

# Vroklage, Founding Father of the Institute of Anthropology

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In 1948, Bernard Vroklage (1897–1951), a member of the missionary congregation *Societas Verbi Divini* (SVD), was invited by the then Catholic University of Nijmegen to accept the chair of ethnology at the Missiological Institute. He was also appointed extraordinary professor in ethnography in the Department of Literature and Philosophy. In this essay, I will reflect on the controversial relationship between missionaries and anthropologists. How did this relationship evolve from cooperation to opposition, and vice versa? With a portrait of this missionary and founding father of the Dept. of Anthropology in Nijmegen, I will try to shed some light on the subject.

Right from the start in 1923, the university had a strong preference to initiate missiology as a permanent part of the Faculty of Theology, but it took years before it was put into effect. On 3 October 1930, the saint's day of Theresia of Lisieux, patroness of all missions, the chair in missiology was finally introduced and Dr. Alphons Mulders was appointed director and lecturer.

In the early 1920s, Mulders had attended the University of Fribourg, where he learned about the missionary congregation SVD and the ideas of one of its most prominent members, Wilhelm Schmidt. In those days, Schmidt was already a well-known scholar who, in 1906, had founded the *Anthropos* journal, an international scientific review of ethnology and linguistics. Over time, it inspired Mulders to add general linguistics and ethnology to the standard courses of the mission institute. When missionaries could not go abroad during the Second World War, some of them were allowed to study at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. According to the anthropologist Leo Triebels, Mulders took the opportunity to recommend Bernard Vroklage as professor of ethnology. Furthermore, he asked Father Gregorius OFM Cap., 'a fervent follower of the Vienna School' of Wilhelm Schmidt, to teach comparative science of religion, while he added the linguist Jo Wils to the team (Triebels 1979). 'There the missionaries learned a bit of anthropology', the

future professor of anthropology Matthew Schoffeleers remembered (Meyer and Reis 2005: 25).

After the war it became possible to found an independent Institute of Mission Studies, the main purpose of which was to train missionaries academically so that they could be nominated by their congregations for managerial positions, in mission areas as well as in their homeland.<sup>1</sup> It was at this point that Bernard Vroklage started his official career at Nijmegen.

## The Long Educational Path of Bernard Vroklage

Bernardus Arnoldus Gerardus Vroklage was born in the village of Oldemarkt, in the north-eastern part of the Netherlands, on 28 December 1897 as the eldest son of Johannes Vroklage and Geertruida Agatha Polman. Seven brothers and sisters followed, two of whom passed away at an early age (Stamboom Froklage et al. n.d.).

The young Vroklage attended primary school and was ‘a quick and smart altar boy’ (Mulder 1912). Almost every year a missionary came over to inform the children about his work among indigenous people in faraway countries. These visits triggered the young boy to develop a desire to become a missionary himself. Telling his parents about his intent, they made it clear that they had insufficient means to send him to a minor seminary. After a series of temporary jobs his interest had not decreased. With the help of a local parish priest he succeeded in collecting the required funds and wrote a letter to the principal of the minor seminary at Uden, in which he explained his motivation as follows: ‘I want to offer my life to God which will hopefully lead me to heaven’ (Vroklage 1912). On 7 September 1912, at fifteen years old, Vroklage was admitted to the seminary of the *Societas Verbi Divini* where he turned out to be a brilliant student. Twelve years later, in 1924, he was ordained as priest.

Not long afterwards, he was appointed teacher at the newly opened novitiate *Sint Lambertus* in Helvoirt, where he started to teach ethics and the history of religion. In 1930 he received permission to study theology at the *Collegium Pontificium Internationale Angelicum* in Rome (Vroklage 1934–1935). He finished his PhD in 1931, a theoretical study on ‘redemption’ in Christianity as well as in Buddhism. Appar-

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1 Vgl. Hoofdstuk 10. Het Missiologisch Instituut. In Gids van het studiejaar 1949–1950 van de R.K. Universiteit Nijmegen. Bron: Universiteitsarchief Radboud Universiteit, Bestuursarchief Theologie 1940–2010, inv. no. 191.

ently his superiors had great expectations of him since they sent him to Vienna to study ethnology at the recently founded Anthropos Institute led by Wilhelm Schmidt. In 1935 he completed another PhD, this time entitled *Die Sozialen Verhältnisse Borneos: Eine Kulturhistorische Untersuchung*. After returning to the Netherlands he was in the race for a professorship at Leiden University, but was passed by J.P.B. de Josselin-de-Jong (Meurkens 1998a; Willemsen 2010). Subsequently, recommended by Wilhelm Schmidt, he received a commission to do ethnographic research. After studying the records of the universities of Leiden and Amsterdam for about two years, he left for the Sunda Archipelago in Eastern Indonesia, at that time the most successful mission area of the Dutch branch of the SVD.<sup>2</sup>

## Ethnological Research

In the fall of 1936 Vroklage again left his homeland by the *MS Baloeran* to spend two years in Indonesia.<sup>3</sup> After a short stay at Batavia (now Jakarta), he travelled to Muntilan on the South Coast of Java where he delivered some lectures at the *Xaverius College*. The core of these lectures was typical of the Viennese Anthropos assumptions of Wilhelm Schmidt.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Wilhelm Schmidt took a stance against the evolutionary idea that religion had evolved from polytheism to monotheism. According to the Christian faith as propagated by Schmidt it was the other way round. Isolated ethnic groups would have a notion of a Supreme Being, a phase in their development he called 'primordial monotheism'. Only later on had religion degraded into polytheism. To confirm his premise he invited several scholars to do research among pygmies, who, in his view, lived closest to prehistoric man.

Another aspect of the Vienna School was its specific cultural historical research method, named *Die Kulturkreislehre*. Following the ideas of Fritz Graebner, Schmidt and his colleagues initiated the idea of cultural circles of which elements could be taken over by other circles to diffuse into a new composition (*Kulturkreis*). In this way cultures evolved from primitive to primary, and further on from secondary to tertiary. In contrast with his view on religion, he adopted an evolutionary position in this scheme. 'The succession of "grades" is nothing less than the familiar

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2 After his theoretical study at both the universities of Leiden and Amsterdam he published Vroklage, 1936a. See Bornemann 1953.

3 Vroklage wrote an article about the passengers on board of the *Baloeran* (Vroklage 1937a). In the same year he published almost every month an article on Java, Timor and Bali in *Katholieke Missiën*.

sequence of “stages” leading from hunting and gathering types of sociocultural systems through horticultural and pastoral types and on to complex stratified civilizations’, the American anthropologist Marvin Harris wrote about Schmidt’s circles (1969: 385).

Vroklage, in his lectures and later in his ethnographic research on Timor, Flores and some smaller islands, applied the method and insights of his Austrian professors. In his teaching at the *Xaverius College* he pointed to the various cultural influences in Indonesia, originating from the mainland of China. Especially the *proa*-motif, derived from the Tonkin people who called themselves ‘men of one *proa*’, taken over by Indonesian ethnic groups such as the Toradja on Celebes (now Sulawesi) and the Batak on Sumatra.<sup>4</sup> According to Vroklage they had, through age-long contact, adopted these cultural characteristics and incorporated them into their own cultural habits (Anonymus 1936). Until today, this motif can still be recognized in the burial rituals of the Toradja and the specific roof building of the Minangkabau and the Batak.

A second topic concerned the Tuala, an ethnic group living in the South-western corner of Celebes who, according to Schmidt, belonged to the pygmy tribes. Vroklage discussed their successive development stages, each representing different cultural influences derived from a wider area that resulted in the current cultural circle.

After his stay in Muntilan, he travelled to Timor where he settled near the border between the Dutch western and Portuguese eastern part of the island. The central theme of his research concerned the religious life of the Belu, an isolated ethnic group living in this border region.<sup>5</sup> Here he found clear remains of a totemistic culture.<sup>6</sup> Although some elder Belu had a vague notion of a Supreme Being, they never made any sacrifice to Him after committing a sin (Vroklage 1950: 95). Incapable of speaking *Tetum*, the local language, he made use of a few Catholic teachers as interpreters. This diminished the trust of some elderly people, all the more since he lived in the local rectory and committed himself to missionary activities on a daily basis. Later, his fellow missionaries spread the rumour that his informants cheated him and only told stories they assumed he wanted to hear (compare

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4 After returning home he would write a three-part serial of articles (Vroklage 1940). It was a supplement on Vroklage 1936b, in which he described in general terms the *proa*-motif in South Eastern Asia, Indonesia, Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia.

5 In 1937–1938 Vroklage published several articles about special events in his research area, like the refusal of a forced marriage, headhunting practices, myths and legends, mission history and other stories (Vroklage 1937–1938).

6 “Ethnologisch onderzoek op Timor. Het werd de Hoogste Tijd, want spoedig zal van de oude Cultuurgoederen niet veel meer over zijn.”

Willemsen 2010: 151). Vroklage later affirmed this rumour in his inaugural speech of 1948, when he referred to the habit of the Belu that ‘they would never hesitate to give a likeable answer just to please me. Doing so the truth is for them less important’ (Vroklage 1950: 94).



Father Vroklage in conversation with an adat expert from Timor.

Source: *Katholieke Missiën*, April 1938, Vol. 64/6, p. 109.

During his stay he also performed physical-anthropological research on the racial characteristics of the Belu<sup>7</sup> and discovered ‘some pygmoid traits’ (Our Batavian Co-worker, 1938). He collected a large number of ethnographic objects, which he later donated to the Leiden Ethnographic Museum (De Jonge 2005: 182, 186). To compare and confirm his data, he went to the island of Alor and subsequently to the Western part of Flores, where the missionary Jilis Verheijen SVD (1908–1997) undertook linguistic and ethnographic research among the Manggarai people. Since his arrival in 1935, Verheijen was engaged in collecting numerous totemistic stories. When Vroklage visited his parish in 1938, Verheijen, remarkably enough, avoided meeting him. He later informed me that he did not intend to share his

7 He collected 5000 blood samples, 300 hand- and fingerprints and measured the length of 2700 people (Our Bataviasche Co-worker 1938). Prof. dr. Barge of the University of Leiden would elaborate on these racial data. See ‘Missiologisch Instituut 1947–1970’, Appendix 1, page 5, Universiteitsarchief Radboud Universiteit, Archief College van Bestuur, Cb13367 / cvb01052.

laboriously collected data about totemism with his academically trained fellow brother. He himself wanted to publish about various aspects of the Manggarai language and culture (Willemsen 2006: 106).

After Vroklage left Flores, he made a few trips to the islands of Sumba, Lombok and Bali and finally headed for Sumatra in order to collect additional data among the inhabitants of the Pasemah-area (Anonymus 1938). From Belawan, a harbour north of Medan, he left Indonesia by the same *M.S. Baloeran*.

Back in the Netherlands, he started to work on his collected materials. Apart from a sizeable book on the *Belu* he intended to publish a number of articles on cultural phenomena concerning the smaller islands. His list of publications is impressive. He became a member of the editorial staff of *Het Missiewerk* and published quite regularly in *Anthropos*. He was also frequently invited to give lectures (with additional slides) all over the country and received positive reviews in the newspapers (see for instance *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 1939). In the early 1940s, he was appointed professor at the *Sint Franciscus Xaverius* seminary in Teteringen to teach ethnology and religious studies (Vroklage 1948). Apart from all these activities, he gave lectures twice a month to major seminarians from various congregations on the cultural historical research method.<sup>8</sup> One of his students, Herman Sombroek MSF, remembered Vroklage stimulating his trainees to make a profound study of the 'native' culture of their future mission area.<sup>9</sup> During the years of war, Vroklage taught, as pointed out above, at the Missiological Institute and also set up a 16 volume serial named *The Religions of Mankind* of which he wrote the first part: *The Religion of Primitive People* (Vroklage 1949). After the war, in 1947, he took part in the foundation of a Mission School for young women together with Father Gregorius OFM Cap. He instructed them in ethnology and the various religions of Indonesia. Due to all these responsibilities, Vroklage did not succeed in finishing his manuscript on the *Belu*. It was only published after his sudden death in 1951 (Vroklage 1952).

## Missionaries and Anthropologists

The history of anthropology is intertwined with colonization and in its slipstream the Christianization of the indigenous people in various countries. Due to their long

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8 KMM interview with father Herman Sombroek msf at Catholic Documentation Centre, Nijmegen. Archive no. NL-NmKDC\_KMM\_75\_724.

9 Idem.

stay in certain areas, colonial officers and mission workers did acquire an intimate knowledge of the local language and culture. A number of them succeeded in publishing books and papers on local customs, collected numerous artefacts and sent them to ethnographic museums. When, in the twentieth century, anthropology gradually became an independent discipline, it was not surprising that priests and former administrators were invited to fulfil lectureships.<sup>10</sup> In the late 1940s, most students of the Faculty of Indology at the universities of Leiden and Utrecht, who were trained to become civil servants in the East Indies, became anthropologists after Indonesia obtained independence (Trouwborst 1990: 33). The director of the Mission Institute, Alphons Mulders, was a priest like Vroklage. Jeremy Boissevain, who worked for a welfare organization, was inspired to study Anthropology after he ‘visited the Wisers, who had written a famous book called *Behind Mud Walls* about life in an Indian village. They were missionaries’ (Van Ginkel and Stengs 2005: 49). He was appointed Professor at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) in 1966. Something similar occurred to André Köbben, who was inspired by a book written by H.A. Junod, a missionary and ‘keen observer’ and decided then and there that he would be an ethnographer himself (Strating and Verrips 2005: 10).<sup>11</sup> A decade later Matthew Schoffeleers and Johannes Fabian, who were appointed professors of anthropology at, respectively, the Vrije Universiteit (1976, VU) and the University of Amsterdam (1980) were also both priests (Meyer and Reis 2005). Fabian was, like Vroklage, a member of the *Societas Verbi Divini* and had been trained in Bonn, Vienna and Munich.<sup>12</sup> All of these scholars were acquainted with Schmidt’s theoretical framework, approved by some, rejected by others.

The way anthropologists collected data by staying in a certain area for one or two years did not differ much from the way mission workers obtained knowledge of ethnic groups. Both of them focused on local stories, myths and legends, asked questions in order to explain certain cultural phenomena and, where possible, attended local ceremonies. They noted down their observations and used them as starting points for new questions, thus gradually obtaining insights into the life of the local people. By definition missionaries were particularly interested in religious affairs, but anthropologists worked with preconceived research aims and objectives as well. Unconsciously both parties were more or less convinced that

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10 In Leiden, Ethnology started in the late 19th century, Amsterdam and Utrecht followed in the Interbellum and Amsterdam, Nijmegen and Groningen started after the Second World War.

11 The book of Henri A. Junod is entitled *Life of a South African Tribe*, Vol. 1. *The Social Life and Vol. 2. The Psychic Life*. Neuchâtel: Attinger Frères, 1913–1914.

12 Both Munich (1930) and Vienna (1933) had a Missiological Institute. See Mulders (1963) and Van de Port and De Rooij (2005).



their own religion and culture were superior. What differed was that missionaries were eager to learn about local religion in order to modify it according to the Christian faith or, as Vroklage noted, ‘anthropology or ethnology should contribute to the pastoral task of the missions’ (Trouwborst 1990: 37).

## From a Controversial Relationship to Mutual Respect

From the time anthropology became an independent discipline, anthropologists more and more felt the necessity to distinguish themselves from missionaries. They started to criticize mission workers and accused them of distorting the original culture by imposing the Christian faith on the people. In their view, missionary publications were all biased by Catholic motives. When Vroklage returned from the field in 1938 he already had to deal with this kind of criticism. Anthropologists from the universities of Leiden and Utrecht rejected the scientific premises of Wilhelm Schmidt and the Vienna School. Some of them thought the ideas were outdated, strongly anti-evolutionary and too much in favour of the Catholic doctrine that God was the initiator of ‘primordial monotheism’. In short, they argued that Vroklage’s research was biased by the Christian faith. He himself remained an adept of the Vienna School, although he minimized the theoretical cultural historical approach in later work. After his sudden death in 1951 none of his students continued to do research in accordance with the theoretical framework of Wilhelm Schmidt (Meurkens 1998b). In due course, they also rejected the belief in primordial monotheism. An example is given by Father Sombroek MSF. He was sent to Borneo (the part now Kalimantan, Indonesia) in the early fifties. From the start he was convinced that Vroklage was right about the notion of a Supreme Being among the Dayak and began to use their local term of God in his preaching. A few years later he concluded that he had misunderstood the Dayak who in fact did not recognise a Supreme Being but instead addressed themselves exclusively to their ancestors.<sup>13</sup>

By the same token, missionaries were sceptical about research done by anthropologists. They criticized their relatively short stay in the field, their often inability to speak the local language, their leaning on missionary information and use of mission facilities, but most of all their intellectual disdain towards them. An example from Jilis Verheijen’s life illustrates this attitude. After many years

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13 KMM interview with father Herman Sombroek msf at Catholic Documentation Centre, Nijmegen. Archive no. NL-NmKDC\_KMM\_75\_724.



of extensive research in the eastern Manggarai districts of Flores, an American anthropologist arrived. Verheijen allowed her to use his dictionaries and published texts in the local language and to live in his home for a few months. And yet, in a report sent to her supervisor, she dared to write: 'The whole eastern part of Manggarai has received little attention by administrators, priests interested in anthropological work, and anthropologists' (Willemsen 2006: 301). This offended Father Verheijen. In a letter to the British anthropologist Rodney Needham he wrote: '...the damage was done. Although we remained on friendly terms, yet I could not get it over my heart to give a lot of anthropological material concerning Rembong, which at first I planned to hand over to her. Maybe you don't expect such an attitude of a missionary, but you will understand it' (Willemsen 2006: 302).

Over time the friction between the two professional groups dwindled. Decolonization diminished the influence of both missionaries and anthropologists. Ethnic groups began emphasizing their own unique identities (Bonsen, Marks and Miedema 1990: 6). At the same time, missionaries came to the realization that they had to incorporate indigenous concepts of belief in their Christian message or leave their message out altogether. Younger missionaries started to support the local people in economic and social welfare programs and propagated the so-called 'liberation theology'. Anthropologists, on the other hand, recognised their own theoretical biases. They focused their research more and more on injustice, land ownership, the oppression of women, poverty, the lack of education and health care and the miserable situation of marginalized minorities. In this way, both professional groups grew towards each other which resulted in increasing mutual respect.

Indeed, missionaries became anthropologists, a tendency Peter Nissen named 'the conversion of the missionary' (Nissen 2022). Anthropologists, on the other hand, started to get interested in the doings and writings of missionaries. In May 1988 this resulted in a workshop at the Department of Anthropology in Nijmegen and the subsequent publication edited by Roland Bonsen, Hans Marks and Jelle Miedema: *The Ambiguity of Rapprochement. Reflections of anthropologists on their controversial relationship with missionaries*. In various contributions, the common history of both professional groups was acknowledged, but the essential differences in approach and purpose were also emphasized (compare Lagerwaard 1988). Was it mere coincidence that this seminar was organized forty years after Bernard Vroklage started his career as professor of ethnology?

A couple of years later I was introduced to the mission congregation SVD and became acquainted with Father Jilis Verheijen. He had recently returned from Flores after almost sixty years and brought his still unpublished ethnographic,

linguistic and other scientific manuscripts with him. My yearlong talks with him, his fellow missionaries and family resulted in a scholarly biography of his life and achievements. In doing research I also stumbled upon a sizeable collection of private letters written by his fellow missionary and future Bishop Willem van Bakkum and was allowed to publish them (Willemsen 2005). In subsequent publications I concentrated on other members of the SVD, wrote various articles about specific missionary topics and a series of portraits based on the KMM (*KomMissie-Memoires*) interviews collected by the Catholic Documentary Centre of Nijmegen University (Willemsen 2014).<sup>14</sup> In doing so I reversed roles. Not the Indonesian people, but the missionaries and their activities became my ‘exotic’ research topic (see for instance Van der Geest 2006). In that way, I contributed to the completion of the circle that Vroklage had opened in 1948.

When he died in a car accident in October 1951, the Dutch branch of the SVD lost one of its most prominent members. Not only had he laid the academic foundation for a group of Dutch missionaries, he was also the founding father of anthropology at the University of Nijmegen (Mulders, 1951). In 1958, the discipline of cultural anthropology was transferred from the Missiological Institute to an independent institute (Meurkens 1998: 36). Six years later it was integrated into the newly founded Faculty of Social Sciences (Triebels 1979: 22; Nissen 2015: 148). Vroklage’s supervisor Wilhelm Schmidt survived him two years as did his own father (Stamboom Froklage et al. n.d).

Nowadays the Dutch province of the SVD has dramatically declined. Only eight members are still alive, most of whom live at the central mission home in Teteringen. New missionaries from Flores and other Asian countries have come to the Netherlands to take part in what is called ‘reversed mission’. They live in communities and support vulnerable groups in our Western society. The Institute of Mission Studies supports these foreign mission workers in various ways. As such, Vroklage’s original mission has come full circle as well.

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14 The KMM interviews, a rich collection of oral history, can be consulted at the Catholic Documentation Centre (KDC) in Nijmegen, Erasmuslaan 36.

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