

Investigating Oral History

Interview with Professor Jan Vansina

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“Szilárd Biernaczky corresponded with Jan Vansina in 1984–85, when, in his role as Director of the African Research Program and the organizer of anthropological and folkloristic conferences, he kept in touch with several Africanists around the world. The result of this correspondence is the present invaluable material, which contains Jan Vansina’s views and positions on the role and importance of collecting folklore, the interpretations of ethnohistory in Africa and elsewhere around the world, including the political use of folklore. This material deserves to be published, even if it has already been printed in Hungarian. Though Vansina was a prolific author, in these letters he formulates some of his insights in a more direct and more deliberate way than elsewhere, thus this text is worthy of the attention of future generations anywhere in the world.” (Quotation from a peer-review. The Editor)

Abstract: This interview with Professor Jan Vansina, conducted in the mid-1980s by Szilárd Biernaczky, is the result of extensive correspondence between the two. After a brief introduction to the achievements of the distinguished and pioneering scholar of African history, the interview addresses the following issues: 1. the current status of oral history research; 2. new theories in the field of oral history research; 3. ethno-history versus oral history; 4. ethnography, ethnology, European peasantry, and oral history; 5. the mythical dimension of the “beginning” and its inherent historical models (“outbound” segments, migration, new conquest, first ancestors, etc.); 6. oral history as a source of nationalist movements in Africa; 7. the appreciation of oral history (and its research) and African cultural movements.

Keywords: Jan Vansina, oral history research, European history, African history, folklore.

PRELIMINARY NOTE

Under the direction of the author of this interview, the *African Research Program* functioned between 1981 and 1992 at the Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest,

Hungary), hosted first by the Folklore Department, Faculty of the Humanities, later by the Department of Regional Geography, Faculty of the Natural Sciences. During its active period the Program organized three successful conferences.¹ About 50 specialists came from different disciplines (cultural anthropology, folklore studies, geography, history, economics, political science, literary scholarship, tropical medicine, agricultural sciences, history of religion, theology, etc.) grouped about the program.

Though officially not recognized, the small, free organization had enough clout to put out publications as well: the material of the first conference was published in two volumes (BIERNACZKY 1982); the first two volumes of the periodical *Africana Budapest*;² as well as the first volume of a large-scale planned book series.³ As a result of this optimistic period of growth we gathered the material for two additional volumes of *Africana Budapest*. In addition the participants of the other two conferences also bequeathed us nearly 400 papers for publication. Finally, the first international conference established an international scientific society (*International Association of Oral Literature in Africa*), and the first two numbers of its planned journal (*The IAOLA Newsletter*) were prepared.

The year 1989 brought great social and political changes in Hungary. At the same time, it also led to a longer period of “introversion”: the previously state-mandated third-world relations had gradually been disappearing after 1990. The African Research Program thus become orphaned, in the vacuum of the times, soon faded. Later – at the proposal of the African Research Program’s manager, the present author – the Hungarian Africa Society was established, but for objective reasons, unfortunately, it could not become a significant international organization at the national or international level.

Notwithstanding the above history and many years after its creation, we would like to make some of the works that remained in manuscripts, available in a printed form for the benefit of the international and Hungarian Africanist researchers. Of these, it is the interview conducted via correspondence in 1984–1985 with Professor Jan Vansina, a world-renowned scholar of history and the seminal creator of a new school of research, we considered foremost valuable. The interview was prepared with the intention of publishing it in previously mentioned issue of the *The IAOLA Newsletter* that unfortunately never materialized. (By “correspondence interview” we mean that since we could not personally meet with the scholar in person, professor Vansina responded in writing to questions that were also sent to him in writing by the interviewer; the introduction and concluding remarks were, of course, prepared by the person seeking the answers.)

Undoubtedly, Professor Vansina explained his theoretical ideas – both before and after this interview – in many places and forms, enriching the items and conclusions formulated in his fundamentally significant, groundbreaking book (*La tradition orale*, 1961, *Oral Tradition*, 1965) with further and further details. Still, we believe, it is not pointless – even after such a delay – to publish, in its original language (English), this interview, which has been sitting as a manuscript for 17 years (though in 2003 the interview was

¹ *Folklore in Africa Today* in 1982 and 1984 and *Tradition and Modernization in Africa Today* in 1989.

² *Africana Budapest : African studies in Hungary : études africaines en Hongrie*. Nos. 1–2 (1984–1986), editor Szilárd Biernaczky, published by the African Research Program, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest.

³ BIEBUYCK – BIEBUYCK 1987, an analysis of thirty-six Nyanga tales edited by Szilárd Biernaczky

published in Hungarian, BIERNACZKY 2003). We believe it contains some details which enrich Vansina's oeuvre, and more broadly, our vision about oral history research.

EXCHANGE OF VIEWS ON ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH

It is a rare occasion for a scholar to have the birth of a great school or a "new area of science" attached to his name. Oral history research has become perhaps the most popular branch of African studies since about the 1960s, and we may add that in the "shadow" of this popularity there are real scientific results which are very valuable and quantitatively important. Let it be stressed that the outstanding role of Jan Vansina, as a creator of theory and at the same time as an exemplary scholar in the field of empirical research is beyond question. But we have to take into account that together with the exemplary research results – let us mention only the book by Alain Delivré: *L'histoire des rois d'Imerina* (DELIVRÉ 1974), or one by Roy Willis: *A State in the Making, Myth, History, and Social Transformation in Pre-Colonial Ufipa*, (WILLIS 1981), – we must positively evaluate also those works which presented historic traditions, oral traditions important for the creation of a sense of national identity of African countries and ethnic groups, leaving for further research the complicated and difficult task of evaluative analysis.⁴

Jan Vansina, who was born in Antwerp in 1929 and since 1960 has been professor of history and anthropology at University of Wisconsin-Madison, undertook no small responsibility when in 1961 he launched the new scientific method for research into the history of the non-literate peoples. I believe we can state this with full justification even if many precedents are known in this research field. Summarizing the teachings of the past and present of this branch of science, one of the latest standard works assesses Vansina's efforts, his high quality work spread over several decades and its influence as follows:

"Somewhat in the nature of a manifesto – although the author thought of it as 'no more than an introduction' – Oral Tradition has been phenomenally influential; references to it can be found not only in the footnotes of the writings of Africanists but in those of most other kinds of oral historians as well as anthropologists and folklorists. Trained both as a medievalist and an anthropologist, Vansina brought to his work a salutary respect for evidence and a first-hand appreciation of the peculiar challenges of fieldwork. Despite its pioneering character and despite the great amount of work done since its appearance – including second thoughts of the author – Oral Tradition remains the single most useful tool for historians who use oral sources, serving both to guide and justify their work." (HENIGE 1982:21–22)

⁴ From the very rich material we can mention the Fulbe collections of the Cameroonian Eldridge Mohamaddou of Adamawa Fulbe origin (MOHAMMADOU 1976; 1978; 1983; 1986). These volumes contain explanations, but we consider, in the published texts "history is hiding a lot more" than what is revealed on the base of these explanations.

A special feature of Jan Vansina's scholarly development is that after important field work (1953–1956: Kubaland – West Kasai, Zaire; 1957–1960: Ruanda, Burundi)⁵ as well as several early studies and books,⁶ it was relatively early in his career that he wrote the fundamental theoretical work *De la tradition orale* (VANSINA 1961; 1965) also mentioned by Henige, which was to become determinative in the activity Vansina carried out in the following decades.

His later theoretical-evaluative research conducted on an empirical basis (*La légende du passé: traditions orales du Burundi*, 1972; *The Tio Kingdom of the Middle Congo 1880–1892*, 1973, in part *Children of Woot. Essays in Kuba History*, 1978, or countless studies) can be regarded as practical applications of his *Oral Tradition* published in 1961 and issued a few years later in English (1965). *Oral Tradition* was supplemented with a lengthy chapter for the Italian edition (VANSIN 1976), and around that time and also later it was translated into in Spanish, Swedish, Polish, Russian, and Arabic (1981). A new, highly revised form was issued in 1985.⁷ In the meantime, the scholar elaborated his thesis in further theoretical papers (VANSINA 1972; 1973; 1978).

A perhaps less noticed but similarly important feature of his scientific view is found in another work, *Kingdoms of Savanna* (VANSINA 1966). Here he chose the sole practicable ideal road in “ethno-history” by which it is possible to reconstruct the African peoples’ “own history”, independently of the (written or oral) nature of the sources; to write the history which is not the consequence of white or Arab incursions and any written records they may have left; to overcome at least in part, the one-sidedness of these sources: how one can, by peering behind the picture painted by these most often very one-sided sources, bring to the surface the original and true African past, or at least to create the contours of the continent's peoples.

At the same time an especially worthy and exemplary feature of the professor emeritus of University of Wisconsin-Madison, Jan Vansina's scientific activity is the way he constantly polishes his earlier results. We can see this in the case of the different theoretical writings mentioned and listed alongside *Oral Tradition* (*The Use of Oral Tradition in African Culture History*, 1967; *The Use of Ethnographic Data as Sources for History*, 1968; *Once Upon a Time...* 1971; *Tradizione orale e storia orale*, 1977; *La tradition orale et sa méthodologie*, 1980, etc.). In this connection, it is also worth noting similar continual polishing and elaboration over several decades in the case of valuable collection-data relating to the Kuba which leads from his first book *Les tribus Ba-Kuba et les peuplades apparentées* (1954)⁸ to his outstandingly important large monograph *Children of Woot* (VANSINA 1978).

The folkloristic teachings of Vansina's researches have so far been little heeded, perhaps alone Richard M. Dorson looked at these questions in a longer study (DORSON

⁵ See in the curriculum vitae sent to me: “...Other experience: 1953–1956: (with break) fieldwork Kuba (West Kasai, Zaire), 1957–1960: fieldwork Rwanda and Burundi, 1963–1964: fieldwork Tio (Brazzaville prefecture – Rep. Congo).”

⁶ The selected bibliography of the scholar is to be found in the Festschrift issued in honor of the seventy-year-old Vansina (HARMS et al. 1994:473–480), accordingly up to 1965, he published five books and 45 studies.

⁷ The release of the revised work: VANSINA 1985.

⁸ VANSINA 1954; 1963; 1964 etc.

1976).⁹ Vansina himself tries essentially to keep his branch of study apart from the methods of the methodological, demonstrative, theoretical approach of oral literature researchers. In one place, for example, he stresses that such important genre-theoretical attempts as that which can be found in Ruth Finnegan's notable volume *Oral Literature in Africa* (FINNEGAN 1970) are not fruitful for the researcher of oral history. And in one of his recent theoretical studies, he writes:

"It can be seen that it is impossible to achieve a universal taxonomy of the genres since the social institutions and the collective representations differ from one society to another (Chapter III, sections 1 and 3). However, this has not prevented some scholars, including Finnegan, from attempting to define a typology valid for the whole of Africa in which the main divisions are poetry, prose and other special forms (drumming language, theatre). The first category is divided into seven subgroups and the second into four, namely the tale, proverbs, riddles and orations. For the reasons mentioned in Chapter III (in section 3), classifications of this type, that are based on intercultural comparisons, are only of limited use for the historian. In reality, the sources are characteristic of the culture that created them and they must be judged by the criteria used by their creators. Consequently, the sources cannot be studied on the basis of a priori judgments, even if these judgments are derived from the comparison of genres that can be found in neighboring regions. On the other hand, it is obvious that classifications such as that of Finnegan are of value because they enable us to assess the problems that arise in the study of traditions and can be used as an aide-mémoire when collecting data." (Vansina 1976:279–280)

CORRESPONDENCE INTERVIEW

SzB: What is your opinion in general, after two to three decades of activity, about the oral history research in the world?

JV: Oral history dealing with the reminiscences of peoples still living about their youth was non-existent in 1950 (except for some Polish studies about farmers in the 1930s). It began in the US as a branch of elite history at the Columbia University around 1945. The advent of the tape recorder was a decisive element. The second element in this procedure (returning the interpretation of history to those who made it) and it then became a "movement" from Columbia to Great Britain, from China to France.

Meanwhile folklorists who always had used oral information just continued and merged with the oral movements only around 1970.

Yet another group were historians who used no oral information at all. Although amateurs in Africa (administrators, missionaries) had gathered traditions, historians dismissed them. That was the situation I found in 1953. From around 1960 onwards, however, the nationalism accompanying the movements to independence helped to put more value on such traditions and in the 1960s they were gathered enthusiastically, especially in Africa, but also a bit later in New Guinea, Australia, Malaysia, Mexico, India, etc. By about 1970–1975 specific difficulties were taken seriously: matters of record

⁹ The former professor at the Folklore Department of Indiana University at Bloomington addresses the issue of oral history in more places, also in connection with Scottish traditions.

(deposit of tapes), matters of interpretation (the rise of the structuralist-intellectualist schools à la Levi-Strauss), matters of reliability. With this development real maturity came to this subsection of the field. Today we are not far from an integrated approach towards oral data, making use of the lessons of folklore, history and anthropology. But one thing is certain. The oral histories and traditions prove to be even more important for the understanding of populations (by themselves or others) than had been thought three decades ago.

SzB: What kind of theoretical problems do you see in the recent research in our territory?

JV: Problems of the impact of performance on content, of creativity and its sources, of structuring by human memory in general on the contents are one level, and a very important one. Problems in the evaluation of tradition (whether literary or historical or other) are at a more profound level. Is the meaning of an oral text “emic” or “etic”? In fact, we must recognize that there exists an academic subculture that is transnational and “etic”. By itself its interpretations are no better than those of the producers of oral data themselves. But as our knowledge of the effects of human memory increases and in so far as we further apply universal logic (“rules of evidence in history”) to such data, interpretations can be built up that are better informed than those of the people who transmit such data. Still the problems of what (a) all memory does to the product of the human brain and (b) how interpretations should relate to each other, remain crucial questions for further study.

Lesser but old problems are questions of gathering and sample or universal collection and problems of translation.

SzB: Don’t you think that oral history research can develop in the manner of complex “ethno-history”?

JV: Universal “ethno-history” is an ambiguous expression:

- (i) If ethno-history means history of third world people, it should be rejected.
- (ii) If ethno-history means history of all illiterate people everywhere, it remains a question of source distinction (written vs. other).
- (iii) If ethno-history means historical consciousness bound up with the very construction of identity as an “ethnos” there clearly is a field here. But there is a tendency not to use the term in this sense. Most often the term is used in the second sense and the question becomes one of whether data from archaeology, oral tradition, linguistics and other traces of the past can tally and if they don’t, how the results should be interpreted. The “ethno-history” schools in Austria or the USA differ in their views, although both are inspired most by anthropologists who began by wondering what the history of ethnic groups was and how it could be reconstructed in a historical fashion. In the USA more groups of people have been involved (such as historians) and there are signs that the need for some theoretical goal (such as “the laws of social change”) has come. But so far there is no other theory or goal in these efforts than producing “history”.

In Africa generally (and in Asia to a certain extent) “ethno-history” is rejected as a term because it is understood in the sense that it is a second-class status in the world, something that cannot be accepted.

SzB: In Hungary there is the term “sub-historic view of peasants” to outline some special distortions of vision of historic events in the mentality of peasants. I am thinking here of a simple moment when the memory of a certain type of African migration is not a historic event for the traditional European historian, while the ethnographer-ethnologist or (cultural, social) anthropologist knows its meaning and role in the history or prehistory of the world’s peoples. In your opinion, can we utilize certain methods and categories of ethnography, ethnology, social and cultural anthropology for oral history research or not?

JV: Historical consciousness exists in all human societies and is expressed by all societies, in all classes at all times either in writing or by word of mouth. That is part of “identity”. Whether the historical tenets expounded are “true” or not does not matter from this point of view. The fact is that people believe now that their past was so and so. To call this “sub-historic” is only a term academic historians could have invented. So these views are pre-professional. Certainly, they are often incorrect with regard to what happened in the past. They always simplify beyond reason. True. But it is the task of historians to analyze these data, to check them not only against logic, analogy and written documents, but also against archaeological remains, biological knowns (e.g. domestic plant yields, etc.), linguistics, etc. Of course this is what ethnologists often do, but not with the same goals. Anthropologists, folklore specialists of the older persuasion and ethnologists studied rural populations in very small groups (often a village only) and privileged this data as “traditional” (i.e. not affected by change), as valid for a whole ethnic territory (and ethnic was also seen as an “eternal” social category that always, had been there) and from that element then built up comparative hypotheses regarding human cultural and social characteristics in general. Historians are at once more specific: they look at data in time frames, always gauge change vs. continuity (cf. Annales school) and do not forget that however remote a village or a pygmy camp may be it is influenced by the wider world. Already by 1600 pygmies were hunting elephants, especially because there was a demand for the tusks in Europe!

Yes, we can use categories from anthropology and its sub-disciplines but only if we check them out in precise cases for their applicability. Fieldwork in the anthropological manner is one important tool and it should be done properly. Ethnography can be useful even in its comparative aspects, despite the now defunct culture-historical schools. But historians must work with their own epistemology and their own macro-theories.

SzB: When I raised the “possibilities” of ethnography (or folklore) in connection with oral history research, I also had in mind those questions which you touched upon in your study entitled *Comment: Traditions of Genesis*: “Twenty years ago oral traditions were neglected by nearly all historians. Now many collect them eagerly, if not always properly, to use them step by step in reconstructing the past. There has been a lack of boldness in their interpretation, and hence too many historians have been merely restating what a society says, thinks and feels about itself. Nowhere is this more true than with regard to traditions of Genesis, as one may well call traditions of creation, origin and migration in which the last term flows from the preceding one. ... In 1957 we examined Kuba concepts of history (time, truth, causality, aims, etc.) carefully and followed the traditions back as far as we could then in the written sources in which they were first

noted. The Kuba have a real passion for history and the reason for this was researched. At every social level – family, clan, village, chiefdom, kingdom – all the available traditions were analyzed in detail to allow for transformations caused by functional imperatives. But because of their very mass we seriously underestimated the global impact of the whole corpus of Genesis traditions” (VANSINA 1974:317). Thinking over your work, I raise the question whether – according to you – with the ever-increasing quantity of data and analyses there is the possibility of approaching the “mythical” – to use your own word – dimension, category and time from a certain ethnological viewpoint. In other words, is it possible to elaborate more subtle clichés (e.g. “original home”, migrations, wars, relations with other peoples, etc.) based on the great quantity of collections, instead of the rough categories already existing in the oral tradition, which extend from the myth of creation, or more precisely, from the first ancestor, to the settlement of peoples? Is it possible to organize groups of clichés and cliché chronologies into a system which would serve as a model of the consciousness of “prehistoric” human societies before the founding of states?

JV: The greater the collections, the more research done, especially in basic cognitive categories and in comparative study of clichés (*Wandersagen* especially) throughout all branches of oral art, the more the unique or stereotype quality of various representations will become apparent. What this will lead to first is an understanding of (a) the dynamics of the human memory, in general what its tendencies are (e.g. fusion, selection, simplification along socially and communally significant lines), and (b) the grasp of how all humans think alike (I do not believe in separate modes of thought for either prehistoric peoples or in oral societies), and yet the subject of thought is different. That is, all cultures have collective representations which are the essence of culture. These are substantive inputs in the mind which then processes these in the same way all over the world. But the representations are culture-bound. We will find (c) that concepts of “original home”, “migration”, etc., are tied to particular cultures and not identical from one to the other. “Migration” involves specific notions of time, space and a model of how people can move and why. The conditions imposed by the basic notions explain why various clichés are constructed the way they are, culture by culture.

So in short I believe that in-depth study of clichés will yield data that bring us further on the road of study as to how the human mind functions. This is an approach different from and complementary to those of psychologists (“memory”, “perception”, “thinking”) and students of the brain itself. Meanwhile we can refine some categories of cliché, as more data are available and we find sub-clichés within a given family, but I do not believe that a whole taxonomy of clichés will yield much. A model of consciousness of “prehistoric” human societies is something too general and too construed for any historian to accept. We can develop concrete models for given societies by using in-depth *Wörter und Sachen* studies, i.e. limited comparative studies that refer to a given time period. Even here difficulties are well known; Dumézil’s attempt to establish functions for Indo-European thought is an example of them. We must be more modest to begin with and work with lesser time depth and greater wealth of concepts used, among which must be the basic categories of perception and appreciation (time, space, number, reality, truth and cause, for example).

SzB: It is well known that the legends of the past and the popular culture played a very important role in the culture history of some European peoples. What positive and negative factors can you discover in using folklore or oral tradition in general and the results of oral history research as the source of nationalism in Africa?

JV: Nationalism in Africa often began in cities. The urbanized people gradually discovered the richness of the thought and art of their rural cultures. But in the early nationalisms (1880s and after) this was of no importance because “modernization to be equal with Europeans” was more important. However, after 1945, some major movements began to incorporate products (such as the “national” *kente* cloth of Ghana) or traditions (usually proverbs). The ABAKO party of Zaire was not the only one that was formed to preserve the heritage of proverbial wisdom and went on to become a nationalist party or indeed a justification. (ABAKO found rural support when it could claim to be the spiritual heir of the former kingdom of Kongo which although broken apart by 1678 was still the ideal for Kongo-speaking people.)

Obviously studying oral tradition and other tradition in general yield results (we hope!). These can be used by nationalist (or other!) groups who can then select what they want and thus distort our view of the past or even, in radical cases, orient research so that only materials useful to them will be gathered. Moreover, through school primers, films, radio, etc., this “new oral tradition” or “new folklore” can be disseminated to millions of people who will often accept it and abandon their former knowledge of tradition or custom for the new “urban” variety, thus in the process contaminating (by “backfeeding”) the as yet uncollected primary data, that have not been recorded so far. This latter effect is very visible in music, for example. Gramsci’s dominant cultures still exist and still have their effects.

Folklore and oral tradition should be the servants only of the rule that one records what is there, and if possible all of it, in order to understand what the culture (the things communities have in common in their minds: the collective representations of Durkheim, and others that are more individual like dialect and idiolect) of these groups (local, ethnic, social strata, etc.) is. Anything that makes this goal impossible militates against those disciplines. On the other hand, the masses themselves (i.e. the groups studied) are certainly entitled to know the results of the research as soon as possible and will draw their own conclusions, i.e. redraw their own self-image. This clearly is something no social system in the world – and we are all part of one or another system – will just allow passively to happen. Hence in practice one must at the same time understand the goal of perfect recording of what culture truly is here and there and understand the inevitable necessity of popular transformation by our social systems. Somewhere in between folklorists and historians work. Their part of the overall job is to collect the data and make them available to those who tell them the data, though not to use it for educational purposes, etc. That is the job of other specialists.

If they do this everyone will have a clearer idea of social realities and romantic notions about “the folk” (*narod*) or peasants (*Volk, Bauer, mujik*), too common in the 19th century in Europe and now in Africa, but also so harmful, will be reduced to truer proportions.

SzB: I believe that the “popular” or “folklore” movement based on Vico’s and Herder’s thoughts and launched by the Grimm Brothers in the early 19th century was

closely connected with the European peoples' primary nationalism and search for their national identities. On the other hand, the increasing appraisal of folk culture plays a particularly important role in the lives of small, marginal European peoples whose official cultures did not have centuries-old traditions.

The second wave of interest in folklore in our century is rather promoted by aesthetic concerns and by the search for the sources of new artistic genres. However, the effort to express national identity is not negligible here either. I think that in today's African countries folklore also has to fulfil the role of providing historical traditions. Since numerous African peoples lack written traditions, they can only learn about their own historical past through their oral tradition.

Probably this special claim to utilize oral tradition by the society accounts for the publication during the last ten to fifteen years of many books dealing with the historical traditions of various peoples, mostly without commentaries, analyses or evaluations (see, among others, the collection of data concerning the Kenyan precolonial past listed in Patrick Pender-Cudlip's study, *Oral Traditions and Anthropological Analysis: Some Contemporary Myths*, the publications of the Niamey Centre d'Études Linguistiques et Historiques par Tradition Orale, the publication series of the University of Abidjan, several Senegalese and Nigerian authors' works, etc.).¹⁰

How does the theoretical founder of oral history research evaluate these phenomena from the viewpoint of research on the one hand, and from that of the "social utilization of the reconstructed historical past" on the other?

JV: A/ Cultural nationalism plays a major role in oral art research. But it is not often narrow nationalism, rather a trend of further decolonization, fitting in the ideologies of négritude (Sénégal) Africanness (Ghana) or authenticity (Zaire and others), the latter being the official ideologies of various countries. This tendency is quite visible in the work of African researchers. By itself it does not affect the collection, publication, etc., of such texts in a negative way and it does promote such research. However, enthusiasm leads sometimes to hasty collection (neglect of variant versions, of in-depth study, etc.), although this danger is not great where there exist well trained university establishments that study these phenomena. It is now claimed by some African philosophers such as V. Mudimbe that studies based on such texts from the 1920s and later are "truer" than anthropological studies of the colonial period (MUDIMBE 1983:134).

A much greater danger for the sound development of research is a tendency for patriate researchers to interpret what they call myth in terms which refer to each other's interpretations and not to thought common in the cultures from which the texts derive. In other words, they write too much for each other, for the academic subculture of which they form part.

B/ Concerning the social utilization of the reconstructed past, this problem involves use of oral tradition, but also of the results of historical linguistics, archaeology, etc. Two levels should be distinguished. At the national level leaders such as Nkrumah, Mobutu, etc., have used and are using such reconstructions to further the consciousness of an

¹⁰ PENDER-CUDLIP 1972, see also: AG ARIAS 1970; AYOT 1977; CISSOKO – SAMBOU 1974; CONDE 1974; DANKOUSSOU n. d., MOHAMMADOU 1976; 1978; 1983; 1986; MWANIKI 1974, WERE 1967; but as we mentioned above, the number of examples could be propagated almost beyond measure.

independent past, a past to be proud of and sometimes as in the 1973–1974 Zairisation in Zaire for very practical purposes as when the President used the argument that businesses should be Zairian because in the 19th century Zairian businessmen were doing very well by themselves in the great Congo River trade. Sometimes such reconstructions are rejected or amended as in the case of the Hutu/Tutsi splits which led to revolutions in Rwanda and Burundi. In one country it is denied that such splits existed in precolonial times. In the other the split is emphasized but the independence of many Hutu from Tutsi in precolonial times is emphasized. Such uses of reconstructed past as national consciousness are quite normal and examples can be given for any country and every country.

Locally or regionally traditions are the key element in cultural reproduction. A culture is a culture because it is reproduced and oral “tradition” (memories, crafts, etc.) do this. Such traditions are still used in defining *wir Bewusstsein* (‘we consciousness’), in reinterpreting contemporary events in significant categories from local cultures, etc. Precedents are still used in practical matters such as problems of land, inheritance, social status, etc. These always have had and still exert an impact on the content of various traditions. Hence we must always remember that traditions are *of the present* as much as they are *of the past*, that they are not just sources but the product of an “historiography” i.e. an oral historiography. To take this into account is perhaps one of the most delicate critical operations a historian must perform if he is to use such data for reconstruction.

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