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In Memoriam Jilis A.J. Verheijen SVD¹

26 March 1908 – 25 April 1997

A Collector's Life

All through his long life, Jilis Verheijen cherished and cultivated a few of his early childhood interests. His birthplace in De Liemers, in the eastern Netherlands, lay in a rural setting, on the banks of the River Rhine. It was surrounded by rich orchards, cornfields and meadows, with unpaved footpaths leading to isolated farmhouses. Steamboats and sailing-boats were a regular sight, the sailing-boats lying on shore whenever there was little or no wind. Game was plentiful; people hunted and poached. Jilis would go on long rambles with his stepbrother Guus, who was eight years his senior and the eldest son of his father's first marriage. It was Guus who gradually introduced him to the fascinating world of birds. In spring, plovers' eggs were eagerly sought, and Jilis collected empty eggshells. In his interest in the world around him he was further stimulated by his parents, who were teachers at the Wilhelmina primary school in Ooy, near Zevenaar. They gave him nature books to read and introduced him to the *Herder* Encyclopaedia. His father, who was headmaster, subscribed to such journals as the poultry magazine *Avicultura* and the weekly gardening magazine *Floralia*, which Jilis read eagerly. Over the years he learned much about plants and animals. Nature was on his doorstep. Jilis also read the local daily paper *De Gelderlander*. Of this, the agricultural column interested him most, followed by the church and school section, which from 1919 on included missionary reports. It was the regular exposure to this kind of information that inspired him to become a missionary.

Besides his love of nature, Jilis developed an early interest in language. At home standard Dutch was spoken. Outside the family he liked to speak the Zevenaar dialect. Years later, when a missionary, riding on horseback through the mountains of Manggarai, he reflected on this dialect and wrote an essay on it (1975).

Jilis already knew as a schoolboy that he wanted to be a missionary. His brother Guus attended the Naval Training College in Amsterdam and later worked for the KPM (Koninklijke Pakket Maatschappij) shipping company in Southeast Asia. Jilis, like Guus, was attracted by adventure.

¹ The Dutch original of this In Memoriam was translated into English by Robert Vacher and Tomás De Faoite.

Jilis A.J. Verheijen SVD †

He sought distance from home in his choice of schools. However, his father did not agree with this choice and enrolled him at Sint Willibrordus grammar school in Uden, run by the missionary Society of the Divine Word (*Societas Verbi Divini*). Jilis passed his final exams here in 1927 and became a novice at Helvoirt for two years. In his final year here one of his teachers was Bernard Vroklage SVD², later to become the first professor of ethnology at the University of Nijmegen. After taking minor orders, Jilis continued his studies at the major seminary in Teteringen. During this period he developed a preference for China as a future mission field.

The region of Southern Shantung on the east coast of China was the area where the Society of the Divine Word had first been active. Here Freinademetz, who became Jilis' example, had been sent as a missionary in 1882, shortly after the foundation of the Society. In the 1920s the China mission had undergone a steady expansion. The Dutch missionary Henricus Veldman had worked in the district of Kansu Occidentalis from 1924 and in Sinkiang in Western China, on the border with Russia, from 1926. Riots and revolution in the area had obliged him in 1928 to return to The Netherlands, where he became a lecturer at the major seminary in Teteringen. Jilis, who had just begun his studies there, was as much enthralled by Veldman's vivid accounts of missionary work in a country where the inhabitants were nomads as by the popular adventure stories of Sven Hedin. The travel accounts of this Swedish scientist and globe-trotter, who travelled extensively in Eastern Europe, Asia, China and Australia at the turn of the century, and Veldman's stories complemented each other nicely.

Jilis Verheijen was ordained as a priest on 28 January 1934. The three mission areas for which he subsequently expressed a preference were China, Flores, and New Guinea. Two months later he wrote to his sister Lucie: 'I am very pleased and happy to be able to tell you that today I received an appointment for Flores'.

The Roman Catholic mission in Flores, Indonesia, which the Society of the Divine Word had taken over from the Jesuits in 1913, was flourishing. Consequently there was a shortage of mission workers on the island, and Jilis was sent there with eight others. However, he had to put off his journey to Flores for a year, owing to a concussion. He finally set out for the Dutch East Indies on the *MS Dempo* on 25 September 1935, arriving in Ende, the port on the south coast of the island, on 1 November. From the beginning Jilis showed a distinct preference for the western part of Flores, the Manggarai region, whose language had not yet been the object of academic study. Paul Arndt SVD, who by that time had several linguistic publica-

² Vroklage, who, after finishing major seminary, studied and graduated in theology in Rome, studied ethnology in Vienna, graduating for a second time in 1934. From 1936 till 1938 he did anthropological research on the islands of Flores and Timor.

tions to his name, had been active in the neighbouring region of Ngada since 1923, whereas Adolf Burger SVD had been engaged in linguistic studies in the Ruteng district of Manggarai since 1931.³ The latter had evolved a method of studying the local languages by recording local tales, from which he then compiled a vocabulary. Jilis found Burger's method congenial. Fortunately he was posted to Tjibal, a central Manggarai district north of Ruteng. In the course of time he collected numerous stories, myths and riddles, which he later compiled into his eighteen-volume 'Manggarai Texts' and used for his lexicographical work. His ultimate aim was to compile a dictionary. From 1935 until the outbreak of World War II he selected thousands of Manggarai words from these stories and noted them down on what Dutch students in those days called '*schedeltjes*' (= 'little skulls', i.e., index cards containing headwords and their dialectal variations or synonyms). As an outcome of these activities, he wrote an article on assonance in the Manggarai language, which was published in 1941.

Most of Jilis' time in this period was taken up with travelling. As a rule he was on the road three weeks every month. He would go for long horse rides and sometimes went with his *djongos* on long hikes, walking from village to village through mountains and hills. In the evenings he would talk to people and jot down whatever he found important. On his return to his base he would hold a short religious meeting with a few people and then attend to his correspondence and his accounts. During these breaks the horses were rested and Jilis could do some shopping, though there was not much to buy; he had taken a vow of poverty and could only spend a little money on pencils and notebooks.

On 14 May 1942 the Japanese landed on Flores. The missionaries were ordered to assemble in the coastal town of Ende. Jilis, who was travelling on the north coast of Tjibal at the time, obeyed the order and was interned in Ndonga, near Ende, with other priests and nuns. Months of uncertainty followed. In mid July the Japanese issued an order for all foreigners to leave. Jilis was taken to Celebes, as it was then called, on an old KPM boat and sent to a camp in Makasar together with government officials and missionaries from various parts of the Lesser Sunda Islands. The period of this internment was of short duration. At the end of September everyone was transported by truck to Pare Pare, north of Makasar, where six hundred men were interned in barracks (Van Baal 1986; Valkenburg 1977). The healthy men were put to work on the wharves or, like Jilis, in local gardens. Jilis later was given a job in a cowshed, where he worked with Louis Onvlee, a linguist from Sumba. In the afternoons they had some time

³ Burger's 'Voorlopige Manggaraise Spraakkunst' (= Preliminary Manggarai Grammar) was published posthumously in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië* (103:15-265) in 1946.

off to engage in philological studies. The internees included quite a few well-educated people who felt a need for an exchange of knowledge, so all kinds of courses were started. Jilis did a course in ornithology given by Coomans de Ruiter. He prepared the first few letters of his Manggarai dictionary and worked out his notes for *Het Hoogste Wezen bij de Manggaraiers* (= The Supreme Being Among the Manggarai, published in 1951).

For the most part the Japanese internment was full of hardship. In October 1944 the internees, seeking refuge from an Allied bombing raid on Pare Pare, sheltered in pigsties in the Bodjo valley. There 22 people died of dysentery, six of them members of the SVD. Seven months later the internees were transported to Bolong, high up in the Toraja mountains. There was no work there, nor any courses of study. A shortage of food, medicines, warm clothing and blankets killed any initiative on their part. Life became boring and existence minimal, with nothing to do but lie on a mat all day.

In August 1945 Japan capitulated. The internees were taken back to Makasar, where they were obliged to wait until Flores was liberated by the Allies. By Christmas most missionaries were back in their parishes. There was little time to recover from the hardships they had endured, as there was a great deal of work to do. The 'orphaned' parishes, some of them in a state of collapse, were in need of attention. Jilis returned to Pagal, in the Tjibal district, and resumed his former life as a wandering missionary and scholar. On his second tour, in 1946, he kept a diary and wrote, with a backward glance at the years of internment:

'March 8, 1946

I carried most of my Manggarai texts, a few thousand pages in all, with me as a memento of Manggarai. Most of my fellow-priests read these Manggarai notes, which gave information on the people. I have revised the texts ethnographically and linguistically many times. ... Spent many happy hours with them because of my love for Manggarai. I often had to hide them, in stables, in haylofts, in beds and, in Bodjo, in the ground.'

In spite of his many tours, Jilis found time to work out the material he had researched during his internment. He wrote an essay on the Manggarai way of thinking (1947) and another one on word repetition in the Manggarai language (1948). In early 1949 he went to The Netherlands on leave. Here he studied ethnology and comparative Indonesian philology with Professor Fischer and Professor Gonda at the University of Utrecht for a year and a half. He moreover finished the manuscript of *Het Hoogste Wezen bij de Manggaraiers*, which was published by the Anthropos Institute in 1951. In the introduction to this book he points out that he did not want to follow any particular school of thought and rejected too much theory. What was of the greatest importance were the literary texts in the local vernacular, free from any theorizing and general conclusion. Here he is echoing Alfred Russel Wallace's warning in his *Malay Archipelago* not

to draw any general conclusions when you can see only a small part of the picture (Wallace 1996:95). That was exactly what Verheijen thought, preferring as he did caution to premature or rash conclusions. These ideas also partly resembled those of the Austrian ethnologist Wilhelm Schmidt SVD at the time he launched the ethnological journal *Anthropos* (1906). The latter had advised missionaries to collect facts, to work descriptively, to write much about little, instead of little about much, and then to hand the material over to professional European ethnologists (Brandewie 1990:58). It is quite striking that Verheijen, who had collected the data for this book before the war, was no longer able to endorse Schmidt's anti-evolutionary ideas after the war. He had changed his mind after doing a course in ethnology with Jan van Baal in the internment camp at Pare Pare. Van Baal had discussed Schmidt's theoretical premises at length and rejected them. Verheijen did not hand over his ethnological materials to professional ethnologists in Europe, either. He had the ambition to use his own data to write his own articles. In an interview on 13 April 1995 he stated, recalling a visit once paid him by the Dutch ethnologist Vroklage:

'Vroklage was in Manggarai for six months, I believe, and worked in my parish for a week. He suffered from the disadvantage of not being able to speak Indonesian, or Malay, so that he always had to work with an interpreter. At that time there were many ethnologists who, seated behind their desks, hoped to obtain information from the outside world without setting out into it themselves. It took us a lot of trouble to collect all kinds of odds and ends and it would be cheap to give it all away. Those were our views. One had an ambition to achieve something. You can't live without that.'

On 8 February 1951 Jilis' two-year leave came to an end. The day before his departure for the Indies his mother died. He could not attend her funeral. On the journey on board the MS *Oranje* he read the printing proofs of *Het Hoogste Wezen*. Then, shortly after his arrival in Flores, his father died.

Jilis resumed his old life, travelling and living in close contact with the people. He was transferred from Tjibal to the district of Lamba-Leda. Besides the language, he now studied the local flora and fauna, in consequence of the courses he had done in the internment camp of Pare Pare. This marked the beginning of a long period of collecting, personally or through others, eggs, birds and plants, as well as stories and lexical items. He published a few articles in *Katholieke Missiën*. In 1956 he wrote his first short article on birds, concluding that his roving way of life left him little time to polish his notes and make them suitable for publication. In 1959 he was relieved of his pastoral duties thanks to the help of his colleague, the agriculturist Jan van Doormaal. He subsequently settled in Ruteng, the capital of Manggarai, and devoted himself to scholarly work.

Verheijen's first few publications after 1960 were articles on birds (1961, 1963, 1964). He sent a small collection of seventy species of birds to the

Museum of Comparative Zoology in Cambridge, Massachusetts (Paynter 1963:1). He also made Dutch translations of a number of stories from Manggarai mythology and published them in *Katholieke Missiën*. In these myths birds, as well as other animals, play an important part (1966, 1967).

In 1967 the first volume of the Manggarai-Indonesian dictionary was published by the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology at Leiden. This dictionary was the result of thirty years of hard work. Jilis realized that he might be the only person who had dedicated himself to the study of the Manggarai language and culture for such a long period. He did not restrict himself to simply translating words but also added references to myths, as well as etymological and historical data. Words connected with plants and animals were specially marked in the dictionary.⁴ His statement at the end of his introductory notes that 'I cannot but feel dissatisfied' (p. xxiii) testifies to his constant striving after perfection and to his modesty. Reviewers praised his work as 'a magnificent corpus of material for the purpose of historical and comparative study' (Echols 1969:673), or as 'clearly the best dictionary yet of any language in the province of Nusa Tenggara Timur, and it is likely that it will retain that honour for many years to come' (Walker 1977:648-9). There was some criticism of his use of Indonesian instead of English, as this might seriously restrict access to the dictionary. This might be countered, however, by the consideration that most scholars who do research in Indonesia learn Indonesian anyway, while the use of English here is not widespread. The second volume of the dictionary, Indonesian-Manggarai, was published in 1970. It was designed as an index to volume one. Here Verheijen also incorporated information intended to be used by linguists, botanists and anthropologists. Rodney Needham, Professor of Anthropology at Oxford, made use of this material for some of his studies on social classification in Manggarai (Needham 1980, 1985, 1986).

Jilis did his extremely thorough lexicographical work essentially as a self-taught man, for he was not an academically trained scholar. He followed the example of several lexicographers who compiled vocabularies on neighbouring islands, such as Jonker in Bima, Matthes in South Celebes, and Onvlee in Sumba. He used their wordlists, translated them into Manggarai, and searched for dialectal variations. Perhaps because of his limited academic training, he was sometimes beset by doubt about the final result of his hard work. He would check words over and over again. He repeatedly revised his notes, and wrote and re-wrote his manuscripts until the printer took over. He could take pride in his achievements as a researcher, however, when scholars like Needham congratulated him on his work. Needham wrote in his *Belief, Language, and Experience*, for

⁴ See the English-language introductory notes, sections 4, 6.1, and 6.6.

example: 'The best instances are the publications of linguistic missionaries, those who dedicate their lives to gaining that familiarity with foreign languages as will permit them to expound their faiths in alien idioms, but men of this calibre are very few ...', explaining in a footnote whom he had in mind here: 'I think, with humble admiration, of such as Professor Dr. L. Onvlee (Sumba), Fr. J.A.J. Verheijen (Manggarai, Flores), Fr. J.P. Crazzolaro (Nuer), and my friends in the Borneo Evangelical Mission' (Needham 1972:197). In a letter Jilis wrote to Needham years later, he told him, referring to this passage, how very pleased he had been by his kind words: 'Precisely at that time they meant a moral support for me. I think that I don't work for praise, but in my opinion researchers deserve some acknowledgement for their labour.' (Letter to Needham of 28 December 1985.)⁵ In another letter, written almost a year later by Jilis to Needham, who had complimented him on his article in the NUSA series (NUSA 1984), he showed himself in his true colours:

'Of course, I was much pleased with your praise concerning my article in NUSA. *However you should not overdo it. It is very well possible that linguists will regard it, especially chapter 6, as "grandes passus extra viam". I should have been much more hesitant in expressing myself in the field where I am only an amateur.*' (Letter to Needham of 29 December 1986; my italics.)

After all those years of intensive lexicographical study, Jilis now gave priority to the preparation of the hundreds of Manggarai stories he had collected for publication. These stories, which formed part of the Manggarai oral tradition, had been collected not only by himself, but also by his predecessor, Adolf Burger, and his colleague Willem van Bekkum. They dealt with almost every aspect of Manggarai life and culture. Through their publication, Jilis hoped to preserve this cultural treasure for future generations. In his preface to Volume I he states:

'Herewith we begin to make our precious collection of Manggarai Texts available to everyone interested in Manggarai culture and language. Almost all of them were written before 1942. They are of great value, as no other old records exist and most data and information are no longer retrievable, at least not in this form and in such profusion. ... Every kind of oral literature will be found in abundance.' (Verheijen 1977, 'Manggarai Texts I', Preface.)⁶

Jilis worked with a few assistants, who typed the collected material, while he did the checking and editing. In 1977 he published four volumes of these texts of a hundred pages each. With the publication of the last volume in 1991, they ran to a total of over 2000 pages. Thanks to financial

⁵ In the late 1980s the universities of Amsterdam and Surabaya both offered Verheijen an honorary degree, which offers he rejected with strong arguments.

⁶ These eighteen volumes of Manggarai Texts form part of the KITLV collection in Leiden. The SVD archive in Teteringen (The Netherlands) and in Ledalero (Flores, Indonesia) also include a few copies of the complete series.

support from the Indonesian Linguistics Development Project (ILDEP), launched in the 1980s as a project of cooperation between Leiden University and the National Language Centre of Indonesia, Jilis finally had sufficient means to have the texts translated by permanent assistants.

In the early 1970s Jilis, in the course of his study of the dialects of eastern Manggarai, discovered a hitherto unknown language, Rembong. He immediately put a number of skilled people to work making lists of words of this language, using a few stories collected by his colleague Johan Swinkels SVD in the 1930s. Lack of time and money obliged him to drop the project, however. In 1975 circumstances were more favourable for its continuation. He then wrote that he simply could not resist the challenge of introducing an as yet undescribed language to the world of learning.

In 1976 the Netherlands Foundation for Scientific Research on the Tropics (WOTRO) granted Jilis a once-only grant for further research on this language. In 1977 the 'Kamus Rembong-Indonesia' and a volume of Rembong texts with Indonesian translations were brought out. A year later the index to part one, the 'Kamus Indonesia-Rembong', appeared, to which was added a glossary of kinship terms and plant names. These dictionaries were less comprehensive than the Manggarai ones. The first three volumes were followed in 1988 by a volume of texts Jilis had recorded together with Bapak Egi Dadu more than ten years previously. A selection of these Rembong texts, along with Indonesian translations, will be published posthumously in 1998.

This delay in publication was caused by new projects Jilis set up in the late 1970s, such as the translation of the Gospel according to Mark into Manggarai. Although no longer involved in pastoral work, Jilis still retained an interest in this work and was happy to stand in for a colleague every now and then. It got him out and about, away from his desk. He enjoyed meeting people and having the opportunity to collect new data. He also offered practical help and gave some people financial support or medical assistance. He imported coffee and fruit seeds from Europe and the United States and instructed the Manggarai people in the planting and cultivation of these. Although missionaries had offered the people of the area practical help from the beginning, this practice became more common after the war, with evangelization making way more and more for development aid.

Another project Jilis directed his attention to was the study of the language and culture of neighbouring Komodo Island. In the 1970s plans were made to establish a nature reserve on the island, which is famous for its gigantic dragons (*Varanus komodoensis*). This would lead to an influx of tourists and government officials. Having made an earlier attempt at linguistic research on Komodo, Jilis realized the importance of pressing on now with the recording of texts in the original language. After a first visit

to the island in 1977, he came into contact with a competent 'native speaker'. From two short glossaries handed to him by a civil servant and a teacher, he drew up a provisional list of words in 1978, of which he brought out a limited edition on a copying machine. In 1982 this preliminary study resulted in a definitive edition, entitled *Komodo; Het Eiland, het Volk en de Taal* (= Komodo; The Island, the People and the Language). Jilis realized once again that he was probably the only person to have studied the Komodo language and culture in their pristine state. That is why he not only presented his lexicographical material in Komodo-Indonesian-Dutch-English glossaries, but also added ethnographic information and data on flora, fauna and toponyms, and additionally topographical and linguistic maps. Self-critical as ever, Jilis wrote that he felt this study lacked depth, as he had had too little time to do research. This, too, is an understatement, however, similar to that in the preface to his Manggarai dictionary. Thanks to his years of experience and his detailed study of the Manggarai and Rembong languages, he certainly knew how to tackle a subject such as this. Though perhaps his research was less detailed than he might have wished, it provided a useful basis for a more extensive survey. His linguistic research in any case led him to the conclusion that, contrary to the common assumption, the main language spoken on the island of Komodo was not Bimanese, although the people used many loanwords from this language. Verheijen described the Komodo language as an independent language, related to the Manggarai linguistic group.

It is a curious fact that Jilis in retrospect worried about outside interference with these people, who until then had lived in isolation. He wrote that the greatest influence on Komodo island was exercised by 'a number of people who, intellectually, economically and socially, belong to a superior group of government officials, teachers, medical personnel and public servants' (Verheijen 1982:256-7). We sense a certain discrepancy here between his attitude as a scholar and that as a missionary. For the latter always interferes with local life by the very nature of his profession. In the end, Jilis was not completely satisfied with this Dutch-language publication on these threatened people. Later, in 1987, an Indonesian translation of the work appeared in an ILDEP edition.

Throughout the years when Jilis was engrossed in language and culture, he preserved his interest in natural history. After some negotiating, he sold his entire collection of birds and eggs to the National Museum of Natural History at Leiden. He also handed over more than 5,000 specimens of plants to the State Herbarium at Leiden. This way he became one of the most important donors of Eastern Indonesian flora and fauna to both these institutions. In his collecting activities he met with support from his much younger German fellow-missionary Erwin Schmutz, who had only come to Flores in 1963 and possessed the same keen interest in

natural history. They discovered several unknown species of plants and birds, which were subsequently named after the discoverers (for birds see Mees 1973; for plants see Hoogland 1978, Nielsen 1985 and Weibel 1980). His publications on birds and plants found their way to the Australian series *Pacific Linguistics* as well as to the Indonesian journal for linguistic studies, *NUSA*.⁷

One of Verheijen's last lengthy works was a study on the Aha Sama (= people of Sama), sea nomads living along the coasts of several islands in Eastern Indonesia. As early as 1947 he had recorded a few birds' names in the Sama or Bajo language. Later, when doing research on the Komodo language, his interest was aroused once more by the Sama Bajau people. Again becoming the collector intent on preserving disappearing cultures and languages, he wrote: 'Since Bajo communities are changing drastically, a process expected to accelerate in the future, it is important to save data about them for further research' (1986:24). He planned this study along the same lines as his Komodo book, presenting his lexicographical material interspersed with ethnographic and historical information.

Jilis once told me that he had got great enjoyment out of his research on the sea nomads. It is very likely that their nomadic existence evoked some nostalgic memories of his own nomadic life. He liked travelling, feeling at home wherever he was. His life style may also be compared to that of the Turkomen in Turkestan, near the border between West China and Russia, which was the area of his first preference as a missionary.

With his Sama/Bajau study, Jilis' life as an ethnographer seems to have come to an end. In the last decade of his life he concentrated on completing his manuscripts. In 1993 he was finally able to free himself of all his self-imposed duties and return to The Netherlands. It was in his last years that I met Jilis in the SVD home for elderly missionaries in Teteringen. He died in April 1997. The last image I have, and the one I treasure most, is of him sitting in a chair turned away from the window on a sunny spring day. It was as though he felt that his end was near and he shied away from the outside world. He had roamed enough.⁸

⁷ These publications comprise Latin glossaries not only listing the names with their vernacular equivalents, but also giving indications of the use of the relevant items and the area where they are found, as well as the name of the family to which they belong, their historical name, and so on.

⁸ The author of this article is preparing a PhD thesis on Jilis Verheijen SVD.

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