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Two studies on Asmat and social transformation in the past and the present

Jan Pouwer, *Gender, ritual and social formation in West Papua: A configurational analysis comparing Kamoro and Asmat*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2010, x + 300 pp. [Verhandelingen 258.] ISBN 9789067183253. Price: EUR 34.90 (paperback).

Astrid de Hontheim, *Chasseurs de diables et collecteurs d'art: Tentatives de conversion des Asmat par les missionnaires pionniers protestants et catholiques*. Bruxelles: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2008 + 317 pp. [Dieux, Hommes et Religions 12.] ISBN 9789052013800. Price: EUR 34.95 (print on demand).

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Two studies feature the Asmat of West Papua, New Guinea: Jan Pouwer compares their rituals with those of their western neighbours, the Kamoro, and Astrid de Hontheim examines the impact of religious missionaries. In the 1950s, Pouwer was a government anthropologist who lived among and studied the social structures of the Kamoro (then known as Mimika). He became so familiar with them that they called him Mister Pen and Paper, a title of honour. Pouwer wrote his dissertation in 1955, but, as it was published in Dutch, it never got the international recognition it deserved. Therefore it is fortunate that he was able to finish *Gender, ritual and social formation in West Papua*, which may be regarded as his magnum opus.

Through interviews, Astrid de Hontheim compares the strategies and methods of Catholic and Protestant missionaries. At the beginning of the book the pioneering Dutch priest Gerard Zegwaard is introduced. In 1953, he started converting the Asmat to Christianity. He settled in the region, thus forcing the Dutch colonial government to establish Agats station, which has today become the largest town. For the description of this very first period the author has to rely on documents, and as these observations are written in Dutch and usually were not translated in English, the book blurs the contours at this point. But between 2001 and 2006 De Hontheim interviewed 23 retired priests and preachers and three missionaries still in the field, as well as 22 Asmat, including three

clergy-men, who offered independent opinions. She draws attention to the problems of Catholic and Protestant missionaries in the field, their adaptation to the territory, their perception of reality and their tolerance with respect to the Asmat people and their influence on the culture. These interviews complement ethnographic observations which are the core of cultural anthropology. Over the trajectory of De Hontheim's fieldwork, the strange gradually becomes familiar and perhaps as well, the familiar strange. De Hontheim also applies this anthropological approach to the history of conversion in West Papua into the framework of specialist literature on Christianity in Oceania.

Pouwer's work similarly contributes to the literature of the region. His book offers a valuable supplement to the cross-cultural analysis of *South Coast New Guinea cultures: History, comparison, dialectic* (1993), which overlooked the Kamoro, as author Knauff could not read Dutch. Pouwer makes a comparative analysis by means of a configuration: 'a process that turns elements into components arranged and imbued with meaning by a central orientation' (pp. 7-8). Of course, here is a man who devoted his lifelong career to structuralism, and to systematic comparisons. Because Pouwer is willing to interpret the fundamental differences and the remarkable similarities of Kamoro and Asmat, he gives the reader something to hold on to; he offers a clear insight into society, culture and beliefs, and into the ways in which they go together or interact. In this way, he contributes to a deeper understanding of their cultures. Pouwer emphasises that their world view is based on two concepts: reciprocity or balance, and duality, which in turn are an expression of the principle of complementarity.

According to Pouwer, the principle of complementarity structures the world – and thus myths, rituals and art, into basic binaries: the duality of man and woman, on a cosmic level, the division of upper world and under world, and on a spiritual level, ancestors and the living. Reciprocity is called *ao pao* by the Kamoro. Women still have a powerful position in the gathering of food, and Kamoro tend to focus in a symbolic way on female aspects, and according to Pouwer, therefore the way they strive for balance is far more peaceable than their neighbours. Even at the time of his fieldwork, Asmat exhibited a strong obsession with headhunting and revenge; their men were rewarded for their warfare. While Kamoro focus on female fertility, the Asmat believe that spiritual life stems from death, the male antithesis of continuity. This is the most important difference between the two cultures. Strong similarities are to be found in their cosmology, their narratives, their art, as well as in their rituals and cult of the dead. Pouwer expands upon the traditional religion of both Kamoro and Asmat, which still determines their way of thinking, even if they are converted to Christianity.

A different sort of duality exists in the religious strategies for conversion. The title of De Hontheim's work hints at the most salient discrepancy

between the Protestant and Catholic missions. The Protestants were not so much concerned about the culture of the Asmat Papuans, but present God's Word and take an objective to pursue 'Satan in the swamps'. The Catholics assert that the goal of policy is not conversion but the wellbeing of the Asmat, and to keep their culture alive by stimulating and collecting Asmat wood-carving. The Protestant clergymen focus on medical care next to pastoral care; Catholic missionaries fix their attention more on schooling, hygiene, and the emancipation of women. The book merely sets these approaches beside one another without analysis or commentary about their similarities and differences, and little or no judgement of their overall project

The one thing De Hontheim is clear about is that her informants have trouble understanding 'the Other.' Most striking is that in their work missionaries mostly depart from their own convictions and theories. It appears difficult for missionaries to enter into the Asmat's way of thinking. The same goes for the reader, as published interviews do not provide enough opportunity to gain a real insight into the worldview of the Asmat. De Hontheim shows the approach of the missionaries and related problems. They see it as a difficult task to introduce what they regard as the achievements of the Western welfare state as schooling, medical care, hygiene and women's lib, or the rejection of polygamy, especially when the result often fails to achieve the desired effect. It came to pass that girls going to mixed schools later became pregnant. It also happened that they did not apply their knowledge of hygiene on their return to the village. According to Virgil Petermeyer OSC, an introduction of these concepts is more successful if it is in accord with elements already existing in Asmat culture; for example making use of the pre-existing stories and symbols in teaching. He states that, during initiation, knowledge is passed on to the young men via mythology and also via works of art that conceal privileged information. However, on occasion Petermeyer also meets fathers who withdraw their sons from school on the grounds that school learning shouldn't interfere with traditional, sacred and secret knowledge. But for those critical of missionary work, this methodological advice is beside the point, since it merely offers ways for Catholic or Protestant institutions to more effectively and efficiently achieve their goals.

When Pouwer discusses the modern marketed carvings, and the revival of the accompanying rituals as supported by the Crosiers Asmat Project, he shows clearly how it converges in a reification of culture limited to art. Pouwer combines the data of his fieldwork in the 1950s with those of the recent situation gathered by scholars with whom he maintained a direct contact. In this way, he also pays attention to the Catholic mission and their 'cultural diplomacy'. It is also remarkable that he draws not only on his own investigation, but also on research of Catholic missionaries with a keen interest in the mythology and worldview of Asmat and Kamoro. In his acknowl-

edgements, Pouwer expresses his respect to the dedication of Zegwaard, and Coenen, his successor in Kokonao, in the Mimika region: 'They put much effort into gaining a deeper understanding of Kamoro and Asmat life-ways; I owe a lot to them' (p. x).

It will be clear that the anthropologist Pouwer, as a structuralist, has another goal and another public than De Hontheim. By systematically comparing, he focuses on cultural orientations, patterns and paradoxes, whilst De Hontheim gives her informants a voice. Because of this basic difference in attitude, motivation and methods of the two authors, their understanding and description of the Asmat world naturally differs as well.

The anthropological method used by De Hontheim is nowadays also adopted by Western performing artists, filmmakers, and visual artists, due to the personal and temporal elements in description. They consider many issues. How great is the responsibility of the author who noted all those opinions? What choices did she make in giving informants a voice? Opinions of the interviewer may change during the research process, and those of the reader may also change over the course of the book. The book starts with a scattering of voices, building up to a many-voiced choir of informants making all sorts of sounds and noises; some very distinct voices, striking a completely different note than others, but everyone seems to be telling a different story. De Hontheim's fascination with missionary cultures trying to convert the Asmat and change their traditional practices provokes general reflection on similar contemporary efforts at what today are called 'nation building' or 'democracy promotion'. What might readers, whether native or colonial, religious or secular, make of such practices?

What is documented, how, and for whom? How does the author handle the answers of her Asmat informants? Often I found that they noted that Westerners ask those questions which they are unable to grasp, whilst being expected to give answers which are comprehensible to Westerners. What did this research mean to the Asmat who contributed to it? How do we evaluate the status of these time documents? The onus is placed on the reader to deduce their own analysis or story. The difficulties of *suggnomè*, the Greek notion of 'understanding the same reality', become readily apparent in this context.
