JAN VERSCHUEREN'S DESCRIPTION OF YÉI-NAN CULTURE
EXTRACTED FROM THE POSTHUMOUS PAPERS
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Map of the Yéi-nan territory
Preface

Joannis Cornelis Verschueren (1905-1970) worked as a Roman Catholic missionary in southern Irian from 1931 until his death on July 28, 1970. Following his ordination in 1930, his Congregation, the Sacred Heart Mission, destined him for a function in the organization's information and propaganda service in the Mother Country. For his orientation, his superiors sent him on a visit to the diocese of the Moluccas and South New Guinea, one of the Congregation's major mission fields. Travelling through the Merauke area, he became so fascinated by the missionary work being done there that he requested and received permission to stay. After an introductory period at Merauke, he was put in charge of the work in the middle and upper Kumbe and Maro basins, a region which through his own activities was soon afterwards extended to the Boadzi territory west of the middle Fly. Initially stationed at Merauke, he later settled at Bupul on the upper Maro. From here it was easier to serve the three parts of his "parish" and pay an occasional visit to the upper Bian area than from the Mission's main station at Merauke. As he was an indefatigable walker, I suspect that this was not the only reason for his retreat to Bupul. At Merauke he knew himself too much watched by his superiors. In the solitude of far-away Bupul he could be himself and follow his inclinations to establish as many contacts as he liked.

He did not return to Holland until 1946. Back in New Guinea, he was stationed in the Mappi River region, whence he was recalled to Merauke in 1953 to participate as an expert on local customs in the researches of the team charged with the task of exploring the factors causing depopulation among the Marind-anim (the South Pacific Commission Project S 18). He persuaded his fellow-members of the team that the Yéi presented a good case for comparison with the Marind. Having a different language and culture, they suffered from a comparable population decline. The argument was valid, and in addition to other work on behalf of the project, he assembled and sorted out his old fieldnotes on the Yéi, made a one-month trip through the area, and proceeded to write the papers which are recapitulated in the present volume. After a short visit to Holland (1955) he was stationed in Wendu, on the coast, with the Kumbe basin and the coastal area between Bian and Maro as his parish. During his last years he lived at Merauke.

Verschueren was quite a character. He cared little about his personal appearance, and it took him some twenty years to get his Brahman accent under control. Outwardly a countrified parish priest, he was a keen intellect as well as an artist. The mural on the vault behind and over the altar of his little church at Bupul was of a bright beauty which deeply impressed me when in 1937 I paid
him a visit at his headquarters. He also had a gift for music, and gave much of his time to the recording of native songs. Above all he was interested in native culture, though not with the aim of preserving it unchanged, for it was his calling to change it, spiritually as well as materially, and he was always active in both fields. One of his accomplishments in this respect was the establishment during the war of an agrarian school in the hinterland of Merauke. He nevertheless was deeply convinced that the past is not a thing to be thrown away. There is always something in a cultural past to be proud of, something capable of merging with Christian belief and liturgy. This was his ultimate object, which, combined with a purely intellectual curiosity, induced him to probe as deeply as he could into his parishioners' cultural past. The results of this research were published in a small number of articles which contributed substantially to our knowledge of the original cultures of the area. Really outstanding is his article on human sacrifice in South New Guinea (Indonesia I, 1948), which was an eye-opener, at least to me.

However, Verschueren had one handicap, namely his impetuosity. He was always in a hurry, and more given to quoting from memory than to the patient checking of details which were not to be found in the fieldnotes at his immediate disposal. Yet there was one exception. When challenged to prove or disprove either one of his own or of another person's assertions, he would go to the very heart of the matter. Here he was at his best, which is the reason why his major contribution to ethnography was provided by the letters written by him in comment of the original draft of my book Dema. They cover hundreds of closely typed pages containing a wealth of hitherto unknown facts, which changed the old picture considerably. This time these facts were well checked. I owe him a great debt for this, though not for this alone, but also for that great friendship which survived all differences of opinion. Actually, we disagreed often and on various points. But the friendship which sprang up between us during our common journey to the Boadzi in 1937 endured.

It is this debt which I must now try to repay. After Verschueren's death, his confrères collected the papers from his legacy. They were, as expected, in a state of chaos. His old friend, the late Father P. Hoeboer, sorted them out and, moreover, typed out those which might be of ethnographic interest, kindly putting a copy at my disposal to see what could be done with them. I had to postpone this scrutiny for many years, but when at last I was able to find time to study them more closely, I discovered that they comprised three categories: a collection of fieldnotes concerning the Boadzi, four papers on the Yé, and three Malay-language reports, written in reply to questions put by Verschueren to Indonesian mission teachers stationed in the Yé-nan area.

The fieldnotes on the Boadzi have, for the greater part, been summarized by Verschueren in his letters concerning Dema, in which their contents have been published. In so far as these fieldnotes contain additional information, this is too fragmentary to be of any use, except to students with a wider knowledge of Boadzi culture than is available at present. They can be consulted in the library of the Social Sciences Department of the Royal Tropical...
Institute, in which also my correspondence with Verschueren is kept, together with his final comment on Dema, one year after its appearance. Here I have also deposited the papers being published in this book, together with the teachers' reports just mentioned. One of these is dated 1934, and I have good reason to suppose that the others are from the same period. Only some of the data presented in these reports were used by Verschueren and worked into his papers. Others were ignored by him for reasons which sometimes I am able to guess and sometimes do not know. Because I feel uncertain about the specific value of the writings of these teachers, I have made no more than a moderate use of them for my comments.

Before turning to Verschueren's papers themselves, a few words should be said about the only two ethnographic reports on the Yéi ever to be published, those by Wirz and by Nevermann. Both authors were professional anthropologists, the former of whom was well acquainted with the nearby Marind-anim, while the latter was a collector of ethnographic artifacts commissioned by the Berlin Museum to visit not only the whole of southern New Guinea, but also the New Hebrides and New Caledonia. Wirz's observations are limited but, on the whole, reliable and matter-of-fact and concisely formulated. Nevermann, on the other hand, was new to the area, had no other means of communicating with the natives (and the mission teachers!) than a rather limited Malay, and spent only two, at most three, weeks in the area. Yet he managed to fill well over 130 folio pages with an account of his experiences. Though his statements about what he himself observed are sometimes valuable, it takes quite some time to extract them from this verbose essay. I have seldom come across an anthropologist who could write so much about so little.

What Verschueren has to tell us is of a different nature altogether. It is genuine inside information. Though sometimes distorted by an over-emphasis on the differences between the Yéi and the Marind, which is aggravated by his conviction that the Yéi were sexually less depraved than their neighbours, his data as such are new and authentic. So authentic, in fact, that they repeatedly contradict his avowed opinion on the more "moral" character of Yéi-nan culture when compared with that of the Marind. Actually, he himself blocked the way to a more neutral interpretation of the facts presented by him by his insistence on including the Yéi in the depopulation research because they were culturally so different. In the context of the team's concern he was successful. With regard to the facts I can only say that they create a picture of a typical lowland culture with a surprising emphasis on headhunting, an uncommon way of segregating the sexes, and a highly elaborated system of phallic symbolism.

All this can be concluded from the four papers left by him, which, for the sake of convenience, I have labelled A, B, C, and D. Among these, ms. D stands apart. It comprises a four-page collection of myths which, unlike the three others, contains no reference to the author's participation in the Depopulation Research Project. Presumably, it is of a later date and was written as a contribution to some collection of native myths and folktales.

Manuscripts A, B and C all make mention of the Depopulation Re-
search Project as the reason for their writing. They are summary descriptions of Yéi-nan culture of highly divergent lengths, comprising 18, 54, and 13 closely typed pages respectively. Only one of them forms a complete whole by itself, namely ms. A. It is moreover the only one which bears a date: Merauke, 1954. Its final page has a table of contents and a short glossary. Apparently it was written as the author's contribution to the team's final report. It was not included here in full, but was worked into a special chapter better adapted to the immediate aims of the report than the more comprehensive text of ms. A. The writer of the definitive text of the report, Dr. S. Kooijman, is not to blame for this. He adopted this procedure reluctantly, expressing the hope that Verschueren's studies might one day be published in full in an ethnographical journal. Dr. Kooijman did more than this: he also attached Verschueren's ethnographic map of the area to the report, in spite of the fact that it had no real bearing on the final text. Although it is still mentioned there, the publishers, the Ministry of Overseas Affairs at The Hague, did not attach it to the mimeographed text, which, moreover, was distributed to only a very few institutions. Those which I know received copies are, apart from the South Pacific Commission in Noumea, the National Ethnographic Museum in Leiden and the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam.

Yet the map is of considerable importance in the context of Verschueren's combined papers, in particular mss B and C. I only realized this when, by a stroke of unusual luck, I came across it in my private collection of maps which I was searching for something else. The map indicates all the different arow (confederations of clans) into which the Yéi are divided. It is published in the present volume after having the names and locations of the present-day villages and the names of the rivers added, the latter as far as I have been able to identify them from other sources. How the map found its way to my library is a question which I cannot answer with certainty. I probably owe its presence here to the kindness of Dr. Kooijman, to whom I wish to express my sincere thanks for this as well as for other reasons.

Manuscript A contains a very concise survey of Yéi-nan culture, on which more detailed information is provided in mss B and C. Unfortunately, both are incomplete. B breaks off on p. 54, in the middle of a myth, i.e. in the middle of the first section of the chapter (obviously the last one of the essay) devoted to Religion and Magic. The text of ms. C runs closely parallel to that of B, but breaks off much earlier, somewhere in the middle of the chapter dealing with the social organization of the Yéi.

The fact that the three documents overlap raises the question of which is prior to which. The possibility of settling this question on the basis of external evidence has disappeared with the originals of the typescripts at our disposal. The only factual indication provided is the explicit reference in all three to the author's participation in the depopulation project as the immediate reason for writing the paper concerned. This implies that they all originated in the same period. A comparison of mss B and C - which are close parallels - suggests that B is prior to C. B impresses me as having been written more hurriedly than C. B contains superfluous details.
and one or two poorly based value judgements which are lacking in C. The question which remains is that of the relation between mss B + C and A. A provides a good, convenient synopsis and presents the data in the same order as B (and C). Being a good synopsis, it will have demanded a good deal of prior spade-work. On these grounds I presume that mss B and C were the author's first attempts at writing a survey of the main traits of the culture. He must have started the work with that unbridled enthusiasm which was characteristic of his way of doing things. While working on the chapter on Religion and Magic, he must have realized that it was becoming altogether too long and, besides, was in need of revision anyway. So he started a new. This then resulted in the more refined but only slightly more condensed text of C. Realizing that this, too, was growing too long, he again broke off, but now much earlier than before, and thereupon wrote the concise text of A. The fact that the description of the material culture and economy of the Yéi in ms. A is closer to the text of C than of B supports this assumption. Though no definite proof can be furnished, the assumption offers a satisfactory explanation for the fact that we are confronted here with three parallel texts, which are often divergent in details, and of which only one, the most concise one, was completed. A is the only document presenting a coherent survey of Yéi-nan ritual and magic. The latter implies that precisely on the point of ritual and magic the information is scant. No one deplored this more than Verschueren himself. In 1967, while on long leave in Holland, he stayed for a week or more with us, and on this occasion repeatedly expressed his ardent wish to complete his Yéi-nan papers and prepare them for publication. This was in contrast with what he said about his field-notes on the Boadzi: these had been so badly damaged by mice and termites that it would not be worth while bestowing much attention on them. His papers on the Yéi, on the other hand, were still intact and contained a great deal of new information - as, indeed, they do. In any case their analysis has led me from one surprise to another as gradually the picture unfolded of a typical New Guinea lowland culture which is distinguished from its neighbours by its unique mode of giving expression to the dialectics of sex and violence in a male dominated society.

Two points remain to be discussed. In the first place that of the manner of presentation of the three texts. Publication of the three simply one after the other, leaving it to the reader to decide what to do with them, would not be very helpful because the differences between the texts raise questions which cannot be left unanswered. Besides, this method of publication would be contrary to the intentions of the author, who had in mind a single comprehensive description. For this reason I considered it my duty to combine the texts and to explain the choices I made wherever the differences between the three texts created problems by means of annotations in square brackets. Although this seemed reasonable enough, it soon got me into difficulty with Verschueren's own interpretations of his data, which constitute part of the text. I have already pointed out that some of these are dubious, to say the least. Actually, the situation is worse than that. Verschueren never for a moment realized the full
meaning and significance of the data which he presented. The materials collected by him are really surprising, but he never knew this. Should I, for formal reasons, let this go unnoticed and publish the text without pointing out what a really new kind of world the data open, whilst, by my familiarity with surrounding cultures, I am in a better position than practically anyone else to recognize their significance? I would have honoured his memory poorly if I had! Consequently, I have not withheld my comments. To avoid confusion between my own statements and Verschueren's texts, I have placed these sometimes in end notes (in contradistinction to the one footnote added by Verschueren), sometimes in square brackets within the text itself, but mostly as Editor's comments in separate indented paragraphs. The reader will find these paragraphs dispersed throughout the text and will find the notes and comments always sufficiently recognizable as my additions and as observations which are my personal responsibility. In this way an ethnographic description took shape which in some places differed in its order of presentation from that by Verschueren, but in every other respect always follows his text closely. I feel confident that this mode of presentation of his materials demonstrates more convincingly what a fine ethnographer he was than a method whereby I would have withheld my comments.

The second point to be raised concerns the linguistic position of the Yéi and the difficulties I had with the orthography of Yéi native terms. Our knowledge of the Yéi language is poor. On the point of vocabulary all we have to go by is a wordlist of 450 items arranged in non-alphabetical order as part of the comparative wordlist appended to Geurtjens' Marind-anim dictionary (referred to in the text as Woordenboek). Secondly there is Drabbe's grammatical outline of the Yéi language (10 pages), and Boelaars' comments on it in his dissertation (1950). The latter is important in that it informs us that linguistically the Yéi are related to the Kanum-anim and the Trans-Fly people, and not to the Marind or the Boadzi. All this, however, offered no solace in my difficulties with Verschueren's often confusing spelling of Yéi-nan words. Consequently, I had to evolve my own system, which may be summarized as follows: e designates in most cases the mute ë as in novel, but may actually also be pronounced as é (the a of April) or è (as in bed or French père), simply because the texts do not give any clarification on this point; a may denote either the a of French grand or the á of German Bahn. Where there is evidence, occasionally, that it should be á, it is rendered as 'such; j designates the sound often reproduced as dj, namely the j of just; y is used where Dutch has j; it corresponds to the y of yes. I had special difficulties with the v and w. In Drabbe's grammar the v is not mentioned, and only the w is. Verschueren uses the two consonants interchangeably. A case in point is the word yevale which is often spelt yewale. Apparently, the sound is somewhere in between the two; with the many dialectal differences in the Yéi language, this is very well possible. I solved the problem by opting for yevale because, in a dispute with Verschueren about a for-
mally related Marind term, he emphatically spelt the word out as $yōvalē$ (cf. Van Baal 1966:243).

In conclusion, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology for its preparedness to honour the memory of my late friend by publishing his intellectual legacy in its Verhandelingen Series. I am indebted also to the Institute's staff, in particular to Ms. M.J.L. van Yperen for her highly appreciated revision of the English text, and to Ms. H.P.M. Tijchelaar-Schulten for her effective secretarial and editorial assistance.

Doorn, December 1982. 

J. van Baal.