Theorizing Oral Tradition: Jan Vansina and Beyond

Dr. Pamphile MABIALA MANTUBA-NGOMA

Historian and Ethnologist,

Department of Historical Sciences, University of Kinshasa

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Introduction

- Jan Vansina wrote, among others, three methodological books on the African historical writing. However, in Vansina's mind, these three books were merely the application of general historical method to particular fields of African history.
- My presentation aims at rethinking Vansina's theoretical thought relating to oral tradition as scientific practice. It questions not only the ontology of oral tradition but also a set of approaches induced by Jan Vansina himself and by his critics on this topic. Last but not least, I will try to reconstruct an outline of a « Vansinology ».

1. Conceptual framework
1.1. Oral Tradition and Oral source

- Jan Vansina (1961) defines 'Oral Tradition' as all verbal testimonies which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation. The message must be oral statements, spoken, sung, or called out on musical instruments only. According to Vansina, not all oral sources are oral traditions, but only those which are statements – sources – which have been transmitted from one person to another through the medium of language.
- Barbara M. Cooper (2005) sees oral tradition as stories about the past, that local population produce and reproduce through oral performative transmission as a means of preserving their own history and consolidating or contesting a sense of belonging and identity (stories rooted on mythology, cosmology, legendry cultural heroes, orginins). Oral source means « personal reminiscence …In an interview format and it may focus on the life history of the person beeing interviewed, on specific events of interest to the historian or on the subject of idiosyncratic memories of family, neighbourhood, community, or movement.

1. Conceptual Framework:
1.2. Oral History and Oral Tradition

- David Henige (1982: 2) states that 'Oral History' is an activity that refers to the study of the recent past by the means of life stories or personal recollections, where informants speak about their own experiences.
- 'Oral Tradition' is a genre of historical source that relates to those recollections of the past that are commonly or universally known in a given culture. Versions that are not widely known should rightfully be considered as 'testimony' and if they relate to recent events they belong to the realm of oral history.

1. Conceptual Framework
1.3. History and Memory

- Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*; Soziales Gedächtnis (mémoire sociale); Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*; Memory Turn (1980s)< Cultural Studies on Nationhood)
- Vansina (2008) states that memory is precisely an affective belief, but not directly history, it is able to build individual and collective identities, without taking in account the raw material that the memory uses to create the pictures which it is pushing forwards. This raw material may also contain, among other data coming essentially from oral history, simplified conclusions, deriving from the discurse of the historian.

2. Vansina'sTheory of Oral Tradition

- J. Vansina, *De la tradition orale. Essai de méthode historique* (1960): states that OT is the main historical source for the reconstruction of the past of the societies without writing. Even by the societies with writing, most of the earliest documents were written on the basis of oral tradition. He demonstrates how to apply the general methodology of historical critics to the study of the past of these societies (sources of information, typology, process of transmission, chronology, historical validity of data, etc.). Degree of academic acceptance: Bestseller: around 80,000 copies sold; traduction in English (1965), Spanish (1966), Italian (1976), Arabic (1981), Hungarian (1984).
- J. Vansina, *Art History in Africa. An Introduction to Method* (1984): The book applies the general methods used in art history to the specific situation of arts in Africa. He radically changes his conception of the value of sources for writing African history. He presents an art work as a very important source for the study of African history because a history without objects is bloodless and unreal; it is not a history. An art work constitues a more reliable and valid historical source than a written text or oral traditions.

2.Vansina's Theory of Oral Tradition

- J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (1985): Vansina gives answers to diverse critical assessments to his first methodological book on oral tradition. He operates an epistemological jumping, a rethinking of previous statements on oral traditions.
- Vansina argues that oral traditions are documents of the present because they are reported in the present. But they contain messages from the past. They are the representation of the past in the present. They cannot deny whether the past nor the present in them. That is why attributing the content of totality to the present, as sociologists do, is a reductionist attitude. Ignoring the impact of the present, as some historians do, is also reductionist. Traditions must be understood as reflecting both the past and the present.
- This latter book was completed by the book on « *Living with Africa* » (1994: 197-221): Vansina reacts vividly to structuralist, functionalist, and marxist professionals and doctrines in the writing of history.

3. Controversy on Vansina's Theory of Oral Tradition

- **Symbolic Approach**: Thomas O. Beidelmann (1970) reproached to the historians the fact that they were ignoring the symbolic structure of oral tradition and reducing them simply to historical representations. In doing this, historians demonstrated their difficulty to distinguish «sociological truth» with « historical fact » (Kaguru Myth)
- **Structuralist Approach**: Steve Feierman (1974) and Roy G. Willis (1976) made use of the structuralist interpretation as means for the historical study of societies without writing. They put together elements of the structuralist interpretation and the material historical approach of social development. The structural interpretation helped them to show out the fundamental structure that was common to all variants of the myth. Thank to the historical critical perspective, Feierman succeed in deepening the statements of the content of the myth and to specify them; showing how the historical events were constituted (Shambaa Myth <Sheuta Myth).
- **Chronological Approach**: David Henige (1974) points out the inherent difficulties of establishing chronology, from oral sources. So history must have chronology (a sequential chain of changes); David Henige (1982) discusses many problems relating to « Oral Historiography », to the collecting of traditions (language, interest, chronology, genealogy, ethics of interview, validity of information, feedback, etc.)

3. Controversy of Vansina's Theory

- **Genealogical Approach**: Joseph Miller (1976), thank to the results of his research on the Mbundu people of Angola said that oral history was more complex than presented by historians like Vansina at that moment. It is important to distinguish the genealogies as means designating kinship relations of persons or political relations. In spite of these limitations, the genealogies have a kind of historical value but we have to use them very prudently in the historical research.
- **Exegetic Approach:** Ute Luig (1984) revealed that the use of the exegetic method may highlight the analysis of texts coming from oral tradition. Exegesis is a science that consists in establishing, according to the norms of historical criticism, the sense of a text or of a literary work. This concept is essentially used for the interpretation of biblical texts, using diverse methodological procedures to analyze written and oral traditions, among them : philosophical methods of textual criticism, the procedures of hermeneutical interpretation and the essays of the sociological explanation.

4.Outline of a Vansinology
4.1.Transmissional Approach

- The question of transmission of information between the moment of the event and the date of collecting of the story is very important. It is also the same for the credibility of what they call the witness. In contrary, for the sociologist or the folklorist, who study the collective memory, these questions have no relevance because they are more interested by the degree of representativity of the person which they designate as informator.
- Vansina writes that oral tradition is obeying to a process of intergenerational transmission. One of the characterицts of tradition is the fact that, in comparison to written sources, they are part of living process of transmission. Therefore, he concluded that oral traditions are not only means for the reconstruction of past but they have also their own history.

4.2. Social Communicational Approach

- Communication presupposes society and therefore all messages are social products. Messages of oral tradition have a ‘social surface’. They are significant to members of communities in which they are told. Otherwise they could not be told at all. The message is created by the society, which is subject to recreation by historical change. Messages are often influenced by the »social present ». The extend of such influences must always, be assessed as the interpretation of any message will have to take such influences into consideration.
- Vansina argues that the total content of oral tradition is created in the present for the society. Messages are part of culture. They are expressed in the language of a culture, and conceived as well as unterstood, in the substantive cognitive terms of a culture. Hence culture shapes all messages and this must be taken into account when we interpret messages (cognitive aspect of culture, symbolic aspects of the message, matters concerning image, clichés and their interpretation).

4.3. Conditional Approach

- Telling oral tradition is limited by the respect of conditionalities along the chain of transmission. The diffusion of oral tradition is limited by secrecy, selection and censorship.
- **Secrecy:** A Yombe proverb says: « The dog's dream is only murmur» A Yombe Song : « Local people know it but strangers do not know it and they are totally lost ». Secrecy orders knowledge, regulates access to power, to cultural intimacy, and establishes boundaries between genders, classes, professions. Secrecy is an aesthetic channel of communication, a social and political divider, and a form of property and power. Sanctions against disclosing secrecy and the severe taboos associated with membership in secret associations, contribute to the conservation of tradition and to the transmission of knowledge and ritual practice from a generation to the next.
- **Selection:** People from oral societies define history as a « usable past », as rememberance of some things past, in order to serve as means of sagacity for the next generations. Selectivity of contents means an active choice of items to remember, and that choice is dictated by their perception of history. History must explain and thereby justify the world, the mankind and the way of doing things.
- **Censorship** is another limitation of freedom of speech. As well ancient as modern societies, especially dictatorial regimes, need to root and consolidate their power in an ideology that instrumentalizes the past as it has survived in memories, traditions, and cultural heritage (Shep Mathias of the village Mapey poisoned in 1953).

4.4. Representative Approach

- The question of the representativity of the information reported among the community space is very important.
- According to Vansina, most of information relating to oral tradition are not avaible in discrete packages, but are drawn from a single pool – pool that only exists in memories. To cope with this, we must go beyond the usual rules of evidence. As opposed to all sources, oral tradition consists of information existing in memory.
- This information forms a vast pool – one that encompasses the whole of inherited culture; for culture it is what is in mind. It is the pool that is essential to the continuity of culture and the reproduction of society from generation to generation.

4.5. Lexical Approach

- Vansina (1978 : 249-250) underlined the importance of the method of «*Words and Things*», that is, of lexical comparisons, in the writing of oral history. The historian finds it as an interesting research field in establishing phonemic and morphonemic correspondences of form, which must be regular for instance, differences of tone (high tone and low tone), vowel systems, and nominal classes between the languages of the compared cultures.
- The method of « words and things » makes use of vocabulary as source of reconstruction of past. The political vocabulary helps to reconstruct the past that it is designating.

4.5. Performative Approach

- When he is dealing with oral tradition, the historian is now the « creator » of the piece of writing. His is now the recorder of the living tradition. The crucial question here is: what is the relationship of the text to a particular performance of the tradition involved and what is the relationship of that performance to the tradition as a whole?
- Jan Vansina (1985) sums it up in saying that it is when it is clear how the text stands to the performance and to the tradition can an analysis of the contents of the message begin. This means that questions of authenticity, originality, authorships, the place and time of composition must be asked at each of these stages. The crucial link is the performance.
- A performance is the normal expression of a whole tradition, the condition of its reproduction and those of the tradition itself. However, the concept of 'text' implies something that is stable and that exists independently of all those who interpret it. It is a written item. The text is what testifies to something, but it is not a testimony.

4.6. Material Approach

- Art is a storehouse of social, political, economical, and intellectual history. Then, in social history, art objects are not just ustensils marked as something special. They are tied to institutions. The skill displayed in them testifies to degrees of specialization of labour. The distribution of their use relates to social stratification.
- Concentrations of art objects around certain institutions indicate their dominant role in society. Art work is a direct source, emanating from the community itself, not from foreign reports as is so often the case in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Art relates also to intellectual history. As an expression of culture. Changing ideology, legitimation and altering values can often be directy documented: symbol of luck and wealth, feminity and masculinity, power, older prestige. Art also expresses cosmology, and documents legitimation. It expresses changes in mentality of long duration.

Conclusion

- By elaborating the guiding principles for the use of oral tradition as normal and important source for the historical writing on oral societies, Jan Vansina provoked a scientific revolution which helped at promoting this new paradigm as a disciplinary matrice.
- Thank to permanent readjustments of his thought, Jan Vansina helpeld not only at the acceptance of oral traditions in the academic world as valid sources of history but also to the promotion of an African inspired historiography.
- Nowadays, Jan Vansina is wellknown as a Pioneer of oral historiography.
- Without oral traditions, we would know very little about the past of large parts of the world, and we would not know them from the inside. Oral traditions remain an indispensable sources for historical reconstruction. They correct and complet other sources, just as much as other perspectives correct and complet it.