

“This Guy has become a Complete Savage” – A Last Interview with Jan Vansina

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Abstract: Professor Jan Vansina looks back at the early years of his rich academic career as a historian of Africa and more specifically at his field research among the Kuba peoples of the DR Congo. Learning their language and participating in the boys' initiation allowed him to become a deeply involved participant observer. He worked on the current anthropological themes of the day, and more importantly, he also collected oral material for an innovative historiography that would later inspire hundreds of students and researchers. Blinded by cultural prejudice, missionaries and colonial administrators did not understand what he was doing, and saw him as a hopeless case, but Kuba people came to accept him everywhere in the country. As a junior researcher, Vansina had been sent to the Kuba kingdom because of the great reputation of its art in the West. He found out that this same reputation had played a crucial role in the survival of the kingdom, in particular after its initial encounter with the terror of King Leopold's Free State. Kuba kings had learned to deal with the realities of the Belgian Congo, using their revered art for clever diplomacy and bending the model of indirect rule to their own benefit.

Introduction

The present interview took place at the home of Professor Jan Vansina in Madison, Wisconsin (USA) on May 12 and 13, 2016. Its main purpose was to video-record a number of statements about Vansina's research on the history of the Kuba peoples of the DR Congo. These would be used in one of the new galleries of the renovated Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium.¹ The gallery titled “Rituals and Ceremonies” has showcases displaying the objects of Kuba royalty, as a historic case to illustrate a broader narrative about diverse models of leadership in Central Africa. There I wanted to include the story of Jan Vansina's field research in the 1950s among the Kuba peoples, in what was then still the Belgian Congo. This would provide visitors with an insight into how anthropological and historical knowledge is produced. Inspired by the book *Being Colonized* (2010), I also wished to convey a sense of the extraordinary importance of Kuba art for the survival of the Kuba kingdom under colonial indirect rule.

The interview was done in three sessions, as agreed beforehand, in order to not exhaust Professor Vansina who was then already suffering from a terminal disease. He had just made this public in an article titled “De Vita Sua” in the journal *Society*, of which he lent me his copy so that I could read it at night. The article contains a self-evaluation of his own trajectory as a scholar and a reiteration of a passionate argument in favor of a truly *African* history, written for and accessible to *African* audiences. Histories are important for the role

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v18/v18i2a1.pdf>

they play “in sustaining or even creating collective identities” and thus in supporting collective and individual self-confidence and self-esteem. The article has a distinct melancholic feel, stemming from a continuing passion for a noble cause for which his own battles had now been fought, and from a seemingly inescapable wondering about how people will look back at himself, the historian.



Figure 1: Professor Jan Vansina at his home in Madison. Still from video-recorded interview by Hein Vanhee, 12 May 2016.

I had met Professor Vansina before, when he visited Belgium in 2001 and gave public lectures at several Belgian universities, and we had often corresponded about archives, collections and research.² In 2010, Vansina donated his research archive to the Royal Museum for Central Africa, containing the original notebooks of his field research in Central Africa. These document his research among the Kuba intermittently from January 1953 until July 1956, and among the Tio from October 1963 until April 1964. In addition, the archive holds the series of oral history accounts which he collected in Rwanda (known as *ibitéekerezo*) and in Burundi, besides boxes with more research notes, drafts, vocabularies and offprints. The motivation behind Vansina’s choice was clear and simple: in “Tervuren” his archive would be both safe and (more easily) accessible to researchers from Congo, Rwanda and Burundi.

I enjoyed a warm welcome at the home of Jan Vansina and his wife Claudine. I had brought a large bottle of dark Belgian Trappist beer of a brand I thought would not be available in Madison stores (I had missed my connection at London Heathrow since it took a while for security staff to figure out that it would not explode). After our first interview session we spent a pleasant moment together up in the living room with Claudine, their son Bruno, and Professor Florence Bernault who had stopped by for the occasion. We chatted in French, English and Dutch, changing from one language to the other almost unwittingly, exchanging anecdotes and laughs. Jan Vansina said I absolutely needed to visit the University’s open stack library which he praised for its treatment of researchers. I remember

the strange sensation of feeling truly honored to be the guest of someone for whom I had such a great admiration while at the same time being comfortable as if I was at home.

We spent several hours in his downstairs study and library, where I recorded the interview. It felt like being in a sanctuary, where so many great ideas were born, where so many articles and books had been written. With large windows allowing a lot of light to come in, the place was stuffed with houseplants of various kinds and sizes, making it look like a greenhouse. A large map of Africa hung on the wall which had Mweka on it, where the colonial administration had set up headquarters in Kuba country. Explaining the empty bookshelves, Vansina told me he had given most of his personal library to the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee. He kept giving away the new books that were still coming in, as if he was leaving for a destination where he could only take a tiny suitcase. Hesitatingly, I accepted Jelmer Vos' "excellent book" on the late Kongo kingdom. Had I a copy of Nancy Hunt's "fabulous" *A Nervous State?* "Oh no," he changed his mind, "not this one, there's a personal dedication written in it."

My memory of the two days that I spent interviewing Jan Vansina will always be dominated by an image of the sheer pleasure with which he was telling about his first fieldwork among the Kuba peoples. The way the people initially responded to his presence, the incomprehension of colonial officials for what he was doing, his final acceptance by the Kuba after he had gone through initiation: the stories filled him with visible joy and nostalgia. In his mid-twenties he had been the rebellious researcher who sided with the Kuba against arrogant and ignorant colonial bureaucrats, and that still gave him great moral satisfaction.

At the end of our last conversation, almost as prompted by an afterthought, I showed him on my laptop the selection of Kuba art objects that would be on display in the new gallery I was working on. As I am used to Africanist historians being rarely interested in African art and material culture, I started explaining various items. He quickly took over, and instructed me about details of iconography and used materials, of which I had not been aware. I nodded. Then we sat outside waiting for my taxi. When it became clear that my taxi was late, he decided "Come on, we're not going to wait any longer, I will take you back to your hotel." Running through the hallway, he swung a coat around his shoulders and with a boyish grin he picked up a baseball cap with the inscription 'ANGOLA.' He laughed, "I got this from a doctoral student!" With a decided foot on the pedal and nervously pulling the steering wheel, he drove me back in his bright red sedan, explaining to me on the way the layout of downtown Madison and every smallest landmark that came into view.

Professor Jan Vansina passed away peacefully in Madison on 8 February 2017, aged 87. The obituary card distributed at the funeral service in Belgium identified him as a "historical anthropologist." Reflecting values held high by his family in Belgium, the accompanying text praised his sense of duty, his professionalism and his honesty. "He received the highest honors in his field, but he remained easy to deal with."

The Interview

Hein Vanhee: How was it to start doing fieldwork among the Kuba peoples in the 1950s in what was then still the Belgian Congo?

Jan Vansina: In the early 1950s, it was unusual for Belgians to do fieldwork. The reason for that was that anthropology was not taught at any Belgian university, it was an unknown discipline. Fieldwork was completely unknown. Actually, before I went, there had been only

two fieldworkers that we know of, Maquet and Biebuyck, who were both anthropologists, and who were attached to the same institution I was attached to. So, it was new.

The thing that made fieldwork different was that I went to live in a small town, on my own, and I did not come out of it. I did not go to the state post Mweka, which was one of the posts in this district, the most important one, the center. There all the Europeans went on weekends at least, if not more often, to drink, to see films and the like, and they did not see me coming!

HV: How far was that from the place where you were staying?

JV: Oh, that was about 80 kilometers, 80-85. The only other Europeans nearby were at the mission station. There was also one administrator, who was detached there to supervise the whole Kuba kingdom, a very large area, in administrative terms. He was different from all other administrators, in that he also did not go to Mweka, but was very concerned with the development of that chiefdom.³

So, I learned a lot. I learned that I had to watch out for my health. I could not eat all the things that Kuba were eating, I had to eat some other food as well. But we adapted quite easily. I was not integrated in one family or another, as happens sometimes in fieldwork. No, I stayed separate, in an abandoned European *gite d'étape*, that is a lodging house for passing people. But I talked to everyone, and all the Kuba at the court pretty soon came to consider me as a pupil, that is, somebody who was there to learn. And that was fine with me, because that was what I was! So, our relationship in general was quite smooth. There were no particular difficulties.

With Europeans there were not *many* difficulties. They knew that I was there, at least the administrators knew, and when I came to Mweka they did not know how to talk to me, or what to talk about. Half of the times when I came to Mweka, anyway, was because I was so ill and I had to see a doctor. Eventually, the chief administrators realized that I could be useful to them. That was what they saw, because the things that I was collecting were also useful for their administration.

HV: How was it decided originally that you would go to the Kuba? Was it because they thought you would be useful?

JV: It was decided for me to go to Kuba country almost a full year before I went. It was decided by the board of the institute that I worked for, the *Institut de Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale* (IRSAC). And it was decided *in practice* by the director of the museum in Tervuren. The director of the museum in Tervuren, Frans Olbrechts, wanted to send someone to do fieldwork in an area that was known for its objects and its art. He could not get someone in art history to do this, so he sent me as an anthropologist, after a period of training in London. That was the reason why I was sent.

Now the administrators... I did not come with letters of introduction, or not many. All the things that were normally done, like visiting the administrators, visiting this, visiting that, none of that occurred in my case, and this made it all the more questionable as to what I was doing there! So, when the administrators found out that much of what I was doing was useful to them, they accepted me. In fact, they probed a little to see if they could not *order* me to do things. The institute, however, was completely detached from the ordinary administration in Congo. It had no links whatsoever with it. So, that meant that I was completely independent.

After about six months, everything fell more or less in the groove, and the

administrators realized that, well, they had a queer person, an odd person, somewhere in the bush, “who was going native,” but he wasn’t bothering anybody. The Catholic missionaries had also accepted me more or less the way I was, and vice versa, of course. The administrator in the capital of the Kuba – where I was – understood what I was doing, and I was getting along very well with him, in fact.

The decisive point came when the Kuba asked me to go to initiation with them. That meant that I would be initiated which, for the missions, both Catholic and Protestant, was the *ultimate* in things you *should not do!* For Europeans in Mweka, it meant that, yes, this guy has become a complete savage... Civilized persons don’t do things like that! But the Kuba accepted me after this anywhere in the country. That spread like wildfire, that I had been initiated.



Figure 2 : *Les garçons liés par la fibre de raphia* (The boys bound by the raffia fiber). Mapey, Province of Kasai, DR Congo. Photographer unknown. October 1953.⁴

HV: Was this a matter of racial prejudice or was it fear?

JV: Well, there were at least two factors at work. Racial prejudice—remember, this is not long after the war—was not really very prominent. But cultural prejudice, that’s something else! You see, all these Europeans were convinced that they were civilized. They had never thought about being civilized or not before they arrived there, but once they were there, they started thinking that their ways of life were, of course, infinitely superior, although they could not really defend this, but this was a feeling. So, going to a school—because that’s what initiation really is—for inferior living, in their minds, meant that you were completely hopeless.

HV: How did Kuba people initially respond to the questions that you were asking?

JV: Well, the first thing the Kuba people did was to find out where to classify me. So, I was not a missionary, I was not an administrator, and I was not a trader. So, what was I? At their capital they had answers for that, but elsewhere, you know, there was a fourth category of

Europeans that ... *make no sense*. So, as long as they don't harm you, you just leave them alone, and if you can make a benefit of them, make a little benefit, and that's it.

At the capital, they were far more advanced, because they had had a lot of foreign visitors. This was a famous kingdom, it had been known since the 1880s. It had had visitors, including two anthropologists, who were internationally very well-known, and who had been doing work there for a couple of months each time. One of these was called Emil Torday.⁵ Emil Torday was somebody who was not there for long, for a month or so, but he took in an enormous amount of information. He published that, and with the backing of the British museum, he introduced the notion that there was African art, that Kuba art was art! As a result the kingdom became very well-known. Now, that was important from the beginning, because it meant that a well-known kingdom would be included on the tour list of the British consuls who came to see how Belgium was taking over the mandate from the Congo Free State.⁶ So, after 1908, the Kuba were particularly either left alone, or well treated.

In any case, at the court, they realized the importance of such visits because they saw the effect Torday had had. And he was not the only one. From the 1920s onward, they got very illustrious visitors. There is no member of the Belgian royal family who did not go to the Kuba at various times. The last one before my visit had been Prince Charles, in 1947.⁷ And then, after that, King Baudouin, who came twice. He had contact with the Kuba twice in the 1950s, and after that still in the early 1960s.⁸ So, the Kuba were very well aware of the outside world. I found in the papers of the king, after he was dead and they arrived here, thirty years later, that he had received correspondence from California, from South Africa, so the court itself was very well informed about things.

HV: Did this have an impact on your work?

JV: It had an impact because local people tended to confuse the sort of anthropology I was doing either with photography—because a very famous photographer had been there in 1947—or, mostly in the 1950s, with object buying for galleries and for the art trade.⁹ There were traders around, practically, during much of the time I was there. They would not stay long, but they were people with money, and they would spend it or not spend it, and that was of a concern to villagers everywhere. But otherwise, my link with the center of things, with the capital, and with the king, was mainly conditioned by the visitors of political importance that they had had before. They didn't know whether I was of political importance or not. I thought I was not. Back then I never thought even of that question. They seem to have thought that, well, I was harmless. Then, once this initiation had happened, and they realized that I stood completely on their side in whatever culture questions were going on, the whole relationship altered. I mean, after that, I was not cooped with any other kind of European, I was just, you know, above. I was given several Kuba names, and I was just one of these names and that's all.



Figure 3: *L'ainé et le cadet des initiés. Le cadet est paangl, le chef des initiés* (The oldest and the youngest of the initiates. The youngest is paangl, the leader of the initiates). Mapey, Province of Kasai, DR Congo. Photographer unknown. October 1953.¹⁰

HV: You mentioned that Kuba saw you as a student of their culture. Does that mean that they decided what you could know about them?

JV: In certain areas, yes. The last day that I was in Kuba land in 1956, that is, after more than two years being there, some of the main elders of the court said to me “Oh boy! Now you are leaving, and we were just about thinking to tell you the secrets, to initiate you into the secrets that you have to know!” but there was a bit of grandstanding in that. Essentially, on most points, they just let me do what I wanted. I asked questions, they provided answers, and sometimes later they came up with more answers. The institute I was working for had a lot of funding which meant that I could and did get some assistants. I trained these assistants and some of them turned out to be quite gifted. So, I could do things like collect dreams. Dreams are important for the Kuba. The assistants would document these in their own language and bring them to me. I had one or two assistants who were just gossip, like the daily radio—what’s happening? Later that turned out to be very rich material, for all sorts of things. And when I wanted to make inquiries on particular points, I could send some of the assistants around and they would ask people who would answer. They would also sit in on court sessions, so that when questions came up in tribunals I would know about that. But you see, at the court, this was not considered special knowledge, this was not worthy of their high attention.

When it came to history, especially precolonial history, which was the justification of the polity itself that they were very careful about! Who I saw, who I did not see, who I could talk to... I benefitted from some rebellion against the central view, in other chiefdoms, or also in the capital itself, where some people simply did not agree with the control that the court had over them, the control that occasional visitors would not notice. The Catholic mission,

for instance, never realized how much control was exerted over the inhabitants of the capital, who were not directly royals. At least, they never heard them speak of it. So, with such dissenting voices, along with the other voices, in fact, there was not much that escaped. After I had left, about ten years later or something like that, I came to be considered in Kuba country—as I still am today—as the person who knew everything! “He knows everything, but he’s not always *telling* everything, he doesn’t tell our *secrets*,” people would say, or “He knows everything, but he’s not *publishing* everything!” So, you know, that’s how the image of a person may develop in the minds of the people you are working with.

HV: It’s almost as if people came to see you as a Kuba elder, in a way.

JV: Yes, sure. I was not someone who came in to have a nice time and then leave, and from whom the people would never hear anything anymore, no.

HV: How did other Europeans respond to the fact that you stood much closer to the people than anyone else among them?

JV: Well, Europeans saw me differently according to where they were. Essentially, there were two main groups. One consisted of Europeans who knew the Kuba well. Actually, there was only one of them, one administrator who knew them very well. There were a few missionaries who were used to them, but did not know them well. The administrator knew them well not only because he was living at the capital, but also because he was constantly busy with Kuba cases. He was responsible for the management, for the running of the kingdom, as an advisor to the king, and he took this seriously.

His political views were completely different from what was current in Belgium at that time. His views were that Kuba had a religion and a civilization that seemed to suit them very well, that some of this needed to be adapted to modern living conditions, you know, like railroads, taxes, stuff like that, but other things needed not be. For instance, there was no question that he would ever ask the government or do himself persecutions of sects or religious movements of any kind. He believed that was Kuba religion and that they adhered to it more faithfully than Europeans did to their own religions. This was completely unheard stuff in the 1950s in those circles. He also thought that there was a danger that the Kuba were exploited by greedy merchants of all sorts. So, he pushed to impose rules, for instance, on the selling of art objects, amongst other things, by creating a co-op, and imposing co-op rules, which of course was hated on the railway line where all these objects were sold. But he was *sui generis*, his own guy, nothing else.

Other Europeans did not understand what I was doing. Their first idea was that this was just tax money being spent. But when I told them where the money came from, from the institute I worked with, they understood that this was not tax money, or not Belgian tax money. If anything, it would have been Congolese tax money. Also, most of them escaped paying taxes anyway, so that was all I had to argue with. On the whole, Europeans saw themselves as so far more civilized than Congolese that they just could not understand.

Europeans did not realize that already at that time, in the early 1950s, some local Congolese, local Kuba actually, who had been to school, were discussing independence. They were discussing whether it would be a good thing or a bad thing, whether it should happen soon or not soon, and there were arguments circulating, you know, amongst that tiny intelligentsia. But this was at the time that no single European in the territory understood anything. Once, out of curiosity, I brought this up in the main bar, and the question was to know what they thought of Liberia and Sierra Leone, well especially

Liberia. “Liberia is an independent republic,” I said, “it is a black independent republic. Don’t you think that, well, you know...what are your conclusions from this?” And what I got was an impossible list of horror stories, of Belgian ships docking in Monrovia, and all the things that were wrong with blacks! And when you talked about black people who had gone to schools and universities, you know, these were the most *impossible* kind of people, because, as they believed, they had taken on all the bad things from one, and all the bad things from the other. In other words, this was prejudice without hope!

When I came back to Belgium, I began to hear what all these people had been writing to their friends, and what the opinion had become in Belgium. The opinion in Belgium was that I lived in trees, and that I ate savage food, and, you know, they were not sure whether that included bats or not... In other words, I was becoming as exotic as all the other things they were telling about Congo. It was just a hopeless story. But it was nothing to really worry about from my side. For me the question was what I could do in Kuba country, how I could bring back to Belgium, and to Europe, a meaningful story, an idea as to what the Kuba worldview was, how they viewed the contemporary times, and that this was all very different from what was happening in Europe.

I was also estranged a little bit from anthropology because I was claiming that history was important, and at that time anthropologists considered the present as important. They expected comparisons that were worldwide to bring up laws that were important, and here I came with Kuba data that showed that there were many differences indeed, but also many similarities. When you look at this over time, you find dynamics that are not unfamiliar at all. So, even decades later, you could find some anthropologists accusing me of being not an anthropologist but a historian. In Belgium, everybody was convinced that I was *not* a historian, including the people in my own institute. They were convinced that I was an anthropologist because they saw me as an ethnologist. An ethnologist meant a describer of foreign customs and foreign thoughts, and that seemed to be more or less what I was doing. It would take a whole struggle for me to get the university to recognize eventually that, no, I was a historian.

HV: Can I get back to an earlier remark, where you said that colonial officials thought that you could be useful to them. How was that?

JV: Well, part of the work of administrators in Congo, besides collecting taxes and maintaining law and order, was called political work. Political work was designed to supervise and arrange as much as possible the direction of African leadership at inferior ranks, under the level of European control. In most parts of Congo, this did not concern village headmen, that was too low, but just above the rank of village headmen, the smallest administrative categories. These had appointed heads or supposedly chosen heads, agreeable to the administration. So, it was the appointment of these heads, their legitimacy with regard to the people they were administering, and the dynamics of that, that the administration was interested in. For the Kuba kingdom, in the 1920s, they had codified the whole thing. They had worked two or three years at it, to set up their administrative chiefdoms, sub-chiefdoms, and all that, and all of that was documented in the archival records at Mweka – which means that archival records can be important!

What they were interested in was in a revision of this. After 1945, the colonial authorities of Kasai decided to review the whole situation in this particular territory. They wanted to do this, first of all, because there had been complaints from several other territories around it. Whatever they did not like seemed to come from this “indirect rule

territory," where a king was more important than an administrator. Secondly, after 1947, after the war, a new economy had set in. Locally, the trade in maize had become very important and was a major money maker for foreign local settlers. It was an intricate situation and they were reviewing all this. So, what could be better than having somebody who was not linked to the administration to gather all this information, as I was doing in the normal course of affairs, and to find out what the kind of tensions were, and equilibria, between the various political forces in the kingdom? But I would not give all my results to them. There was confidential information, and there was non-confidential material. The non-confidential material I did not worry about. The truly confidential stuff, you know, I did not share. But what was confidential to me was usually also known to that local administrator in Nsheng, so I didn't have to bother too much about it. So, that is what they called useful.

The people I did not get along with at all were, within the administration, the agricultural specialists, who were beneath everything at that time, and the tax collectors. There were no administrators who were only tax collectors, they always had multiple duties, but there was a level at which some of the Europeans were mainly concerned with collecting taxes and also with requiring people to work on things of public interest. They tended to be short-tempered, and they tended to have absolutely no understanding of what was going on, and of when it was a good time to ask people to work, and when it was a bad time to do that. They had no idea whatsoever, and I simply did not get along with any of these people!

HV: In 2010 you published a remarkable book about the experience of the Kuba people during colonialism, titled *Being Colonized*. In there you explain how the Kuba kingdom was first seriously impacted by the establishment of the Congo Free State, but later survived in part because of the particular policies of the Belgian Congo. How unique was the Kuba case?

JV: The Kuba kingdom lived on its reputation. When the first European explorers arrived from Angola and then from the Lower Kasai, the kingdom was believed to be very strong militarily. The king tended to say, you can go this far and not further, and when Europeans or Americans came this far, they found that yes, they could not go any further. There was a real administration over a large territory, with villages and districts that obeyed a central administration. Europeans were not used to this. And there was the reputation of this army, which in reality was nothing exceptional. It took a very long time for Europeans to realize that this army could not be that strong. They arrived in 1885, and it was not until 1899 that one of the military officers realized that the Kuba had no guns. So, how could they have a powerful military, if they had no guns?

It is in that year that a young Belgian territorial officer, who was 21 or 22 years old, and had no more than a primary school education, decided on his own to go with a troop of his soldiers and with a local ally into Kuba country in order to plunder whatever he could. He was after ivory, ivory being the measure of career success at the time. To his great surprise, it worked. There was a battle in front of the capital, which the Kuba obviously lost. He looted the capital for a few days and then he had to return, because it was not really safe. A few months later, the allies of another territorial officer attacked one of the southern Kuba subgroups, and the officer got away with it. And then, the next year, the Kuba capital was attacked again.¹¹

So, by that time, the kingdom collapsed, in the sense that the capital was occupied twice and that, the second time, the king died, supposedly just before the attack occurred. The Belgian record says that he died long before, and that there were human sacrifices, and that

the Belgians came in to save the people. All the oral witnesses I found claimed that the king had died during the attack or after the attack. In any case, whatever the moment this happened, there were no more kings. They initially appointed a new king, but the new king died, then they appointed yet another king, and this king also died. We think, with our modern minds – and I still believe this – that this was the result of an epidemic of mumps, which was going around.¹² We know that there was one. The Kuba, of course, believed that it was witchcraft, and eventually one of these ephemeral kings began to attack the supposed witches with foreign sorcery that came from another part of Kasai. For the Kuba, this is important.

What the Europeans saw, was that this new king managed, first, not to die, and secondly, to reorganize the whole kingdom in a very short time, in two or three years. Recently, after I had written that book, I learned from another piece of archive that, in fact, even when the kingdom had broken down, its internal administration continued to function. This sounds very strange: you have no king, you have no government at the center, but you still have tax collectors, going out to collect taxes and bringing it back home. Which home, one does not know. In such conditions two years is not unbelievable for somebody to establish control. He established control but then found that there was a rebellion in part of the kingdom itself, in the interior. That's discussed in that book. Part of the kingdom in the south was rebelling against foreign labor. It was directed against the new Luba labor force that was becoming prominent in the south and which was working for Europeans. That was what the rebels were after, they feared that they would be demographically ousted from a part of the kingdom. This led to a rebellion in 1904 with, of course, a charm that was supposed to be superior to every other kind of charm.

The rebellion was put down and normal order returned. Now, the normal order in 1904-1905 is not what you would imagine. There was no territorial administration set up in the area itself, no. There was no administrator who did nothing but administrating. Even in the district, the only administrator in 1904-1905 was a military official who was set up to organize a district and who only represented a delegation from the central control in Luluabourg. So, it took four to five years to set up a genuine administration, one with archives and the like, starting in 1905, just after the rebellion. Then the rubber period broke out. The rubber in Kasai, and in the Kuba country in particular, was some of the best quality rubber in the whole world. So clearly, rubber was very important. And this rubber was now collected for concessionary companies, which was something very different from the old economic regime. In any case, the concessionary company ruined the country pretty quickly. This happened so quickly that only after four years, in 1908-1909 – and with the Kuba being known internationally – there was a celebrated case where a court, at the instigation of the American Presbyterian missionaries, accused local rubber collectors of plundering the country and doing all sorts of things that were illegal. The government lost its case, in spite of this being in the context of Leopold II's general policy.

By 1910 then, the Independent State was gone, and the Belgian colony had taken over. What most people do not realize is that Belgium's ownership of the colony was not recognized without conditions by all international powers. It was, in fact, the reports by British consuls from 1910 to 1913 that established the international validity of Belgium's rule. In 1913-14, there were no more of them, simply because of the impending world war. So, that question was then diplomatically finished. But it meant that for the years that there were consuls – 1910, 1911, 1912 and 1913, I think – they came to the Kuba capital. There are

very good reports made by them, and the Kuba must have realized that they were somehow protected, that there was more than just Belgium.

If you add to this that Torday had placed Kuba art on the world map, so to speak, at least in Europe, the combination of both meant that by 1913, the Kuba had once again acquired the reputation of being a strong kingdom. It was considered strong from a political point of view, and it had a supreme art. Kuba art was classified internationally by art dealers and in art journals as the best art of Africa from about 1913 to about 1925 or so. This was a crucial period for the establishment of that kind of reputation. And that was, of course, one of the reasons why the royal family of Belgium was so attracted to the Kuba. They liked Kuba art. Kuba art was liked from the beginning because European tastes in the age of *Art Nouveau* corresponded perfectly with what the Kuba had to offer. Also, the fact that Kuba art consists so much of ordinary objects, you know, tied in perfectly with the European *avant garde* trends of around 1900. So, that's just chance!



Figure 4: King Mbop Mabinc maKyeen of the Kuba meeting with King Baudouin of Belgium. Kananga, Province of Kasai-Central, DR Congo. Photograph by Henri Goldstein. 27 December 1959.¹³

HV: So the Kuba kingdom in part survived because of the reputation of its art?

JV: Yes, indeed. One of the things about art in general, or at that time, was that the upper classes in Europe or America were very interested in art. And Kuba art was already international. To give you just one example of how far the Kuba kingdom was known: in 1937-1938, there were two films made by commercial businesses in New York about the Kuba kingdom. One was about the Protestant mission and the other only about kingship and the kingdom. Those films were used by an American anthropologist who wrote a general textbook on political anthropology, a person called Lowie, already before 1940. Then, if you look at Kuba on the ground, the indirect rule, in the time of the depression, you

may have a hard time connecting all the lines together and see that yes, indeed, it was the same thing. But the indirect rule system worked, and it was genuine indirect rule, it was not a fancy one as in Eastern Congo, where you had some other supposedly indirect rule chiefdoms, but not like this one.

HV: Indirect rule meant that within the framework of the Belgian Congo the Kuba kingdom was allowed to have its own life and to continue its own business.

JV: Yes. The degree to which it could pursue its own business and its own life varied with time. Before the depression, the latitude was fairly great. For instance, justice was almost completely out of the hands of the Belgian authorities. It was completely, most of the time, an internal affair. From the late 1920s, and especially during the depression, the central administration became more important in Congo. Its edicts had to be observed, and whatever kind of rule there was. It was only in the application of those rules that there still was some autonomy. Then after 1945, the central administration became even stronger. In the name of economic development and the reforms of the ten year plan of 1949 various measures were taken which made the Kuba lose more of their autonomy. But as late as the early 1950s and mid-1950s, on the ground it was still very visible. So, it was a real thing.

HV: The Kuba had learned how to live with the colonial situation?

JV: Right. My own idea is that this began early, with King Kot aFe. He started in 1902, and then, you know, had the rebellion, and after the rebellion he came back. He is the one who then really worked out how to work with the Europeans. He taught the first administrators how to work with him. Essentially, it worked, to the point that the last king was one of the strongest forces in Kasai *against* independence at the time. He found that the way it was worked very well for him, whereas an independent Congo, that would be one that would rely much more on elections. Leadership that came from elections was far too unsafe, in his mind.

HV: Your work on the Kuba has been most appreciated for your critical use of oral traditions. How hard was it to convince people of their validity as sources for the writing of history?

JV: Oral tradition and oral history have existed since ever and ever, but they were not trusted by historians. Historians of Europe, or of China for that matter, only believed in written sources. They thought that oral testimonies, or oral witness accounts even, would change over time, and therefore could not be used by historians. However, on a popular level, in Europe, in the Far East, in South Asia, people used oral histories and oral tradition very much in their own lives. If you think of Belgium, just ask people, really old people, about the cholera epidemics, and they will still remember, in their cities or in their regions, what they were. Or ask about emigration to America. Few people will know that directly, but they have heard stories about it. And about the potato famine, and so on. So, for ordinary people it was clear that that was a source of history. But historians did not accept them.

It turned out after examination in the field, after doing fieldwork amongst the Kuba people in Central Africa, that it was possible to apply the standard method for evaluating the value of testimony in history, which we call the rules of evidence, in English. It was possible to apply the rules of evidence to oral material. And I wrote a handbook about that. First, I wrote a dissertation, which was eventually accepted by all universities in Belgium.

Then it spread out as a method. Over time there were critiques to this method, and there were revisions, and I wrote another revised version of it. But it spread all over the world, not just in Belgium or in Africa, and it spread from historians of antiquity to historians of the modern era, and to historians of recent times who, like political scientists, had always used interviews, which is oral material.

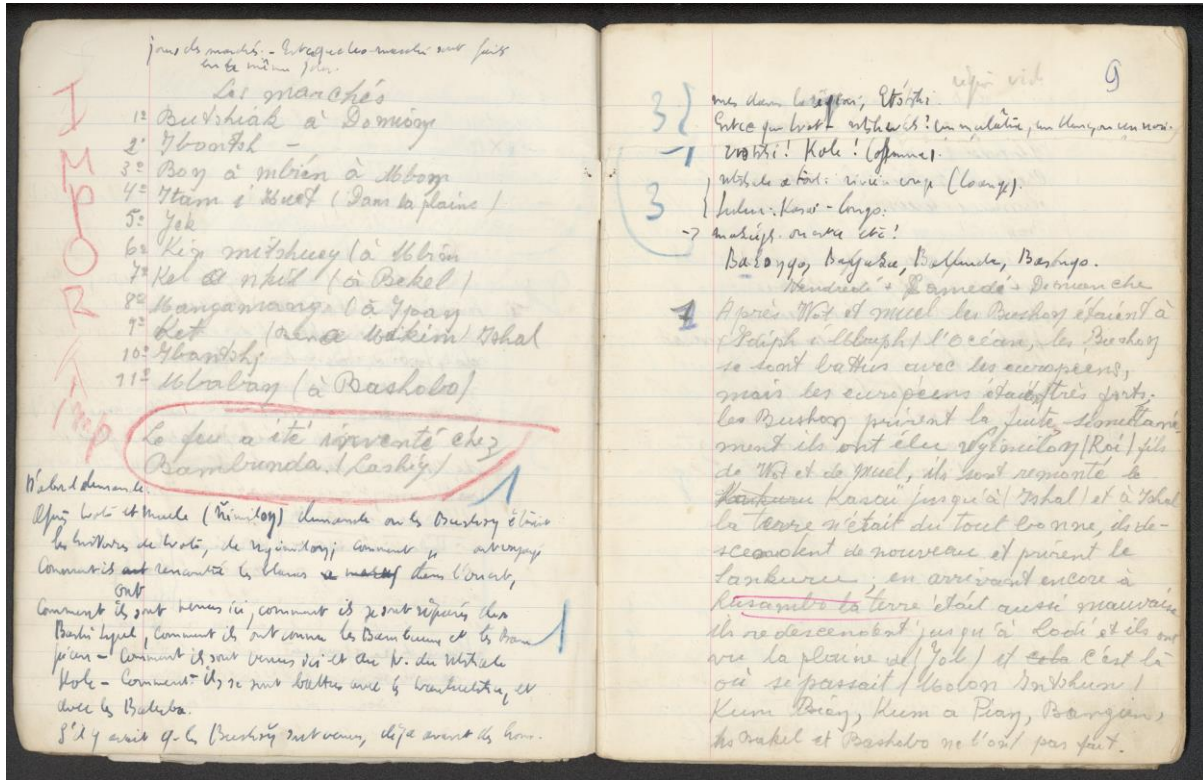


Figure 5: Pages from a notebook by Anaclel Mikwepy. 1953.¹⁴

HV: When did it become clear to you that the study of oral traditions would provide the key to unlock histories that otherwise were not possible to write?

JV: Well, this began in fact before I ever went to Africa. The MA dissertation that I did, in medieval history, dealt with oral presentations that were later recorded in writing. So, I had an idea as to what kind of problems I would encounter. I arrived in Kuba country, to be an anthropologist, and after about two months or so, some older person with whom I was talking said “We have our newspapers too! Our newspapers are oral. We do remember things from the past.” You know, immediately, I made this connection with that medieval material. And while it was still universally acknowledged that oral sources were not valid, I thought, it is worth checking! So, as I had been trained in method especially, I began to check first data that were remembered word by word, like poetry, things that are the closest you can come to written versions, and I found that there was a great fund of them. Now, it took a year, or more than a year, to assemble all the data that I could use for a history of the Kuba. It was a history that was entirely based on oral material, with very little written stuff in it. It was also based on oral material primarily of the ruling group in the kingdom. I knew that because I had worked out the genealogies of who knew what from whom, but I didn’t imagine that this was going to be a major problem. But of course, eventually, it was a problem, because it was the story as remembered and as told by the ruling group in a polity, where it was, of course, its legitimacy. So later on, after a number of years, the issue of oral traditions had to be improved, something had to be done about Kuba history, to back it up

by other items than the oral tradition of the court. And this is where I used linguistics.

Now we stand at the threshold of a new era, in that very recently it has been shown that there are two sorts of oral history, as far as the human brain goes. We remember things directly and we do that in one part of the brain that is closely connected to emotions. We also *know* things, like two plus two is four, and oral traditions of longer date. Things like epics, or stories of origin, tend to be stored in the brain in the section of knowledge, which is in the cortex, in the top of the brain. This is much less linked to emotion. This means that there were two sorts of oral histories and oral traditions. Oral histories about recent times, from interviews, which may go back to about hundred and twenty years ago, let's say to the time of your grandparents or perhaps a little earlier, those can be used and evaluated by standard methods. There is no problem left. And they can be used anywhere in the world. For the older oral traditions, there are a number of problems. We know that some of the very old oral traditions are strongly associated with emotions, but these are emotions from the present, not emotions from the time that supposedly the events happened. So, there is a whole further study to write and to work out as to how these older traditions were actually preserved, how they got to be endowed with new emotions about what sort of issues. Most of these issues are identity questions, and that is a research domain that is not completely finished.

Notes

- 1 The Royal Museum for Central Africa, now also called the Africa Museum, reopened on December 8, 2018. For visits and any other information see www.africamuseum.be.
- 2 I did an earlier interview with professor Vansina in 2001 together with Karel Arnaut, which was published in Dutch in the newsletter of the (now dissolved) Belgian Association of Africanists and in English on H-Africa.
- 3 This administrator was René Schillings (Vansina 1994: 260).
- 4 Jan Vansina Archives, RMCA, Tervuren, HA.01.0331. This photograph shows Jan Vansina participating in the boys initiation of the Kuba at the village of Mapey in 1953.
- 5 The Hungarian ethnographer Emil Torday visited the Kuba in 1908, shortly after the German ethnographer Leo Frobenius who had been there in 1905 (Vansina 2010).
- 6 The Congo Free State was taken over by Belgium on 15 November 1908, and became the colony of the Belgian Congo.
- 7 Prince Charles of Belgium (1903-1983) led the Belgian monarchy as regent from 1944 to 1950, and he visited Congo in July 1947.
- 8 Before the declaration of Congolese independence, King Baudouin (1930-1993) had visited Congo in May 1955 and in December 1959.
- 9 The famous photographer was Eliot Elisofon who visited Nsheng in January 1947. His photographs are in the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives at the National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C.
- 10 Jan Vansina Archives, RMCA, Tervuren, HA.01.0331.
- 11 The catastrophic events of 1899-1900 are described in *Being Colonized* (Vansina 2010: 69-79).
- 12 In *Being Colonized* this is attributed to smallpox (Vansina 2010: 75).
- 13 Photographic archives, RMCA, Tervuren, HP.1960.4.42.

14 Anaclet Mikwepy was one of Vansina's main research assistants among the Kuba in 1953. He taught Vansina Bushoong, the language spoken in and around Nsheng, the Kuba capital. On the left is a list of Kuba markets and on the right is the beginning of a version of the Kuba story of origin, mentioning the primordial ancestors Woot and Mweel. Jan Vansina Archives, RMCA, Tervuren, HA.01.0331, notebook 5, pp. 8-9.

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