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Good Intentions

Catholic idealists faced difficult questions in the daily practice of mission and medical aid, at least, if they let those issues get to them.

Dorrit van Dalen

Left: Dries Oomen in 1933 next to missionaries in their daily habit. The boat is about to leave the port of Marseille. Collection Mar Oomen

Right: Boarding school girls and student nurses perform Dutch dances. Sumwe, July 1958. Mar Oomen Collection

Round dancing Indonesian women in the 1930s, dancing hand in hand to the beat of the Dutch song 'White swans, black swans', because that was more civilized than the dances of the Minahassa (North Celebes, now Sulawesi) themselves. You can see in it a symbol of colonization, a caricature or a mistake. Mar Oomen leaves it to her readers in Missievaders. She hardly judges, she tells the story of her grandfather and her father, missionary doctors in the Netherlands, the Dutch Indies and Tanzania. From a wealth of letters and other documents she distills their motives and places them in a historical context. A family history, therefore, spanning some fifty years in which the missionary doctor acted as a litmus test for the changing relationship between Dutch 'aid', Dutch Catholics and the countries where they worked.

Lay Apostles

When Janus and Stans Oomen went to the Dutch Indies in 1933 as 'lay apostles', they were pioneers. The mission was still the domain of fathers and sisters. But Janus and Stans were progressive Catholics from wealthy families, where the understanding grew that doctors too would be excellent advertisements for Christian civilization, as (the Protestant) Albert Schweitzer had shown. Loaded with sacrifice and romantic images of regions far from the civilized world where God would be near, and with toddler Dries by their hand, they traveled to the town of Tomohon in the Minahassa. Janus

would run a hospital, set up by Dutch nuns, and together they would show how a Catholic model family (four children were added) led a pleasant and blessed life. It was a bit disappointing that Tomohon was not as primitive as the Lambarene of Schweitzer and that the pagans in the Minahassa had already been Christianized by Protestants. But the couple learned Malay and Tombulu, he operated and healed, she taught women to weave and dance (and later felt uncomfortable about the latter).

Yet they just couldn't get in. "Wherever we go, the conversations stop," Janus wrote to a friend after a few years. In the eyes of the local population, they remained representatives of the white rulers. Logical, because they kept celebrating the Dutch version of Sint Nicolas with the sisters and forbid their children to play with 'native' children. But they themselves saw it differently. In the Netherlands in particular, the Dutch government kept missionary workers to some extent in check, because it did not want any conflict with Islamic administrators. In their own eyes, the churches, the colonial administration and the missionary doctor were busy with different things. Janus was annoyed by the sisters' lack of professionalism and their 'ostentatious compassion' and later also by the heartlessness of Dutch planters in Java.

War

In 1940 - Japan was about to invade Celebes - the family moved to Java. Janus became a doctor in the service of planters, in Rangkasbitung, where Douwes Dekker wrote Max Havelaar. Even when they did not give him the opportunity to improve conditions for their workers, he did not realize that he and the Catholic mission were on the side of the colonial ruler and, at most, the Indonesian elite. (Here his granddaughter drops the word haughtiness once.) Shortly afterwards, with the destruction in the wake of the Japanese invasion of everything Dutch, the realization of being hated hit hard. Subsequently, the family was dispersed in several Japanese camps, which they all survived. An example of how well Oomen chooses her quotes: the captain of the ship with which Stans and the children after the war go on leave to the Netherlands, had received this assignment: "Don't let people on your boat have the feeling that they actually are pitiful wretches, men and women without a future. " From idealists to wretches, it had happened in just thirteen years.

Missionary doctor becomes tropical doctor

When Stans left for Java again, her eldest son Dries stayed behind at a boarding school in Nijmegen. His holidays he spent with relatives. 'You feel like a guest everywhere,' he wrote to his parents in 1949 and that phrase is the core of the book to me. The confusion that Janus should have seen became the drama of Dries' life. Out of idealism, a sense of duty and solidarity with his parents, he went to Tanzania as a doctor; and out of longing for a home that was not in the Netherlands. He offered his services to a progressive Dutch bishop, who supported the struggle for independence and was good friends with Nyerere, the future president of Tanzania. Also his family will live next to a Catholic missionary hospital and share daily life with Dutch sisters and fathers, not with Tanzanians.

But it frustrates Dries that Catholic care in Tanzania is mainly used to stop the rise of Islam (which had been there for a few centuries) and to curb that of Protestants. It annoys him that religious leaders act as if everyone in Africa is pathetic and working in Africa is heroic. Like many of his colleagues, he wants to see more of Africa outside the scope of the Catholic mission, to reach other people, work together with what we now call traditional healers. This was not possible within the Catholic structure and many missionary doctors left.

In 1965 Dries switched to the development aid that was coming into vogue at the time, namely in Ethiopia, the only African country that had never been colonized. The missionary doctor became a

tropical doctor, while the white doctor was employed by an Ethiopian hospital management. However, at the expense of the Netherlands, which strongly supported Ethiopia for reasons of international politics and the hope of growing sales markets in the countries for which Ethiopia was an example. That kind of considerations kept Janus busy, as he was making a career in international (WHO) and national development cooperation.

But what did Dries see? That development workers who came to Africa with government support for a year or two earned a lot, but understood very little of how things were going. And that it was the European religious who had learned the local languages, knew the customs and had gained the confidence of the population. Another detail to think about: in the 1980s, Janus and Dries traveled together (in the family vocabulary they made a 'homesick journey') to the Minahassa. The round dance of Stans Oomen turned out to be included in the traditional repertoire of many dance groups. As a writer you can be lucky with your material; it is admirable when you use it so well.