

In memoriam Alfons van Nunen ofm, 1922 - 2013

Anton Ploeg

Alfons was the religious name that Bernard Otto van Nunen received when he entered his training to become a Franciscan friar. Unlike some of his colleagues, such as Sibbele Hylkema and Herman Peters, he kept using that name or its abbreviation 'Fons' in the course of his life. Van Nunen belonged to the first generation of Dutch Catholic missionaries who were sent to New Guinea after World War II. However, since the mission wanted to make use of anthropological insights to support its work, he was assigned to study anthropology before going there.

In 1952 he got a B.A with first class Honours in the anthropology department of the University of Sydney, to start work in New Guinea the next year. He lived in New Guinea until 2003, so well beyond retirement age. His first posting was among central highlanders then called the Ekagi or Kapauku, living around the Paniai lakes and farther west. Nevertheless, he continued his anthropological studies with field work among a group of Moni, the easterly neighbours of the Ekagi. By working among Moni he intended to complement Leopold Pospisil's work among Ekagi living in the Kamu valley, west of the Paniai lakes.

The Moni lived dispersed over a number of highland valleys. The 'community of Kugapa' in which Van Nunen carried out his research, lived away from other Moni and had Ekagi as their neighbours. The report he wrote on the basis of his research earned him a M.A. degree in 1966, again in the Sydney anthropology department. It was a very welcome addition to the in those days tiny corpus of west New Guinea highlands ethnography. The thesis was published in 1973 as an issue of the journal *Irian. Bulletin of Irian Jaya Development*, produced by the anthropology department of the Universitas Cenderawasih, in Jayapura. The published text was edited and Van Nunen regretted many of the changes. He also assembled a collection of mainly Moni artefacts that he made available to the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. It is recorded as collection 2796 - 1 / 111.

Names for ethnic groups in the west New Guinea highlands remain contested. Respecting Van Nunen's mild, but tenacious insistence that 'Ekagi' is the proper name for the people around the Paniai lakes, I use that name in this obituary. But

members of the group concerned --it is unclear how many-- reject it and promote the name 'Mee' or 'Me' instead.

Van Nunen was primarily a pastor and a teacher. He published little, unfortunately for his colleague anthropologists. And what he published was mostly in journals of the Franciscan order. Noteworthy is his analysis of the 1956 Obano revolt, during which groups of Ekagi attempted to get rid of the colonial newcomers, administrators and missionaries alike. Drafted by Van Nunen, and addressed to the colonial administrators, it formulates the point of view of the local Catholic missionaries. A shortened version of the paper was published in 1957, in *Neerlandia Seraphica*, the journal of the Franciscans published in the Netherlands.

From the late 1960s Van Nunen took an active part in the establishment and the functioning of the Akademi Teologi Katolik, in Abepura, inland from Jayapura. This school trained its pupils to become functionaries in the church. Van Nunen was one of the teachers. Over the decades he built up an outstanding library of published and unpublished documents about New Guinea. He left it behind in Jayapura where it still is. Pdf versions of the documents exist, but they are not available online so far.

It was only in the 1990s that I got to know him personally, first during visits to Jayapura, and from 2003, after he had returned to the Netherlands on account of his health, in a retirement home of the Catholic Church. He was a most pleasant, prepossessing person to talk with so I was happy to discuss New Guinea highlands ethnography with him.

And there were others who benefited from his extensive knowledge. Jan Sloot, the chronicler of the Franciscan mission in west New Guinea, found him a 'living archive' (2010: 9) who corrected numerous errors in his drafts. About his history of west New Guinea, comprising 671 pages, Dirk Vlasblom writes (2004: 11) that Van Nunen was almost the co-author. And he advised his nephew, the filmmaker Nico Boink, when he made his documentary *Franciscus van Papoea*, dealing with the work of the Franciscan missionaries in west New Guinea. So, most fortunately, part of Van Nunen's knowledge is indirectly available via these documents.

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