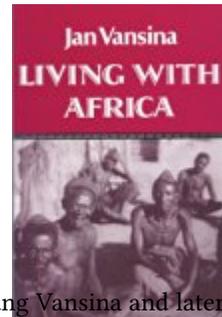


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jan Vansina. *Living With Africa*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994. xv + 312 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-14320-6; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-14324-4.

Reviewed by Kenneth E. Wilburn (East Carolina University)
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Living in a world largely ignorant of Africa's present and past, Africanist academics constantly seek new teaching resources. Part of that quest is fired from exchanges between us and that faction of our Americanist/Europeanist colleagues whose views of Africa are scarcely more advanced than the notorious remarks of Hugh Trevor-Roper and whose World Civilization courses are taught as Western Civilization. Some of us have made our rite of passage from fieldwork on the continent; others have done so primarily in archival research. In either case, to paraphrase Jan Vansina, we Africanists have at least one foot of our *mpiinis* firmly implanted somewhere on African soil.

Taking the long view from here to human origins, some of us believe that we are all Africans, as astonishing as that might sound to most people, including citizens of Africa today, who would view me, for example, as a Euro-American from the United States. Despite our passion for and knowledge about Africa, few of us can detail the development of the major centers and curricula of African studies since World War II. Fewer still are eyewitnesses and founders. In Jan Vansina's *Living with Africa* we have a valuable, firsthand account that "centers" the recent professional past of Africanists with Africa.

Last summer Vansina's newly published work first caught my eye, then took me by complete surprise. I had known of Vansina from his contributions to *African History*, his work in UNESCO's *General History of Africa*, his *Art History in Africa*, and his pioneering work in the methodology of oral tradition. As I read Vansina's new book, anticipation gave way to enthusiasm; here at last was a book about Africa and the historiography of African studies that could make the continent accessible and personal relevant to undergraduates. The book

spanned their age group twice (young Vansina and later his son, Bruno), was extraordinarily well written by a participant, and explored many important issues raised during the first fifty years of African studies. The book was so impressive that I decided to devote every Friday of the semester to roundtable discussions—a chapter each Friday.

Twenty students and I would transform our room from rows to a circle, then they would take turns talking about the components of the assigned chapter that they considered most important. By the time the circular "chapter processing" ended with me, most of the crucial points had been covered. When students missed something substantive or Vansina required clarification, I would profess. On several occasions I used a few minutes on a Monday to conclude a Friday's chapter.

This approach to Africa and Vansina (especially in considering the theoretical sections of his book), combined with a writing-intensive journal, made the course my most successful and satisfying section of African history ever. I know this in part because of the intensity and quality of undergraduate observations at our roundtables. I also know it worked from student comments in the summary/reaction journals they kept of the course. They wrote that they enjoyed hearing each other's points of view and insights about Vansina, his approach to Africa, and my elaborations when required.

They commented on how well the book complemented our survey text. Vansina captivated them so much that they came to see him not only as a pioneer Africanist, but also as a student, a father, a husband, and a person of courage—in sum, a worthy role model. One of them was even inspired to write Vansina, and, as a generous and kind teacher, he wrote back, to the delight of

the class!

For extra credit on the final essay exam, I gave my students about ten days to respond to a take-home hand-out that asked them specific questions about *Living with Africa*. I told them that some of their responses would be used for this book review. Here is a fair sampling of what they said:

“How the Book Helped Me Understand Africa”:

distinguishes well between myth and fact and establishes the truth that the history of Africa is primarily the history of Africans in Africa

explains well how Africans, Africanists, and Westerners view Africa and colonialism

discusses components of African family life

helped me see African history from many different historical perspectives

persuaded me that oral history, linguistics, and interdisciplinary collaboration were important in historical research made Africa real to me

taught me how important it is not to place one’s own cultural view upon others when trying to understand other ethnic groups

taught me the importance of participant observation prompted me to think a lot about my family’s history in South Africa and Zimbabwe

“The Book’s Strengths”:

convinces readers that the history of Africans is important

marvelous accounts of fieldwork, research, oral history, student life, teaching, family, and relationships to colleagues and students

discussed the development of the discipline of African history without writing the history of Vansina in Africa

writes in an exceptionally clear, accessible, and entertaining style even though English is not his native language felt that part of Vansina’s “mpiini” was in our classroom every Friday morning

explains how a few dedicated scholars created the discipline of African history that has evolved into our course see Vansina as a role model, especially in terms of hope, perseverance, love, openness, and uncompromis-

ing ethics

explored historiography generally and the recent historiography of Africa in particular exemplified that tedious research can really pay off

provided proof that people from different ethnic groups can live together

shows how a person (Vansina) from one ethnic group can become so sufficiently centered in another ethnic group that he can communicate the essence of that second group to a third [Vansina taught African history in China]

made African history personally relevant

wrote his book almost as if it were a story

gave an eyewitness account of colonialism and its collapse

challenged me considerably—but our roundtables helped

took me far beyond where I would have been had we only had our survey text and *Weep Not Child*

best chapter—“In the Field: Kuba Country”—this really sets the stage for the whole book because it enables the reader to see where Vansina really stands; would have liked more

appreciated Vansina’s primary goal of writing about Africa to an African audience, rather than to other professors

helped me see how important it is to view a history of a people from the inside, as if I were a member of the focus group

saw how far Vansina had grown as an Africanist from his trip to Libya

chronicled the growth of African studies in Africa, Europe, and the US

“The Book’s Weaknesses”:

chapters entitled “Professionals and Doctrines” and “Betwixt and Between” seemed a bit dry and would have been too

challenging outside our roundtable discussion no illustrations beyond the book cover and back no maps [professors *must* provide maps]

no annotated bibliography—bibliographical informa-

tion is not easily accessible as it appears in chapter note format

no update on Vansina's son, Bruno [students found Bruno fascinating]; need more information on Claudine, Vansina's wife, and Bruno in general and the impact Africa had on their lives

sometimes Vansina jumped too much from subject to subject a chronological table of Vansina's life, contributions, and publications would have helped

"What I Would Like to Ask Vansina?"

How are Claudine and Bruno?

If you could do it all over again, would you change anything?

What are your views on the timing and efficacy of fieldwork in Africa today?

How did all of your travel affect Claudine and Bruno?

We got the feeling that behind your incredible success was the support of Claudine—how true is this, and how did you keep up such a lifelong, hectic pace?

How can we help African countries, especially Zaire, move faster toward democracy?

In what direction should African history be going that would be most beneficial to Africans themselves?

Where do you and African history go from here?

What really inspired you to be a pioneer of the development of African history and studies in a period when only a handful of people cared?

What did you find the most challenging moment in your career?

What do you really consider your best work?

Do you still feel somewhat alienated in the United States?

What exciting material did you leave out of your book?

"Should other Africanist academics share *Living With Africa* with their students?" (everyone said yes)

helps students understand Africa from an African perspective students can come close to experiencing fieldwork in Africa through Vansina's efforts

written for African, Asian, and Western audiences

shows how African history developed as a discipline from one of its creators

if you are a true Africanist, then the question should not even be asked

one of those rare books that leaves a lasting impact on a class's mind and heart the book opens one's mind to new and foreign concepts, ideologies, and methods

If students were so enthused about Vansina and his book, imagine what professional Africanists have in store. *Living With Africa* is an important addition to the resource section of any Africanist's library, and if handled properly, can be used in any undergraduate African studies class. It chronicles the origins and development of African studies in Africa, Europe, and the US in terms of anthropology, archaeology, history, and linguistics. The book explores the early days of the African Studies Association and the evolution of the Cambridge and UNESCO histories of Africa. It charts the relationship between academics trained in imperial history and those who helped create Africanist history. The work considers Afrocentrism, Eurocentrism, functionalism, historicism, Marxism, oral history, positivism, postmodernism, and structuralism.

Vansina's book makes personable such Africanist pioneers as Helen Codere, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, Philip Curtin, Basil Davidson, John Fage, Melville Herskovits, Martin Klein, Roland Oliver, and Terence Ranger. The surprises are many—Vansina even knew Alex Haley. Vansina's account of teaching Zairians in the revolutionary atmosphere of the Belgian Congo on the eve of independence is exceptionally riveting, to say the least.

Living With Africa has proven especially valuable for my institution, East Carolina University. Last summer ECU received its most important benefaction of Africana. A donor from North Carolina contributed several hundred pieces of African art that has as its core the art of the Kuba of Zaire. Vansina did his early fieldwork with the Kuba, has published several books and articles about them, and talks about them and his life with them at some length in **Living With Africa**. Thus, much of what is African in Vansina is Kuba. What an astonishing coincidence this was to both my students and me! In the future I hope to arrange lectures in the room in which the Kuba art work is exhibited when discussing Vansina in particular, and the Africa content of World Civilization in general. We at ECU are truly fortunate.

One of the components of my African history class

was to share African poems and riddles with my students to bring them closer to Africa. Our class and Vansina inspired one of them to create his own riddle at our semester's end: "Even though it is often hidden and hard to find, it exists in everyone" (answer: Africa). Vansina dedicated *Living With Africa* to his students everywhere. Although now retired, it is clear from the influence he has had on my students that Professor Jan Vansina's student roll continues to grow far beyond classrooms past. African Studies is the ultimate beneficiary.

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