepared for the Fifth International Roundtable in Anthropology and History, held in Paris in 1986. Entitled simply 'The Production of History', the paper argued that the processes of the pro-

7 Ibid., p. 87.

8 Ibid., p. 89.

9 Ibid., p. 90.

10 David William Cohen, *Womunafu's Bunafu: A Study of Authority in a Nineteenth-Century African Community* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

11 Ibid., p. 8.

12 Ibid., p. 9.

13 J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).