

The Children of Woot: Inheritance and Legacy

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To define precisely the boundaries of a book review, a review article, and an article which draws on a book for its themes would seem to propose nice, indeed over-nice, questions; and what is over-nice tends to become nasty. If we seek to contextualize the term “book review” by insisting on the prior causality of an editor who selects both book and reviewer, this is not a book review at all, which is as well, as it would suggest an outrageous delay if a book published in 1978 were reviewed now. Nor is this even a review article, since I am not so much considering Jan Vansina’s *The Children of Woot*¹ for its own valuable content, namely a discussion of the evidence for the history of the Kuba of Zaire, but rather as a jumping-off ground for reflections on two quite separate topics, the validity of historical knowledge as such, and the possibilities for development available to African societies in the pre-colonial era. The flavour that *New Blackfriars* has developed over the years comes surely from the recognition by successive editors of the areas of interplay of the sacred, the scholarly, and (in a very wide sense) the political as a primary focus, perhaps *the* primary focus. This encourages me to claim that Vansina’s suggestion (p. 242) that “the Kuba past consisted of more than events concerning a few people in a corner of the tropical woods” can be given a wider range than even he might intend.

As with all stereotyping, the European view of pre-colonial Africa as either a continent without history—what was it Trevor-Roper said about “the gyrating tribes”?—or as one in which white-haired sages meticulously instruct the young in enormous narratives whose details have been precisely memorized for hundreds of years, offers bifocal falsehood. African oral traditions, as Jan Vansina stoutly maintains against such sceptics as David Henige, are a source of valid historical knowledge, but it is not simply a matter of mutual good-will and a satisfactory tape-recorder. At first sight, indeed, Kuba society seems programmed for the preservation of historical knowledge; Vansina tells us (p. 17), “The ruling king; the head ritualist of the realm, the *muyum*; the eldest living son of a king, the *mwaddy*; the woman who taught the royal songs of the nature spirits to the king’s wives—all were required to remember specific traditions”. Moreover, there existed, apart from these royal guardians

of tradition, the category of *bulaam*, a term which could cover both skilled teachers and practitioners of dance and persons with substantial historical knowledge.

When Vansina gives us a closer look, however, this variety of historians seems oriented to an anti-history. There do indeed exist chronological narratives of the history of the monarchy, but these prove to be little more than lists of names and places. More detailed information has to be sought in other sources; songs, clan mottoes, praise names for persons and places, village and family histories, and stories explaining the origin of particular institutions or customs. All this material yields an enormous quantity of anecdotes, which can be fitted into the chronological order provided by the list of kings just as anecdotes about Alfred the Great and the cakes, or Robert Bruce and the spider, can be fitted into the king lists of England and Scotland. The British anecdotes were (and no doubt are) used to anchor the chronology of events in the memories of schoolchildren; the Kuba use of historical anecdote serves an entirely different purpose, that of providing an explanation for the origin of any community, custom or institution. While these explanations can be linked on to the "sequential" royal history, this is not in fact the way Kuba think. The explanations given by the anecdotes are "natural" rather than "historical", they answer questions about causes rather than provide an understanding of change over time; indeed, since any custom is brought into existence by the act of an individual, and is seen as then existing in its complete form, this is effectively excluding any idea of gradual change.

Kuba history is not, therefore, all that different from myth. Vansina himself rejects the idea that it is possible, in considering any body of historical information, to sort out myth and history, and refers sympathetically to Sir Edmund Leach's position that myth is the precipitate of a particular historical tradition. Vansina lists seven creation myths, some of which are fairly typically African, for instance the story of the first man and woman being let down from heaven on a rope, which was drawn back up when they had untied themselves. Others are less typical, such as the one of the two co-creators. Woot is given as the name of the first man, who established the order of nature, but one myth tells us of nine brothers, all called Woot. Not only is there this choice of myths, but myths are open to revision. The story of the first man and woman being let down from heaven, which was told to the pioneer missionary William H. Sheppard in 1892 as a story of the origin of all mankind, was being told by the 1950s as a story of the origin of one clan. Elements are collected from other cultures and from missionary teaching. A myth of a drunken king, mocked by his sons, but covered with a cloth by his daughter, seemingly derived from the Genesis story of Noah, is used

in the boys' initiation ceremony to explain the Kuba matrilineal system.

If myths are flexible, anecdotes are subject to censorship. An anecdote only became officially recognised after it had been privately discussed by councillors. Moreover, a tradition once approved could later be rejected. Vansina was told by a very old notable (p. 17) "After a while the truth of the old tales changed. What was true before, became false afterwards". Vansina suggests that this seemingly cynical remark is equivalent to the anthropological concept of "structural amnesia" by which a society will consciously or unconsciously reject past events that do not fit in with new institutions. Perhaps also there is a convergence with the more ruthless types of form criticism of the New Testament.

The bare list of kings seems less subject to manipulation, but this does not apply to the anecdotes that flesh it out. The process of selection tends to favour anecdotes which show the kings as magicians and warriors, and this applies to times within living memory. Vansina met in the 1950s veterans of the Kuba rising of 1904. But the main anecdote officially remembered was how the king's medicine man, executed at the king's orders, had managed to take revenge. Again, fighting which took place in 1908 was remembered for an episode in which the king is supposed to have fitted all his soldiers into one house (p. 25).

Nor were the brutalities of the early colonial period included in the official history. Vansina says of the then king, Kot aPe:

Kot aPe collaborated fully with the *Compagnie de Kasai* after 1905, sanctioning their methods for obtaining rubber and accepting compensation in return. No one in 1953 had forgotten the forced labour imposed to collect rubber, and the resulting hardships and atrocities, which were the main cause of the 1904 insurrection and which culminated in the years 1906—8. Family traditions and even personal memories were still rich, but no account of those events appeared in the dynastic traditions. The rulers who had benefited from the system were not about to commit this to official memory. (p. 230)

As was said earlier, all this seems to provide us with an anti-history; the Kuba seem designed to show us how the intellectual and social organization of history can end up in the manufacture of untruth. Even in the mass of dubious anecdotes, however, Vansina finds footholds of truth. First, there are dates which can be confirmed from atmospheric phenomena, the eclipse of 1680, the appearance of Halley's comet in 1835. Nor is the grip of structural amnesia on the corpus of anecdotes complete. As elsewhere in Africa, the king was seen as both a life giver and a destroyer, and this tends to produce pairing of kings. Thus Shyaam, who founded the kingdom early in the

seventeenth century, is seen as a peace-loving innovator and magician, whereas his successor Mboong aLeeng is presented as a warrior. Yet even in the obvious pairings not all the anecdotes fit the appropriate stereotype, nor is there a complete separation of destructive and life-giving traits. Thus we are told of Kot aNce, who seems to have ruled in the early eighteenth century, that he was short and invented a tall, pointed hat in order to look more impressive, a story which, being neither military nor magical, is probably true.

Even if Vansina's reconstruction of Kuba be accepted as broadly correct, which I believe it to be, it immediately gives rise to another set of questions, to which he offers answers of a more tentative nature. Thoughtful outsiders, such as the black American missionary Sheppard, the German anthropologist Frobenius, and the Hungarian "white hunter" turned art collector Torday, who saw the Kuba kingdom before colonial rule, or at its very beginning, were astonished at both the prosperity and the "quality of life" they found at the capital. Frobenius, for instance, described the Kuba as "civilized to the core". This was not simply a case, common enough in nineteenth-century Africa, of a forceful trader, like Jaja or Rabeh or Samory, acquiring military and hence political power. A long succession of economic and political choices lay behind the sophistication revealed in the architecture of the capital. Vansina tells us of:

the use of open, walled spaces as the main principle of monumental architecture and the notion that perspective should not be evaluated from a stationary vantage point but from walking down the thoroughfares. Hence the main avenues of the capital were blocked off by public buildings of various heights and widths to mask the approach to the main plazas—trees were also consciously used as elements of the architecture both to set off the horizontal line and perspective or to reduce the monotony of views that would be too long without them. (p. 223)

I have earlier said that the historical orientation of Kuba society produced an anti-history. But it is also possible to say that the Kuba mind was profoundly historical in the sense of having a strong conviction that it is possible for human beings to shape the development of their society. The "Age of Kings" (the final age, beginning in the early seventeenth century) was also the age of officeholders, a class of men who combined administrative responsibilities with valued status symbols and to whose ranks any free man might be appointed by the king. As the number of officeholders grew, so also did the need of a surplus to support them and the non-farming artisans. Vansina argues persuasively both that it is the existence of a non-productive class that produces a surplus (rather than vice-versa) and that during the Age of Kings the standard

of living of the free farmers actually increased, owing to new crops and improved methods. The heaviest burdens fell on what Vansina calls the *menials*, slaves, the aboriginal Kete people, unfree villagers (descended from prisoners of war or Kuba victims of a collective punishment) and, among women, the unfortunate category of pawn wives. Why did these inequalities not produce unbearable social tensions? The subordinate Kete and unfree villages did occasionally rebel, but met with extremely severe repression. For both the poorer freemen and many of the *menials* there seems to have been a real loyalty to the system, based both on the chances of individual nobility and the considerable amount of participation provided by the feasting and pageantry of the court and the officeholders.

It would be naive to call Kuba society “feudal”. The Kuba kings felt that they ruled over people rather than land, but by the nineteenth century relations involving the common currency, cowries, provided the main sources of revenues at the capital, namely trade and tribute. Vansina seems justified in objecting (p. 195) to the labelling of this kind of economy as “peripheral market”. His summing-up of the relation between elite requirements and peasant standards is also worth quoting:

Trade had developed because the elite demanded exotic goods, and once long-distance trade in these goods had been established the commercial network offered an outlet for other products as well. Thus the surplus of goods helped bring about the expansion of trade, which led in the end to a rise in the standard of living of the same farmer who was exploited by the elite. (p. 186)

Any society which combines state-building, entrepreneurship, and artistic creativity deserves celebration and the Kuba kingdom is fortunate in its celebrant. But there are traits in Vansina’s portrait which, if reflected on, might make us see things from a rather different angle. Vansina honestly notes the exploitation of the “*menials*”, but it would seem that this was a system in which economic growth was only possible if more and more *menials* were available, and this was happening in the later nineteenth century (pp. 166, 180). Moreover, the growth of prosperity seems to have been accompanied with a weakening of the system of checks and balances which in most African states prevented tyranny. And almost inevitably, a pre-colonial African kingdom with expanding trade was bound to develop a relation of dependence with Arab and Berber, or European trading communities. Nor did the technical gains brought about by these contacts, of which the most notable were Arabic script from the Muslims, new crops (such as cassava and maize from the Americas) from the Europeans and, from both, firearms, suffice to overcome the limitations of African technology. To put this last point

in a rather different way, if we compare nineteenth-century Africa with tenth-century Europe, there would be a number of African areas which could show larger political units and greater volumes of commerce than much of tenth-century Europe, but technically tenth-century Europe was ahead, with water mills and wheels as well as the plough².

The Children of Woot can indeed be read, as Vansina surely wishes it to be, as evidence that the African inheritance includes acting on history as well as being its victim, economic expansion and statecraft as well as music and sculpture. But it can also be read as suggesting that many features of to-day's "dependent capitalism" in Africa, even though fostered by the abundant selfishness and shortsightedness of colonial administrations, have their roots in the precolonial period. History, as William James decided long ago, is a discipline for those with the tough-mindedness to live with the ambiguities of the past.

- 1 University of Wisconsin Press—William Dawson & Sons Ltd., Madison and Folkestone, 1978, pp xi, 394, £21.
- 2 For a discussion of the social bases of the development of European technology which made the colonial empires possible, see Carlo M. Cipolla, *European Culture and Overseas Expansion*, Penguin Books, 1970.

Freedom, Evil and Farrer

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A revised version of a paper presented in 1983 at the third Oxford conference on the theology of Austin Farrer.

Freedom has a central place in Christian anthropology. We may begin our consideration of the notion, somewhat idealistically, by focusing attention on the most exalted sense of freedom, which, according to Christian tradition, is that of man's true freedom in relation to the God who made him. This true freedom may be defined as the spontaneity of unrestricted and undistorted love, as man realises his true nature as a creature made in the image of God. In the end, in the consummation of all things in the life of heaven, the creature will for ever exercise this true freedom, in both thought and action, as the love of God, now unambiguously manifest, elicits the free, the spontaneous response of love in the communion of saints.

Such a conception of man's true freedom raises many theological