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OBITUARY



## Jan Vansina (1929–2017): a founder figure in the study of Africa's past, early and recent

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Jan Maria Jozef Vansina, Vilas Professor Emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, died peacefully at home on 8 February 2017, surrounded by his family. He was born on 14 September 1929 in Antwerp, Belgium. In his career, Vansina published a score of books and hundreds of articles and supervised more than fifty PhD dissertations, above all in African history, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he worked from 1960 until his retirement in 1994. An exuberant man with a restless mind and an abiding desire to revise his views on the past in light of new evidence, Vansina always had time for younger scholars, especially in Africa, but on all the other continents as well. He continued to write and publish until the end of his life; six of his twenty books appeared after retirement. His teaching, scholarship and mentoring helped to establish the guild study of Africa's past around the world and archaeology was part of that project pretty much from the beginning.

Vansina claimed only to have come to archaeology in 1960 when he arrived in Madison at Philip Curtin's invitation, though he 'had helped out in some digs' before then (Whitehead and Vansina 1995: 306). But his utterly catholic interest in the world meant that he had been thinking and writing about objects, space, ecology, built form, technology and the ways in which all of that interacted with people and other life forms since his earliest engagements with the past as a medievalist at the University of Leuven, Belgium (1946–1951), and his immediate hiring thereafter by the Institute for Scientific Research in Central Africa (IRSAC). Vansina arrived in the then Belgian Congo to take up that post before the end of 1952. He would be engaged with the continent in one way or another until the end of his life, sixty-five years, or four and a half generations, later.

One generation of archaeologists, his age-mates, knew Vansina as a participant in foundational scholarly gatherings, such as the July 1957 gathering in London, 'La Deuxième Conference sur l'Histoire et l'Archéologie Africaine' (Vansina 1957). At that late colonial moment, when Africa's earlier past beckoned with renewed weight, historians and archaeologists routinely shared ideas. A next generation — this time including graduate students, but still mixing historians and archaeologists — met him through his writings on the history of the Bantu languages and the pitfalls of correlating that complicated story with the findings of archaeology (Vansina 1979, 1980, 1984, 1995a; Eggert 2005). A third generation met him as the author of *Paths in the Rainforest* (Vansina 1990) and of "A slow revolution: farming in subequatorial Africa" (Vansina 1994/95). The book presented the first, sweeping history of flexible complexity — 'political tradition' — in the

Inner Congo Basin over two millennia. The article synthesised the archaeological record relevant to food production south of the Equator as it stood in the early 1990s and proposed a model of gradual incorporation of agropastoral practice that led to the transformation of settlement patterns and political scale after the turn of the first millennium AD. Vansina, a sprite in size, presented it seemingly extemporaneously as a capstone lecture to “The Growth of Farming Communities in Africa South of the Equator” conference held at Cambridge in July 1995, after consuming more than one pint of ale at *The Granta*, a pub on Mill Pond. More than two decades on, it continues to be influential, both as a model and as a foil for rethinking the centrality of hunting, fishing and foraging in that story (Ashley *et al.* 2016: 421ff.; de Luna 2016; but see also Grollemund *et al.* 2015). The most recent generation of archaeologists, including those not working in Central Africa, met him through his synthesis of southern central Africa’s past *How Societies are Born* (Vansina 2004a) and his provocative essay “Historians, are archaeologists your siblings?” (Vansina 1995b; see also Vansina 1983). Meant to stimulate debate as much as to present novel interpretations of well-known bodies of evidence, this essay embodied one of Vansina’s trademarks: the strategically pointed intervention. Formal rejoinders authored by Peter Robertshaw (2000) and Christopher DeCorse and Gérard Chouin (2004) took up the challenge.

Historical archaeologists are likely to have encountered Vansina’s (1985) *Oral Tradition as History*, a methodological handbook for treating oral traditions that fully revised his *De la Tradition Orale* (Vansina 1961), the path-breaking book that put the study of times and places beyond literacy (and archaeology) on some solid evidentiary ground. Surely for most of today’s readers of *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa*, Vansina’s most influential statements are the provocative “Siblings” piece, the synthesis in “Slow revolution” and the sweeping histories offered in *Paths* and *How Societies Are Born*. In “Siblings” Vansina begins with the common ground beneath historians and archaeologists: they both ‘deal with the reconstruction of human societies in the past’ (Vansina 1995b: 369). He divides them based on the claim that historians are basically modernists, echoing a thread of critique in African history that emerged at about the same time with the publication by Vansina’s former colleague, Steven Feierman (1993, 1999), of an essay that worried about the ways in which African history and World History fit together. Despite claiming that historians were not interested in ‘material culture or technology’ (Vansina 1995b: 370) — as books and articles on these topics appeared in the 1990s (Herbert 1993; Kriger 1999) — and attributing to archaeologists a strangely narrow commitment to social evolutionist theory, Vansina was pushing on the limits of interdisciplinary scholarship.

This misrepresentation of the depth and breadth of archaeological theory drew the most pointed reactions. DeCorse and Chouin reminded readers of pithy theoretical and epistemological debates engrossing to many (but not all) archaeologists. In saying ‘yes’ to Vansina’s provocative question, they accepted that archaeologists and historians share a common interest in the past. The important thing, for them, was to raise questions in which practitioners in both disciplines have interests and something to contribute. The last millennium in Africa offers the richest zones of overlap between ‘sociocultural and historical change’ largely because it encompasses the appearance of literacy (DeCorse and Chouin 2004: 8–9). Robertshaw (2000: 286) had noted earlier ‘whether or not we admit it, archaeologists will consider the relevance of their results for historical interpretations,

not as a final step in the research process but as an ongoing debate throughout their work'. Echoing that sentiment, the source of the rivalry — if such even exists — may be found in the seemingly more encompassing reach of historians' claims to write about change and continuity over time, of whatever sort. The issues that Vansina opened up mix source, theory, narrative scope and audience. They will endure because the politics of Africa's past in the present continue to be fraught with risks, especially where states take an interest in controlling or directing its production (Stahl 2000; Mbembe 2002; Reid 2014).

Whatever intellectual fashion shaped each discipline in a current generation, the technical complexity of analytical skills and the wide variety of sources of information on the human past have grown increasingly impossible for a single scholar to master. Archaeologists have always known this, working in teams of specialists as numerous as funding will allow. But historians tend to work alone, unless they are engaged in significant ethnographic and/or oral history. This is increasingly true not only for archaeology, but also for anthropological genetics, historical linguistics and the application of research and publication tools in the digital humanities. Historians had better learn to work in teams, like archaeologists, if they are to live up to one of Vansina's most important lodestones of the academic project: reaching the widest audience of scholars and educated lay persons by publishing effectively and efficiently.

Vansina's scholarship — its contents and, occasionally, the timing of its appearance — always blended a wry humour and a critic's scepticism with an ethic of social justice. In November 2004, he wrote to Patricia Meyer Spacks, then President of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, to resign his membership. 'This decision has been years in the making,' he wrote, 'as I followed its [the AAAS] various activities — although its main work really seems to be the annual election of new members to the great pride of the chosen and the attendant discomfiture of those who are not so honoured.' But, he went on, 'The straw that finally broke this camel's back was your lofty 'Can Torture Ever Be Justified' and the suggestion that perhaps its substance could be, albeit redefined' (Vansina 2004b). Out of view, or centre stage, Vansina saw things for what they were and kept working to make them clearer to the rest of us.

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