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Review Essay

A Vocation, a Task!

Two New Contributions on Dutch New Guinea

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Wim van de Waal, *Een Roeping, een Taak! Bestuursambtenaar in Nieuw-Guinea, 1959–1962*. Leiden: Primavera Press, 2018, 200 pp. ISBN: 9789059972650, price: 35.50 (hardcover).

Merel Hubatka, *Norman*. Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2019, 303 pp. ISBN 9789028427839, price: EUR 19.19 (paperback).

Dutch New Guinea inherited a multiple entry system for its administrative staff, resembling the one that had existed in the Dutch East Indies. At the top were the public servants dealing with Interior Affairs (*ambtenaren Binnenlands Bestuur*), in short *ambtenaren BB*. They were Dutchmen with university degrees obtained in the Netherlands, first in “Indology”, later, when that discipline was discontinued, in a range of other disciplines. Second were the so-called AA, the administrative public servants (*administratieve ambtenaren*), also Dutch, with a much shorter training, about which more will be said below. The third group were the administrative assistants, in a number of ranks, initially consisting of Indonesians, or people of Indonesian parentage, but increasingly Papuans.

The work of Interior Affairs (henceforth BB) has been extensively written about, by the public servants themselves and by others, but the other two categories have long remained neglected. Fortunately, Leontine Visser and Jos Marey have collected and edited a number of self-accounts by administrative

assistants, in both Indonesian and English (Visser and Marey 2008; Visser 2012). And now, almost simultaneously, two accounts have appeared of the works of two AA, or, as one of them writes: “AA/BB” (administrative public servants of Interior Affairs). They are Wim van de Waal (henceforth VdW) and Frank Hubatka (henceforth H). They both started work in 1960 and witnessed the end of Dutch colonial rule in September 1962. Van de Waal left New Guinea in early October, but Hubatka stayed on working for the United Nations Temporary Executive Authority, the UNTEA, until the beginning of the Indonesian administration of western New Guinea in May 1963.

The two books differ in a number of ways. Van de Waal has written a memoir of his own career, looking back after an interval of over half a century. The work is dedicated to his wife and children. His book is a large-sized hardback containing over 200 pictures, almost all taken by himself. Many are in color, many cover more than one page, and very many are quite magnificent. The result is a picture book as much as a text book. The second book, about Frank Hubatka, has been written posthumously by his daughter Merel. Her book is a paperback of smaller size, which does not contain illustrations. Merel Hubatka's account of her father's work in New Guinea is “faction”, based on oral information and over 100 letters found after his death in 2013 (H 297, 299). She uses the fictional name Norman Taborsky for her father, and this device enables her to include short fictional scenes sketching the interactions of leaders such as Joseph Luns, the Dutch minister for foreign affairs, Paul Rijksen, a former Dutch CEO of Unilever, and the American presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy, in their deliberations that determined the fate of the Dutch administration. It also enables her to cast her account in the present tense, which makes for a vivid presentation of Taborsky's work and his state of mind. Only at the very end of her book does she break off her faction and make it clear—in a personal statement written in the first person singular—that through Taborsky she has written about her father. The shift in perspective is significant: it is reminiscent of a similar shift effected by Multatuli at the end of his *Max Havelaar*, the iconic nineteenth century Dutch novel dealing with Eduard Douwes Dekker, a dedicated, but ultimately ineffective colonial administrator (cf. Berghoef 2019). Notwithstanding the uncertainty about the range of fictional elements that Merel Hubatka has woven into her account, I will use the name Hubatka, not Taborsky, for the principal character in her book.

The two books are most welcome, especially in combination. They show how two very young men, both bachelors, had to run a colonial patrol post, were charged with carrying out a set of wide-ranging duties, many of which they had only very recently heard of and learned about. They had to do so among people whose ways of life were quite unfamiliar to them. I therefore commend

the two books as valuable additions to what we know about the post-World War II colonial administration of New Guinea.

The fact that all AA/BB were young or very young men was the result of the rules guiding their selection. They were recruited in the Netherlands from among those with a high school diploma. The Dutch government tried to get their attention with a brochure entitled *Een roeping, een taak!* ('A vocation, a task!'). Van de Waal has chosen this phrase as the title of his book, and I have followed him by using the English translation as the title of this review article. 1959 was the last year that the Dutch government invited young men to apply (cf. Schoorl 1996: 634–6). By then, the Dutch administration of western New Guinea had been challenged repeatedly by the Indonesian government and had become questionable, nationally and internationally. Nevertheless, Van de Waal and Hubatka were two among over 300 applicants for the sixteen positions open for the new levy of AA/BB. Applicants had to be unmarried, and had to remain unmarried until the completion of their training in New Guinea. Service in New Guinea exempted them from compulsory military service.

Their training took place in Hollandia, then the capital of Dutch New Guinea. It lasted nine months and consisted of courses in "Malay language, adat law (indigenous legal arrangements), penal and civil law, sociology, knowledge about building and building materials, agriculture, the art of using weapons, economics, anthropology, general politics" (VdW 18). Van de Waal's comment that "all of it" was "pure theory, from several years back" (VdW 18) seems an overstatement. In 1960, all sixteen trainees completed the course successfully. If, after four years of service, their performance was deemed to have been of appropriate quality, the Dutch government offered them university study, free of charge, in either sociology or law. If they accepted, they had to sign on for another four years of service in New Guinea (VdW 11), but then in the capacity of BB.

Van de Waal was posted to the South New Guinea residency, first to its headquarters, in Merauke, to acquaint himself with administrative procedures. In October 1960, when he was 21, he was appointed Officer in Charge of the Pirimapun patrol post, on the Casuarina Coast, in the eastern periphery of the Asmat area. In the Dutch colonial setup it was an "Exploration Area", which entailed that the resident commissioner in Merauke was his direct superior. The post had been established in 1958 (VdW 63, 141) or 1959 (VdW 27), and Van de Waal replaced a fellow AA/BB. He, and one or two Catholic missionaries, were the only Europeans in the area. Pirimapun was located on a shoal bordering the

sea, with extensive swamps on the “land” side. A strip for small aircraft was under construction on that shoal.

In keeping with the term “Exploration Area”, there was there still much to explore. Even the boundaries of the area had not been established. Van de Waal did explore often: he wanted “more contact with the interior” and found patrolling “just fantastic” (VdW 83). The pictures in his book illustrate his close associations with Papuans. He does not give any indication that he followed instructions from the resident commissioner as to when and where to patrol. Given the swampy nature of much of the area, rivers were the suitable avenues of travel. A major problem, however, was that most rivers could not be reached due to the absence of a seaworthy vessel. Van de Waal had to improvise one: two canoes connected by a superstructure built with local materials, in his own term a “catamaran”. He got help from a carpenter sent from Merauke. The contraption proved seaworthy. The procedure exemplifies the meagre support that he got from the district’s headquarters. In the course of the almost one and a half years that he was posted in Pirimapun, the resident commissioner visited him once, for just two hours. He concedes that it resulted in his getting most of the materials that he had said he needed (VdW 91). Yet, as he writes:

Later, I had wondered how, in a government department in chilly Holland or an office in Hollandia, decisions were taken about people like me. Who decided that a bloke of just twenty could cope and would not break down? Whether there was sufficient contact to bring to light potential mistakes. Was there really a plan? Or was it just one big experiment: who manages and who succumbs and has to be carried off? A process of natural selection, simple but not immediately constructive for either the persons or the [Papuans] concerned.

VdW 91

Van de Waal does not make explicit how he conceived of his task as a colonial administrator. It appears to have been his task to suppress practices such as headhunting and cannibalism, but he writes quite dispassionately about them. This may well be because he writes so many years after the events. He also comments (VdW 119) that he did not wish to handle disputes about women and about rights to land. That avoidance eased his work considerably, but, in the absence of much anthropological knowledge, it may have been a realistic decision. In any case, his wording suggests that he was not instructed by his boss to leave these disputes alone.

The makeshift catamaran that Van de Waal had built was featured in the international news in November 1961. By then, he had sold it to Michael Rock-

efeller who wanted to use it for his art collecting expeditions. In Van de Waal's reconstruction of the events, Rockefeller had overloaded the vessel on a trip to the Casuarina coast, while underrating the difficulties of navigating it in the Arafura sea. Consequently, it had capsized. Rockefeller had left the vessel in an attempt to swim to the coast, and disappeared. This event drew enormous publicity and has been the subject of numerous speculative reconstructions. But since it took place before the coast of Van de Waal's Exploration Area, he became further involved.

That Rockefeller reached the coast is unlikely, given the sea currents and the presence of sharks and crocodiles. However, rumors soon surfaced that he had not drowned, but had been killed, beheaded, and eaten by inhabitants of the village Otsjanep. Such a course of events was politically very unwelcome. At the time, the conflict between Indonesia and the Netherlands over the administration of western New Guinea had escalated into an armed struggle. Any manifestation that the Dutch were in poor control favored the Indonesian claims. Hence, the Dutch version of the events was that Rockefeller had drowned. Bert Voorhoeve, who carried out linguistic research in the area from late 1960 to September 1962, and who was based near Agats, the district's headquarters (Voorhoeve 1965: 4, 362), remains convinced that this is the correct version (pers. comm. 2019).

Nevertheless, in early March 1962, the resident commissioner secretly assigned Van de Waal to investigate the rumors that Rockefeller had been killed in or near Otsjanep. Van de Waal had visited Otsjanep before, but this time he took residence there, accompanied by eight policemen and two personal servants, in an impressive building, constructed for the occasion.

He told the inhabitants that the administration wanted to establish a patrol post there. After weeks of fruitless investigations, villagers told him a version of the events that confirmed the rumors. However, these villagers were not the perpetrators. They also helped him to locate bones that they claimed were Rockefeller's. Van de Waal's book contains pictures of these bones (p. 150). Rudy de Iongh, the acting Officer in Charge of the district's office in Agats, farther west, visited Van de Waal in Otsjanep, where the latter handed him the bones. Decades later, De Iongh included an account of this visit in his contribution to Pim Schoorl's *Besturen in Nederlands-Nieuw-Guinea 1945–62* (1996). Van de Waal writes (p. 150) that it contains serious fabrications. While De Iongh wrote (1996: 523–35) that he spent three days in Otsjanep, Van de Waal comments that it was a few hours; and that De Iongh's statement that he visited Rockefeller's grave and met his murderer (1996: 534), is "quite untrue".

A likely motive for the murder was that, in 1958, a patrol led by the district officer Max Lapré had shot five villagers in Otsjanep. Lapré himself had shot

two of them. Hence, Michael Rockefeller was possibly killed in revenge. This killing incident was covered up to the extent that Van de Waal was unaware of it during his visits to the village, and accordingly was also unaware that its inhabitants might have wanted to avenge themselves.

The official Dutch version has remained that Rockefeller drowned; Van de Waal's findings have not been published or leaked (VdW 156), nor has the inquiry into the collected bones been made public. Van de Waal was told that they had belonged to a Papuan (*ibid.*). The events having to do with Rockefeller's disappearance occurred while, far away, deliberations took place regarding the fate of the Dutch administration of western New Guinea and its transmission to Indonesia. His comments on this turn of events are brief: the Dutch let the Papuans down by doing too little, too late. He does not comment on the brutality of the subsequent Indonesian regime.

Van de Waal returned to the Netherlands in late 1962. Since he did not complete his four-year term, he did not qualify for a paid university study. Instead, he enrolled at the college of tropical agriculture in Deventer, the Netherlands. Since 1968, he has lived in Tenerife (p. 156). His later profession is not mentioned. He writes that his sister corrected his Dutch since he did not expect to write it flawlessly (p. 9).

Frank Hubatka had likewise applied to become an AA/BB in 1959, the year he got his high school diploma, since he did not see attractive prospects in the Netherlands. He was then 22. His daughter describes him as head-strong. She writes that during his training in hilly Hollandia, he bought a push bike because he wanted to visit Papuan villages so as to be in contact with Papuans.

Like Van de Waal, Hubatka was posted to the south coast, in his case to the western Fakfak residency, and first had to spend three months at its headquarters, in Fakfak, at the tip of the Bomberai Peninsula. Thereafter, he was sent to the Agimuga patrol post, located on the plain between the coast and the central highlands. Merel Hubatka uses the Dutch spelling "Akimoega"; I here follow the Indonesian and English spelling used by Hein van der Schoot (1996), who from mid-1961 to mid-1962 acted as the district's officer in charge (OIC) (Schoorl 1996: 621). As in Van de Waal's case, he was the only European in that post. But while Van de Waal's predecessor properly transferred his tasks, Hubatka was less fortunate. His predecessor was incensed that he had to leave his post, in his view suddenly and prematurely, so he had not written a Handover Report and left it to his successor to find out most things for himself.

While Van de Waal had to wonder whether the colonial administration indeed had a plan regarding the Exploration Area to which he was posted, Hubatka was charged with implementing an ambitious resettlement and cash

cropping project aimed at relocating, and concentrating, the nearby highlanders around Agimuga. It was one of the few regional agricultural projects that the Dutch colonial administration had begun (Lagerberg 1962: 181–2). Unlike the Pirimapun patrol post, Agimuga was a center of activities. I suppose that Hubatka appreciated this, since Merel Hubatka's account makes it clear that her father actively sought and appreciated the company of Papuans, and wanted to learn about them and their ways of life.

Soon after his arrival, the district officer, his boss, instructed him to start persuading highlanders to relocate, and to help them build their new houses. It soon became clear to him that the people needed little persuasion. They apparently welcomed the shift and started relocating on their own initiative, thereby frustrating the orderly process that the administration had planned. Hubatka's interpreter advised him that the people likely exaggerated what relocation would bring them. Surprisingly, it seems that his anthropology course in Hollandia had not alerted Hubatka to the occurrence of such inflated expectations.

In the following years, the project turned into a great and tragic failure. In one analysis, published decades later, Van der Schoot points out that the success of the project depended on its gradual implementation (Van der Schoot 1996). As Hubatka observed, this was far from the case. Hubatka also noticed the first cases of malaria among the highlanders. At the time he was OIC of the district, Van der Schoot reached the conclusion that the project was to be discontinued. However, this was unfeasible because of its administrative prominence (Van der Schoot 1996: 463). Hubatka, moreover, had to deal with hostility between the members of ethnic groups that formerly lived at some distance from each other. Around 1990, the mountaineer Bart Vos visited Agimuga and was taken aback by its desolation (Vos 1992: 163 ff.).

In the course of 1962, the conflict over the administration of western New Guinea aggravated. Indonesian military infiltrated on the west and southwest coast. However, news about these events reached Agimuga with long delays. Hubatka was alarmed when he finally heard about them, realizing that he was at risk.

What Van de Waal and Merel Hubatka wrote about the functioning of an isolated patrol post vividly reminded me of my own experiences when I lived—also in 1960–1962—for 18 months in the vicinity of Bokondini, another isolated patrol post. I find Merel Hubatka less convincing in her portrayal of her father's personal relationships. The blurb on the outside back cover tells us that “the wife of the governor tries to seduce him”. This is not what Merel Hubatka has written: the woman concerned was the wife of his immediate boss, probably a district officer. But in my view the author has included this subplot, whether

fiction or fact, to contrast these advances, and Hubatka's reactions, to his more genuine concern and affection for several Papuan women, which included a brief love affair.

In September 1962, when the UNTEA started taking over from the Dutch, Hubatka decided to stay on and work for UNTEA, one of the thirteen Dutch public servants to do so (Vlasblom 2004: 339, 345). In a publication of his own, he writes that he had conceived his task in New Guinea to be to "train Papuans to independence", as "a temporary guest" (Hubatka 2013: 9). While he had lacked motivation as a high school student, his work in New Guinea gave him a purpose. Back in the Netherlands, he studied anthropology and theology. From 1976 to 1981 he lived in western New Guinea for a second time, lecturing at the university. Back again, he kept actively supporting Papuans and the Papuan cause. Like Multatuli, who wrote his novel to make a wider public aware of the plight of the Javanese, Hubatka has written hers to raise awareness of the plight of the Papuans that her father had wanted to ease. She writes in conclusion:

The injustice inflicted on the Papuans has troubled him to the very end. After his death I have not considered holding on to his bones, as Papuans did formerly to keep their ancestors close by. I had the same wish, but found another way and built out of his ashes a personage in a novel.

H 293–4

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