
PATHS TOWARD THE PAST

AFRICAN HISTORICAL ESSAYS

IN HONOR OF

JAN VANSINA

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CULTURAL HISTORY: PATHS IN ACADEMIC FORESTS¹

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Jan Vansina's *Paths in the Rainforests* bids fair to become the capstone to his long and distinguished career. Others of his past works vie with it in importance, and new works of equal distinction may yet flow from his pen, but the breadth of synthesis and the depth of analysis in *Paths* is sure to give it a special place in African historiography. Vansina portrays over two millennia of creation and transformation in the political tradition of the equatorial forest, through a lively narrative replete with empirical, methodological and philosophical jewels. The result delivers a powerful blow to any remaining notions of the impossibility of recovering the outlines of the distant past, or of the unchanging nature of African society. The book is a *tour de force* in cultural history.

The notion of "cultural history", however, is a moving target, and for several reasons. Most importantly for present purposes, the definition of "culture" is in change. During the course of Vansina's career, the dominant scholarly definition of "culture" has changed from a focus on the *results* of cultural production (the "old" definition) to a focus on the *process* of cultural production (the "new" definition). For this and other reasons, historical analyses of culture and cultural change written today are quite different in their assumptions and in their interpretations from those written a generation ago.²

Thus, while praise for *Paths* comes readily to mind, one cannot escape the responsibility of specifying whether the praise is offered in the context of the new definition or the old definition of culture. In this essay, I offer some reflections on the changing ways of analyzing cultural change in Africa, with a focus on *Paths*. I attempt to place the book on the map of cultural methodology, and I also use it as a guide to the changing methods and objectives of cultural historians.

Old and New Definitions of Culture

The old definition treated "a culture" as an identifiable entity, a "complex whole" of beliefs, of institutions and artifacts.³ A culture (or an ethnic group or a society) served as the unit of analysis in cultural historical study. Within the framework of this definition, a range of approaches struggled for dominance. That range included, at one limit, analysts treating culture as coherent, bounded and internally homogeneous (whom we may label as "lumpers"). At another limit, it included others (whom we may label as "splitters") treating culture as a shifting collection of attributes, without sharp boundaries and containing competing influences, though still susceptible to holistic analysis.⁴

The new definition of culture focuses on the activities of cultural production and transformation. It centers on the struggles and ideas of individuals and groups of peoples and on the interaction of their contradictory ideas. In these terms, culture is

"the semantic space, the field of signs and practices, in which human beings construct and represent themselves and others, and hence their societies and history".⁵ The new framework is more explicitly historical than the old.⁶ The unit of analysis in this framework is not generally agreed upon by its practitioners, but I would label it as the *debate*: analysis centers around a debate of some social import, and the people and events analyzed are parties and events drawn into the resolution of that debate.⁷

The contrast of old and new frameworks in studies of cultural history reflects the philosophical shift from modernism to post-modernism that has pervaded academic debates since about the 1960s.⁸ The old definition is positivistic: within its framework, one may seek to delineate the elements of culture, the impact of various factors on culture or the determinants of cultural change. The new definition is post-modern: it focuses on relationships and discourse, not on objects; it stresses indeterminacy, not cause-and-effect; it emphasizes change as the rule rather than the exception. Where the old framework centers on locating causality, the new framework focuses on identifying contingency.

To adopt the convenient terminology of Thomas Kuhn, a "paradigmatic shift" has occurred. Pressures grew within the old framework, as thinking about culture evolved and developed contradictions. Then innovators such as Clifford Geertz proposed a new paradigm to encompass the field as the old framework burst its limits.⁹ More recently, the work of John and Jean Comaroff has gained recognition as a statement of the new outlook.¹⁰

Vansina's work spans the decades of this analytical transformation: to judge his work according to some static criterion would miss this point. Hence, assessing his work as cultural history requires that we locate an adequate standpoint — or series of standpoints — from which to pass judgment. In particular, we need to know the nature and the magnitude of differences between old and new types of cultural analysis. Are we experiencing an incremental albeit significant change in the method and focus of cultural analysis? Or has there now developed an unbridgeable paradigmatic chasm in cultural studies? Does the new definition represent intellectual progress, so that the old definition has become obsolete?

Cultural History in Scholarly Context

The rethinking of cultural history in Africa forms but a single facet of the past generation's metamorphosis in scholarship. The broad changes, in simplest terms, include: more theory, new philosophies, greater analytical rigor and interdisciplinary expertise set atop disciplinary specialization.

In the course of this transformation, the overlap of history and related disciplines has grown dramatically. A century ago, historians interacted little with adjoining disciplines, borrowing some of their terms and dabbling in their methods, yet ignoring their theories. As historians became professionalized, however, they came to season their narratives with increasingly explicit interpretations of change. Historians' formal interpretation of change relied on their ever-greater borrowing of the methodologies, theories and data of adjoining social-science, humanistic and artistic disciplines. The sister disciplines, in turn, have learned from history to be more nuanced in narrative and more explicit in analyzing change over time.¹¹

Each of the disciplines, at the same time, has undergone metamorphosis in theory, method, philosophy and in its empirical record. Contending liberal and Marxist approaches have struggled for advantage, though normally within their

common positivistic philosophical frame. Empirical studies within both philosophical leanings accelerated with the development of computers and quantitative techniques.

Post-modern philosophy, more multivariate and contingent than positivism, then joined and further transformed the discourse.¹² Post-modernist philosophy, a highly relativistic outlook, is critical of the positivistic notion that much change (for instance, "modernization") can be identified as "progress". It is ironic, then, that post-modernists tend to present their own philosophy as constituting progress over positivism, defining previous views as outmoded.

As the disciplines fell into the turmoil of debate and transformation, disciplinary walls came to be breached with impunity. Still, the complexity of interaction has varied with the disciplines involved. Population historians had only to rely on demography; economic historians had only to rely on economic theory. Social historians, in a more complex pattern, drew both on sociology and social anthropology.

For cultural history, the equivalent scholarly interaction and transformation is unusually complex. Cultural history draws at once on studies in cultural anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, literature, art, architecture, music, religion and philosophy. With such a range of disciplines, it is hardly surprising that cultural studies should differ in both empirical content and theoretical orientation from continent to continent, from country to country.

In African studies of cultural history, two disciplines dominate: cultural anthropology and linguistics. In the colonial era, all the peoples of Africa, allegedly lacking history, had been consigned to anthropologists for social-scientific analysis. As historians entered the field in the era of decolonization, they relied respectfully on the theoretical frameworks and ethnographic literature of their predecessors. Historians of Africa gained disciplinary breadth from this interaction, but ended up somewhat short in analytical self-confidence.

The methods of linguistics loom large in African cultural history, but these methods are diverse and convey a complex heritage. Lexical studies range from simple word lists to the elaborate technique of glottochronology; structural studies, less numerous, focus on comparative grammar. Various classifications of languages (drawing sometimes on lexical and sometimes on structural data) were central to debates on race, cultural groupings and migrations of Africans. Joseph Greenberg's breakthrough in classifying the genealogy of African languages — so central to our understanding of the Bantu migrations — relied on a balance of lexical and structural elements, and on "mass comparison" of data. More than anything, however, Greenberg relied on lexical comparisons of words and things.¹³

Yet another impact of linguistics has been indirect. Early in this century the Swiss linguist Saussure developed the notions of "the signifier" and "the signified", thus introducing formally the consciousness of the speaker as well as the word and the thing. His work became influential only much later and mainly through the work of French scholars including Lacan, Foucault and Derrida. But its influence was nonetheless profound, as it sustained new departures in literary theory, cultural anthropology and, generally, the development of post-modernist philosophy.¹⁴

Beyond cultural anthropology and linguistics, other disciplines contribute significantly to the outlook and the tool-kit of cultural historians of Africa: philosophy, religion, archaeology, art and literature. But these few notes on anthropology and linguistics may serve to indicate the complexity and mutability of the methodology of cultural history in Africa. It is this changing field in which we must locate Vansina's work, then assess it.

To explore the range of definitions and philosophies applied by cultural historians of Africa, I shall focus on their *models* and *metaphors*. That is the only way to address such a broad issue with brevity. Every scholar writes with an underlying logic that may be expressed as a model. Even scholars who renounce or decry the use of models make interpretive generalizations: these general statements, sometimes presented in the form of metaphors rather than as explicit and formal models, provide the reader's best clue to the underlying logic of the analyst. So, in the passages below, I offer a concise, analytical and metaphoric review of African cultural history, rather than an exercise in thick description. I will summarize not the *arguments* of the authors, but the *processes* and *logical structures* through which they make their arguments.¹⁵

To anticipate the location that I will assign to *Paths in the Rainforests* on the methodological map of African cultural history: Vansina offers cultural historians a methodological bridge, linking old and new approaches.¹⁶ He does so, firstly, by working within the old framework and striving to perfect it. Secondly, he utilizes key insights from the new framework. Thirdly, and of equal importance in his research strategy, is the practice of alternating among various frameworks. Vansina's methodological bridge links old and new approaches to cultural history, though without pretending to synthesize them: he provides an eclectic and artful deployment of distinct analytical techniques, assumptions and even philosophies, to attempt a multifaceted reconstruction of cultural change.

African Cultural History in Old and New Frameworks

We lack, so far as I know, a thorough review of the past century's development of cultural history, in Africa or elsewhere. Adam Kuper's fine intellectual history of anthropology focuses on kinship studies, long the core of the discipline, and deals little with cultural anthropology; Jacques Le Goff's review of the history of *mentalités*, cited approvingly by Vansina, centers on Europe; similarly, I know of no review of linguistics sufficiently broad for present purposes.¹⁷ We can be certain that there is much to be learned of the rise and fall of theories of culture, or the development and dismissal of the notion of cultural "traits", and so forth. For the moment, however, we may take as indicative Kuper's finding, within kinship theory, of a broad continuity from the early work of Tylor to the recent past: it would not be surprising to find a similar century of continuity in cultural studies. The work of George Peter Murdock provides a prism that displays many facets of that continuity.

Murdock's 1960 survey of the "peoples and culture history" of Africa exemplifies a positivistic modelling of the results of cultural processes, in a form characteristic of the "splitter" tendency within the old approach.¹⁸ Murdock developed interpretations of long-term cultural change based on maps and tallies of such results of cultural production as kinship systems, crops and political institutions.¹⁹ Murdock's unit of analysis shifted between the tribe and the culture province (the latter consisting of a collection of tribes), but the effect of his work was to reify ethnic groups. Although much of his interpretation focused at the level of the culture province, and while his text noted the overlaps and internal distinctions in ethnic groups, the organization of his argument and his widely reprinted ethnic map of Africa emphasized discrete and bounded ethnic territories.

Murdock's models, applied through his maps and tallies, centered on diffusion and differentiation of language groups, crops, kinship and political systems. He thus

focused on the results rather than the processes of cultural production: he labelled his data as "traits". Still, he criticized "trait-chasing", by which he meant supporting hypotheses through searching out the traits under study in isolation from other data. His own main hypothesis was that an ancestral system of matrilineal descent had dominated the continent, and that it had evolved by stages toward patrilineal descent, at rates varying with location. The hypothesis itself reveals the causality in his reasoning, and his investigation led at best to dubious results. With more success, he supported the thesis of independent invention of agriculture along the West African desert fringe. In this and some other cases, Murdock skilfully confirmed his analysis of innovations and population movements by collecting observations on several types of evidence.²⁰

In the thirty-plus years since the publication of Murdock's study of Africa, cultural studies have changed greatly. As Adam Kuper argues, "Mainstream cultural and social anthropology today has abandoned primitive society and, with it, society itself".

Instead it is embracing the second tradition of anthropology, the anthropology of Tylor and Frazer rather than Morgan and Rivers, the anthropology of culture.²¹

Clifford Geertz became the most prominent prophet of the turn to the anthropology of culture. His definition of culture as "a set of control mechanisms" is oft-quoted. More influential in practice were his expository technique of "thick description", intended to convey a multiplicity of viewpoints on any set of events, and the particular case of a Balinese cockfight along with the responses of community members when it was broken up by police.²² The emphasis on thick description may be seen as an attempt to avoid modeling and thereby to sustain consideration of more variables.

The critique of anthropology associated with decolonization resulted, as Kuper has argued, in rejection of the idea of primitive society. In an important contribution to the critique, Johannes Fabian argued that the ethnographic present was not simply an erroneous assumption of social stasis but an "allochronism", a device for placing the "Other" (the subjects of anthropological study) into a different time so as not to have to share the world with them.²³ The results of such critique devastated social anthropology and left cultural anthropology as the main surviving branch of the field.

Yet the paradigm for cultural analysis developed into a rather different form from that proposed by Geertz. For not only had decolonization brought a change to the focus and outlook of anthropology, but new analytic devices had come forth, notably the Saussurean linguistics of the signifier and the signified, and its more recent variants in philosophy and literary theory.²⁴ Thus, for the Comaroffs, culture is "a historically situated, historically unfolding ensemble of signifiers-in-action, signifiers at once material and symbolic, social and aesthetic". The term "culture" in the noun form virtually disappears from the lexicon of those utilizing this new definition, and the adjective form "cultural" takes its place.²⁵

David Newbury's study of political culture in Ijwi shows success in applying the new definition, with its reliance on consciousness and subjectivity, into a past as much as two centuries distant. In counterpoint to the stereotypical local tale that immigrant founders had created the Ijwi kingdom of Lake Kivu at the turn of the nineteenth century, he emphasizes two sorts of interaction in the rise of the kingdom — interaction of immigrant clans and individuals with those already in place, and interaction of clans and the monarchy, so that the clans and the monarchy each defined and solidified themselves through interplay with the other. The central unit

or nexus of Newbury's analysis is neither the clans nor an overarching Ijwi polity but rather the debate on the nature of clan identity, which itself shifted over time and space.

Newbury portrays the transformations of Ijwi as taking place more in the realm of ideas than in institutions.²⁶ He poses, implicitly, the question of what sustains the historical stereotype against which he argues: since we now see the complexity of the rise of Ijwi monarchy, why do the people of Ijwi today seem content to summarize their history in such categorical terms as the arrival of kings from the outside?²⁷

Newbury provides a powerful, though implicit, model of political dialogue through his use of metaphor. After scrutinizing each of the fields in his picture of cultural change, Newbury portrays the overall operation of this system by focusing on the *muganuro* (first fruits) ceremony, which even today reifies the roles and the validity both of the autonomous clans and the overarching monarchy, restating the range of social values and roles working in creative tension.²⁸ Meanwhile, Newbury declines to present his analysis with reference to explicit models, in an approach shared with Geertz. This reflects his emphasis on detail and contingency, rather than on general patterns, and may also reflect a feeling that to engage in the discourse of models is to adopt a positivistic, deterministic approach.

Johannes Fabian applies the new framework by focusing significantly on language itself: the rise and elaboration of Shaba Swahili.²⁹ His multivalent vision of that process emphasizes that the language "emerged" as a range of speech patterns rather than as an authorized version, and he challenges the notion that Swahili "diffused" to Shaba from some point in East or Central Africa. Still, the language did not simply arise as a folk practice: Fabian emphasizes the importance of European grammarians in structuring and codifying the language, and the importance of the Belgian colonial regime in ensuring its spread at the end of World War I. The locus of Fabian's analysis of Shaba Swahili is the debate on the question of what was to be the vehicular language of Shaba. The participants in the debate were dominated by those in the colonial order who had influence over language policy, but included all the speakers of the various dialects and tendencies in the language.

Fabian's analysis of language change addresses words, things, structures and consciousness. To underscore the historic diversity within Shaba Swahili, he develops concepts consistent with that diversity.³⁰ His tracing of the emergence of Shaba Swahili, as compared with other dialects of Swahili, focuses on the developing structure of the language. While many of his sources are labeled "*vocabulaire*", his use of lexical data is subordinated to the exploration of putative pidgin and creole stages of the language. Fabian has shown how even words and grammars, so seemingly arbitrary in their symbolism, are ideologically charged.³¹

Fabian lambastes positivistic models of language change. Thus,

Centre-periphery thinking applied to language development shares with similar views in politics and economics an opprobrious logic of tautological definitions of correctness and deviance (the center is correct, the periphery deviates).³²

As he argues, such notions of deviance serve to marginalize evidence on the "peripheries", to reinforce assumptions that the deviations will soon be overcome and to draw the observer (and subsequently the analyst) away from focusing on processes reproducing cultural specificity in each "periphery".

Where work within the old definition focused on central tendency, work within the new definition privileges local variation. Murdock, reflecting the "splitter" tendency in the old approach, was sensitive to local variation in cultural makeup, but he treated such variation as nuance to his main concern, which was to locate centers of innovation and broad patterns of cultural change. For Newbury and Fabian, local variation is more than incidental: it is the focus of their stories of cultural change. The differences among these studies provide reminders of the substantial changes in the language, theory and empirical focus of studies in cultural history over the past generation.

Politics presents a likely field on which to test the differences between the two definitions of culture: the old definition centers on structure, the new definition focuses on process. Supporters of the new definition argue that the old definition helped sustain the colonial regime and reified hierarchy within that regime. The new definition, it is argued, leads to critique of colonialism and of hierarchy in general.

A new paradigm has thus emerged to challenge the old. The old paradigm, however, has not yet withdrawn from the field of discourse, either for scholars or among the general public. Whether its persistence stems from sheer inertia or from its continuing relevance is a large question. Fortunately, we can explore that question in the pages of *Paths in the Rainforest*, by asking how Jan Vansina has navigated the changing theoretical currents, and particularly in his interpretation of politics.

Paths In The Rainforest: The Framework of Analysis

Vansina, in his study of political tradition over a wide area and a long time, has summarized a generation's research on the Western Bantu languages and their speakers. He portrays a culture unfolding over time. Using linguistic data to recreate the spread and development of Western Bantu society, he chronicles first the elaboration of an ancestral tradition and then its modification through various perturbations to the equilibrium of the system. His topics are numerous, but his focus always returns to politics.

Vansina's presentation is, first of all, a narrative. The narrative begins with the ancient and common tradition. Here he centers on big men; on the three institutions of house, village and district; on such issues in economic life as farming, finding food, industries and exchange; on beliefs in heroes, spirits, medicine men, witchcraft and charms; and on the common preference for low population density. Expansion of the tradition accelerated with the adoption of metals and the banana. The "historical watershed" and the impulse to institutional change came with the occasional rise of population density to higher levels.³³ In recounting the subsequent development of patriliney and matriliney in various regions, he emphasizes both the contingency of historical development and the degrees of cultural interaction and differentiation within the equatorial forest. But he also addresses interactions with other traditions — with Africans in adjoining regions and with the European influences of the Atlantic slave trade and colonial rule.

Secondly, for all its complexity, *Paths* relies heavily on lexical analysis. Most of Vansina's method relies on historical linguistics, and on a technique he labels as "words and things", or "the combination of linguistic and ethnographic data". Vocabulary studies are "the most rewarding to historians because of the special properties of words as joiners of *form* and *meaning*". "The history of the *form* tells us something about the history of the *meaning*: the institution, belief, value, or object

to which the form pertains". The analysis is thus based overwhelmingly on lexical studies, and on the inheritance, borrowing and innovation in words and in the associated things.³⁴

Third, in his interpretation of cultural change, Vansina exhibits faith in the perfectibility of the old framework. In describing his research design, Vansina asserts that "the scholar working with 'words and things' is like a mosaicist or a pointillist painter". Ethnic units "must be abandoned as unanalyzed units for study", and the analyst must seek instead to pinpoint the geographical location of each observation.³⁵ The work of the mosaicist takes place, however, within a very capacious frame: the unit of analysis in this study is the "common tradition" shared by the people of equatorial Africa. Vansina traces the notion of the "tradition" back to the work of Alfred Kroeber.³⁶ Within this large unit, Vansina centers his attention on "major lineaments of the original tradition: the economic, social and political institutions ... and key elements of worldviews and ideologies". Overall, then, Vansina's definition of his task — with his focus on words, things, the "common tradition" and institutions — reflects an approach grounded in the old definition of culture.³⁷

But, fourth, Vansina draws another arrow from his interpretive quiver: the difference between the consciousness of historical actors and the world they perceived. This distinction makes clear his reliance on the new framework as well as the old. Before launching his narrative, Vansina presents this conceptual tool in a section entitled "reality and reality".

I will use the expression 'physical reality' in the sense that all observers, whatever their cultural background, agree on the action, situation, or object, not that it 'really' exists in an absolute philosophical sense. Most records, however, are cultural interpretations shared by the members of a community. They are 'collective representations' and refer to a different reality. I will use 'cognitive reality' to designate it ... Among the sources, vocabulary testifies to cognitive and physical reality separately. An item meaning 'sun' deals with physical reality, an item meaning 'family' with cognitive reality.³⁸

Thus, for example, districts were a physical reality, in that all early observers noted them; they also shared a single ancestral term. The notions of "maximal lineages" and "subtribes", in contrast, were cognitive expressions imposed later by outsiders.³⁹ Then in his conclusion, Vansina utilized "reality and reality" to restate the definition of "tradition": they "consist of a changing, inherited, collective body of cognitive and physical representations shared by their members".⁴⁰ In short, this set of distinctions represents Vansina's handling of the issues of textuality and subjectivity, which are central to the new definition of culture.

Fifth, Vansina's models make each of his major interpretive and methodological points. He emphasizes the complexity of his interpretation by proposing multiple models for a given phenomenon. For instance, in addressing the initial Bantu expansion, Vansina argues that "It is unwise to rely on a single model of expansion" — he prefers to hypothesize an alternation between slow movement into unfamiliar habitat, and a rapid dash ahead in familiar habitat. In one instance he condemns "one-way models" of the relationship between ecology and community.⁴¹

In methodology, Vansina's lexical analysis centers on the starred (or putatively ancestral) form of each word and on the "tree model" of linguistic change, though he also notes that the "wave model" shows how change ripples through language, and asserts that "both models work together". In another instance of methodological modeling, he notes that a uniform mental scheme or model underlay the ethno-

graphic questionnaires utilized by colonial-era ethnographers and officials. As he argues, the advantage of that single mind-set is that we are left with parallel data from many regions; the disadvantage is that the system of selection incorporated prejudice and excluded much information of importance.⁴²

Vansina assembles the elements of his interpretation by alternating among interpretive models. Thus we may emphasize, on the one hand, Vansina's metaphoric generalizations drawing on a positivistic intellectual heritage. Utilizing a mechanical image, Vansina once labels the equatorial tradition as "a gyroscope in the voyage through time".⁴³ The central metaphor of *Paths*, however, is that of a social system in equilibrium: "The system was in a stable dynamic equilibrium, because all the Houses and districts were *similar*, equal in manpower, and hence in military strength. But the system was potentially chaotic: one small change could trigger ... a chain reaction ... which would stop only when it reached the limits of the system". This metaphor, repeated at several points in the book, underscores the main line of Vansina's argument: "As soon as that balance was broken by an innovation, diffusion of the innovation or a counter-innovation followed in a continuing attempt to restore stability".⁴⁴

On the other hand, Vansina relies on a metaphor that is post-modern in its contingency. He adopts from the equatorial African tradition the metaphor of the leopard and its spoils for analysis of the political system: "the disposition of the spoils of the leopard ... is the best indicator of the political structure". Since the forest peoples recognized the leopard as the symbol of power, the successful leopard-hunter stood in the position of reaffirming or challenging the political order, by delivering portions of his kill either to a series of local authorities, to a chain of ascending powers, or directly to a central authority.⁴⁵

Vansina thus alternates among new and old approaches, yet relies most heavily on the old. In a methodological defense of his overall interpretation, Vansina characterizes it as a "complex hypothesis", whose very complexity provides support for its validity. The propositions in the book, he argues,

achieve a high order of validity because they are interconnected (the relation to the ancestral tradition) and because they claim to account for many data. The quality of hypothesis varied with the density of the interconnections between its parts and with the number of the elements it attempts to explain ... This is why the dominant hypotheses in physics are so convincing: they address a multitude of disparate data by a single integrated hypothesis ... The main hypothesis laid out in this book is complex enough to induce confidence, even though the interconnections of its various component propositions often remains loose. An alternate overall hypothesis to account for all the data is possible but unlikely.⁴⁶

This notion of hypothesis-testing relies far more on the causality of positivistic thinking than on the contingency of post-modern thinking.

Vansina's concluding chapter argues for broad historical reconstruction, again within the old framework. He develops explicitly his notion of the tradition. "Traditions, as fundamental continuities which shape the futures of those who hold them, are not just in the minds of observers. They are 'out there'. They are phenomena with their own characteristics ...". In a logical next step, Vansina lays out, ardently and skilfully, a call for "comparative anthropology". He rejects much earlier work ("the

usual methods of comparative anthropology are flawed, if not bankrupt") but argues that a modified approach can lead to valid results.

The study of cultural tradition can change this situation and make the dream of controlled comparison come true... by following the historical course of a single tradition.⁴⁷

The accompanying argument lays out a macro-level approach which has more in common with the goals (if not the techniques) of Murdock and Kroeber than with the more local level studies of scholars working in the new tradition.

Vansina's sense of the perfectibility of the old framework appears to be strong enough that he declines to treat the new framework as representing any major breakthrough. In a review of the Comaroffs' *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*, Vansina asks of the methodological propositions offered there, "How does this actually differ from the work of the garden variety of historians?" He thus argues that recent changes in the framework and methodology of cultural studies are more incremental than fundamental.⁴⁸

On the other hand, for all the positivistic underpinnings of his *analysis*, Vansina's *conclusions* do exhibit a clearly post-modern dimension. They emphasize the uniqueness and contingency of the historical patterns, the mutability and interpenetration of historical processes in equatorial Africa. He stresses the numerous exceptions to evolutionist schemas of political development from local community to state; instead, he argues that the observed political patterns of the forest zone resulted from the coexistence of ideologies extolling the success of big men and stressing the ideal equality of all. He argues that environmental factors, while significant, did not determine the development of institutions: low population density and decentralized political systems were a choice and not a necessity.⁴⁹

Cultural Change Viewed through Multiple Lenses

In the above, I have proposed a location for *Paths* on the methodological map of cultural history. Vansina has one foot in each paradigm, but he leans more heavily on the old than on the new definition of culture. At best, his approach of bridging the two paradigms raises the possibility of gaining the benefits of each; at worst, such methodological eclecticism could lead the analysis into confusion and internal contradiction. In any case, this methodological assessment tells us that our judgment on the success of *Paths* must account for three standpoints: within the old framework, within the new framework and from the bridge surmounting them.

If, as I have argued, the book relies most heavily on the "old" notion of culture as entity — and more on the institutions than the processes of politics — then the interpretation must be considered as a triumph from that standpoint. Vansina's narrative gives a vibrant portrait of a tradition — in effect, a culture — developing a range of profound innovations, yet remaining within a set of ancestral bounds for millennia; then undergoing major transformation and finally destruction as a result of influences from the Atlantic in the last half millennium. The strength of this interpretation comes from its specificity (in the precise types of innovation noted and in their geographical location), and in the liveliness of its presentation. The specificity of the theses makes them testable, and thus of greater value to subsequent scholars.

The very focus on culture as entity, however, has been under attack. Proponents of the new definition are less charitable toward the old definition than Vansina has been. Their concern is that the old approach, in using positivistic, cause-and-effect reasoning, in focusing on central tendency, in using mechanical and organic metaphors and in treating culture as an entity tended to privilege hierarchy and justify the hegemony of the powerful over the weak. In short, the old definition helped sustain the colonial regime and reified hierarchy within that regime. The new approach, in using post-modern, interactive and contingent reasoning, in focusing on local variation, in using metaphors relying on consciousness and in treating culture as a process was posited as privileging a critique of hierarchy and permitting observation of the independent activities of those who existed in the interstices of or in confrontation with the hegemonic structures of the powerful. Thus the new definition leads, according to its proponents, to critique of colonialism and of hierarchy in general.

Vansina's response to the debate over definitions has been threefold. First, he accepts the objective of the new definition: the highlighting of process in cultural production and of contingency in the results of that production. Second, he has sought to show that many interpretive objectives of the new definition can be achieved within the old framework. Then, third, he applies the new definition in a fashion which, while episodic, is clear and firm.

The new definition requires information different from the old. It requires information on the consciousness, the debates and the activities of people in the process of cultural production. One of the difficulties of applying the new definition to the distant past, as Vansina suggests in passing, is the need for evidence, difficult to reconstruct, on the consciousness of historical actors. Still, with his emphasis on counter-innovations such as the creation of extended town structures in response to the power of patrilineages, Vansina suggests the importance of the new framework to making sense of the timing and location of innovations. Such theses on timing and location of innovations have the advantage of being testable. His focus on the distribution of the leopard's spoils as a model for the debate over and distribution of political power underscores his emphasis on the climate of opinion as a factor in historical change. But his attractive thesis on ideology — the importance of a tension between an ideology lauding big men and one favoring equality of all — will be difficult to test. In sum, from the standpoint of the new definition, Vansina affirms its relevance and develops some images and metaphors consistent with its principles.

The view from the bridge is more complex. Because of the significant differences in the two frameworks he seeks to bridge, we must ask about the manner in which he links them. We must know whether the linkage of the two paradigms is in the form of a blend into a hybrid form, or an alternation between two paradigms that remain distinct. Examples of both types of linkage can be found in the text of *Paths*.

First, here is a case of the blending — or at least the overlapping — of many elements of Vansina's tool-kit, drawn from his analysis of the *noko* system of the Aruwimi basin.

Villages within a district became physically unequal, and new military institutions and new weaponry appeared. In terms of cognitive reality a system of Omaha kinship terminology was invented, and later the patrilineage emerged to sanction, organize, and give meaning to the other innovations ...

The adoption of the Omaha system of kinship terminology eventually led to a fundamental transformation of the cognitive reality of the House from a 'family' into a 'patrilineage' ... The innovation was so useful in the representation of the internal organization of the village, and especially of the district, that it rapidly spread and reinforced the physical reality of superior and inferior Houses and villages.⁵⁰

Vansina here invokes demographic change, military change, kinship terminology, lineage structure, ideology, political structure at house and district levels and his notion of reality and reality, each linked to the other. The argument is attractive in its comprehensiveness, but becomes perhaps too comprehensive as it appends one type of logic to another.

Vansina's alternation among frameworks appears not so much in elaborated form in any textual passage but in his readiness to shift among models and metaphors, on one hand, and in the broad organization of his argument on the other. The battle of Bolongo Itoko is one key node of his argument. Lance-carrying soldiers of the *noko* system, expanding as described in the quote above, encountered archers of the *nkumu* system in the iron-rich region of Bolongo Itoko. In terms of the old definition, the collision exhausted the expansive power of both systems. In terms of the new definition, the battle of Bolongo Itoko was a contest of the wills, a debate between alternative modes of social organization, and a source of further innovations.⁵¹

The complexity of the view from the bridge stems from the many choices involved in manipulating whole frameworks of analysis, and not just the elements of a single frame. But it is too late to turn back: historians have already committed themselves to applying multiple disciplines to their study of the past and therefore cannot escape having to address the conflicting philosophies within each discipline. Vansina has done us the favor of advancing the debate. He has written a wide-ranging and methodologically explicit treatment in which he addresses, implicitly yet clearly, the problem of how to link results from incommensurate frameworks. This problem arises in each area of historical studies, but the most complex and interesting version of it arises in the study of cultural history.

The choice of strategy in addressing alternative analytical paradigms is sure to preoccupy historians in years to come. One approach is to fix oneself within a given paradigm — as Murdock, Fabian and Newbury have attempted to do. Another approach is to blend (or synthesize) paradigms. The historian's tradition of writing synthetic narrative encourages him or her in this direction, though, as with Vansina's passage on *noko* above, it risks mixing apples and oranges. A third approach is alternation among paradigms: I have attempted to how Vansina's models, metaphors and overviews correspond to such an alternation among paradigms.

Perhaps there exists a fourth strategic approach, in which various disciplines and paradigms may be linked together in some logical and encompassing frame. But such a broad exercise in theory exceeds our abilities at present — certainly in the field of history and especially in cultural history.⁵² So we are left with the alternation of frameworks as the broadest practical strategy for interpreting the past. Vansina's notion of "reality and reality", along with his readiness to shift among models and metaphors in analysis, imply an approach that moves eclectically among frameworks. The reasoning goes as follows: the historian should look at his or her subject not through a single discipline and not through a single analytical framework. We can never directly experience the objective reality of the past. But if we believe it exists,

we can search for the shadows it projects as seen through all the lenses and filters we possess.

Paths in the Rainforests is an inspiring book. Its reconstruction of cultural change in the forest is stimulating in its vivacity. Its methodological breadth is at the frontier of historical studies. Vansina's contribution to the debate on the nature and direction of political change over the past several millennia is also inspiring in its originality, its contingency and the brilliance of its critique of dogmatic evolutionism in political theory. Through both narrative and analysis, Vansina manages to focus the reader on the source of his own inspiration — the peoples of the forest. The forest peoples of past times elaborated and lived the tradition analyzed and celebrated in this book. The forest peoples of the present, consciously and unconsciously, husband the remnants of the ancestral tradition, and meanwhile elaborate a new tradition, perhaps equally original.

NOTES

¹ The author wishes to thank Joseph C. Miller and David Newbury for their critiques of earlier versions of this essay, which were frank, challenging and unstintingly helpful.

² Another reason for change in studies of cultural history, aside from changing definition of culture, is changing composition of the field. That is, cultural history is not a coherent field but a congeries of sub-fields, with foci ranging from art to language to religion to social structure and politics; the assumptions, theories and methodologies used within cultural history range widely, as do the levels of activity in each sub-field. In this essay, the focus will remain on that part of cultural history closely tied to ethnography and cultural anthropology.

³ According to Edward Tylor (1871), culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Quoted in William H. Durham, *Coevolution: Genes, Culture and Human Diversity* (Stanford, 1991), 3.

⁴ A history of anthropological and historical definitions of culture deserves to be written. Such a study might parallel Adam Kuper's *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (London, 1988), which traces transformations in kinship theory. The terms "lumpers" and "splitters" have been used in European historiography by J. H. Hexter, and in American historiography, to distinguish those making overarching generalizations from those emphasizing particularities.

⁵ John and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, 1992), 27.

⁶ In anthropology through the mid-twentieth century, the American school and Kroeber in particular analyzed culture in historical terms; British and French anthropologists were less systematically historical. In the new framework, all claim the centrality of history to cultural change.

⁷ As the Comaroffs note, "We are the first to acknowledge that it is not easy to forge units of analysis in unbounded social fields"; *Ibid.*, 32. A historically situated debate or discourse, however, may be a good stab at identifying the unit of analysis. A debate can, for instance, be studied at levels from the familial to the global, so that analysts can achieve their desire to be freed from the old analytical units of kin, ethnicity and nation.

⁸ For an interpretation of this transition focused in the areas of economic and architectural thought, see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Conditions of Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1989).

⁹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1970); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973). Most of Geertz's essays were first published during the 1960s.

¹⁰ Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago, 1985); John and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography*; Jean and John Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago, 1993).

¹¹ Still, history remains distinct from related disciplines because of its primary focus on narrative, the importance of chronology in its interpretation (though now explicit and often

based on borrowed theories), and the breadth of its scope. On the interactions between history and social sciences, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The Historical Profession and the "Objectivity Question"* (Cambridge, 19xx); and Peter Burke. On metamorphoses of the disciplines in African studies, see Robert Bates (ed.), *Africa and the Disciplines* (Durham, 1993).

¹² As computers and techniques of linear regression facilitated the testing of positivistic hypotheses on empirical data, so also are empirical studies within the post-modern frame are likely to accelerate, in turn, with the expansion of data bases and categorical techniques in computing.

¹³ "There are three fundamentals of method underlying the present classification. The first of these is the sole relevance in comparison of resemblances involving both sound and meaning in specific forms... The second principle is that of mass comparison as against isolated comparisons between pairs of languages. The third is the principle that only linguistic evidence is relevant in drawing conclusions about classification." Joseph Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa* (Bloomington, 1966), 1.

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, 1981).

¹⁵ The analyses of cultural history we read are texts, each constructed by an author. The nuances and the specifics in these texts are of great importance, but they can be best understood when we know the logical skeleton on which the author has placed them.

¹⁶ A suspension bridge spanning a forest creek, as sketched by an American artist for an 1890 book, graces the cover of *Paths in the Rainforests*: Vansina presumably chose it as a metaphorical bridge over time and space, linking the reader to the long tradition of the forest peoples. In the remainder of this essay, I propose to extend the image of the bridge one step further, to the methodology of cultural history.

¹⁷ Kuper, *Invention*; Jacques Le Goff, "Les mentalités: une histoire ambiguë," in J. Le Goff and P. Nora (eds.), *Faire de l'histoire* (Paris, 1974), 76-94.

¹⁸ George Peter Murdock, *Africa: Its Peoples and Their Culture History* (New York, 1959). For a "lumper," see C. G. Seligman, *The Races of Africa*.

¹⁹ Murdock, generalizing this method, created the Human Relations Area Files. These files assembled a great amount of data, but the data were coded on the assumption that they reflected independent observations and independent cases. For an example a study conducted through regression analysis of these data, see Frederic Pryor, *The Origins of the Economy: A Comparative Study of Distribution in Primitive and Peasant Economies* (New York, 1977).

²⁰ In another successful line of inquiry, Murdock developed his thesis on the existence of "megalithic Cushites" — showing that Cushitic-speaking peoples had earlier occupied zones of Tanzania now occupied by Bantu- and Nilotic-speakers — by overlaying distributions of several types of data. Murdock's analysis of crop distribution showed the importance of the Western Sudan and Ethiopia as centers of agricultural innovation. His reliance on incomplete and faulty agronomic data led him to conclude that yams and rice were first imported to West Africa rather than domesticated there. The error on yams, while empirical rather than methodological, was especially costly, as it caused Murdock to postpone his date for the start of Bantu migrations until the arrival of Asian yams. In contrast, his hypothesis on megalithic Cushites has fared rather better in the light of subsequent work. Murdock, *Africa*, 199, 222-5.

²¹ "Meanwhile, on the margins, there is the third tradition of anthropology, which has at its heart the theory of biological evolution"; Kuper, *Invention*, 243. As evidence for Kuper's point on the third tradition of anthropology, one may note William Durham's study of the intersection of genetic and cultural inheritance, which has gained popular as well as academic attention. Durham subscribes to "ideational theories" of culture and treats his definition of culture as similar to that of Geertz. (Durham defines culture as "systems of symbolically encoded conceptual phenomena that are socially and historically transmitted within and between populations.") Durham's purpose, however, is to seek out the links of biology and culture through a complex but positivistic analysis, and in doing so he is happy to utilize Murdock's Human Relations Files. Durham, *Coevolution*, 8-9; see also 3, 193-6.

²² Geertz's definition is as follows: "culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns — customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters — as has, by and large, been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms — plans, recipes, rules instructions (what computer engineers call 'programs') — for the governing of behavior." In his essay on the Balinese cockfight, Geertz ranges from categorical statements of national character ("... the Balinese, for whom nothing is more pleasurable than an affront obliquely delivered or more painful than one

obliquely received ..."), to nuanced statements of post-modernist philosophy ("The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong."). In sum, Geertz enunciated a transitional doctrine, rather than setting forth the a fully developed new framework. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 44, 433, 452.

²³ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York, 1983).

²⁴ Kuper emphasizes the importance of kinship terminology as a complex analytical game; one may wonder whether the notions of signifier and signified provide a new and equally engrossing game. Kuper, *Invention*.

²⁵ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Ethnography*, 27.

²⁶ "The ultimate form of kingship was structured by the conceptualization of society: by the relations of groups to one another, of individuals to larger groups, of the flow of power and force in society." David Newbury, *Kings and Clans: Ijwi Island and the Lake Kivu Rift, 1780-1840* (Madison, 1991), 226. In a concluding chapter, Newbury develops his approach through a broad literature review. *Ibid.* 227-35.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Newbury himself, in addressing this issue, found that various groups within the Ijwi kingdom had distinct and even contradictory stories of the kingdom's creation and suggests that the simplified version of immigrant monarchs might be a generalized version suitable for relating to outsiders. Newbury, "Kamo and Lubambo: Dual Genesis Traditions on Ijwi" (Newbury, personal communication).

²⁸ Newbury, *Kings and Clans*, 200-21.

²⁹ Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power: The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo 1880-1938* (Cambridge, 1986).

³⁰ "Instead of seeking spots (centers of diffusion) I shall attempt to identify spheres or fields of interaction in which not 'Swahili' but varieties of Swahili, became one medium of communication among others." Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power*, 9.

³¹ Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power*.

³² *Ibid.*, 12.

³³ Vansina, *Paths*, 6, 99-100, 259-60.

³⁴ "Vocabulary studies (semantics) are the most rewarding to historians because of the special property of words as joiners of form to meaning." Vansina, *Paths*, 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 20, 31.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 6-7.

³⁷ In constructing his analysis, he began with an ethnographic baseline just before the European conquest, then utilized a technique of "upstreaming" to determine earlier institutional change. From the other side of his time frame, Vansina elicited the process of settlement from the genealogical model for Western Bantu languages. "First the petrified face of continuity, then the mobile face of change." Despite the broad strokes of this research design, in his handling of empirical data Vansina is more of a "splitter" than Murdock.

³⁸ Vansina, *Paths*, 72.

³⁹ For this example, Vansina's meaning of physical reality is as he introduces it. In other cases, he moves to a more shorthand approach of assuming that physical reality is really real. *Ibid.* 81.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 259.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 55, 255.

⁴² *Ibid.* 11, 27-8.

⁴³ The gyroscope metaphor is presented as follows: "... the debate between materialists and idealists as to the priority of physical or conceptual reality makes little sense, because change is perpetual, forever yoked to continuity. During this process of innovation all the principles and the fundamental options inherited from the ancestral tradition remained a gyroscope in the voyage through time: they determined what was perceivable and imaginable as change." *Ibid.* 195.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 100, 193.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 104. Vansina enunciated this image in much the same way as Newbury was to adopt the metaphor of the first fruits ceremony for discussing politics in Ijwi.

⁴⁶ Vansina, *Paths*, 250. This reasoning parallels, in the more complex realm of cultural history, Joseph Greenberg's methodological axiom of mass comparison, affirmed in his classification of African languages.

"The importance of mass comparisons as opposed to isolated comparisons between pairs of languages has become clear to me as a result of certain questions of a general nature raised by a