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In Memoriam
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On 19 August 1993 a large audience of relatives, friends and colleagues gathered in the beautiful Old Church of Heemstede to commemorate Herman Gerrit Schulte Nordholt. He had passed away at the age of eighty-one a few days before.¹

His end did not come unexpectedly. It was preceded by long weeks of illness in hospital. But, in spite of his state of physical debility, the characteristics which we as his friends and pupils had always esteemed and admired again were plainly manifest during these last days. The experienced administrator he was, he not only arranged to receive us one after another but also planned his memorial service down to the tiniest detail. As the paternal mentor and teacher we had always known, he once more showed his warm interest in all our current activities and discussed our work and our plans with us. As the sympathetic friend he had always been, he took our hands and conjured up moments of closeness in the past. And now more than ever before he spoke about himself, too: of shortcomings he regretted and of the gifts of life he had enjoyed. And he expressed his confidence in the great change awaiting him.

Schulte Nordholt's academic career was not a straightforward one. Due to bad health as a child, he was brought up away from his family in the isolation of a Dutch country parsonage. He read widely, mostly books on history – a fact which he later often advanced in explanation of his lifelong predilection for this subject. After attending secondary school in Zwolle, he studied Indology at the University of Utrecht from 1930 to 1934 to prepare himself for an appointment as government administrator in the Dutch East Indies. Because of the great depression, however, it was not possible for him to be sent abroad immediately upon obtaining his degree. Consequently he continued his studies in philosophy, Islam, and the ethnology of Indonesia.

¹ I would like to thank Dr. H. Schulte Nordholt for the information and help he has given for this obituary and the bibliography, and Professor J.W. Schoorl for his kind permission to use his 'Foreword' to the volume published in commemoration of H.G. Schulte Nordholt's retirement as Professor of Cultural Anthropology (R. Schefold, J.W. Schoorl and J. Tennekes (eds), *Man, meaning and history*, The Hague 1980).



Herman Gerrit Schulte Nordholt †

In 1936 he married Oet Zielhuis. In October of the same year, the young couple was finally sent to the then Dutch colony. Schulte Nordholt worked first in Sumbawa Besar, and was transferred to East Flores in October 1938, and to North Central Timor, where he was a *controleur* (district official) in Kefamnanoe, in November 1939.

The Japanese invasion in the first months of 1942 put an end to this phase of his career. He himself has given an absorbing account not only of the situation just before and during the landing of the Japanese, but also of the general complexities of the position of a government official in a part of an outer island which had not been under Dutch control for much more than one generation (since 1915), in his *Besturen in een vacuüm* (An administrator working in a vacuum; 1977). After over three years of internment in Japanese prison camps, he returned to Timor in September 1945, where he resumed his work for the colonial government until July 1947. Due to problems with his sight, he was not given any more overseas postings after that.

Schulte Nordholt's stay in Timor laid the foundation for his later specialization in cultural anthropology. In the earliest stages of that stay, disputes about the succession of some of the local '*zelfbestuurders*' (self-governing rulers) had prompted him to investigate the traditional political organization. Other administrative concerns, such as the implementation of a project to improve agricultural conditions, had drawn his attention to land tenure rights and to the role of the sacral ruler in the annual agricultural cycle with its accompanying rituals. In the course of his investigation and analysis of these matters a meeting with G.W. Locher was to prove of great consequence. Locher was conducting anthropological fieldwork in Timor in 1940 in connection with his former studies at Leiden University. The Indology programme in Utrecht 'was distinguished by being politically and scientifically anti-Leiden', as Schulte Nordholt later observed (1980:232); it was mainly ethnographic in focus and provided no adequate preparation for the type of investigation Schulte Nordholt wanted to do. Locher told him about the anthropological tradition that had evolved in Leiden under the guidance of J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong, and brought the elaboration and application of relevant theoretical concepts in the work on Eastern Indonesia by F.A.E. van Wouden, one of De Josselin de Jong's most gifted students, to his attention. The holistic view of the connections between myths, rituals and socio-political systems as parts of the essential unity formed by a given culture furnished the perspective Schulte Nordholt needed for his research. At the same time it became evident to him, however, how inadequate was the old material on Timor that was available for his investigation.

Schulte Nordholt had written an extensive report on his findings for the government (*Memorie van overgave*), but this document after the turmoil of the post-war period turned out to be untraceable. Upon his return to The Netherlands he initially devoted himself to other matters and started

studying Semitic languages, Arabic, Hebrew and history. In the second half of 1949 he interrupted his studies to take part in the official activities in connection with the Round Table Conference on The Netherlands' recognition of the independence of the Republic of Indonesia. In 1950 he obtained a position as a teacher of history at a secondary school in Waalwijk, and later in Doorn. In 1953 he was awarded a Master's degree in history at the Free University in Amsterdam. Finally, in 1960, he was offered a lectureship in the anthropology of Africa in the newly founded Department of Cultural Anthropology of the Free University in Amsterdam by Professor L. Onvlee.

At that time Schulte Nordholt embarked on a study of sacred kingship in Africa. This subject soon led him back to Indonesia, however. Encouraged by Locher, and stimulated by reports of the studies of C.E. Cunningham, who had done field research among the Atoni from 1959 until 1961, he turned his attention to Timor once again. Unexpectedly, a copy of his long-lost report had been discovered on this island after all, and had been consulted by Cunningham for his researches. The data of this report and Cunningham's research, combined with an analysis of the existing literature, official records and information furnished by missionaries (especially by P. Middelkoop, who had published and translated many ritual texts from Timor), provided the basis for a study which was submitted as a Ph.D. dissertation to the Free University, with Professor Onvlee as supervisor, in 1966. In the English version of this, published as volume 60 of the KITLV *Verhandelingen* series in 1971, the book was described by P.E. de Josselin de Jong as constituting the 'culmination point' of a long Dutch tradition of research on symbolic classification in Indonesia. With its application of a combination of historical and structuralist methods, it has influenced a whole generation of researchers.

The political system of the Atoni of Timor in fact offers much more than the title suggests. It attempts an all-embracing structural analysis of the Atoni and presents their symbolic order in its various local manifestations as a totality which Schulte Nordholt himself characterized as a 'system of life'. To put it in the most general terms, he established a pervasive dualism obtaining in Atoni society, with a hierarchical relationship existing between two unequal but mutually indispensable halves which involves both integrative reciprocity and divisive rivalry and is often mediated by a third, unifying concept. His background as a historian prevented him from presenting such a system as a 'fossilized' – complete and integrated – whole. 'The system of symbols is not a closed, static one; its structural principles tend in different directions, and within the structures tensions exist which are inherent in these structures themselves, so that these function oppositionally in part' (1971a:10). However, as systems of transformations, structures tend to be self-adjusting and thus self-reproductive, though this does not necessarily imply repetition of the old. Schulte Nordholt regards such holistic tendencies as being the result of an active and continuous

concern of the people themselves. His study is a splendid example of the combination of vivid ethnography with a comprehensive analysis both of the structural principles underlying a particular system of life and of the continually changing forms in which people remould these principles when responding to new conditions and developments.

In 1970 Schulte Nordholt went back to Timor for a new study, which is referred to in a note in the English translation of his monograph and which formed the basis for his 1980 article on Atoni symbolic classification. The central theme of this article is the multifaceted and complex use of the male and female principles. Apart from this, however, his activities during his later years at the Free University did not leave him as much room for new publications as he might have wished. He had been appointed to the chair of Cultural Anthropology as the successor of L. Onvlee in 1967, and he viewed the further development of the department as his main task. This was not always easy, especially during the periods of unrest at Dutch universities in the late sixties and early seventies, but the sincerity of his commitment, in combination with his administrative talents, guaranteed a continuity of good relations with students and university staff alike.

In his inaugural lecture (1967) Schulte Nordholt referred once more to his life-long interest in history and emphasized that the drawing up of a structural configuration should always be accompanied by investigations of the diachronic dimension. The dynamic potential of conflict and 'événement' should be taken into consideration, with regard both to any reactions involving re-adjustment and to the possibility of partial structural changes. In the teaching specializations he introduced at the Free University, namely political anthropology and symbolic anthropology, he attempted to work out these ideas about research with other staff members and students. This resulted in several Ph.D. dissertations, covering various regions in Africa and Indonesia.

It was Indonesia which remained his main area of interest and affection. When in 1975, after a period of low intensity in the relations between Indonesia and The Netherlands, an Indonesian Studies Programme was launched as the product of a new scheme of co-operation between the two countries within the framework of a Cultural Agreement, Schulte Nordholt became one of the first members of the steering committee of that programme. He actively participated in the programme and was involved in several of its successful projects. Another reflection of his lasting commitment to Indonesian studies was his participation in the activities of the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology (KITLV), where he became a member, and twice vice-president, of the executive board. In recognition of his services he was made an honorary member of the KITLV in 1991.

Schulte Nordholt retired from the Free University in 1981. In the following years his health gradually declined. The most serious drawback he had to cope with was the near-loss of his sight. He, who had always

astonished his visitors with his wide reading even in the most unexpected fields, now became dependent on what was read to him by others. But he never lost his interest in what was going on around him. He listened to what his Ph.D. students had worked out for him on tape and helped them with his comments. And these comments were always just as much to the point as in his earlier days. He hardly ever imposed his views on others, but stimulated them where they gave evidence of insights which he considered important until they discovered themselves what Schulte Nordholt wanted them to understand.

He was a brilliant narrator, and his enthusiasm in telling the right story at the right moment communicated itself to his listeners, who usually discovered afterwards that without realizing it they had been set on a particular track the narration had been intended for. What Schulte Nordholt said about Onvlee in his inaugural lecture, namely that he was a 'leader of the dialogue in a very personal relationship', was no less true of himself. We will remember him for his reflective scholarship, for his quiet guidance, and for the warmth of his friendship.

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