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F.A.E. van Wouden (1908 -1987) - A tribute


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To commemorate a person's achievements requires the construction of a memory. Regrettably, F.A.E. van Wouden left little to his academic colleagues, other than his writings, with which to carry out this task.

Certainly the circumstances of his career were hardly fortunate. The economic depression of the 1930's that limited employment possibilities, the outbreak of the Second World War and his internment as a prisoner of war in Indonesia in the 1940's, and then the rupture in Dutch relations with Indonesia in the 1950's – together with problems of personal illness – combined to frustrate his efforts to achieve a stable intellectual ambience in which to work. For most of his career in Indonesia, Van Wouden was a government linguist who served in obscure posts in Sulawesi. Only for a brief period did Van Wouden hold an academic appointment. This was a position as lecturer in anthropology at the University of Indonesia, an appointment that lasted for three years. When this position was terminated, Van Wouden returned to the Netherlands but failed to secure a suitable academic appointment. Soon thereafter he retired for health reasons, ceasing to have further contact with most of his former academic colleagues.

In the course of his career, Van Wouden produced only three publications: a dissertation in 1935, a long essay on various north Sulawesi myths in 1941, and an article on the social organization of Sumba in 1956. This slender output would, superficially at least, seem an unlikely basis for achieving the international recognition now associated with his name.

Recognition of Van Wouden's work came only after he had retired, when, ostensibly, he acknowledged no further interest in anthropology or Indonesian studies. His 1935 thesis, Sociale Structuurtypen in de Groote Oost, although of some influence among a small group of anthropologists, remained virtually inaccessible to the wider international academic community until the publication of Rodney Needham's elegant translation in 1968. Similarly Van Wouden's 1956 article, 'Locale groepen en dubbele afstamming in Kodi, West-Sumba', went largely unheeded until it was translated and included in P.E. de Josselin de Jong's important anthology, Structural Anthropology in the Netherlands, published in 1977. To this day, Van Wouden's 1941 publication, 'Mythen en maatschappij in Boeol', has
still to be translated and remains a more or less unrecognized effort in myth analysis.

A further irony is that international recognition of Van Wouden’s early work followed on the publication of Lévi-Strauss’s *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*. As a result, interpretation of his work has often been advanced as if Van Wouden were merely a precursor to Lévi-Strauss. Thus he has been seen as an analytical thinker of some discernment whose various structural insights into particular forms of cross-cousin marriage foreshadowed later theoretical developments.

In this view, well before Lévi-Strauss, Van Wouden recognized that: (1) cross-cousin marriage is the ‘logical expression of a systematic communication of women among larger descent groups’; (2) the ‘lineality’ of the descent groups is theoretically immaterial to the forms of connubium; (3) ‘ordinary’ [symmetric: MBD/FZD] marriage and ‘exclusive’ [asymmetric: MBD] marriage are ‘representatives of two opposed systems of affinal relationships between groups’; (4) exclusive marriage with the FZD would make a ‘systematic ordering of affinal relationships between groups impossible’; and (5) an ‘integral system of affinal relationships’ based on exclusive or asymmetric marriage would number at least three clans but could also be composed of any larger number of clans linked in a ‘closed chain of marriage connexions’. (See Fox 1970:337-339 for a longer discussion of these issues.)

This retrospective interpretation of Van Wouden’s thesis, based on a checklist evaluation of those points on which Van Wouden anticipated Lévi-Strauss, provides an inadequate view of his work. The critical, and certainly more difficult task, is to consider Van Wouden’s thesis in terms of its own particular theoretical foundations. From this vantage point, *Types of Social Structure* appears as a distinctive work that might better be read in contrast to *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*.

Although both Van Wouden and Lévi-Strauss drew from the same *L’Année sociologique* tradition, they systematically elaborated different ideas from within this tradition. Thus the crucial ideas in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* are those of reciprocity and exchange and the key text is Mauss’s ‘Essai sur le don’. However, in Van Wouden’s *Types of Social Structure*, this essay by Mauss is not cited at all. In Van Wouden’s thesis, there are only three references to works outside the Dutch tradition: Rivers’s *Kinship and Social Organisation*, Malinowski’s *Myth in Primitive Psychology* and, what is the critical text to an understanding of Van Wouden’s study: Durkheim and Mauss’s essay on primitive classification, ‘De quelques formes primitives de classification’.

Van Wouden’s major concern is with systems of classification, not with systems of exchange. Most of the book focuses on the analysis of various myths and on systems of dualism and tripartition. Marriage is seen as the ‘pivot’ to these classification systems, not because of the entailments of reciprocity, but as a reflection of a concomitant cosmological order:
'Cosmos and human society are organized in the same way, and through this there emerges the essential interconnexion and similarity of the human and the cosmic' (Van Wouden 1968:2). For the same reason, the directionality of exchange is less important than the classification of the exchanging groups and the categorization of the objects that they exchange.

Whereas Lévi-Strauss's elementary structures develop, by means of exchange, toward more complex structures, Van Wouden's synthetic model represents a reconstruction of a former order. As a consequence, those developments that gave rise to the divergent practices evident in eastern Indonesia imply a disordering of the logic of this prior system and of the integrity of its underlying classification. This at least is the implication of Van Wouden's arguments, which clearly reflect the influence of Rassers (1925, 1931), as much as of Durkheim and Mauss.

Given Van Wouden's interests, it is not surprising that his next major work should be directed to the further examination of the structure of myths. Unfortunately, as a government linguist, Van Wouden was not posted to any of the areas of eastern Indonesia that he had considered in his dissertation. Thus having stressed the importance of the different forms of cousin marriage and of connubial relationships between unilateral descent groups resulting in double unilateral descent, Van Wouden found himself obliged to work in an area of 'bilateral kinship with a pronounced tendency toward endogamy within the bilateral kingroup, same-generation marriage and no distinction of any kind among different sorts of cousins' (Van Wouden 1941:392). The social underpinnings of his previous analyses of forms of classification were lacking and the existing social structures - as indeed the myths associated with them - were sufficiently different to call forth fresh analytic models.

In a long essay of some eighty-seven pages, Van Wouden examines in detail different versions of two origin myths he had gathered, in 1938, in the domain of Buol in what was then North Celebes. (Buol has since become part of the province of Central Sulawesi.) Evidently ethnographic in intent, this paper includes the text and translation of one of the two analysed myths and provides a considerable assortment of information on the organization of local groups. In this material, Van Wouden discovers a recurrent four-fold localized, endogamous class system. Although the underlying structural model of this society is different from his earlier construct for the islands further to the east, recurrent dualism is a persistent feature for both areas.

In formal terms, Van Wouden's Buol analysis is similar to the mode of analysis in this thesis: the assertion of a formal social model serves as the means for a reflective analysis on principles of classification that, for Van Wouden, form the basis of society. A certain circularity of argumentation leaves little room for contrary evidence or counter-argument.

What is innovative in Van Wouden's Buol essay is not his main argument but his analysis of myth. This involves a systematic examination of the
transformations of elements from one myth to another. Thus, if in 1935
Van Wouden was carrying out social structural analyses that resembled
later efforts by Lévi-Strauss, by 1941 he was clearly doing myth analysis
of a sort that Lévi-Strauss was to begin in the 1950's.

By 1950, however, Van Wouden had the opportunity of reading Lévi-
Strauss. He returned to Leiden briefly and participated in the seminar that
J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong was conducting in 1950-51 on Lévi-Strauss's
Elementary Structures. The work of this seminar eventuated in the publi-
cation of J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong's 'Lévi-Strauss' Theory on Kinship and
Marriage', which, with Leach's essay on 'The Structural Implications of
Matrilateral Cross-Cousin Marriage', marked the first extensive consider-
ation of Lévi-Strauss's ideas. Here Van Wouden had the benefit of an
encounter not only with Lévi-Strauss's ideas, but also with the ideas of his
former professor, J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong, the man who had directed him
in the writing of this thesis in the early 1930's. Following on this seminar,
Van Wouden was able to take up a position at the University of Indonesia
and was given leave to do fieldwork in West Sumba for a period of two
months from December 1951 to January 1952.

From this fieldwork, Van Wouden produced his third (and last) essay in
structural analysis, 'Local Groups and Double Descent in Kodi, West
Sumba', which was published in the Bijdragen Festschrift issue for J.P.B.
de Josselin de Jong. This is a mature work of considerable sophistication,
an exemplary essay in the Leiden tradition. It offers a specific analysis in
a comparative framework. It no longer proposes a single formal model of
eastern Indonesian social organization, but concentrates on the covari-
ation and differentiation of associated structural elements within the re-
gion. Instead of being assertive, the essay is tentative, explorative and
speculative. The complexity of processes of historical and sociological
development is acknowledged. Rather than enunciating a set of conclu-
sions, Van Wouden ends by pointing to promising lines of analysis for the
future study of eastern Indonesia.

After this essay, Van Wouden wrote no more. He withdrew from aca-
demic life. Yet, for eastern Indonesian studies, he remains a major figure.
By his initial attempt at a 'regional' synthesis, which was formulated at a
time when there was little reliable ethnographic documentation, Van
Wouden created 'eastern Indonesia' as a field of comparative study. He
was also the first anthropologist in the post-war period to conduct ethno-
graphic fieldwork in the region and to reassess his own earlier work in the
light of his field experience. In this, he set a direction for future studies.
Following this example, few ethnographers of eastern Indonesian societies
have felt it necessary to parrot his observations or to follow his structural
model in a strict, uncompromising fashion. Most ethnographers of the
region would, however, acknowledge the stimulation of his ideas and
recognize that he set the dialectic for the field by continually moving from
specific analysis to comparative assessment and from general principles to particular instances.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


