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VANSINA, JAN M.

VANSINA, Jan M. (1929-)
Professor of History and Anthropology
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[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 1.]

00:00:28

LAURA SMAIL: This is Laura Smail, and I'm interviewing Jan Vansina, who has been a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin since 1960, and to begin with we're going to talk about your research and how you do it, how you got into it, some of the problems that you've encountered. I know that you started off, what, 26 years ago or so in the field, in studying African history, some kingdoms of the Middle Congo, but you did your undergraduate work in medieval history, and then you went to London to study anthropology, and I am curious as to what caused you to move from history to anthropology.

JAN VANSINA: Well, very simply this--that one of my friends in history, when I was studying that, had calculated that after the normal training we would then start teaching in high schools, we would teach so many hours and then arrive at pension age and be pensioned off, and I thought that was a bit short.

LS: This is in Belgium, by the way.

JV: Yes, yes, this was in Belgium. So at the same time, or around the same time, I heard that the Institute of Studies in Central Africa was looking for an anthropologist, so I quickly read a book on anthropology--I liked it--there was nothing in it that I didn't like--so I applied, and they took me.

LS: Just that simple.

JV: Yes. It happened all within four weeks.

LS: For heaven's sake. So you hadn't thought about Africa at all, as a—

JV: No. You see, I had had interest in culture, but it was more ancient Egypt, China, and things like that. Not Africa.

LS: Yes. Because most people didn't even think Africa had a history at that time.

JV: Well, even at that time people thought the history of Africa was simply the colonial history.

LS: Yes, well--yes. So you went to London for a year.

JV: That's right.

LS: And then--? Then you—

JV: I went to London for a year, and then I was sent off to the field, and I was supposed to do anthropology, in the style of the British social anthropology of the day, which means you, you talk about kinship, and you try to find out everything you can about kinship, but you're not very interested in other things. Of course it didn't work out that way in the field.

00:02:36

LS: But--where did you go? You went to the Kuba—

JV: Yes.

LS: --country.

JV: I went approximately to the middle of what's now Zaire, where there was--there had been a kingdom before, and the outward form of the kingdom had been kept during the colonial period. So I was supposed to work there. I had not chosen this myself. The institute had chosen this, because the place was renowned for its art, and they wanted to know more about its culture.

LS: I was puzzled at this, though, your book, The Children of Woot, which has just come out, didn't have any pictures at all. I would like to have seen some of its wood sculpture, largely –

JV: Oh yes. No, that book should have had about twenty or thirty pictures in it. But it's just for economic reasons--they couldn't put any in it.

00:03:33

LS: Yes. What a pity. The cover has a picture. So, you described it in an article you wrote. What was it like, arriving there?

JV: Oh well, of course, you see, the training you get in disciplines you take does not really prepare you for practical things. And so it took a while to get adjusted to simple things like that you need money to get around, that somehow you need to find housing or lodging in a totally unknown place. But, once you're over that, and everybody somehow gets over that--I began by learning the language. And when I was learning the language, I would go from time to time in the town, because the housing I had found was a decayed house or hut, about five to six kilometers from the village.

LS: You were twenty-three years old, at this time, by the way.

JV: Twenty-two, I think. I don't know. Well, anyway, so I began dutifully learning the language, and then trying it out, and collecting some kinship terms. But it was while I was learning the language that one afternoon we were sitting in the compound, and one of the older men, he was not that old, but middle-aged, maybe, began to make a point, and in order to make his point, he cited a poem. Very short poem. "If I fight with the so-and-so, if I make battle with the so-and-so, I will not eat their salt, and I will not eat their fish", or something like that. Well anyway--what was that? I mean, what was that? He said "Oh well, that comes out of our history, and that proves that this point is so--that point he was arguing about. Well of course I had been trained as an historian before, and I had done my M.A. work in history on oral tradition in the Middle Ages, so I had a vague idea as to what it was about. And all of a sudden it struck me that if you had this, and if these points were not changed every time they were told, then you had the means of finding the equivalent of documents, and you could write a history of those people.

LS: You really had no idea of doing history when you went then? I hadn't understood that.

JV: No.

00:04:42

LS: So this was a very important breakthrough for you.

JV: Oh yes. Yes, you see--and I asked him if he knew some more, and he knew some more, and so he--you know--he said, "Well, you know, you write everything in newspapers," because that was the only writing he knew about "but we keep it all in our head." And indeed they did. Of course that sent me off on the problems you encounter with oral sources as sources. But the nice thing about this sort of thing is that when you encounter it in the field you don't worry about the difficulties. You gather the material and you begin to see what the problems are. And then afterwards, you know, you develop it for years and years. If you knew it before-

LS: What the problems were?

JV: Right! You would probably never start it!

00:06:16

LS: Well, should we go into what the problems are, or about gathering it first?

JV: No, I think gathering is more fun. You see, pretty quickly it turns out that you can gather these materials in two basic forms. One is poetry, which comes packaged. That is you ask someone for a poem and he recites the poem.

LS: Do you say, "Do you know a poem?" or do you say--?

JV: Well, what you find out of course is how those poems are named in the language. So you say, "Do you know `this' or `that'?" and this indicates the types of poems you're interested in--clan poems or general poems or poems of chiefs, and so on. And then he says yes or he says no. And you simply listen to them. And of course he may begin with four or five poems you know, but you are just patient and you see if there are any he doesn't--you know--he doesn't know. And you come back. The other type is tales. That's the other major type--stories-- and they you know, they differ more from one person to another, so you have to look for the line of the story more than for each word of it. But again, ah, there we had a bit of a break and you see, this was all justified at the time, towards my institute because it was teaching me the language, therefore it helped with the anthropology, and, ah, it was providing linguistic material.

LS: That's right. Because you said anthropologists tended to look down on history.

00:09:09

JV: Well, you see, I still have a paper from my student days, and I studied with a person who has become very famous since, Mary Douglas. And I remember--I still have the paper somewhere--getting the paper back on which one paragraph was accusingly marked with--in red-- "history-not valid"! So since then, anthropologists have changed, but at that time, they were very anti-historical. But anyway, with this type of language study, I managed to get help after about a month or so from a linguist who was coming through and who had a tape recorder, which was a very rare thing then, because you see a tape recorder needed an engine so you had to bury the engine about half a kilometer from where you were taping. It was a whole thing. Well, anyway, we set it all up, and we got the king to recite the official tradition.

LS: You just said to the king, "Will you recite your tradition?" and he did?

JV: No, no, of course, you know, I met the king four or five times beforehand, and then we explained the tape recorder, and then when the man came with the tape recorder, we showed how it worked, and he was interested in it, and he gave a public performance, as he would under certain other circumstances of this official tradition. After that, he was a bit annoyed with it, because for about three or four weeks, every day we worked with that tradition, and so everybody came and listened to it again, and this had not been in the intention of the king, of course, that ordinary commoners who couldn't listen to it when he recited it would now hear it day after day until everybody knew what he had said. So he was a bit miffed at that, but it wore off.

LS: That's good.

JV: Right. But you see, this is what brought me, then, onto the tale-type tradition, because the comments on this king's version came from absolutely everybody. And then it spread all over the land, of course, that there had been such a machine and the king had spoken into it and for three everybody had heard what he had said, so people all over the country knew that there was an interest in recording these oral histories.

LS: So then they were willing to—

JV: Oh, yes.

LS: --to give their versions.

JV: You see, in addition, of course, I was not the very first one to stumble on this. The administration had--and the administration everywhere in all colonial countries--had used that type of data to establish what the legitimacy of chiefs was, or what the priorities of this group over that were, what land rights were, and so on. So the people began by giving me all the versions they had given to the administration, and so I had to check in the records whether, yes or no, that was that, and then only later on did I get versions that were divergent or represented counter-claims, or I figured out for myself that, you know, they had cheated in this way or that way for this or that particular purpose.

LS: Were these--were these tales mostly of descent and of relationships and of battles, or did they give you facts about trade and about--oh other things that—

JV: They--some of them gave some facts about trade but what they mainly dealt with were battles--and wars rather than individual battles--and magic. Now, magical things can be anything. So they could touch on things such as trade, and the like. But by and large, data on economics were not in the tradition, and you had to rely on reminiscences of people. Or on folk-tales, where such details are present, and they're imbedded in the tale. So you know, you can then ask, "What does it mean?" And they say, "Oh well, before we used to do like this and we used to do like that." But by and large, the problem with oral traditions is, yes, they deal primarily with political and social change, but very little with intellectual and economic—

LS: Or with personalities. You made that point, and—

JV: Yes, you see, the--of course, an oral tradition is also a way people look at their own history, and their interpretation of the history. So they will stress two or three strong personalities, and they will add on to them, so they become ideal types, rather like George Washington and the stories of the apple tree. And--but it means that for long periods of history, for perhaps hundreds--two hundred or three hundred years-- you may have no more than two or three personalities, and you are not too certain, either, whether they approximate the reality. So the big problem, I think, for African historians, is--in that situation-- is that you see what is happening--you can recover some things of the past--but you know almost nothing about the actors.

LS: And that's something we treasure in history.

JV: Well, normally, in history we cannot do without it. And you know--because it does not tell

us what motivations there were. Why people do things, is normally given in--by the accounts that tell us what the personalities were and what they believed and so on. Here you only have the actions.

LS: I see. In fact, that's what history is about, is the motivations—

JV: Well, the interaction of both.

00:14:36

LS: Yes, all right. I got the impression that trying to find how to write a history of the Kuba people, for instance, was as important to you as the history itself. That is, how to develop a method by which you can reach the history.

JV: Well, you see, again, I think that some common sense is useful here, in that, of course when you stumble on a thing like that, and you think it should be possible to write a history, the first thing I thought--as far as I remember it now--was, well, I will show those anthropologists that you can really write history, and the notion was that if I could recover the history, it would provide some depth to anthropological description and make anthropological notions much more sophisticated. So I was looking upon history as something that would be a help for social anthropology, rather than the reverse. That was my first idea. Also, I simply felt that since these people had a history, it should be written down, or it should somehow be compiled as a history, and that they had just as much right to have a history as anybody else. This of course is simply to do with the fact that the more I stayed there the better I liked the people, the more I found them sophisticated, the more I, you know, appreciated them and looked up to them. So, these factors are not scientific at all, they are just the interplay of circumstances.

Well, of course, working with the data, and having had training in history after all, it became very important for all of these purposes that the sources be correct, and you know historians are always trained to find the sources and when they found them to evaluate them. And of course, as I said before, since evaluation of oral sources is not often as easy as written sources, I had to work more at it. But then it became very important to show that these oral sources were valid, because just as in those days anthropologists did have little feeling for history, in fact called it mostly 'conjectural history', because they would have no hard written data, historians did not think that those sources were, would have any validity either. Well, in practical terms, I was faced with convincing both of them so I had to be extra careful. And then a few years later, a year or two later, you know, I had to face the fact that I had to write a Ph.D. about this, and therefore convince a jury of historians.

LS: Well—

JV: How did I convince the jury?

LS: That, or--are you going to--because you spoke of having to bring in linguistics and archeology.

00:18:04

JV: Oh this--linguistics and archeology come in at various stages. First, obviously, you cannot collect oral traditions if you don't have at least a working knowledge of the language. And in the beginning of course, I thought that the oral traditions would give me enough data to work at a history, but I realized already that archeology would be useful. As it happened, I had only one chance of getting somebody, again, to help me out with the archeology and one place had been cited by the people as a very important site. So we went there with everything that was needed for a dig, and it was way in the bush, and we went and we went, and we went, and we ended up--we were walking in a marsh, finally with water, water up under our shoulders practically, when two things happened. First, one of our guides said, "I don't like this place--there are crocodiles around".

Then the other one said, "Look through this clearing," and we looked through the clearing and we saw a lake--we were practically in the lake by that time--we saw a lake. He said "This is where all the important things happened, and this is the site of the lake." Well, obviously, you couldn't do any field work there. So we got back from there quickly and quietly, because of the crocodiles, and about four or five miles further, (but it was evening then) we found a place that was littered with pot-shards, that is, where pot-shards existed and where we could dig. Unfortunately, people had made up their fields there, and the crops were growing, so we could not destroy them. And by the time the crops were harvested the archeologist had gone. There was no chance of doing it again. And since then nobody has been back there. So, archeology was for practical reasons, out.

Now, linguistics came in more and more as time progresses, because you see you could--and I did in fact--write a history of the people without bringing in too much--too much linguistics. Of course, you already used it, you could see that, for instance, if you found that the language belonged to a certain group of languages and the people claimed it came from the area where the other languages of the group are located, then you have a sort of second proof for it. Because people are not linguists, they cannot, you know, combine this themselves. But, in fact, linguistics turned out to be much more important later because, you see, after this Ph.D was done, it was all

right. It looked all right, but it represented really the vision that these people had--the Kuba people had--about the past. But, there was nothing really to tell me whether that vision was correct or not, and over time it developed that there were certain parts of it that simply were not correct. But it took ten years to prove this. That one point in particular, which they had sworn was correct, and which by their standards of historiography had to be most truthful, simply wasn't.

LS: Are you talking about a date, or an event, or--?

JV: No, an event. An event that's connected with a date. You see, they claimed that they had fought a war during their migrations, or at the beginning of their migrations, with a named people, and these people appear, in a written record, on the coast at a given date. And it turned out, when those other people were studied, that this was impossible. So, at that point, it became also clear that there were whole parts of history where you just did not have many dates. But, if you used linguistic material, you could by comparison, establish where words come from, which words are loan words, which words are old words, which words are innovations in the language. You can make a sort of history of vocabulary. If you do that for the vocabulary that's related to history, then of course you add a whole lot of information. For instance, you take, let's say, names for the days of the week. Well, the days of the week are linked with markets. If the days of the week and their names correspond to those that you find in one direction only, and you can show moreover that the system of these names is derived from another place, you have a very strong argument going, a)--to show that the trade connections were with that direction and not with others, and b)--that the systems originated somewhere else. Then you back this up by looking at the names and the objects for currencies, for the names for markets themselves, and so on. And with clusters of this data, you are able to find a whole lot about the past that you cannot find by oral tradition. But using the language and the ethnography of a people, together, you can flesh out the record.

00:23:21

LS: You said that the Kuba were close enough to the coast that they were affected by the trade--by the European trade--but were not themselves invaded and were not subject to slave-trading and that sort of thing. Is that right?

JV: Oh yes. Well the Kuba lived although they lived about a thousand miles up the coast, it was still influenced by the outlines of the trading system. And far from being asked to provide slaves, they already imported slaves; again, you see, the--when I was talking about language before--you can prove this, you can show this, by the terms the Kuba used for slaves--that in fact they were

buying them. And when we begin to have written data, in the nineteenth century, we see that they are still buying, and they never provided slaves. They bought them, they built up their populations with them. What they exported were special cloth--dyed cloth--ivory, and other such items, some of which got into the international trade, and many of which were used by other African populations, and these populations, were then selling other items--it is a very complicated system. But one that is linked, yes, with the Atlantic states, as early as the say, sixteen hundred or so.

LS: Your study of the kingdom of the Tio, who were slave traders--did that link up with the Kuba?

JV: Not directly. You see, of the reasons I worked with the Tio was that I hoped that it would link up directly with the Kuba. But as it happened, it didn't.

LS: Oh.

JV: Now, it should have. You see, this is where logic and history don't come together. Logically, there should be a connection because the easiest way to go from the Kuba to the coast is simply down the river, and this same river--it's a mighty river--goes down from their country, very conveniently, to the Tio country, and then to the Stanley Pool, which was the main market, since 1530, for connection between the Atlantic slave trade and trade with the interior. As it turned out, the Kuba trade goes mostly overland. But, and so the Tio became quite a different project.

00:25:47

LS: Did you have trouble, by the way, convincing you Ph.D. committee that --

JV: I had a lot of trouble. You see, when I left for Africa, I was not thinking of a Ph.D., I just was thinking about the field work. But, after a year or two, it was, you know, it became clear that I could get a Ph.D. with this kind of data, but since I had been sent out as an anthropologist, had begun doing the anthropological work, it had always been assumed I would try and do a Ph.D. in anthropology. So, I had taken my prelims in London and I thought I would defend the Ph.D. in London. Being in the field though, I thought well, it's much easier to defend it in Belgium, and I can do it in history and I should do it in history, and I became convinced I should. By that time, my old major professor had died, and had been replaced by a very young one. So I came back to Louvain with the Ph.D. practically finished--finished for about two-thirds--and went to see the replacement for my old major professor, and told him about it. And he said, "No! I mean, this is

not history. Go to London! Don't come here!" And I said, "No this is history. Because after all there is only one historical method; if it is logic it should apply just as well to this material as to medieval history, and what have you." Well, he said, "That's as may be, but this is not history." So then I said, "Well, look, you have replaced the other one--my major professor--and you have to, you know, take his liabilities over, and I am one of his liabilities." Well, he was sensitive to that argument, and so he began at least reading the material, and then he became more convinced of it. But he could not convince the department. So the department decided this question was too difficult for them. And they sent it on to the division. The division decided that it was too difficult for them to decide whether this was history or not, so--this was absolutely unheard of--they sent it right up to the president of the university, and of course the president said, "Well, that's none of my business--I'm just in administration. You've got to decide." So in the end, they decided they would take the history professors of all the Belgian universities who specialized in historical methods--they saw it as an historical method problem--and they added to that some other members, and they got this very difficult jury. From my point of view what it did was, of course, keep me on tenterhooks for about seven or eight months because it took that long before they decided on it. So it was not that easy.

00:28:46

LS: No. I'm glad they finally decided, and passed it and since then you've written, what, seven books, is that right? I counted them up--not to mention all the articles—

JV: Well, I think, ah-- you mean, seven books about the Kuba?

LS: No, just generally.

JV: No, I think it's twelve or thirteen, I don't know myself.

LS: Even more than I know of.

JV: Because you know, it depends how you count in these things.

LS: And here you thought you were going to have a career in a lycee and go on to a pension plan.

JV: Well that's why--that's right! That's why I didn't want to do it. But of course when I married, I told my wife, oh look, now I'm very busy, because I have to write this Ph.D., and this book, and then after that we'll be finished. And that I'm afraid, turns out to be a misrepresentation of.....

LS: That brings up two questions I had. One was: You stressed the point of the necessity of living in the field, and living as much like the people that you're studying as you can, and I wondered if you found that difficult--what some of the things that happened to you were, and then whether you had your wife with you.

00:29:35

JV: No. You see, first I went to the field for this first field-work before I was married, and I was very young. I think I was twenty-two. Well, that's a tremendous advantage, because you are still malleable. I mean, after all, you're coming out of school, you're at the age at which most people now are still graduate students, or beginning graduate students, and all you do is replace your old teachers with new teachers. You're still very susceptible, and people will, you know, people will teach you a language and you will really go at the language with the same energy that you went at languages in high school or at the university. Moreover, since it is your first project, and since you are of course faced for the first time with a foreign culture, a very foreign culture, you have to adapt. But again, I felt at that age, I did not have that many problems, because you are malleable. You know, you are not really set in your habits. Perhaps it was more our generation than now because we had just come out of the Second World War, which was unsettling, so that I never felt any real difficulty in this. And I acquired friends pretty quickly, and settled in a sort—

00:31:20

[End of Tape 1, Side 1.]

[Beginning of Tape 1, Side 2.]

00:31:31

LS: Well, I would like to ask you--I understand that you're the father of African history.

JV: Well, the answer is no. The so called fathers of modern African history would be Roland Oliver and John Fagen(?) in Britain. But they were interested in writing history from the African point of view, and as historians usually were in those days, they relied only on the written documents they could get. Now, in African history, this is not enough, because so much, if not the majority of data, are data that do not appear in the documents, even for the colonial period. Documents give you only the point of view of the colonial officers, whether they are missionaries

of administrators or what have you. Also, you can not understand the history of a society if you don't know how the society works. So it was very important to add field-work to whatever else you did in African history, and by chance--we have gone over that--I was doing field work, and was in a position where field-work and history went together. So the only new thing I may have brought to African history is the insistence that you have to do field-work exactly the same way an anthropologist does field-work.

LS: Well, you have to know how the society operates.

JV: And in order to do that—

LS: Which you can only get by field-work.

JV: Sure. You have to do field-work, and you have to learn the language. So, and that in the—

LS: But, that's a very big difference.

JV: Well, yes, it's a difference, but, you know, nowadays it sounds so obvious. It's surprising that it was not done before.

LS: But it wasn't.

JV: No.

LS: And as a consequence of what you did, oral history has, ah-- would you say you were one of the first in oral history anywhere, or—

JV: Oh, in oral history, the situation is like this: that with regard to Africa or other continents, except North America, oral history and oral tradition had been written down by administrators, missionaries, and the like, but had never been taken seriously by scholars. So what I did was to indicate why it should be taken seriously and how you could evaluate them up to a point. Now of course, oral history itself began earlier than that in the United States, when, as soon as the tape recorder became available, Columbia University began a program of taping reminiscences. And up to this day, in the oral history picture, you can see that Columbia's procedures are still tied to this idea, having grown out of the need for oral memoirs, really.

LS: Which is different from the kind of oral history that you were doing.

JV: Well, yes, you see, oral history in the strict sense is asking people what they have seen or what they have participated in, so you ask really for their reminiscences. In oral tradition, you are asking people about things which they have not seen, because they happened before their time. And so, the difference, technically speaking, can be important, because in the second instance, you have to worry as to how the person who tells it knows it, from whom he has learned it, if the person from whom he has learned it could know it, and so on. So there is a whole set of differences there.

LS: But you still call it oral history. Do you make much of a distinction between oral traditions and oral history?

JV: Oh, yes. Yes. You see, the whole thing of course, is oral, and it's history, so it's all oral history, but the traditions are different, in that they are not reminiscences of living persons. They have gone through, say, at least two memories, or three memories, instead of just one. And it is, well, you know, like hearsay evidence in court, versus direct evidence in court.

00:39:51

LS: Did you do any oral history with people—

JV: Oh, yes.

LS: --with the Kuba?

JV: I did some oral history with the Kuba. I did a lot more with the Tio. And of course I did some in Belgium, which I just--that just for practice. I also did some in Libya. And the Libyan project I was involved in this year was primarily just oral history in the strict sense.

LS: Oh, I see. Talking to people about a particular period—

JV: Right.

LS: --that they would remember.

JV: Right. And, you know, trying to get the information that they might remember, and also the documents that they might still have that relate to that period.

LS: I should be more specific. Were you talking about a--some particular era, with the Kuba, or were you just saying, "Tell me anything you can remember about--"?

JV: No. With the Kuba, you see, the oral history, the strict oral history, relates to the period after 1900. And there I would ask specific things. Primarily about how the area had been colonized. And I got a lot more simply by people telling me, without me asking them. That comes from the field-work situation. In Libya, the whole project was centered on the recovery of data about the war between Italy and Libya, and that's 1911 to 1932. There the direction--the focus--was much more specific. And it has to be if you want to get a good oral history.

LS: And you--you were able to get your--what do you call them--respondents? Or, could think in the same way that you thought, and could answer your question in a way to be helpful to you.

JV: Yes. And of course, that means that you have before you begin, to really think out the whole problem in the terms in which people see them. Because there are two uses for oral history. One is that it gives you a picture of what the people now think about the past, and its a sociological use. It is very important but often neglected. And the other one is simply to know what happened--to know things which have not gotten into the written record. But you see, if you distort the questioning, or if you make it too precise, then you lose the first half of this, which is the view a society now has about the recent past. You could do this in the United States and ask people as has been done, about what they were doing at the time Kennedy was assassinated and what they thought of it. Well, what you will get is not so much primarily what they thought at that moment, as the general view people now have about the place of Kennedy's assassination in recent American history.

LS: Unless you actually pushed them.

JV: Yes—

LS: Presumably they still can remember—

JV: Well, there are a number of very detailed things. You see, we know that numbers and opinions are the things which are least to be trusted in oral history. Because, to separate out opinions you had in 1960 from opinions you have now, say, would require that you become almost schizophrenic, that you can have the ability of saying, "Now, my opinion has slightly altered" or "It has not slightly altered" and in fact, most people simply cannot do it. If they could, they would probably be mental patients, if you start thinking about it.

LS: Is there something else that you would, I'm assuming this is a passage to be cut out—

JV: Yes, yes, of course.

LS: To pursue the creation of the oral history of Africa, for instance, how much did it affect the—well the Kuba people—that you were there doing their history, getting their traditions, and playing back on tapes their songs and tales.

JV: Well, you remember, at that time I had no tapes. In the early fifties there were no tapes. So in Africa the question is important because it does have immediate relevance. Now for instance, the Kuba knew very well that history had an indirect importance--it was indirectly important to them. Because they had already, in 1907, talked some history to a visiting anthropologist, as a result of that, although they did not know it was directly as a result of that, they knew it indirectly, their administration had been different from that of other areas. They had had a better deal during the colonial period. And they realized this. They realized that Belgians would not alter things if one could show that they were old institutions--traditional, very tradition institutions. So, they also had testified a number of times on items such as political successions, relation between different chiefs, and the like. And they were very well aware of the political potential. Now, in a much broader sense, history was very important to the Kuba, and they were glad to see it recorded. Because their present situation is not brilliant at all. So in order to maintain their identity, and their pride in themselves--it's much more important than for other people to remember, yes, that there had been this brilliant kingdom before. In other societies, say--when I worked also with Pygmies for a while--history does not have those important connections, because Pygmy society is so organized that the history does not really matter very much at all. And it will--you know, that kind of approach may vary from one society to another.

LS: Oh, that's very interesting. And the Tio, also--?

JV: The Tio were interested not in very deep history, but they were interested in bringing out the point that around 1880 they had been the most important population in the area of Brazzaville and Kinshasa, on the eve of the colonial period, precisely because they had to leave that area and were swamped by other people afterwards. For they too had some practical points. For instance, a number of Tio, two or three, had continued to claim lands which are now in Brazzaville, and you could claim those lands as part of a whole oral history. Well, when the problem of land in the city was settled, around 18--, sorry, 1958, 1959, it turned out that a number--two or three--of those Tio chiefs became very wealthy indeed, because they were paid compensation. This aspect, of

course, is one that is familiar here, when you look at the land claims by different Indian groups and the like. Well, the Tio are a case of that. And so, you find that every society has a different position now, and a different attitude towards history.

LS: I suppose it's in your book, but can you say briefly why the Kuba--why history should have meant so much to them, and not to--?

JV: Well, essentially, it meant a lot to the Kuba because from about 1620 to about 1900, they lived in a state that was a very brilliant state, in the sense that the political organization was complex, the public ceremonies were filled with pageantry--it's something like the changing of the guard in Britain.

LS: But, can you--but why--that's the first step. Why that? Why are they particularly--why did they have brilliant pageantry?

JV: Well, that of course grows out of their whole history. It takes too long to explain, but essentially, it's the ancestors of the Kuba people who did not have a state, who lived very simply, like their neighbors now. But, by migrating over some fifty miles, coming into contact with other people, and then later undergoing the influence of still another group, they made an original culture. They made something original that did not exist elsewhere in the whole region, and became the pride--their pride--and of course the model for the whole area around them. After 1900, of course, this is finished, because you are now in the colonial period, and the pre-colonial models do not count anymore.

LS: And the answer to whether the oral history affected them, in fact, it was beneficial to them--your work.

JV: Yes. Oh yes.

LS: It must have changed them slightly, but unless—

JV: But you see, they were already steeped in history, but what they hoped to do with my work was of course to convince administrators, and missionaries, and now, administrators of the modern state today, of leaving them alone, letting them do things the way they wanted to, and the like. And up to a point, this has succeeded.

LS: That's a monument to you.

JV: Well, not really.

00:45:51

LS: We were talking about your problems in your first trip out there, and I had wanted to ask you whether you had any problems with health.

JV: Oh, yes. Plenty of problems. See, when I arrived, I didn't realize very much about health issues. Oh, I knew you had to take some things not to catch malaria. And of course you catch malaria pretty fast, in that particular area. But a number of other things came up. One of them was simply malnutrition. Not having any idea as to what nutrition was supposed to be. I thought that if you ate, that was enough. It was also very difficult to get to the correct foods. Now you see, you can't eat what people eat, which would be the simplest solution, because it is boiled in water, and you are told before you leave, that you have to watch out carefully, for water because it carries all sorts of diseases in it, and it's true. So in order to simplify life I then went to those foods that are, you know, that have no contact with water, that are free of germs, and would be ideally packaged and available, and the answer was: the banana! It comes in its own package and you know, it's not full of germs and what have you. At least I thought not. So, I lived on bananas for a while. And then one day, I just couldn't get along anymore. You know, you sort of slow down, and slow down, and slow down, and somebody found me and said, "Look, this is not normal. Go to the hospital." They brought me to the hospital, and the doctor was--jubilant!--he was happy as could be because he found that here was an absolute lack of vitamins, and lipids, and I've forgotten what else. You see, instead of an illness, it was just a condition. But other illnesses I've had, including at that time, typhus. And you just cannot avoid them. I remember another one, which was a sort of thing you scratch, and you scratch, and they were trying out, trying to find out what it was, and finally they found that it was a disease that was known from the one river, where I had been working, just from that one spot. And sure enough, I caught it. It is almost unavoidable if you do serious fieldwork, that you will catch something, and you know, if you ask insurance companies, they make it very clear that their rates will be different.

LS: Your wife, Claudine, was with you one some of your later field trips.

JV: Yes.

LS: How did she get along?

JV: Oh, she got along very well. You see, she had been born and raised--was raised in Africa--so she knew about the field conditions. And she knew especially about cooking health foods and what have you. Now the later fieldwork was characterized by two features, that are due to her. First, none of us got really sick at all, and secondly, she managed to compile a large amount of information about what women were doing. Now the second society I was working in, the Tio, was one where the world of women and the world of men is totally separated. So, if you were a man, you practically do not know what women think or do. You can only see them from afar, so to speak. And of course, when you are a woman, you have the same drawbacks with regard to men. But, a husband-wife team was perfect for that, because we could put things together. For instance, I would see, or we would see together that a quarrel was brewing in the neighboring house, I would follow the man and listen to what he said--had to say. She would follow the woman and see what she--how she explained that to her friends. Then when the full blown quarrel came, because the Tio only quarrel in the afternoons--in the morning they go off and they say, "We'll have a quarrel tonight," you see, so you can prepare for it. So, when the quarrel came, we had all the background ready to understand what was happening.

Another thing she did, she's very good at drawing, and there are many things that are worth recording but would not do very well on photographs, especially if you can not use flash, which is often the case. So, her drawings are, you know, precious, because of that. We also found out in that fieldwork, by the way, if you compare a drawing from now with a drawing from the 1880s--you can do that very well--but you cannot compare a drawing from now with a picture from the 1880s, or a photograph from the 1880s with a--or a drawing from the 1880s with a photograph now, because the two media are so different, that, you see, you're never certain it's the same thing. But, if you compare drawing with drawing, and photograph with photograph, you'll have no problem whatsoever.

LS: In so far as an implement, you mean, or—

JV: No, this is--yes—

LS: Or, a way of weaving, or—

JV: This is for implements, but it's also for the outlay of villages, for instance, or houses, even big things like that show up pretty differently. Why? Because the photograph is exact, it looks exact, but it has problems with shadows and lights, and of course old photographs had these problems more than new ones have. The drawings bring out much more the very fine detail that normally would be left in the shadow, or for instance, in photographs very often the perspective hides half of the objects you want to see. And if you have a drawing that's not too skillfully done,

I mean not too academically done, that's what I mean, what you get is, you have, both in the old and the new drawings, things which the photographic eye really wouldn't see, but which relate, which ought to be understood as part of the same thing. It's in I think, the matter of understanding is different when you make a drawing than when you take a picture.

LS: That's fascinating. Has she done anything with them--have they appeared in your books?

JV: No. We have published four or five of them, we have about a hundred or so, that we just can't do much with, except make copies, because it's so expensive to publish iconographic material. You see, ideally for all of these societies, one should have, next to the written books, something like a hundred or a hundred and fifty, in some cases, two hundred different pictures. To show exactly what the difference in lifestyles are in the 1880s and now. But no publisher will even dream of that, that sort of thing.

00:52:53

LS: I'd be interested to know whether any of the Kuba now, young people, are doing oral history themselves. Have they bought tape recorders?

JV: Well, when I was in the country, in 1953, amongst the people who were born that year, there was a boy who now has an M.A. in history, and he's doing in fact, art history, using oral tradition. So he has a tape recorder, and he has gone back, and if you want, you know, there is—

LS: Here? Did he get his M.A. here?

JV: No. He got it in Kinshasa. And he's now working on his Ph.D. So, clearly, yes, this has continued, and people are continuing to tape all sorts of things.

LS: But it isn't that everybody in the villages are—

JV: Well—

LS: It still isn't a commonplace thing, if you speak of only one.

JV: No. I'm speaking of one who's academically trained. And there are a hundred thousand Kuba. And it's very likely say, that there are, oh, a dozen or so tape recorders around, given the situation of Zaire today. You know, you may have batteries just once a year, and after the batteries

are gone, what do you do? And, so it's more problems of technical kinds, that prevent people from doing it, than anything else.

00:54:20

LS: I'd be interested to have you explain again your system of collecting notes.

JV: Oh, the system I used that was the most effective was one of notebooks, because of the fieldwork situation. So you simply had big notebooks, and you write everything in one after the other, so the notebook at the same time is your diary, essentially. At the end of the notebook, you put,--of each notebook-- you make a table of contents, where you specify for each page what the different topics are that you find on these pages. And these table of contents are themselves four or five pages long. That is, if you want, the index that is going to help you later on. And then you can make the indexes more manageable by indicating one way or another--I did it with colored pencils-- what main topics are included. For instance, I think religion was green, economy was yellow, political--politics was red, and the like. It is better than two other systems, but it has a drawback. First, the drawback. If you don't make copies, and you lose the notebooks, that's it. So, if you can, use carbons --it's better to work with carbons. The advantage, over other means, is that of course you don't have to worry about a typewriter, and if you have made--if you make loose cards, the chances of losing some of the loose cards are pretty high. Also, with papers, loose papers that are typed, you make multiple copies, and the advantage of that, of course, is that you can classify things in several different ways, and the access is easier. But the disadvantage is not only that you lose some of it, but that you mix up copies and originals, or copies of copies, very often. The system I used is, you know, it's very simply. It requires a notebook and a pencil really. It means that once you bring things to a place where there are copying machines, you can copy out the whole notebooks, or parts of the notebooks, as needs be. I found in fact also, another advantage, is that notebooks simply are not bulky, so that you can always carry them with you, and the chances for losing them, really, are small--you have to think of fires, or something like that.

LS: What were these, stenographers notebooks, or the bigger--?

JV: No, I used all sorts of stuff, things. And I used simply the notebooks they use in secondary school, but those are bound type of things. And then I went to accountant books you know, the little accountant books they use in shops, because you can make carbon copies, and you rip the copy out and you mail it somewhere, and that's safe. In Libya, what we did was to use very big, very well-bound notebooks, because the notebooks then could go straight into the library. See,

they're the size of a book, and you don't have to bind them anymore. They were all in the same color, for each field season has a different color there, so you simply have to put the number on it, and you put it in the library, and that's that.

LS: In your library.

JV: No, I mean in the center library—

LS: Your notes are there, in the Libyan library?

JV: The notes we made for Libya, yes, they are there. The Kuba notes are not. The Kuba notes are being--in fact being microfilmed right now, so that they can be in microfilm library.

LS: For this--for the use of other people then?

00:58:22

JV: Yes of course. See that's another thing that has grown up in time. I now realize more and more that it's not good doing any work, if the notes are not accessible, sooner or later, and perhaps sooner is better than later, to other researchers. And this is a problem in African history and in African studies generally, that has been very neglected. You see, how can you know whether an anthropologist was a good ethnographer or not if you can't have his notes. What do you know--are we through with this?

LS: No.

JV: Okay. What can you know about the collection, say, of oral history, or oral tradition, if you don't have either the written--not only the original tapes, but also the notes of the person. You don't know how he found this informant. You know, it is possible, and in fact it happens, that people can be guided from one information to another in such a way that they only get one view of the society, because they are very carefully kept apart from people that would contradict them. And only notebooks can bring this sort of thing out.

LS: Where--who invented this--who thought of this? The notion that you should have access to field workers notes?

JV: Oh, this is--this has been growing very slowly. See, the problem always existed in

anthropology, in anthropology. But anthropologists were very wary of bringing it ever up. In fact, when the diary of Malinowsky was published in 1967, the outcry in the anthropological world was deafening. They thought it was a desecration--it should not have happened. But on the other hand, when you had two anthropological reports about the same society that did not jibe, then anthropologists themselves were sort of wondering, you know, who was right and who was wrong, and would have liked to know. But it's primarily because of the conjunctions of different disciplines that this has come out. You see, when you take historians now who go to do field work, where anthropological fieldwork has been done before, and they find differences, well, the difference may be real--the situation may have changed. Or, the differences may be due simply to the fact that the anthropologist was not interested in this or that aspect of the culture, or in certain very famous cases, never published on that particular aspect, but did take notes. So, you want to see his notes. And from there it is only a step to see that in fact the credibility of everybody relies, whether they're historians or anthropologists or psychologists, whatever, it relies on their raw materials. Plus, their memory, but you go as far as you can with the raw materials. And, you know, that's why we are hoping more and more to get these things on record.

LS: So other people, your students, for instance, could use them for their own research then, presumably.

JV: The students could use them, other--you see, other researchers who plan to go into that area, could use them and also, say, people who come at a later--stage, a later generation, may be interested in points on which you have taken note, but which have not been elaborated. And at one point or another in the future, it's quite possible that a thing which you casually write down now, becomes important and people would like to know exactly what the source was, and how it was said, or how it was written down in the beginning, because conceivably it could make a big difference. But in any case, that's--you know, it's sort of standard practice to do that, and yet nobody does it.

01:02:17

LS: You were--you wrote a reason for, or how you felt about the histories of the countries that you had written--do you remember?

JV: Oh yes.

LS: I like that.

JV: No, that you know, that's the different flowers in one garden bed. The garden then being the world, I suppose, and the flowers, the different flowers being the different civilizations-

LS: Each culture being a –

JV: Right, cultures of humanity. Of course, now we have this big creep of one creeper that's smothering all of them.

LS: But that makes all the more important that you have rescued for the--while there's still worthy individual cultures.

JV: Right. No, and I think, you see, again, that the rescue of these cultures is still possible, that there are many more direct documents about them than we imagine there is, you know. The amount of archives on Polynesia, Africa, and other cultures, without writing, is tremendous, and the amount of researchers that really look, not into official archives--because everyone looks there--but in private archives. Things like missionary archives, they are the richest, but also company archives, diaries, personal papers, and the like, is you know, it defies imagination. So that by working very carefully, you can really find a vast amount, and then, once you have part of that amount, go to the area, and see if you can still find people who remember the days, say, of the beginning colonial period, now, and could explain some of the record that you'll find. Right, I think we're almost through.

01:02:54

[End of Tape 1, Side 2.]

END.