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## Father and son on a mission in the tropics

Mar Oomen describes how the Catholic mission gripped her grandparents and parents.

By Gerrit-Jan Kleinjan

This book could also have been called "Fathers and Sons," were it not for the fact that this title has been given away already for quite some time. In 'Mission Fathers', Mar Oomen, journalist and anthropologist, describes the careers of her father and grandfather. Both men were tropical doctors and, not unimportant for the course of history, Catholic.

The book was born out of many unanswered questions. Why wasn't much of the past talked about at home? Oomen (1961) thought that 'things' must have happened. Well, that turns out to be true.

Brief the facts. In 1933 Janus Oomen, grandfather of the author, leaves with his wife Stans and their family for the Dutch East Indies. Together they are convinced of the superiority of the Roman Catholic variant of Christianity. He is a self-confident missionary doctor, a man who wants to bring faith in addition to healthcare. "Emigrants for God," Oomen calls them. They did not know yet that the time of the Netherlands as a colonial power was coming to an end. For them, on the other side of the globe, there was still unconcerned 'something great being done'.

During the Japanese occupation, the family ends up in a camp. They survive, as well as the chaotic Bersiap period thereafter. Experiences that are terrible, as Oomen describes, but that also stiffen Janus and Stans in all their convictions.

Eldest son Dries cannot escape following in his father's footsteps. At the end of the fifties he left for Africa as a tropical doctor with his wife Pauke. However, by now the wind was blowing from a different direction. Church-inspired help was getting a bad name. Gradually Pauke, too, found herself saying, "So haughty and meddlesome". In 1968 Dries drives with his family from Ethiopia to the Netherlands. Back home he suffers from manic depression which makes normal functioning impossible.

This is not just another family story. Oomen always succeeds in placing her main characters in context of the social developments of which they are part. She depicts her grandparents against the background of the Catholic emancipation in the Netherlands, her father Dries is

defined by the sixties. Unlike his father, he is increasingly in favor of government-financed development cooperation. "Missionary had suddenly become a dirty word. If you wanted to be up to date, you called yourself a development worker," Oomen notes. We now know the outcome of that too.

For Oomen understanding is more important than judging. Fortunately, she stays away from fashionable chatter about white debt. Not that Oomen is uncritical, certainly not. For example, she portrays her grandparents as a couple who set to work with the best intentions. At the same time, they are typical of the 'narrow minded white arrogance', as the Leiden historian J.J. Woltjer once described the Dutch colonial attitude. Janus and Stans remained "riveted to imperialist power", Oomen notes. Something that is clearly evident from Stans' tireless efforts to teach the residents of 'their' village Tomohon the row dances she learned in the Catholic youth movement. Paternalism at its best.

### Iron Grip

One of the main themes, as mentioned, is the relationship between father and son. This psychological interplay of forces gives the book an extra quality. The true tragedy is that her father Dries does not succeed in freeing himself from the iron grip of his father Janus, who's urge to serve does not focus solely on his distant neighbour. His son must finish what his father started. That pays off in a dramatic way. Insecure and burdened with an ailing psyche, he becomes entangled with himself and his surroundings. The crowning achievement of his career is not a professorship in tropical medicine, as his father so ardently wished, but a glorified side job as a writer of entries in a compendium.

This book is complete, concludes the reader who has reached the end of the last page. Oomen is detailed if necessary, and speeds up if possible. The book has no more than four main characters: her grandparents and her parents. She keeps a firm grip on those four. That is not a restriction, on the contrary. In three hundred pages, Oomen sheds light on an already almost forgotten part of the recent past, and provides a penetrating picture of what striving to improve the world can do to people.