My Favorite Article

Luise White

Justin Willis, "Two Lives of Mpamizo: Understanding Dissonance in Oral History," *History in Africa* 23 (1996), 319–332, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3171946.

I've never been a regular or even frequent reader of *History in Africa*. I always considered David Henige a bit of a bully, the kind of scholar who could only become an authority in a small field with exceptionally patrimonial genealogies. I also didn't trust the journal's place in the field. When I was at the University of Minnesota and about to publish the first article of the vampire project someone asked why I hadn't sent it *History in Africa* to "try it out." (I understood this was a comment on the project but it made me suspicious of the journal nonetheless). Six years later I was in Washington DC finishing *Speaking with Vampires* and spending most of my time thinking about the nature of oral evidence and the interviews that generated it. This was the mid-1990s: African historians for the most part regarded oral traditions and oral histories as different things. Oral tradition required scrupulous care to interpret and analyze, while oral histories were based on Africans' recollection of their own experiences and thus were ready-made historical evidence. There was a renewed attention to the individual and to life histories, especially those of women. The oversimplification – embraced even by practitioners – was that Africans, especially African women, had to be allowed speak for themselves, which of course they wanted to do. Interviews needed method but they needed politics more. Rather than develop tools and

History in Africa, Volume 40 (2013), pp. s37–s38
Luise White is a professor of history at the University of Florida. She can be reached at: lswhite@ufl.edu

© African Studies Association, 2013
doi:10.1017/hia.2013.24

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2013.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

techniques to interpret, rather than verify, oral history, the job of the interviewer was to create a situation in which the informant – in one case, "the life historian" – would be able to tell his or her story.

I however spent the mid-1990s struggling with the question of oral evidence, and whether or not it was any different from that found in documents. I was writing the paper for the conference that became *African Words, African Voices* when I found myself pouring over the entire run of *History in Africa*. This, I soon learned, was where battles over the accuracy of oral materials were still fought. No other African history journal engaged with oral tradition and oral history as evidence. (In the early 1990s the *Journal of African History* asked contributors to cover a period no later than that for which archives were available, and the *International Journal of African Historical Studies* had published a nasty debate about interviewing women but that was it). *History in Africa* was like the elephants' graveyard for the study of oral tradition, oral history, and the relationship between the two. Once you found it, you had to walk past a lot of decaying flesh, but eventually you found riches beyond your dreams.

The article which was rich beyond my personal dreams was Justin Willis' "Two Lives of Mpamizo." In a carefully historicized argument, Willis wrote of a woman in southwestern Uganda who claimed a Hima grandfather in one interview and suggested he was a cattle-owning Iru in another. This was not a contradiction, Willis argued, but a dissonance, evidence of the complicated way that people understand their own social categories. Telling family history, most especially recent family history, was how informants recast and edit that history to address the tensions that constituted the recent past. Who they said a grandparent was, or was not, allowed for an argument about the past and privileged the instability of the ethnic and patronage categories. Testimony did not change because of anything to do with the interview, but because of the informant's situation: was a husband or wife in the room, was there an argument with a son's wife a few days before, did the first interview occasion a rethinking of how much social mobility a family had actually experienced?

This was the article I'd be waiting for. Willis revealed that the interview and the interviewer were not all powerful; in fact they were not terribly important. The context in which the informant lived daily was more important than the politics of the interview. In fact, "the interview" was not a very good idea: Willis made a plea for multiple interviews of individuals, because the dissonances between each account "rather than harmony" could offer a critical means of understanding the strains and the opportunities of an informants' social world. In the years before anyone would talk about performance in interviews Willis laid down a wonderful challenge to many of the orthodoxies of African oral history. The interview was not a sacred space, and instead of letting Africans speak for themselves, multiple interviews or just appreciating all the contradictory things informants said was a quantum leap beyond a single, simple African self. Willis' article offered the possibility of seeing the many selves of Africans and the contested histories in which they lived.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2013.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press