

A History of WDO

-Han F. Vermeulen-

The "Cross faculty Ethnological Student Debating Club WDO" (in short WDO) was established in Leiden on November 5, 1928. WDO was founded by the first generation graduate students of J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong (1886-1964), professor of ethnology at Leiden University from 1922 to 1956. The purpose of founding this student debating club (*dispuut*) was to extend discussions on ethnology outside the lecture halls, and to meet socially in an informal club on a scholarly and non-sectarian basis. Meetings took place monthly, usually in student houses, sometimes in restaurants or public places (National Museum of Ethnology). The lectures or papers were given by the student-members themselves or by invited guests. On special 5-yearly occasions (*lustrums*), the board of WDO organized national or even international conferences, sometimes resulting in important publications.



5 november 1988, onthulling van de WDO gedenkplaat door Prof. Dr. G.W.Locher

Appropriately, the meaning of the name WDO remains a mystery. The acronym WDO was found engraved in a chairman's gavel that was presented as a gift to the first board of the *dispuut*. As almost all records of WDO have gone missing during World War II, this mystery will not easily be resolved. However, the names of the founders and the first members have been preserved: J. van Baal, J.F.E. Einaar, H.J. Friedricy, K.W. Galis, G.J. Held, G.W. Locher, H. Luttig, C. Nooteboom, and F.A.E. van Wouden. Most of them wrote a PhD thesis under JPB's supervision and later occupied prominent positions in anthropology, either in ethnographical museums or at the universities in the Netherlands, Indonesia or Suriname.

An overview of the first five years of WDO's existence, compiled by Bas van Eyk (1933), provides details on the early members and the sessions organized during 1928-33 as well as on the subjects discussed (Kinship, Magic, Religion, Social Structure, Animism, etc.). The overview shows that students majoring in other subjects, such as law, history or medicine, could also enrol as members of WDO, provided they were following courses in ethnology.

This explains the "cross faculty" in WDO's name. All students interested in ethnology could become a member or attend the meetings. In the early days of WDO, four female students were a member, including Joke Kortmann (later Chabot-Kortmann) and Maria Leenmans (later known as the poet Maria Vasalis). Because most female students never wrote a PhD (with one exception: Martha Nicolspeyer), their names are not that well preserved in oral tradition.

After the Second World War, a new generation of ethnology students arrived in Leiden, who again joined WDO, restyled the debating club, and re-invented several traditions. They introduced the mock-*hospitium*, an introductory speech by new members on an anthropology subject suggested by the board. They also invented the *dispuutsgeest*, a masked character who livened up meetings with ghost appearances, drums beating and quasi mystical sayings. A *chronique* of WDO during the period 1945-1951,

compiled by Els Postel-Coster and Tom Zuidema (1952), is available in the WDO archives. The names of these second-generation members are better preserved, on account of the fact that most of them wrote their PhD's under supervision of JPB and later occupied curatorships or professorial posts in the Netherlands and abroad: A.A. Gerbrands, P.E. de Josselin de Jong, R. Needham, E. Postel-Coster, J. Pouwer, G.D. van Wengen, A.A. Trouwborst, J.W. Schoorl, R.S. Wassing, J.B. Avé, R.T. Zuidema, and R.A.J. Buve. In 1995,



J.P.B. De Josselin de Jong, 1952

they collectively produced an edited volume of essays on their experiences as students of ethnology and members of WDO. Its title *Waar Dromers Ontwaken* ("Where Dreamers Awaken") refers to how they experienced their "awakening" to the insights of ethnology and how they applied this heritage in their later careers (Van Wengen, Trouwborst & Wassing 1995).

After their graduation, anthropology at Leiden underwent several transformations. In 1953 ethnology was renamed "cultural anthropology" in the Netherlands, adopting the terminology introduced by Franz Boas and his pupils in the USA. Under the influence of cultural relativism, and in a post-colonial context, the Leiden focus shifted to intensive fieldwork in changing cultures under duress. In addition, a new discipline, the sociology of non-western, developing nations, was introduced as a successor to the former Indology courses for colonial civil servants, in 1952 (Vermeulen 2002). From then on, anthropology at Leiden bifurcated between cultural anthropology (CA) and sociology of non-western societies (SNWS). An Institute of CA and SNWS (ICA), combining both study programs, was established by G.W. Locher (1908-1997) in 1956 (Vermeulen 1999). Together with his colleagues P.E. de Josselin de Jong (1922-1999, successor to the chair of his uncle from 1957 to 1987) and R.A.J. van Lier (1914-1987, professor at Leiden 1950-1980), Locher trained dozens of students in both subjects, each year. Celebrating its 40th anniversary in 1996 (Claessen & Vermeulen 1997), the ICA (now a Department) has graduated well over 1,000 MA students.

Of special interest are the conferences organized by WDO in 1963, 1968, 1978, 1988, 1993, and 1998.

Information on the programmes can be found in the books published by or on behalf of WDO. A highlight



WDO gathering, 1987. Behind the slide machine the author of this article, Han Vermeulen

was the international symposium of 1978, dealing with "The Nature of Structure: Structural Anthropology at Leiden" (de Josselin de Jong et al. 1981). The book makes clear that Leiden had produced an important research tradition, the "Leiden tradition in structural anthropology," which combined comparative structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss and cognitive anthropology as developed by Edmund Leach, with the "Field of Anthropological Study" approach introduced by J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong in 1935.

Today, WDO's formula still appeals to anthropology students in Leiden, who are meeting on just about the same basis as in 1928. Their work had been greatly facilitated by the fact that an overarching society for anthropology and non-western sociology students, *Itivana*, was founded in 1993. WDO is now one of *Itivana*'s sections. WDO celebrates its 75th anniversary in December 11-12, 2003 with an international conference, keeping alive a tradition. "Facing Fieldwork: Challenges for Anthropology in a Globalising World" is the title of this conference, bringing together contemporary anthropologists with extensive fieldwork experience.

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