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GEERTJE MAK

## Counting People. Molding intimate lives into legibility in Dutch New Guinea

172 Historical demography is not my specialty. But for my work on gender in colonizing processes in Dutch New Guinea I found the kind of source that would make demographic historians' mouths water. In the late 1950s, the Dutch colonial administration decided to start registering the population of Dutch New Guinea and founded a department called 'Kantoor Bevolkingszaken' (Office of Demographic Affairs). Instead of a historical demographic interpretation of these sources, I would like to present you with some preliminary thoughts on this source in terms of governmentality and gender. The brief essay that follows is written in honor of Theo Engelen, to whom counting people has always meant that people count.

Counting and registering people is not something that comes naturally because a lot has to be done in order to register people. Registering does not simply reflect, it also affects the people involved, according to James C. Scott's argument in his now classic *Seeing Like a State* (Scott, 1998). In order to be able to count, to measure, calculate and control production, population and reproduction, a state needs to create clear standardized units. This does not only happen on paper; often, complex realities themselves first have to be streamlined in order to become easily legible for administrators and politicians. Scott offers a variety of examples of dramatically failed well-intentioned reform projects all over the world. One of his examples deals with the compulsory villagization in Tanzania under Nyerere in the 1970s: in entire regions people were forced to leave their original dwellings and semi-sedentary lives in order to start living in larger 'modern' villages with running water and healthcare. Shared machines would enable mass monoculture agricultural production for the global market. The complex traditional agriculture that used the diverse microclimates of each valley for growing different kinds of crops was re-

placed by a production streamlined for overview and administration. The project proved to be a catastrophe (Scott, 1998, p. 223-268).

Scott convincingly shows how the aim of monitoring and directing agricultural production demanded a clear ordering in reality. He concentrates on the destruction of the population's traditional ways of living and farming, but pays hardly any attention to the ways in which these large-scale resettlement programs may also have affected family, gender and kinship structures. After all, the politics of building 'model villages' was probably rooted in earlier missionary projects to create 'Christian villages', often set up around schools and 'redeemed' children (Becker, 2011). Such villages were intended to cut these children off from traditional ('immoral') ways of life and to create exemplary nuclear family units. The case of Dutch New Guinea may shed some light on precisely these gendered aspects of – in this case colonial – village (re)settlement programs.

173

In the 1950s, the Dutch colonial administration of New Guinea started a project to map all its inhabitants. After losing the decolonial war against Indonesia, the Dutch clung on to New Guinea as their last opportunity to prove that they could be good colonizers. A complete 'development' program was set up to improve the infrastructure, reclaim swamps, set up large-scale logging, agriculture and fishing, and improve the population's health and reproduction. One of the issues of concern was the population's fertility, a concern both fed by racist fantasies about the inevitable extinction of inferior races and concrete problems caused by (imported) STDs (Derksen, 2016). Such 'development' projects demanded the cooperation of the local people. How to involve, motivate, educate, train and discipline them was one of the most challenging tasks within this 'development' program. How to achieve this in practice? How to reach and direct people, how to change their way of life? This is what 'governmentality' is about: the question of how to govern in practice (Miller & Rose, 2013).

Family, households, sexuality and gender figure highly in problems of governmentality, as I hope to show further below (Mak, 2017). This had begun with one of the basic premises for governing: demographic administration. Simply registering people turned out to be a huge practical operation indeed. Administrators – each supported by twenty carriers charged with packages of a variety of forms, cans of traditional Dutch food and packets of dried soup – walked from settlement to settlement to register their inhabitants. They were on the move for months and kept thick logs with accounts of the many practical obstacles that they encountered. In each settlement, they had to fill in an impressive number of forms.<sup>1</sup> Per-

sonal cards (divided into male and female) for those above the age of 14; a family booklet, bearing the name of the mother; a form for the investigation of fertility; a house card (with a small map of the house's interior); and a 'collective register' organized by geographical region. There were also cards for registering deaths or births.<sup>2</sup>

174 All of the forms display the difficulties of using Dutch categorizations for the New Guinea context, and the efforts to accommodate local custom or 'adat'. Almost hilarious are the many kinds of marriage listed on the personal cards: only adat, adat and church, adat and civil, adat, church and civil, only church, only civil, unknown. Furthermore, the family booklet remarkably bears the name of the mother; it provides space for the registration of 16 children, and, for each child separately, the name of their father. On the personal form for women, there is space for four different husbands, and the children are categorized in terms of their 'legality': outside marriage, adat marriage, Christian marriage or civil marriage. This seems to be an adaptation of the form to Papuan custom, assuming that the mother may have easily changed her sexual partners. However, given the fact that most peoples in New Guinea knew marriage systems with huge bride gifts collected with great effort by the bridegroom, his family and larger social network, it is highly unlikely that women often changed their sexual partner. Was the Papuan sexual promiscuity assumed in these forms a Dutch fantasy, maybe, possibly based on a misunderstanding of sexual initiation rites (Herdt, 2006)?

On the so-called fertility form, even miscarriages and stillborn children had to be registered. One of the administrators carrying out the registration reports the difficulties to get the women to speak about these issues. He began to speak to women separately from the men in order to get the necessary information.<sup>3</sup> It shows how deeply the Dutch colonial administration penetrated the intimate spheres of its colonized subjects at the time in order to collect information. But the most intriguing are the house cards, where the people living in one house are registered. Here, too, the deeply penetrating colonial perspective immediately catches the eye: even the interior of each house is mapped, meticulously drawn on millimeter paper, often with nothing more than a fireplace in one corner (Figure 1), sometimes with a separate 'bedroom'. Originally, most Papuan peoples knew a system with so-called 'longhouses', with separate houses for men, for women and young children, and for adolescent boys. On the house cards, the administrators tried to combine this with the system of nuclear families, witnessing the following mind-blowing categorization (Figure

2): I Children group (unmarried children linked to family); II Parents group: A Married couples (men and their wife/wives, if living together), B Separately living heads of the family (if living together with unmarried children); III Other inhabitants (remainders of disintegrated families, etc.).

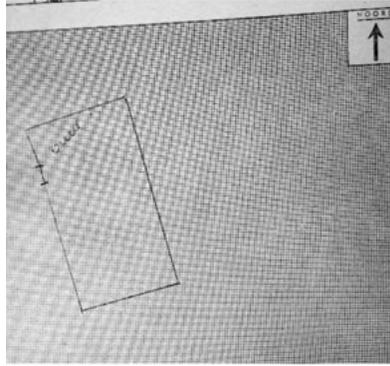


Figure 1. House cards district Numfor<sup>4</sup>

175

5 DEMOGRAFISCHE STRUCTUUR								
GROEPEN			MAN	VROUW	TOT.	AANTAL BORILINGEN VRUCHTBAARHEIDSONDERZ.		
I. KINDEREN-GROEP <small>(ongehuwde kinderen in gezinsverband)</small>			3	4	7			
II. OUDERS-GROEP								
A. ECHTPAREN <small>(mannen en hun vrouw(en), indien samenwonend)</small>			1	1	2	2	4	6
B. ALLEENLEVENDE GEZINSHOOFDEN <small>(voor zover met inwonende, ongehuwde kinderen)</small>			-	-	-			
III. OVERIGE INWONENDEN <small>(restanten van opgeloste gezinnen, g.d.m.)</small>			-	-	-			
TOTAAL AANTAL BEWONERS			4	5	9	2	4	6

Fig. 2 House card district Numfor<sup>5</sup>

The forms clearly show that the registration of people did more than just ‘counting’: it forced very specific, modern Western European ways of understanding marriage, sexuality, households, and children onto the diverse peoples of Dutch New Guinea. The centrality of the issue of fertility, as well as the obsession with organizing sexuality and kinship in the form of nuclear families, is very obvious. These registrations did not record anything about the ways in which these peoples originally understood and dealt with such issues. Or in other words, the forms did not help to know

the people from New Guinea, but imposed specific Dutch grids of knowing on them. I added 'originally' to the sentence before last, because there is one more thing to say about these forms: the administrators and their forms were almost entirely limited to those areas of New Guinea where Protestant and Catholic missions had created strong footholds. They were not very 'original' anymore. The maps showing where the demographic project was fully carried out clearly show this. The easy explanation for this is that these were the only places the administrators could travel to – even when they were supported by twenty local carriers, travelling in New Guinea was extremely difficult.

176

But there is more to it: these are also the areas where missions had successfully carried out colonial civilization projects in close collaboration with the colonial administration. Such civilization projects aimed at fundamental changes in ways of living and entailed a complete restructuring of Papuans' sexual, family and kinship structures. The upbringing of children in 'proper' families and their education in Christian European schools were seen as the key to change. Good households with morally sound mothers could discipline their children into healthy and productive ways of life. Maaïke Derksen (2016, p. 12-19) has carefully described how Catholic missions in the south of Dutch New Guinea had set up a program for schools and model villages from the 1920s onward, resulting in about 200 schools and villages in the early 1940s. This large-scale program was carried out mainly by gurus from the Kei and Tanimbar islands in south-east Maluku and subsidies of the colonial administration. These kampongs consisted of houses for nuclear families. The people were forced to work the land, take care of the buildings and infrastructure, and send their children to school. For the Protestant northern part of Dutch New Guinea, my research has shown that Protestant missionaries started to set up Christian villages as early as around 1900 (Mak, 2017). I suspect they developed resettlement programs similar to the Catholic missions. The category grids that the forms imposed on Dutch New Guinea's population did not travel much further, it seems, than the places where the actual situation had thus already been made 'legible' to Dutch colonial eyes. I would not dare to say that housing resettlement programs were done in order to make the situation in Dutch New Guinea legible; what can be said is that, obviously, only in those areas had it become legible to the Dutch. And not just that: the creation of a structure of nuclear families – or something in that direction – created a strong point of entrance into the disciplining of a new generation. The forms show indeed how deeply

colonial administration could interfere with the intimacies of these already resettled Papuans' lives.

In conclusion, counting people does much more to people than it seems to at first sight. Concentrating on the how of the counting, on the mundane techniques of filling in forms, it becomes apparent how much knowing a population is related to molding it. Structuring the population in nuclear family units and controlling sexuality were at the heart of that molding, in this case. Moreover, here it turned out that the act of registering was accompanied by a deep penetration into people's intimate lives, showing that such counting does not just prepare for governance, but already is the execution of governmental power.

177

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