The Historian's Gaze and the Philosopher's Gaze
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Abstract

The two autobiographies, of V. Y. Mudimbe and Jan Vansina, published in 1994, have many resemblances (both men have worked mainly in Zaire and have spent much of their careers in the United States) and contrasts (one being a philosopher and the other an historian). Vansina has been concerned especially with African history over a long period as it can be constructed from research into local oral traditions and has done much to establish a truly African history as such in place of the earlier history of colonialism in Africa. Mudimbe, a former benedictine monk, has been concerned especially with the philosophy of 'Africa', based on a wide range of historical and philosophical writings of many kinds and many origins. Their work has been complementary and illuminating; yet neither has really come to grips with the reality of the lives of the Africans themselves who have made these histories and philosophies.

Résumé

Regard de l'historien et regard du philosophe. — Les autobiographies de Valentin Mudimbe et de Jan Vansina, publiées en 1994, sont porteuses de nombreuses ressemblances — les deux auteurs ont principalement travaillé au Zaïre et ont accompli une grande partie de leur carrière aux États-Unis — et également de nombreuses différences — l'un étant philosophe et l'autre historien. Vansina s'est surtout consacré à l'étude de l'histoire africaine dans la longue durée, telle qu'elle peut être reconstruite à partir de la tradition orale, et il a beaucoup fait pour substituer une histoire authentiquement africaine à la vieille histoire coloniale. Mudimbe, un ancien moine bénédictin, s'est principalement intéressé à la philosophie africaine en s'appuyant sur une gamme étendue d'écrits historiques et philosophiques de statuts et d'origines divers. Leurs travaux sont complémentaires et très éclairants mais ni Vansina ni Mudimbe n'ont réussi à saisir de façon concrète la vie des Africains, acteurs de cette histoire et de cette philosophie.
The two autobiographies, that of Vansina and that of Mudimbe, are different in many ways, not merely in terms of the obvious contrasts between one of their writers being African and the other European, but in those of the ways in which they view and perceive Africa. On the other hand, both authors come from somewhat the same religious backgrounds, being brought up as Catholics; in Vansina’s case this influence is seemingly not apparent in his professional life whereas in Mudimbe’s it has been central to it. Both authors, after many years in central Africa, have come to work in a country (the United States) to which they were originally alien. Both have lived in central Africa during the historically crucial period of the ending of European colonialism and the beginning of the reconstruction of an independent continent, two sets of events that have largely determined their careers and their ambitions.

Essentially their professional and intellectual lives have been concerned with two basic questions: what is ‘Africa’; and what is and what should be the nature of our knowledge of it? Africa has been defined, ‘invented’, ‘discovered’ in many terms by different people, both African and non-African. Vansina deals basically with the opposition between colonialist and postcolonialist traditions and views held by non-Africans and Africans, mainly in terms of academic differences and struggles for power. Mudimbe also distinguishes these types of opinion and knowledge but the focus in this intensely personal account is his own gradual and painful realization of his identity in Africa, the chief protagonists being the theologians and philosophers who have so affected him, both African and non-African, mainly Belgian missionaries and theologians who taught and trained him to observe the Benedictine rule of ‘meditate and work’.

Vansina’s autobiography is about his life as a student of African history. He began his studies as an historian of medieval Europe, greatly concerned with the problems of evidence and its interpretation, evidence contained in documents written by both original participants and later commentators. He became interested in Africa by reading and visiting museums, took courses on Africa in London,
and went to the then Belgian Congo and Rwanda-Burundi to do research and teach. Until that time, the 1950s, ‘African history’—then an unusual field—had been virtually devoted to European colonial rule over its inhabitants. Because their societies had almost all been without writing (other than for a few literate elites), historians depended upon records by Arab and European travellers, missionaries, and colonial administrators, in which the emphasis was on the views of the writers. Africans being considered either barbarous warriors or naïve savages. Some of these records were illuminating but in the main they expressed the conventional and often racist views of those who wrote them.

There was, however, ‘oral tradition’ in every African society. Historians came late to the study of Africa, being preceded by anthropologists and linguists who had built up an impressive body of information about contemporary African societies and their cultures. Many historians (including Vansina in some passages of his book) show great scorn for these forerunners, who, at least in my opinion, attempted with a good deal of success to understand oral traditions not as historically accurate sources of the past but as ‘true’ in providing the peoples’ explanations and validations of the present. They generally did not accept them as valid records of history but analysed them as what anthropologists consider myths. Both Vansina and Mudimbe portray their predecessors as ignorant and as colonially-minded: both authors build up outmoded and easily knocked down strawmen.

Africanist historians, led by the London-based Roland Oliver, came to view local oral traditions as having historical significance. Vansina was among the first to follow Oliver. He realised that far more careful historical study of traditions was needed, set within the context of the present and as rigorous as the best ethnographic research of the time, and he soon led this study by his own local and comparative analysis, carrying out superb field research in many parts of Africa. He realised also that better instruction in the study of oral tradition was needed not only in the West but especially among African scholars themselves, whose traditions were at the heart of their work, but who had had to go to Europe for advanced training, much of it in conventional colonial history. Both European and African universities were at that time deeply enmeshed in colonialist and neo-colonialist thinking, and Vansina’s teaching led to changing that situation in both Africa and the United States. His book is concerned largely with his research, teaching, and university administration first in Zaire and Rwanda-Burundi (attempts to do much in his native Belgium came to little: those entrenched there had no time for subversive studies of non-written data), and then at Wisconsin, where he remained until his retirement.

The excitement in reading this book comes largely from his vivid accounts of the battles for political and academic authority in the Belgian colonial territories just before and just after the embittered and violent ending of Belgian colonial rule and then of university intrigues and battles between the ‘good’ scholars and the ‘bad’ ones in the United States; ultimately this is a tale of success of Africa-centered over colonial-centered thinking, for which he must be given much credit.

Valentin Mudimbe’s autobiography, while complementary in that most of it deals also with the Congo and Zaire, is very different in conception. Although writing about much the same period (Mudimbe is some ten years younger than Vansina), he shows himself concerned with quite other philosophical ideas and cast of characters.
Mudimbe, a precocious child with a gift for languages, was chosen for a Benedictine life in childhood. After the seminary he became a monk in Rwanda. When he realised that the Benedictine vocation was for him more a ‘style de vie’, he left the monastery and taught in various Congo and Zaire universities. In time he came to see that ‘le fait colonial’ was premised on the Europeans being the masters and the Africans the auxiliaries and servants: it was thus a system of injustice and immoral humiliation. He worked on the fringe of Zairean political life, disillusioned and politically endangered. He then left to become an academic philologist and philosopher; like Vansina, he moved to the United States where he has remained. His literary output has been immense: books on theology and philosophy; on Western definitions and views of an often mythicized ‘Africa’; novels and poems. In his autobiography he discusses the vicissitudes and meanings of a life that began in the erstwhile Benedictine ‘garden’ with his Belgian teachers, to most of whom he pays devoted respect and affection. Certain main concerns during his intellectual life fall into place as parts of a whole: his interest in Latin as a basis for organized thinking; his growing realization of his being a link (as were and are all Africans of his age and generation) between the African past and European ‘modernity’; his readings of early and mostly non-African travellers through Africa, the religious history of Third century northern (Roman) Africa, and finally his interest in the existence or non-existence of an African philosophy. All these concerns have been explored in his other books; in this autobiography we can discern both their genesis and the intellectual links between them.

One must appreciate the fact that Mudimbe became, or was made, a member of the then Congo elite. He was educated by Catholic missionaries, all from Europe and many imbued with racist views. His position, as a brilliant young scholar, was clearly highly ambiguous. The intellectual Catholic elite in the Belgian Congo was the only one permitted by the Belgian administration, and its formation was at times deliberate church policy. In this sense the Catholic church, despite its occasional protests (and doubtless its influence behind the scenes in Belgium) was virtually an arm of the colonial administration, and its teachings certainly helped to buttress colonial rule (it would be interesting to surmise what might have been Mudimbe’s position had he become a Protestant, as did so many political opponents of the regime such as Simon Kimbangu). Mudimbe came to realise these facts and this led to his break from the church and the vocation of monk. A fascinating and historically central chapter of the autobiography is about the ways in which both administration and church defined and recreated ‘Africa’ and ‘the Congo’ by constructing new landscapes, trying to transform the ‘backward’ village into the modern Christian city, substituting French and Swahili for local languages and denying the truth of indigenous religious beliefs and so changing notions of self and responsibility.

This personal history may help explain Mudimbe’s apparent ignorance of everyday African life, or more accurately perhaps his lack of interest in it. His knowledge of African religion and thought comes almost entirely from the writings and discussions of African (and some European) theologians and philosophers like himself: the level of discourse is far from that of ‘ordinary’ Africans. He does refer briefly to the writings of the anthropologists Luc de Heusch and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, but then he writes only of their studies of myth and its significance in building systems of thought; he ignores their work and those of other anthropologists on the everyday actions and words of Africans at the ‘grassroots’ level. His
approach has the weakness of divorcing African thought from African life, a paradox that both he and ourselves as his readers realise is a consequence of the divisive policies and practices of the colonial powers. It must be said also that his experience is essentially that of Zaire: the very different colonial, cultural, and religious situations in other parts of the continent, where the missionary presence had very different significances, are barely mentioned.

However, there is one sphere where he is more fully aware of the actualities of everyday African life. This is in his discussion of the place of African women, the liberation of whom from colonial dependence and subjection he rightly discerns as essential for the future of a free Africa. It is only they, he argues, who can lead Africa in freeing itself from 'l'esprit sorcier', that leads only to a sense of mediocrity, and from the abuse by governments of 'tribalism' that holds Africans back in a colonial-like dependence. These views of women owe more to the work of anthropologists (and certainly to his wife) than does any other part of the book.

Reading of the two books makes apparent a paradox. The 'outsider' Vansina's knowledge is particularistic and comes from specific African peoples' own local oral knowledge of their past. By carrying out intensive field research on the oral traditions of various peoples, he has shown us Africa as it has developed over long periods of history. His interest in the actual Africans is in the ways they have developed from the distant past; even though Vansina's main concern is in Africa outside the run of recent events and not in Africans themselves as they are now, the reader perceives his sense of an African reality.

On the other hand the 'insider' Mudimbe's knowledge is generalistic, comes essentially from non-African writers, and lacks the hard focus of Vansina's writing. His hypotheses are deductive from universalistic theories: Catholic and Catholic-derived theology, Marxism, and so on. One might go further and suggest that Vansina has deepened indigenous Africans' awareness of their own pasts, whereas Mudimbe has as it were started from the (largely European) generalized 'invention' and 'idea' of a single Africa and taking these as his basic data constructed his own views of African thought from them, a religious and mystical idea rather than the hard reality of detailed social and cultural actualities. These two books are both autobiographies and also methodologies of how to study history, yet neither tells us in any detail what is 'Africa' nor who are the 'Africans' who have formed it.

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The two autobiographies, of V. Y. Mudimbe and Jan Vansina, published in 1994, have many resemblances (both men have worked mainly in Zaire and have spent much of their careers in the United States) and contrasts (one being a philosopher and the other an historian). Vansina has been concerned especially with African history over a long period as it can be constructed from research into local oral traditions and has done much to establish a truly African history as such in place of the earlier history of colonialism in Africa. Mudimbe, a former Benedictine monk, has been concerned especially with the philosophy of 'Africa', based on a wide range of historical and philosophical writings of many kinds and many origins. Their work has been comple-
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Keywords/Mots-clés: Zaïre/Zaire, history/histoire, philosophy/philosophie, catholicism/catholicisme, colonialism/colonialisme.