

Carolyn Keyes Adenaike and Jan Vansina, eds., *In Pursuit of History: Fieldwork in Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996) pp. xv, 155.

At one and the same time, this book is both a how-to guide and a challenge to historians of Africa. It is a how-to book, loosely understood, insofar as it allows us to learn from the fieldwork experiences of ten historians. It is also a challenge because at various points these individuals argue that fieldwork is, as Jan Vansina puts it, "*a sine qua non* for anyone who aspires to be a historian of Africa." (p. 127) What makes the challenge even greater is that the criteria offered in this book for adequate fieldwork are, by any account, extremely demanding. As a result, this book raises troubling questions for researchers struggling to negotiate the ethical minefield that is the discipline of African history.

Being an archival researcher just getting his feet wet in the practice of collecting oral evidence, I looked forward to hearing just what these historians had to say about the experience of fieldwork. In this book I found ten historians with a diversity of backgrounds and interests. All of the historians except Janet Ewald, Beverly Mack, and Jan Vansina have received or are working towards obtaining their doctorates in the 1990s. Mack and Ewald's Ph.D.s date back to the early 1980s, while Jan Vansina got his degree in the late 1950s. Tefetso Henry Mothibe is a unique contributor to this volume in two ways: he is the only one of African ancestry, and the only one currently teaching at an African university, the University of Lesotho. Graduate student Sheryl McCurdy is the only one without a doctorate (she is currently working towards it) and the only one without a university teaching position. At the other end of the totem pole is Vansina, a recognized authority on oral history with numerous relatively (for academia) widely-read books and articles, as well as many years of residence in Africa under his belt.

In all, the contributors relate experiences of research in Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Burundi, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire), Botswana, Sudan, and Congo. Their fieldwork experiences total anywhere from about a year and a half to eight years in the case of Richard Shain, who conducted fieldwork in the Jos Plateau region of Nigeria while he taught at a university there between 1979 and 1987. Shain and Mothibe, who conducted his work in Zimbabwe, both

worked closely with local university history departments, while the others tried to avoid academia, even of the African sort. Most, but not all, of the experiences recounted here took place in rural or small town settings.

Despite this diversity, however, there are numerous threads connecting the contributors and their contributions. Most notably, six of the contributors got their doctorates at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and therefore share a link with Jan Vansina, whose shadow looms over the book in many ways. This institutional connection contributed to the book's very existence, since it emerged from a 1993 symposium on fieldwork, which was held at Madison. Besides the fact that Jan Vansina supervised many of the contributors, that he has exerted a tremendous influence on the conduct of oral historiography, and that the symposium brought all these people together, we may also consider the role of the book itself which, by synthesizing the diverse experiences of diverse people, cannot help but to have homogenized their work as it appears here.

It is therefore somewhat ironic that the editors claim not to want the book to be read as a "how-to" for conducting fieldwork. (pp. xiv, xviii, and xxi) The editors themselves concede that the contributors share an inclination to social history, a belief that fieldwork is indispensable, and a refusal to obey the traditional injunctions of fieldwork manuals against personal involvement with their "informants." (p. xiv) In fact, even within the realm of social history it is clear, as the editors note, that these historians tend to ask questions about consciousness most especially. (p. xii) In the introduction, the editors use "we" to refer not to themselves but to the contributors as a whole. (p. xviii) There is thus a sort of editorial unanimity in this text that limits the number of readings that others can draw from it. Though the contributions of the various authors differ in numerous ways, they rarely contradict one another.

Not only is there a lack of apparent contention among these scholars, but even the differences between them more often reflect differences in the aspect of fieldwork focused on in each individual chapter than differences in the fieldwork experiences. For example, Carolyn Keyes Adenaike's piece deals with the problems that come with trying to get settled upon arrival, while Paul Landau examines epistemological issues raised by fieldwork. Z. S. Strother's account of

how she became entangled in local politics and was accused of witchcraft as a result is based on a fairly unique experience. However, in the introduction the editors point out that a similar experience is related by Laura Bohannon in "Return to Laughter." (pp. xxvii, xxxvi) Strother herself makes the crucial point that magic must be understood as "the power to make things happen," and in this sense it is clear that Westerners are powerful magicians, no matter how much they profess to disbelieve in magic. (p. 60 note 6) Observations like this relating to the general issue of sympathy and understanding across boundaries cannot help but be read as tips. Thus, even accounts of unique experiences can take on a prescriptive aura, and the book becomes a "how-to" in spite of itself.

The editors' disingenuity about the prescriptive aspects of this book is nowhere clearer than in the challenges they place before historians. I have already referred to how Jan Vansina sees fieldwork as indispensable. African historians without fieldwork experience, he argues, have not earned the right to be called African historians. While conceding the enormous value of fieldwork for grounding historical research, I still find Vansina's judgment unduly harsh. Many of the most respected African historians of his generation have little or no fieldwork experience, and the same is true of the younger generations. Surely many good historians and much good historiography would be consigned to the dust bins if we followed Vansina's statements to their logical conclusion.

What makes Vansina's estimation of the importance of fieldwork even more unreasonable is his narrow definition of the term. After all, a generous definition would allow many of us to live up to his dictum. However, he will have none of this. In his epilogue to this volume, Vansina rails against what he considers the too-liberal use of the word "fieldwork." (pp. 129-30) For experience in Africa to qualify, he considers that it must be "lengthy" and involve oral research and residence in the community being studied. It is not clear exactly what Vansina means by "lengthy," but he calls his seven-month stay in Congo "fieldwork," so we can consider this a sort of lower limit.

The irony is that Vansina and Keyes Adenaike, in their introduction, go into some detail showing just how difficult it is to get fieldwork experience. The first hurdle, of course, is funding, for it is very difficult for researchers based in North America to get funding for

research in Africa at all, let alone for periods long enough to allow both the archival research that Vansina admits is usually necessary and fieldwork stays of at least seven months. Beyond this, fieldwork involves risks to life and limb and, lest we forget, soul. All the contributors refer to the ways in which fieldwork produces thoughts and emotions that torment researchers, no matter how many commonalities they may have with the people among whom they live. The editors have done academics a service by letting this aspect of research in Africa speak its name. It is a shame, then, that they maintain such an exclusive attitude towards research.

I am reminded of the trend among cultural historians of Africa and elsewhere towards revelling in *jouissance*. I find this trend as edifying as I find it entertaining, and I will not join the chorus of scholars who refuse to tolerate it. However, I am troubled by the potential for disingenuity and exclusivity in scholarship that rejects truth claims. All scholars, after all, including the most enthusiastic anti-positivists, are implicated in a system that polices knowledge by granting or denying funding, publication, or employment. Moreover, it would be truly tragic if our fondness for play led us to dismiss scholarship that earnestly strives to engage in intellectual debates rather than transcend them. What I have said here about anti-positivist historiography is also true of scholarship that places a high value on fieldwork experience. It is surely no condemnation of either tendency to argue that we should save a place for work that is neither playfully ironic nor derived from rigorous and exacting fieldwork experience.

Given their insistence on fieldwork experience, it is interesting that the editors do not spend much time criticizing work that is not based on it. Instead, they reserve their criticism for "traditional" conceptions of fieldwork, especially those to be found in the corpus of anthropological, as opposed to historical, scholarship. Historically, anthropology has valued a kind of objectivity predicated on a distance between observers and observed as well as on the mechanical observation of programmatic rules of procedure. Anthropology's objectivity fetish has not been unique, as it has shared with the other social sciences the pathology which some have called "physics envy:" the belief that the most valuable knowledge is that which may be described by universal laws and reduced to mathematical formulae. Hence, this book's dual emphases - contingency and intimacy -

constitute a reaction to scholarship that has tried to make both procedure and data rule-bound and unemotional. That criticism of narrow conceptions of anthropological objectivity is old news, even among anthropologists, does not matter. This book emphasizes the perils of adhering to these narrow conceptions and the rewards of following things where they lead you, not just as matters of general principle or as points for criticizing the work of others, but in the heat of the moment of our own research, when the safety of the ivory tower is at its most distant. Even my own scant research experiences in Africa have shown me that it is better to embrace unpredictable and emotionally difficult things than avoid them.

Therefore, this book may be read as a forceful argument for scholarly humility. To its credit, it also shows that fieldwork experience is no guarantee that hubris has been overcome. In the book's epilogue, Vansina argues that even veterans of "fieldwork" must be humble about themselves and the fruits of their labors. (pp. 138-9) He insists that they observe the following precautions: 1) beware of imposing experiences gleaned from the present on representations of the past, 2) do not assume that respondents have been entirely candid, 3) avoid acquiring a sort of "secondary ethnocentricity" through identification with the people studied, and 4) remember that the authority of experience does not obviate the necessity of using evidence. The clear message here is that embracing the messiness of life is just a starting point, not a finishing point.

What gives the historians in this book authority is the fact that they have spent years learning the things that fieldwork has only just begun to teach novices like myself. Perhaps the most important lesson that fieldwork has to offer is that there is always something more for scholars to learn, including things that they might think they have learned already.

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