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are not exclusionary but supplementary; that Cross River masquerade arts simultaneously draw upon "the societal ideals of a Janus-like balance of individual power and community harmony" by simultaneously providing an "image of potent conquest," "the heightened realism of a portrait-like memorial," and "association with spirit metamorphosis," and thus they convey a "dynamic multi-focused visual and symbolic fullness." The decision to embrace within a single theory a sequence of apparently diverse thematic alternatives is advanced in this catalogue with vigor and a substantial quantity of background knowledge of the region. If along with its clarifying information Blier's essay incorporates speculative comments, these in turn, whether totally approved or questioned, may assist in redefining the peculiar nature of the brilliant art to be found in the Cross River area.

John Povey

### THE AFRICAN PAST SPEAKS

Essays on Oral Tradition and History

Edited by Joseph C. Miller

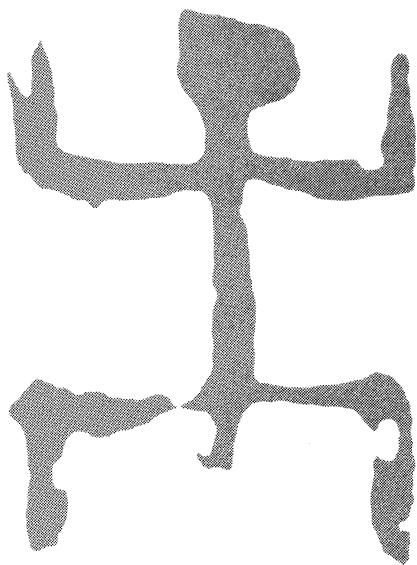
Dawson & Sons, Folkestone, England, and Archon Books, The Shoe String Press, Hamden, Conn., 1980. 284 pp., 12 maps, charts, index. \$27.50.

The African past certainly speaks, but in what language? Is it the language of testimonies and accounts, or is it the language of metaphors, of symbols, and of structures? And once identified, what and whose code will decipher the message and unveil the secrets oral tradition both reveals and conceals? Ten scholars—all historians, Vansina vintage—join in this volume to answer these and related questions, and to counter the critique anthropologists mounted against their mentor's historical method. The eleventh contributor is Vansina himself, who has the last word.

With the publication of *De la tradition orale* (1961) and with its translation into English as *Oral Tradition* (Chicago: Aldine, 1965), Vansina admitted as historical evidence oral accounts, narratives, even songs and proverbs. The book was, and still is, a true milestone in the scholarly attempts to reconstruct the African past. Vansina offered a program for systematic research that has since enabled historians to leave behind dusty archives and yellowing documents and go to the field to tap the oral sources of African history. In subsequent studies, he and his students applied this method to traditions of specific peoples, and the results of this research changed fundamental concepts of African history and broadened the basic information about the African past.

Simultaneously with the ascent of Vansina's historical method, Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology gained stature and influence. *The Savage Mind* and later the *Mythologiques* quartet that began to appear in 1964 offered a philosophy, a theory, and a method for the analysis of mythic narratives in nonliterate societies. Although the textual basis of Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology is mostly American Indian, the implications of his study were not lost on African historians. While for Vansina oral traditions evi-

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dence events, for Lévi-Strauss they encapsulate the thinking of the mind. In this way structural anthropology undermined any claims the historian might have on oral traditions. Even if there were some flimsy connections between current words and past actions, the mind would necessarily structure them in accordance with cultural cognition rather than historical sequence.

African historians could not watch silently the erosion of their newly gained ground, and in the present volume they fight back to regain their territory and re-assert the legitimacy of oral narratives in the courts of history. They do so with vigor and rigor, demonstrating through the analysis of specific cases the dynamic and complex relations between oral narratives and their historical references. They follow the premise proposed by Vansina that "legends of origin resemble palimpsests composed of layers of meanings reflecting earlier times and circumstances" (pp. 82-83). The layers that they expose consist of verbal addition to a narrative core, of cultural symbols, cosmological concepts, religious beliefs, and educational developments. By examining the relations between these factors and possible historical events, the contributors are able to present suggestive, even if at times speculative, historical case studies that contribute to historical knowledge of the particular groups and to general methodological problems in the historical analysis of oral traditions.

Several contributors address the structural-anthropological critique directly. However, their counterattack is often limited to the opening salvos and their sound fades away after the preliminaries. They gain volume once they establish their own historical interpretation and offer an exegesis for narratives that is corroborated by social-political events. Through reading these essays it becomes apparent that while structural anthropology and history differ in their fundamental concepts and goals, both can maintain an independent interpretive legitimacy for oral narratives. The acceptance of the one does not require the rejection of the other.

The potential compatibility between structural anthropology and history implies that in the study of African oral tradition, as in the study of the history in general, it is necessary not only to listen to what the past speaks but also to know what the scholar thinks. Interpretations derive their validity not only from corroborative evidence but also from the logical paradigms created to advance them.

A short review does not permit the careful examination that each essay in this volume deserves. All maintain a high analytical standard. The contributors and their essays are Joseph C. Miller, "Introduction: Listening for the African Past"; Iris Berger, "Deities, Dynasties and Oral Tradition: The History and Legend of the Abacwezi"; John C. Yoder, "The Historical Study of a Kanyok Genesis Myth: The Tale of Citend a Mfumu"; Robert E. Schecter, "A Propos the Drunken King: Cosmology and History"; Richard Sigwalt, "The Kings Left Lwindi; the Clans Divided at Luhunda: How Bushi's Dynastic Origin Myth

Behaves"; Randall M. Packard, "The Study of Historical Process in African Traditions of Genesis: The Bashu Myth of Muhiyi"; Robert W. Harms, "Bobangi Oral Traditions: Indicators of Changing Perceptions"; David William Cohen, "Reconstructing a Conflict in Bunafu: Seeking Evidence outside the Narrative Tradition," Gerald M. Berg, "Some Words about Merina Historical Literature"; David Henige, "The Disease of Writing"; Ganda and Nyoro Kinglists in a Newly Literate World"; and Jan Vansina, "Memory and Oral Tradition."

While all the case studies have broad methodological implications, only the first and the last essays specifically address general issues without relating them to particular historical instances. Miller's introduction sets the tone for the entire volume with a clear and thoughtful presentation of issues, terms, and controversies in the historical research of African oral traditions. Vansina concludes the volume with some reflections about human memory, the obvious link between events and their oral narration.

Nowhere in the text or in the index is the word art mentioned. Yet, the book could pave the way for new directions in the study of African art, for, after examining all the languages in which African art speaks, it is necessary to inquire whether it also speaks in the language of art. Is it possible to use art as evidence of past ideologies, of religions, of politics, of social and cultural movements and changes? And if such an inquiry is possible, how then do we let art reveal the secrets of the past?

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LES ANCIENS SENUFO 1923-1935

P. Knops

*Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal, Netherlands, 1980.*  
*Text in French. 312 pp., 97 b/w photos, map. 100 guilders paper.*

Père Knops is a Catholic missionary who spent the years from 1923 to 1935 in northern Ivory Coast and particularly in Sinematiali, which is primarily a Nafana village located 45 kilometers east of Korhogo. *Les anciens Senufo* resulted from his sojourn and was published by the Afrika Museum for the occasion of an exhibit of Senufo art.

In the preface, A. A. Trouwborst points out that "professional" ethnographers have been critical of ethnographies written by missionaries because of their religious bias, their focus on normative rather than actual behavior, and the comparisons they make with ancient civilizations. In spite of these concerns, Trouwborst supports missionary ethnographies as important primary sources for ethnographers.

Another vital concern with data recorded by missionaries results from their position as agents of social change who, because of the inherent nature of their goals, are adversaries vis-à-vis indigenous societies. This is particularly true in Senufoland, where the Poro society is a religious, political, and economic institution and is vitally important in the maintenance of traditional political power. A chal-