Imagine that Caesar arrived in Gaul and landed in Britain in 1888, a mere century ago, and that your known history began then. You were not Roman, your language was not Latin, and most of your cherished customs had no historical justification. Your cultural history was amputated from its past. Would you not feel somewhat incomplete, somewhat mutilated? Would you not wonder what your cultural heritage was before Caesar? Unimaginable? Yet this is the situation of the So in Zaire, whose record seems to begin only with Stanley in 1877. (xi)

The Royal Museum for Tropical and Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, must be one of the finest examples of what M. Bloch has referred to as 'evidence in spite of itself'. For the museum gives us an excellent insight into the manner in which Africa was - and to a certain extent continues to be - conceived and thought of.

Until recently, the museum was a time capsule in itself, and as such, should have been encased in a monstrous bell jar and left for posterity. Until as recently as 1990, lables to the displays and showcases in the numerous halls read 'Belgisch Kongo' since efforts to scratch out Belgisch after Congolese independence (1960) were only marginally successful. Indeed Ons Kongo ('our Congo') still exists and this is perhaps best indicated by the museum guards who walk around in replicas of the uniforms worn by King Leopold's mercenaries in the Congo: blue ill fitting uniforms with gold epaulette, gold piping along the trousers and topped off by blue caps with a golden band. Display models of villages show the stereotypical contrasts between the primitive African past and corrugated iron colonial modernity. The primitive side of things is illustrated by showcases filled with a jumble of divining bones and statues, while the museum's halls are filled with enormous dug out canoes, stuffed elephants, and stuffed chimpanzee families. On the modern side of things exhibits seek to show the development of railways, mining and agriculture in Belgian Congo. Gilded bronze statues of wise old men and buxom ladies, entitled, 'België schenkt Kongo de welvaart' and 'België schenkt Kongo de beschaving', comfort and console downcast cherubic Africans. A glimpse of the reality of 'Ons Kongo' is provided in a vestibule where one finds an unlimbered cannon and a plaque listing the names of fallen mercenaries.

The glory granted to these killers belies the fact that Tervuren has also produced the basis for what must undoubtedly be one of the very best
Jan-Bart Gewald

historical works written. For not only is Tervuren a beautiful museum, it is also one of the foremost centres in the world in Bantu language studies. As such it provided most of the source materials for Jan Vansina's beautifully written *Paths in the rainforests: toward a history of political tradition in equatorial Africa*; a brilliant threefold synthesis of method, story and historical theory. In contrast to the museum's emphasis on the unchanging primitiveness and barbarity of pre-colonial Africa, Vansina seeks to show the rich history of political innovation in pre-colonial Africa. Though Vansina notes that his theory.

In the current volume Vansina's major addition to our usual historical methodology is that of glotto-chronology and lexicostatistics. Taking his cue from socio-linguistics, Vansina considers words to be the tags that carry the imprints of the past: trace the origin of a word and one traces the historical development of whatever it refers to, be it object, activity, thought, or feeling. Trace the words that refer to everything related to an institution and one traces its existence.

In seeking the African past, Vansina relied heavily on the advancements made in African language studies, particularly in the reconstruction of proto-languages. Proto-languages are languages from which modern languages have developed. An example of such a proto-language well known to historians of the Mediterranean world is Latin. In most of equatorial Africa, languages are spoken which descended from Proto-Bantu. In the second half of the nineteenth century already the interrelatedness of these languages became known. In this Century Guthrie published his four volume *Comparative Bantu*, in which he traced the development of the languages of the Bantu language family from their common origin. Guthrie's monumental work has of late been refined by Meusen, whom Vansina relies on, and Vansina himself.

Through the statistical comparison of languages their relationship and descent can be indicated. This process is known as lexicostatistics. If we trace the meaning of a word through the languages which on the basis of lexicostatistics are most closely related, we will reach the point where the meanings started to diverge. Clearly at that stage a change in the societies took place, engendering the diverging meanings of the same word. By reconstructing an original society through the assembly of shared words one can then start to follow the changes and transformations of this society, and its offspring, as the meaning of its words changed and transformed. This is what Vansina has done for the languages known as Western Bantu.

Looking at the basic word stock of Proto-Bantu we can gather what was common in the world of the Proto-Bantu speakers. One such word is *-ganda*, which was glossed as 'clan' by Guthrie. Vansina's own comment on the word reads as follows: 'The form is proto-Bantu, with the meaning
"House" or "settlement inhabited by a House." It may be the oldest form designating this social unit still in existence." (269) In my own research area amongst Oji-Herero speaking people in southern Africa, the word O/ozonganda refers to a gathering of houses centred around a male family head. My office mate, whose research field is amongst Gikuyu speaking people, 5000 miles away, also has the term Nganda, with the difference that the term is used to describe an enclosure or hut where boys are taught during their initiation. Clearly both terms are related to the proto-Bantu *-nganda as glossed by Guthrie and Vansina. Furthermore it is clear that at some stage in time the words carried an identical meaning. At some stage there were changes in the societies and the Gikuyu term Nganda acquired a different though related meaning to the word O/ozonganda in Oji-herero.

Vansina has gathered the words used to describe society in all its facets, from food cultivation through to housing and governance. He has traced the development and transformation of these words, how in some branches new words were introduced, how in other branches words were retained with slight meaning shifts, and how these changes and transformations reflect changes in society.

Having described in detail how one goes about reconstructing societies from words, Vansina engages in a long discussion as to the historical validity of the information thus garnered. Comparing the scholar, in this case himself, to a mosaicist or a pointillist painter, he notes that 'He or she makes an image of the past by painstakingly fitting together small slivers of evidence exactly as tesserae finally yield a mosaic and dots of paint a picture. It is slow and tedious work, but the approach is incredibly fruitful and flexible.' (31) And thus 'upstreaming' through time, from a baseline based on available written ethnographic evidence, Vansina begins his detailed description of the colonization, by the speakers of western Bantu, of the central African rainforests.

Contrary to the standard myth of the jungle as a never ending and unchanging mass of green where death is ever encroaching, Vansina details the multitude of varying 'eco-tones' existent within the Central African forests. Obviously each of these environmental conditions differently influences the ways in which people make a living, and thus Vansina situates and presents the environmental stage even before the forest was inhabited.

Around 5000 years ago, people living in what are now the grasslands of Cameroon discovered and learnt ways in which to become successful cultivators in a forest environment. These people were the first speakers of Western Bantu, whose life and society has been reconstructed by Vansina, using the processes of upstreaming and lexicostatistics. They were farmers of yams, legumes and palm trees, they had fenced and trapped yearly fields and they traded with specialized hunters and fishermen. These western Bantu forest dwellers had three overarching social and political institutions, which form the basis of the western Bantu tradition. These were the house, the village and the district. The houses and villages were headed by Big Men.

Having learnt how to survive in the forest, people moved into it until they were confronted by the next ecological barrier. Here they were held up for a while until new innovations, iron implements, the development of new edible crops in the small test gardens run next to the houses by women, or the introduction of new crops (such as the revolutionary banana), allowed people to move into areas hitherto only accessible to them as hunter foragers. The author describes how, in time, the whole of the central African rainforest came to be colonized by west African Bantu. 4

But what bearing does all this have on the topic of political tradition, as promised by the book's title? According to the author, the colonization of equatorial Africa was possible not only through continual innovation in the material sphere but through continuous institutional innovation. Therefore, throughout the book Vansina details how with every changing circumstance the shared 'equatorial tradition' allowed for ways in which society could innovate and adapt successfully. Around the second half of the first millennium A.D., when the emigrant communities in equatorial Africa had attained population densities of around four people per square kilometre, new institutional transformations and innovations firmly rooted in the 'equatorial tradition' took place. (99) Vansina describes and details how Western Bantu societies, continually drawing on their shared tradition, transformed their societies throughout the regions of equatorial Africa. Dividing equatorial Africa into a number of varied regions, Vansina details how differing institutional innovations were implemented, whilst continually stressing that these institutional innovations were drawn from and founded upon the same tradition.

... traditions are self-regulating processes. They consist of a changing, inherited, collective body of cognitive and physical representations shared by their members. The cognitive representations are the core. They inform the understanding of the physical world and develop innovations to give meaning to changing circumstances in the physical realm, and do so in terms of the guiding principles of the tradition. Such innovations in turn alter the substance of the cognitive world itself. A tradition is harmed when it loses its ability to innovate efficiently. If the situation perdures, it will die. A tradition dies when its carriers abandon its fundamental principles to adopt those of another tradition. This happens only after a society has become aware of a state of major incongruence between the cognitive and physical worlds of its tradition, and is also aware of an alternative paradigm. Doubts about the reality of its cognitive world can then paralyze any attempt to repair the incongruence. (259-260)
Based on the changing continuity that is tradition, the equatorial Bantu societies (with the exception of Duala) were able to weather millennia of challenges. The equatorial tradition did not only accommodate the challenges emanating from changing African society; for centuries, it also adapted to, and survived, the impact of non-African challenges such as the introduction of the Atlantic trade and later, the Slave trade to the coasts of equatorial Africa. At first, societies such as Congo, blossomed and grew in size, until they were subdued and consumed in the new trade. (221-225) Yet, every time a structure was destroyed, the innovation to replace it - be it the matriclan, the House, or some association - was drawn from the wellsprings of the equatorial tradition. (236) Physical realities were continually understood and innovation employed by drawing from the cognitive core of the shared tradition. However, this core came to be increasingly under threat as European influence foreshadowed the destruction of the equatorial tradition. ‘Ever since 1845 [mission] teaching had been undermining collective certainties of conceptual reality, thus piling mental uncertainty on top of growing physical uncertainty’. (235)

These uncertainties became all encompassing in the forty years from 1880 onwards, when equatorial Africa was colonized by European powers in a series of wars costing half of its total population. Quite rightly Vansina notes that, ‘The violence and utter destructiveness of such colonial wars is often still unforeseen and hitherto unimaginable events of the colonial conquest had created a gulf between the physical and the cognitive reality in the equatorial tradition at the very time that its cognitive reality was directly challenged by foreigners, whose own success seemed to bolster their claims to cognitive superiority. As a result the cognitive part of the old tradition, its very core, went into an irreversible crisis. The people of the rainforests began first to doubt their own legacies and then to adopt portions of the foreign heritage. But they clung to their own languages and to much of the older cognitive content carried by them. Thus they turned into cultural schizophrenics, striving for a new synthesis which could not be achieved as long as freedom of action was denied them. (247)

The death of the equatorial tradition in the forty years following 1880, is one of the core arguments of Vansina’s book. In these years, the implementation of colonial administration in equatorial Africa finally destroyed the equatorial tradition. Public divining and poison ordeals were banned in the name of Christian morality. In the minds of many Africans, this meant that witchcraft now ran unchecked and that public health was ruined. (246) New structures of centralized governance were introduced in the name of civilized administration. In the Belgian Congo the new administration dealt with the African population on the basis of a non-existent ‘segmentary, hierarchical, patrilineal society’ which did not then exist (and never had existed) in reality. Colonial administrators who could not find the existence of this society, physically regrouped the population to conform to it.

Vansina records that the equatorial tradition finally died in the 1920s, when it was killed by two simultaneous developments:

First in the realm of physical reality, the conquest prevented the tradition from inventing new structures to cope with a new situation. Instead the colonial government invented them. Its agents preserved some practices, but the whole structure made sense only in the cognitive realm of the Europeans, not in the equatorial tradition. This process was just the opposite of the dynamics current in the previous period, when novel foreign practices were justified in terms of the old tradition. Second, the
practice. Vansina once again emphasizes the necessity of learning the colonial conquest. In this, Vansina asks us not to indulge in abstract fantasies the way in which we conduct research into the history of societies faced with historical method used, Vansina's work, particularly concerning the Apart from detailing the Bantu migration into equatorial Africa, or the historical method used, Vansina's work, particularly concerning the importance of 'tradition' as an ever-changing continuity in African history, has important implications for our work. Vansina forces us to take a fresh look at the way in which we conduct research into the history of societies faced with colonial conquest. In this, Vansina asks us not to indulge in abstract fantasies as to the impact of colonial conquest. Instead, he commands us to search for that which did exist, starting from a stable background of theory, method and practice. Vansina once again emphasizes the necessity of learning the languages spoken by the people being researched in order to understand the context, the tradition from which these people were ripped. Only with this in mind we can hope to gain an understanding of why people acted as they did. Decensiaia after his seminal works on oral tradition, once again Vansina has shown that he is able to extract history from what at first looks like nothing. Once again, it will be very difficult for historians to keep up with what Vansina urges them to do. Without a doubt, with the passing of time, the elegant bridge constructed by Vansina will be found wanting. Thankfully those attempting to porter grand theories across will find the bridge sadly lacking, the varying strands, stalks and stems which were used to make up the ropes and cables of argument will, with the course of time begin to decay and the ropes and cables will begin to fray. During the course of time ropes will have to be replaced, but the bridge will stay, its basic structure unchanged. It is precisely in this that the strength of Vansina's book is to be found, as he has shown us how, through the use of the most diverse sources and fields, one can and should construct clear paths to the past. Finally, in contrast to Vansina's advice on the work of some other people, I would like to urge that his Paths in the rainforests become standard reading for all those with an interest in Africa.

Notes:

2. S.L. Hinde, 'Three years travel in the Congo Free State', The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society 5 (1895) 426-442. In this article, detailed coverage is given of King Leopold's use of mercenary armies in the sacking of Nyangwe and Kasango. The two market towns, on the edge of the southern rainforests with populations of 25,30,000 and 60,000 respectively, which were destroyed with the express intention of redirecting the trade to the factories run by agents of the Congo Free State.
4. Vansina's incredibly refined discussion and detailing of the societies of the island of Bioko through time is particularly fascinating and in itself it forms a microcosm of what Vansina does (see pages 137-146).
6. See Jan Vansina, Oral tradition as history (Madison 1985).