

John YODER, "THE KANYOK OF ZAIRE : AN INSTITUTIONAL AND IDEOLOGICAL HISTORY TO 1895"

Cambridge University Press, 1992, 211 p.

I was astounded and delighted when I first read Vansina's review of Yoder's book in "Anthropos" (Nr. 88, 1993, 4/6, p. 630). I immediately ordered a copy of his book. We were both on the field in the beginning of the seventies. I started my ethnological work in 1970. Yoder started his historical fieldwork a few years after I left Kanyokland. We did not know each others published research and existence till today... Anyway the two only scholarly studies of the Kanyok are Patrick Wymeersch with "Les Bin Kanyok. Culture et Traditions", published by CEEBA, Bandundu, Zaire, Série II, Vol. 84, 368 p.) and the book of Yoder.

John Yoder's "The Kanyok of Zaire" is based on field research and archival work conducted in Zaire and Belgium in the mid-1970s. In addition, he has drawn on ideas of Jan Vansina, Joseph Miller, Clifford Geertz, Luc de Heusch, Victor Turner, Pierre de Maret, Thomas Reefe, and Jeffrey Hoover in an attempt to understand the data and to place the Kanyok in the context of broad Central African history.

The book, especially the first half, is an analysis of Central African myths, legends, and clichés which serve as vehicles for ideas, and opinions of the people. In Yoder's opinion, the book explains some of the most widespread, but least understood literary symbols of the southern savanna. The unfortunate chief who is deposed for failing to offer a feast; the wonderful, wandering hunter who seduces the local princess; the heroic ordeal and dance linked to the "tomboka" ceremony; and the fearsome chief who challenges lightning, sleep, and hunger are four of the most vivid and central of such tales. Yoder argues that a comparative analysis of these

stereotypical stories (many are used by the Luba, Lunda, Kalundwe, and other groups) reveals a clear political or social message: the failure of the feast is actually a breakdown of the tribute and patronage system, the seduction of the princess reflects a political transition in which patrilineally oriented big men supplanted matrilineally based polities, the tomboka ceremony is evidence of investment ceremonies which sealed inter-village or even inter-ethnic alliances, and the tale of a chief defying the forces of nature was political propaganda intended to legitimize an ascending regime.

In addition to his claim that meaning of stories can be uncovered, Yoder suggests that it is possible to trace the evolution of Kanyok myths, legends, and clichés as they were used over the last four or five hundred years. He believes that as political or social statements, these stories and sayings commented on specific identifiable events or changes within Kanyok society. In fact, Yoder claims that the shifting perspectives of oral tradition (pro-matrilineal before 1600 and pro-patrilineal big man after 1600; or pro-Luba before 1800 and anti-Luba after 1800) provide reliable historical evidence upon which to build a chronological portrait of Central Africa's past. He uses the historical linguistical work of Jan Vansina and Jeffrey Hoover and the oral traditions and political structures of surrounding peoples to corroborate this assertion.

While the first half of the book is an intellectual history, the last half of the book is more conventional account of nineteenth-century politics, economics and society. The growth of the international slave trade, the extensive political and commercial interactions among the savanna peoples, the political structures of the Kanyok and their neighbours, the rise of predatory African slave merchants, and the African role in the coming of European colonialism are all discussed. Even though a bit more written documentation and anthropological data is available to support this part of the study, because the first direct written documents about the Kanyok date from the 1890's, Yoder continues to rely heavily on oral accounts he and other collected.

Yoder's book is an important contribution to the understanding of the history of Central Africa.

Review by:

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