Theorizing Oral Tradition : Jan Vansina And Beyond

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Introduction

Jan Vansina was convinced that many of his activities and publications aimed at applying general historical methods to the writing of African history, that is, in increasing the body of knowledge about the African past. That is why he wrote, among others, three methodological books on the African historical writing.

In the conceptualization of methods relating to oral history, Vansina published three masterbooks that help us to distinguish two major periods of his historiography. The first one began in the year 1961 when he had published his essay on historical method of oral tradition and finished during the year 1984 with the publication on the methodological introduction to art history in Africa. The second period begins in the year 1985, when he published « *Oral Tradition as History* » as an actualization and review of the first book, mainly as an answer to the most critics which he had meanwhile received. In this methodological book and other successing ones, he provided the scientific arena of epistemological precisions on the subject.

The aim of this paper consists to put under review the content of these three books in ordrer to reconstruct the fundamentals of a « Vansinology », that is, in showing the paths followed by Vansina in the formulation of theoretical and methodological possibilities of oral tradition as a scientific practice, in fact, how he manipulates this paradigm in order to allow the acquisition and treatment of knowledge relating to past but also to contribute to the training of a specific school of historians. It consists on reflexive discussions of oral tradition as a body of knowledge on the past and how this knowledge is achieved. It questions not only the ontology of oral tradition but also the fundamentals of a set of approaches induced by Jan Vansina himself and by his critics on this topic.

1. Conceptual Framework

It is possible for us to distinguish oral tradition from oral source, oral tradition and oral history, and history from memory? Are the concepts very different or interchangeable? These questions need an answer if we want to facilitate the following argumentation.

1.1. Oral Tradition and Oral Source

The first concepts that need to bee defined are oral tradition and oral source because many scholars think that both concepts are the same and can be used interchangeably.

Gilbert Garrighan (1940: 118-119) sees oral sources as « the category of sources by oral transmission inclusive of all materials as involves communication through the spoken words. » He further explains that oral transmission of incidents or events from the remote past generally goes under the name ‘popular tradition’ and it is found when written records are meager. It generally comes to the surface long after the occurrence of event which it

transmits. In this respect therefore, our understanding is that oral source and oral traditions can be used interchangeably, with tha caution that each may have its boudaries.

Jan Vansina (1961: 5) 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.

1.2.Oral Tradition and Oral History.

Today 'Oral Tradition' and 'Oral History' are two accepted concepts which are often used interchangeably, though quite different.

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According to Paul Thompson (1978: 18), « Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but forms the unknown majority of the people… It brings history into and out of, the community. It helps the less priviledged and expecially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact – and thence understanding – between social classes and between generations. And to the individual historians and others, with shared meaning it can give sense of bilonging to a place or in time. Equally, oral history offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgement inherent in its tradition. It provides a means for a radical transformation of the social meaning of history. »

David Henige (1982: 2) sees oral history as an activity, and oral tradition a genre of historical source. 'Oral history' refers to the study of the recent past by the means of life stories or personal recollections, where informants speak about their own experiences. Strictly speaking, oral tradition is 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.

According Sharon Veale and Kathleen Schilling (2004: 2), oral history relates both to the personal stories and memories that people tell over other about the past and the formal collection or account of such stories and memories by oral historians and researchers. Within families often such stories are passed on from generation to generation. More frequently our history lives we only ever speak about the past through our memories, the mental impressions we retain and are able to recall. These memories and stories we tell about them help explain our identity and place in the world. Oral tradition is a body of narratives passed from generation down verbally to generation beyond the lifetime of any one individual. It includes stories, songs, sayings, memorized speeches and traditional accounts on past events. Oral

history, on the other hand, involves eyewitness accounts and reminiscences about events and experiences which occured during the lifetime of the person beeing interviewed.

1.3. History and Memory

There is a difference between the memory of past, which is, the remembering or the representation of the past in the present, and history in the sense of past that we can know through the present by studying of subsisting testimonies.

According to Vansina (1985), tradition and memory are only distinguished from other mor recent information by the conviction that they steemed from previous generations, just as memory itself is only distinguished from other iformation by the conviction that the item is remembered, not dreamt or fantasied. It follows from this charcateristic of oral tradition as information remembered that there is a corpus of information in memory wholly different from the corpus of written documents. The dynamics of memory is always acting on the corpus.

Vansina (2008 : 12) said that because of the fact that while 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. Finally, the study of the phenomenon of collective memory depends from the study of human sciences writing on the present, for example, sociology or literary criticism, whereas the study of history depends from human sciences writing on the past.

History and memory often use the same sources as raw material in the construction of their respective pasts. Among them, oral history constitutes an essential source for popular memory and a source of first choice for the construction of the recent past. This implicate that there is no unique method for exploiting oral history and the method that must be applied will be very different according to the objective of the researcher. For example, for the historians, the question of transmission of information between the moment of the event and 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.

2. Vansina's Theory of Oral Tradition

In his effort at conceptualizing oral tradition, Jan Vansina published three books which have each other an espitemological relationship. The first one states the importance of oral tradition among historical sources, especially in the writing of the history of the so-called people without writing. The second underlines that the work of art is reliable source of African history and the third one insists on the social relevance of oral tradition, its possibilities and limitations.

The first book published with the title : « *Oral Tradition : A Study in Historical Methodology* » (1961) results of Vansina's fieldwork in Central Africa, when is was a doctoral candidate and conducting research on royal and dynastic traditions of the Kuba in Belgian Congo (today DRC), Rwanda and Burundi. This study aimed at demonstrating that

among the historical sources, oral traditions occupy a particular place. However, researchers had devoted to little interest to the analysis of characteristics of these sources, even if people is making use of the sources in the everyday life. Not only are oral traditions the most important sources for the historical writing of the people without writing, but everybody knows that oral traditions are originating several written sources, especially in the history of the Anquity and of Middle Age (Vansina 1961: 1).

In writing this book, Vansina was determined to deliver a theoretical book relating to the historical value of oral traditions, with the hope that one day scholars will be interested to the topic and write other theoretical books on oral traditions. In spite of plenty of criticism this book received, he succeeded in making that oral traditions were accepted as valuables sources in the international academic landscape (Vansina 2016 : 245).

Vansina was going from the evidence that oral traditions, as well as written documents, are valid historical sources that we use in applying the method of critical history. With the experience of collecting official traditions of the Kuba Kingdom in the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi, he tested the methodological procedures used by German historians such as Bernheim (1908), Feder (1924) and Bauer (1928) who studied oral tradition related in European myths.

In the seven chapiters of this book, he explained the problem of oral tradition in relationship with the historical method (historical literatuire, ethnology), the place of oral traditions in the chain of testimonies (verbal testimony of oral tradition, mode od transmission of oral tradition, alterations due to transmission); understanding of testimony (propre characteristics of testimony, structure of testimony, sense of testimony) ; testimony as illusion of reality (social significance of testimony, impact of cultural values on testimony, influence of the personality of the interviewee on the testimony) ; weight of testimony (origin of testimony, comparison of testimonies) ; the historical knowledge (types of traditions and their characteristics, predjudices of tradition, contribution of auxiliary sciences ; and the interpretation of history.

In this book, we can underline some essential elements: the typologization of oral sources, the process of transmission, the collecting and criticizing of traditions, the place of chronology in oral tradition.

Vansina insisted also in the fact that when studying oral traditions we have to take in account different conceptions of time in the societies in that we are doing field work. These societies have a cyclic conception of time rather than a linear vision. They use not only genealogical data (generation) but also ecological data (season, rain, drought), biological dat (menstruation), economical data (market day), political data (reign) or astrological data (moon, solar eclipse) and mnemonic data do fix an event in the linearity of time.

Vansina writes that oral tradition is obeying to a process of intergenerational transmission. One of the charactericts 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 their own history. That is why he considered as very important to analyze the process of transmission in order to recognize probable changes and distorsions of the initial historical fact, from the prototestimony throughout the chain of transmission to the moment when the tradition will be recorded and written. Then, for the historian, all oral messages relating to past and that come from a

preceeding generation, and that are reported to the next genration, are part of oral tradition. Strictly thinking, oral history refers to narratives of rememberances of persons who were living when the event happened: participants, ocular witnesses or persons informed through hearsey (Vansina 2008: 14).

In the process of reporting oral tradition, it is very important to saveguard from one generation to the next, the exactitude of the content of the reported message. Particular measures help at conserving the authenticity of religious dogma or political successions (Ibid.)

The process of transmission is influenced by different factors, among them: the form of the text (prosa, lyrics, etc.), the fonction of the text (official or unofficial) and the role of the traditionist telling the story. The manner he is narrating and his personal intentions do influence the content. Since the narrator is strongly designed by the social representations of his time, oral traditions are influenced by the society and its dynamic relations. That is why Vansina recommended to historians to learn the language and the culture of the studied people of which they want to reconstruct the past.

The analysis of the history of transmission aimed at understanding in which manner oral traditions were transformed through individual or social influences. At that moment of writing this first methodological book, Vansina was not interested by an analysis of the society from what the traditions were emerging. He was not dealing with asking the question of distinguishing the past of persons and the past of events, and he did not need to explain what he was understanding under the concept of past.

The second methodological book was published in 1984 and deals with « *Art History in Africa. An Introduction to Method* », that is, with art in Africa and its history, but it is not an art history of Africa, because, according to Vansina, there were not yet enough monographs enabling the historian to write such an art history. The book deals simply with historical problems of the art of Africa from the Northern to the Southern part of the contunent before 1900 A.D. This book applies the general epistemology and methods used in the discipline to the specific situation of art in Africa (see also Mabiala 1994: 133-147).

Vansina explains not only the technics of production of art objects but also the role of art in the society. He states that art work is a very important source for the study of African history because a history without objects is not a history and that an art work constitues a more reliable historical source than a written text or oral tradition.

Vansina (1984: 211) comes to the following epistemological statement that will radically change his conception of the value of sources for writing African history: « *Art is the past coming to us without simplification, without generalization and it comes to us at a glance. It is an ideal mode of expression to render a situation directly rather than to describe it with all the selectivity description entails. This opaque character of art, this power of confrontation baffles the historian, who is not used to being brought face to face with a foreign reality from the past. Art works do not narrate, they do not argue. They present a whole at once. This property implies a complexity of everything in one : medium, technology, use, social, emotional and mental signification, a frozen slice of ilfe as it were.* »

Vansina insists in pointing out that the society is the mother of art in Africa. Art works are a materialization of mental pictures that are associated with significations and that are acting as

an expression of dominating subjects within a culture. He stresses that the creative process is obeying through internal and external copies and loans, to the historical evolution but also to the subjects and reasons that are the product of historical change. Hence, art works become interesting sources for the writing of political, economical, social and intellectual history.

In order to give answers to diverse criticisms formulated against his first methodological book on oral tradition, Jan Vansina operated an epistemological jumping in publishing in 1985 an new methodological book with the title « *Oral Tradition as History* ». In this book, 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 or 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.

Vansina insists that oral tradition is a process of transmission of messages by word of mouth over time until the disppareance of the message. The products of this process are oral messages based on prevoius oral messages, at least a genaration old. He discusses in detail the sources of information of oral tradition (eyewitness, hearsay or rumour, visions, dreams, hallucinations), and different classes of messages : memorized messages (everyday language such as formula, prayer, special language rules such as poetry, formal speech like epic, everyday language as narrative, factual traditions or accounts, tales, proverbs, and sayings.

The analysis of oral traditions was unterstood, in the Vansina's mind, as a questioning of oral tradition as source of history. Oral tradition as evidence can be shown in the relationship between the event or situation observed and the final recording made of it. If there is no link between the record and the observation, they will be no historical evidence: « Evidence of What? » The central argument here is that is always necessary to scrutinize traditions as they are in fact, expressions of generalizations or norms rather then statements of observations of events or situations. Accounts are therefore misleading reconstructing actual situations, acccounts are very limited misleading even though only accounts directly testify to events. When it comes to reconstructing actual situations, accounts are very limited to usefulness because they are the historical consciousness of present and past generations. Tales are more reliable because they create a lifelike setting and give evidence about situations as they were actually observed as well as about beliefs concerning situations.

Vansina makes clear the relationship between performance, tradition and text and highlights the question of 'getting messages' (the interpretation of meanig of the message), and argues that the message is social product which is displayed in a 'social surface' of communication and expressed in a culture and is part of a specific culture, and presents the standard rules of evidence to oral messages.

He concluded the book by stressing oral traditions are really a source of history. When one looks at the proneness of traditions to distorsion and bias, lack of chronology, selectivity of the contents of the tradition, and so on, one may be obliged to discard with oral tradition. But this should be not done because according to Vansina, oral traditions have a history to teach, and historians have accepted its utility in the writing of history especially in oral societies

universally. This is so because not all traditions are automatically unreliable, even though all have limitations.

3. Controversy on Vansina's Theory of Oral Tradition

Between 1961 and 1984, Oral Tradition became a very controversial subject among scholars interested in writing African History. The first question of debate was to define oral tradition as different from oral sources and oral historiography. The second question related to how can we establish chronology of oral tradition and the third question concerned the textuality of oral tradition and the capacity of the historian to understand its structure and to proceed to its desambinguization.

3.1. 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 that they were unable to distinguish «sociological truth» from historical fact. An example of myths of Kaguru people helps to recognize two levels of speech in the contents of the same myth. The Kaguru give two testimonies about the origin of particular clans and about social contradictions, in the initial step, through a symbolic codified form. But they present recent problems of the political lineage through a form that is not codified. Beidelmann comes to the conclusion that is possible to recognize the passation from a mythical presentation to an historical presentation of facts if we have at our disposal an exact knowledge on social structure, symbolic relation and linguistic context. Beidelman was not sure that historians should really have at their disposal all these capacities of desambiguization of the ambiguous or equivocal langage of most texts on oral tradition (Beck 2001).

Beidelman (1970) criticized Vansina about the manner of explaining symbolic and social relations in his theorization. The typology of literary genders did not confer enough credibility to oral traditions. By looking forward to reconstruct objective facts, he did not perceive the stylistic particularities of these traditions or their poetic formulation in order to better understand the distortions that they were hiding. In this way, he was not able to use up all the richeness of the content of oral tradition.

3.2. Structuralist Approach

Claude Lévi-Strauss was conscious that the historical critical analysis of the myth was very superficial and it does not give access to the real message of the myth. He insisted on the importance of distinguishing the code and the message. The code is the means of linguistic expression in that the myth is represented. In his «history of Asdiwal », he speaks about the following codes: geographical code, techno-economical code, social code and cosmological code. These different codes have a complementary relationship to the message of the myth, always attesting that new binary oppositions are varying or circulating in the opposite direction. The expressed antinomies in different codes can be found in different relations to realty. Some of the codes may confirm the existing social relations; other describing in contrary the opposite of the institutions. The dialectical relation between myth und realty is an indicator that this is not a description of social realty but only a justification of the bad condition of social relations.

However, Lévi-Strauss had neglected the analysis of the societies in which the myths were invented. Another weakness of the structural approach of Lévi-Strauss, in the historical point of view, was his recklessness in trying to do analysis of the myth through its variants as a whole. In this way, it excluded any historical perspective which should look for the variants according to the historical form of their birth and aspirations.

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Even if Vansina had neglected these historical aspects, historians like Steven Feierman (1974) and Roy Geoffrey Willis (1976) invested themself in highlighting the place of structural analysis in the understanding of myths and oral litetrature.The reproached to Vansina not taking in account the structuralist interpretation of texts of oral traditions, to use it as means for the historical study of societies without writing. He put together elements of structuralist interpretation and of historical approach of social development. Feiermann is convinced that myth, history, and social structure are interrelated. This interrelation needs systemactical research. Feiermann shows that the myth of foundation of the Shambaa Kingdom in North Tanzania has both the structural and the historical dimension. It is the storie reports both on the Shambaa cosmology, voll with Lévi-Strauss's logic of binary oppositions, and on a symbolic protocol of a decisive historical event: the foundation of the State.

In this study on the Shambaa's history, Feierman finished to pass into review the two approaches, each of them containing its weaknesses but completing each other. The structural interpretation had the advantage of making possible an analysis of the fundamental structure that was common to all variants and the elaboration of divergences. In spite of the carefulness of the analysis, there was nevertheless a reduction in the myth to some common caracteristics. Thank to the historical critical perspective, Feiereman succeed in deepening the statements of the content of the myth and to specify them; showing how the historical events were constituted.

Roy G. Willis (1976, 1981) tried also to show out that the myth of the dominant class of the Fipa people in South-Werstern Tanzania represents at the same time a formulation of the world vision and a theory of history of the Shi of North-Eastern of Zaïre (today DRC). Many Africanist historians in the USA tried to generalize the implications of the combination of structural and historical methods.

3.3. Chronological Approach

David Henige, in his book on «*The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimmera* » (1974), discussed the question of chronology in oral traditions. He points out the inherent difficulties of establishing chronology, the *sine qua non* of history, from oral sources. He insists on the fact that chronology is essential to history. History deals with chains of change, that is, not with change as a result of a precedent situation leading to later situations, but change as product of causality. Chronology needs not to be based on an asolute calendar; it can be a relative sequence of events and situations only.

He begins in recognizing the fundamental incompatibility existing between the manners of time counting in the societies with writing and in a society without writing. In these last ones, there is no clear separation between past and present. Therefore it is very difficult to establish there a chronological framework aiming at putting in order the events from the past within a lineary following of causal chains.

Thomas Spear (1981) states that the traditional model of times are divided in three periods : recently, middle and earlier. Each period is characterized by a different perception of time. There are three conceptions of time in the oral societies : the mythic time (describing the origins of things as they were, in form of a myth with symbolic sense), the repetitive time (describing cyclic processes of things as they had to be, in form of formulas with precise sense) and linear time (describing things as they are, in form of rememberances, respecting the truth).

Henige (1974) critized also the manner with which Vansina was speaking about the genealoy which frequenty undergoes a telescoping or an artficial lengthening provoked by the narrator himself.It not a reliable reference of time. The use of lists of kings is characterized by the same inexactitude, as means of dating events from the past. It often happens that in the oral traditions entire epochs are personified. There is also no reliable means at disposal helping to determinate the length of a reign in the case of a sussession from one brother to another. The practice is also frequent that consisting in establishing chronologies in comparison with events or personnalities of neighbouring societies; this practice leads to the production of a false historical material.

Henige highlighted some problems that were neglected by Vansina, for example, the phenomenon of feedback, which is to be understood as a set of conscious processes, operated by the traditionist seeking to adapt the history of his people to the representations of his colonial masters, with the hope of obtaining political advantages from them. This practice leads to conscious overestimation of the age of a population, the foreign masters having great respect of very old cultures. Another operation of feedback is the fact that oral traditions that were known at the beginning of colonization were meanwhile written, known and considered by the narrators as official version. That is why Henige recommends to the historians to verify exactly if the version of these traditions is not a feedback. In this case, he has to make use of litterary criticism before taking them as autonomous sources.

David Henige (1982) discussed many other problems of collecting traditions, including the use of individual or focus group interviews, the decision to learn local languages or use interpreters, the ethics of interviewing, potential feeback from written sources, means of recording and depositing of interview data and chronology. In so doing, Henige reminds us of the degree to which interviews are ephemeral phenomena, varying according to the historical interests and questions of the interviewer; the knowledge, willingness and performance of the interviewee (s), the relations between the two and historical contexts, such that they are impossible to replicate.

3.4. Geneological Approach

Future researches conducted by Joseph C. Miller (1972, 1978, 1980) confirmed the rightness of Beidelman's reflections on symbolic aspects of oral traditions. The results of this research on the Mbundu people of Angola lead to the statement that oral history is more complex than presented by historians like Vansina at that moment. Then the genealogies which are contained in these traditions are not, as it was believed until to that date, kinship relations of persons, rather political relations. In these genealogies the masculine names designate political titles, whereas feminine names are synonymous for groups of descendance. These genealogies must be interpreted as chartas of the political form of organization of the state. It does not allow the reconstruction of chronologies. In spite of these limitations, Miller

highlighted that the genealogies have a kind of historical value but he recommended to use them prudently in the historical research.

Miller (1978: 75) was looking for one best methodology. He elaborated the concept of « documentary analogy » which constitues the principal premiss of the first Vansina's book on oral tradition. The looking of a better methodology pushed the scholars, especially Vansina's followers, to experiment the technics from Lévi-Strauss and Luc de Heusch. Miller sees these technics as 'useful instruments' in the description of historical facts from narrative texts, from the conviction that 'structure is sense' (Miller 1980: 51). When structuralists and foklorists are combined, Miller explains that the progessive distance between the narrator and the event forces the historian, who works on oral traditions, to develop technics of remembering and repeating, that have an antithesis by the historians of the written cultures (Ibid. : 2).

Thanks to Miller's research, Vansina (1978) had to revisit his former interpretation of the origin of the Kuba peoples. He did recognize that the narrative describing the history of Kuba migrations from the ocean, going up the river, was really a simple metapher, the Kuba considering the ocean as symbol of the origin of the mankind. Consequently, Vansina reduced the signification of the myths of origin to historical sources because the narratives of origin often contain informations on the identity and the world vision of a people. He insisted in the fact that it should not be correct to deny them any historical value.

3.5. 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.

The exegesis of the Old Testament experimented 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. In spite of the differences existing between diverse methodological processes used in the exegesis, all approaches aim at achieving a common goal: the reconstruction of the history of Israelic people as God's people and interpreting the statements contained in the biblical texts concerning the relation between God and man. For this reason, the process of textual or literal criticism has to be unterstood hermeneutically.

The historical critical methods developed by the exegesis may provide necessary tools of the treatment of recorded oral traditions. In the central point of this method, there is the criticism of texts and the reconstruction of the history of the tradition. Textual criticism means the reconstruction of the original content of each specific tradition.

Because the texts of the Old Testament are wriiten in an archaic language, the text is first of all verified in the manuscripts of other transmitted variants of the text. This happens in the case of errors of transcription, of transformation or falsification of parts of text or of cutting of the grammatical structure. Therefore, a piece of text is deeply studied: linguistic specificity, historical context and cultural particularities. From this process emerges an analysis of the relationship of sense and the unicity of text. The analysis of each tradition is concluded by the examination of breakings, of redactional complements and glosses.

Ute Luig recommended vividly the use of this exegetic approach in the study of African tradition because it might certainly bring new highlights in the scientific research.

4. Towards an Outline of a Vansinoloy

The emergence of many scientific journals such as 'Oral Tradition', 'Oral Tradition', 'Oral history Review ' and 'International Journal of Oral History', and the creation of Oral history Associations outlining a set of general principles and best practices for Oral History and obligations of the members, show that the time has come to formulate the fundamentals of the Vansina's School.

Jan Vansina (1985) reviewed his theory of oral tradition by precizing concepts, insisting on the distinction between oral tradition as history and the inscription of oral tradition in the society. The methodology became more systematic and comprehensive. In the central point of this new paradigmatic manipulation lie diverse approaches : social communicational approach, conditional approach, representantive approach, lexical approach, performative approach, and material approach.

4.1. Social Communicational Approach

Vansina (1985) asserted that oral tradition is as process and as product. It is a process transmission of messages by word of mouth over time until the disappearance of the message. Oral messages are based on previous oral messages, at least a generation old. Messages are generated in any situation in which people speak. The message is a social product. Communication presupposes the existence of a 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 through 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 here argued that the total content of oral tradition is created in the present for the society, and if the impact of the present is assessed, there remains no message at all from the past. Messages are part of culture. They are expressed in the language of a culture, and conceived as well as unterstood, in the substantuuve 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).

4.2. Conditional Approach

Telling oral tradition is limited by boundaries along the chain of transmission. The diffusion of oral tradition is limited by secrecy, selection and censorship.

The first conditionality of telling oral tradition lies in the capacity of keeping secrecy. Secret orders knowledge, regulates access to power, and establishes boundaries between genders, classes, professions. Secrecy is an aesthetic channel of communication, as a social and

political divider, and as a form of property and power. To own secret knowledge and to show that one does is a form of power (Bellebaum 1992).

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. The knowledge imparted to members of secret groups is often scaled by the taking of vows, a characteristic part of the initiation process. Oaths of secrecy may also be sworn in the presence of art works or may be commemorated by them. Sometimes an art work may depict the punishment for violating secrecy. In the form of doors, house posts, veils, screens, and threaholds, some artworks serve as literal boundary makers to keep the uninitiated out. Often the purpose of the boundary is simply to enhance the aura of whatever is on the other side (Nooter 1993).

The second boundary to the diffusion of oral tradition is selection. People from oral societies define history as a rememberance of some things past. Selection comes from the fact that the main process of building oral history involves not so much a passive, haphazard loss of memory as 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, mankind and the way of doing things. It involves selection guided by ontological speculation cast within a structural form of exposition (Vansina 1978: 227).

History is the product of a common consensus in the community of which it is recorded. It is relative to the community that elaborates it, whether that community is clan section, a village, a chiefdom, or a kingdom. But dynastic history encapsulates all over communities, and hence its history provides the framework for an overall assessment of the past. Absolute truth matters as little as exact does. Myths and anecdotes become true by common agreement and can be altered by common agreement. What is secelected becomes true ipso facto (Ibid.). Dynastic history of Kuba peoples, for example, dealt with the history of kings; it consists of reflections about kingship and the state, telling myths, tales and anecdotes about kings, explaining, among other, the contrast existing between the perceiption of the king as the source of fertility and the king as sorcerer, the difference betwen a peaceful king and a destructive king, and the major changes which happened during a reign. This meant that most events to be remembered had to be recast as the actions of the kings. Consequently, many unrelated matters were excluded, but not all of them.

The process of selection takes time and it is continuous. Certain items are never considered for inclusion in the record because they are not perceived as community affairs, or because change was so slow that it was not consciously perceived, because to remember the vents should be to deny the correctnessof the present behaviour or views. Structural amnesia of this last kind must have helped to erase memories about religious history, especially about religious movements, while inconscious change explains the omission of detailed accounts about social, economic, religisious, and artistic evolution (Ibid. : 228).

The great selection occurs soon after the events have taken place. At this first stage most of events are actively excluded. The process of selection begins to operate almost simultaniously with the occurrence of the events themselves. It is conditioned bu the existant body of

tradition, bi the political situation and by the notion of cause as a absolute ‘beginning’. In practice only political events survive the first round of winnowing, especially if they are colored by supernatural explanations and are also remembered by other means, such as village traditions, traditions of office, or songs, poems and sayings. But the processus does not stop there. A second round may eliminate many among them to bring the reminder more closely in the line with rest of corpus.This is structural selection of a sort, and as a corpus grows,this force continues to operate not merely by eliminating anecdotes but also by reassigning to to the ‘proper’ kings. The process ist not absolutely perfect. It represents a tendency rather then an absolute rule.

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. History thus becomes an instrument of the official ideology that in its turn serves dictatorial political power (De Baerts 2015: 55). Historical propaganda is the systematic manipulation of historical facts or opinions, by or with the connivance of the government or other powers, whereas the censorship of history is the systematic control over historical facts and opinions and their exchange – often by deliberate suppression - imposed by or with the connivance of the governement or other powers.

A political system, a church, an association has good reasons to limit the diffusion of oral tradition. Telling of oral traditions and building of histories in the Bushong society were not harmless activities. Traditions were used to bolster or attach political prerogatives, and hence the king claimed the right to proclaim the official tradition, a claim disputed by senior patricians, who put forth their own versions. Telling traditions could therefore be a sensitive political activity. According to the gossips, it could be fatal: had not be the best bulaam in the country be poisoned by the king 1951 for citing traditions to the European district commissioner that were harmful to the interest of the king. In relating the episode, public rumor illustrated why these stories were so sensitive. The kingdom was administrated by indirect rule based on the ‘historical consitution’ as recorded by the European administration around 1920 (Vansina 1994: 18).

Jan Vansina participated in an initiation in the village of Mapey. Shep Mathias, one his teachers in the Bushong way of life, had told him something about the initiation wall. Soon after, he suddently died in October 1953. He had been poisoned on ordrers of the king with sulfuric acid from battery, because he had told the European (Vansina) too many secrets. The elders of Mapey were keen on holding an initiation, but they told Vansina that it could not be done without the explicite permission of the king (Vansina 1994: 22).

The manner of telling is very important in the palaver which is a communication place of word but not of any kind of word, a word that implies a change of behaviour. This exchange refers to the subject: to whom speak? About what object (matter of speech)? And the modality (what is the manner of speaking? (Bidima1997: 22).

4.3. Representative Approach

The question of the representativity of the information reported among the community space is very important. According to Vansina (2008), 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 is what is in mind. It the pool that is essential to the continuity of culture and the reproduction of society from generation to generation.

Tradition in memory are only distinguished from the other more recent information by the conviction that they stemmed from previus generations, just as memory itself is only distinguished from other information by the conviction that the item is remembered, not dreamt or fanatasied. It follows from this characteristic of oral tradition as information remembered that there is a corpus of information in memory wholly different from a corpus of written documents. The effects of dynamics of memory acting on the corpus.

4.4. 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 principles of this lexical approach were wellknown before but the connection with ethnography had not been clearly identified. Vansina did develop the methodology more consistently and systematically than before. Its potentials to test the results of most avaible sources leads to more convincing reconstructions and produces the framework for a general method of inquiry that can be applied to all societies without writing anywhere in the world. The method of « words and things » makes use of vocabulary as source at reconstruction of past. The political vocabulary helps to reconstruct the past that it is designating.

A very rich vocabulary relating to institutions was conserved in the Kuba history. This allows to use the situation as an example of application of the technic of « words and things ». This method consists in collecting the appropriate vocabulary relating to the choosen subject for the language or for a set of languages and to refind the spatial dissemination of each word (form and meaning) in all languages in which it is found, and to establish the origin (ancient heritage, internal innovation, loan). This procedure gives historical data which must be confronted with other known historical data in order to proceed to reconstruction. The survey may be enrished by collecting the appropiate vocabulary in the neighbouring languages and to indicate, the absence in the studied language, of forms which are present in the neighbouring societies, forms which should be lost. This allows to state the presence of internal innovations by showing which were the ancient words replaced by the innovations.

4.5. Performative Approach

The concept of 'performance' plays an central role in the creation of of oral narrative (Scheub 1976).

Jan Vansina (1985) writes that when a historian 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 now is: what is the relatioship of that performance to the tradition as a whole? That it is when it is clear how the text stands to the performance and the latter 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 performance.

A performance is the normal expression of a whole tradition, the condition of its reproduction and those of the tradition itself. The concept of « text « on the other hand implies a stable something 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

History without work remains bloodless, unreal, something that could have been, but not really was (Vansina 1984: 196).

Goldweights from Akan (Ghana) often come with commentary. They often represent proverbs, making their meaning or symbolism explicit. Again they are dangers here. The proverbs constitute a potential storehouse of Akan practical philosophy, and often their cosmology, but we do not know that they were in the thoughts of the maker of the weights who could have had quite different allusion or proverb in mind (danger of anachronism) (Appiah 1979).

Art is a storehouse of social and intellectual history. Then, in social history, art objects are as valuable source as in economic history. For they are art objects and not just ustensils marked as something special. They are tied to institutions. The skill displayed in them testifies to degrees of spezalisation of labour. The distribution of their use relates to social stratification. Above all, concentrations of art objets around certain institutions indicate their dominant role in society. Art is a direct source, emanating from the community itself, not from foreign reports as is so often the case in sub-Saharan Africa (Vansina 1984 : 205).

Art relates also to intellectual history. It is estonishing that we know little about aspirations, values, cosmologies, the role of individual thought or even action. As an expression of culture, art addresses the issues. 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. (Ibid.; Appiah 1979 ; Mabiala 1991 ; Mabiala 1994)).

Conclusion

By elaborating of the methodological guiding principles of using oral tradition as normal and important source for the historical writing on the so-called oral societies, Jan Vansina

provoked a scientific revolution which helped at promoting this new paradigm as a disciplinary matrice. Jan Vansina is today wellknown as as a pioneer of Oral Historiography.

Without oral traditions, we would know very little about the past of large parts and people of the world, and we would not know them from the inside. Most written traditions do not consider the past of the down-trodden, the so-called non-mainstream sector of the society. It over concentrates on the political life, the powerful and history makers. This does not however make superior any source (written or oral) over the other. Whenever oral traditions are existant, they remain an indispensable source for his historical reconstruction. They correct other sources, just as much as other perspectives correct it. Where there is no writing, oral traditions must bear the brunt of historical reconstruction.

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