

## IN MEMORIAM JAN VOORHOEVE

19th JUNE 1923 - 30th JANUARY 1983

On the morning of Sunday, 30th January 1983, Jan Voorhoeve died at the Paris address where he was staying in order to work with the African Languages group of the CNRS (Conseil National de Recherches Scientifiques). His death was instantaneous and entirely unexpected. Born in Djombang, the then Netherlands East Indies, in 1923, he had lived to be 59 years old. He was caught in the middle of an active and happy life, dominated by his love for his family as well as for the peoples whose languages he studied. He was a man of great and unreserved affection and total dedication.

Voorhoeve's professional career started at the University of Amsterdam in 1953, when he presented and defended his doctoral thesis, *Voorstudies tot een beschrijving van het Sranan Tongo* [Prolegomena to a description of Sranan Tongo], written under the supervision of the professor of Dutch linguistics, Wytze Hellinga. A few years later, in 1956, he went to Surinam, then part of the Kingdom of The Netherlands, to work for the Dutch Bible Society. He was to stay in Surinam for six years, during which period he became a well-known and highly respected adoptive citizen of that country. He became a virtually native speaker of the local Creole language, Sranan Tongo, which he used when addressing his numerous and regular listeners on the radio every Sunday. In those days many Surinamese were surprised to find out that this popular radio figure was not a born Srananman. Even nowadays many retain vivid memories of these talks.

Meanwhile, Voorhoeve's interest went to the land of origin of the people he was so close to in Surinam — Africa. He was primarily a linguist, but with a mind as open as his heart. And he felt that his knowledge of and insight into the language he had been studying primarily, Sranan Tongo, could never be complete if he did not study its African origins. That is why we see him in Cameroun from 1962 till 1964, studying the languages of Central Western Africa, and of Cameroun in particular. He was to remain devoted to this part of the world and its people until the end of his life. From a student of Dutch linguistics he developed into a Creolist, and then an Africanist. In the last three or four years of his life he took up his old connections with

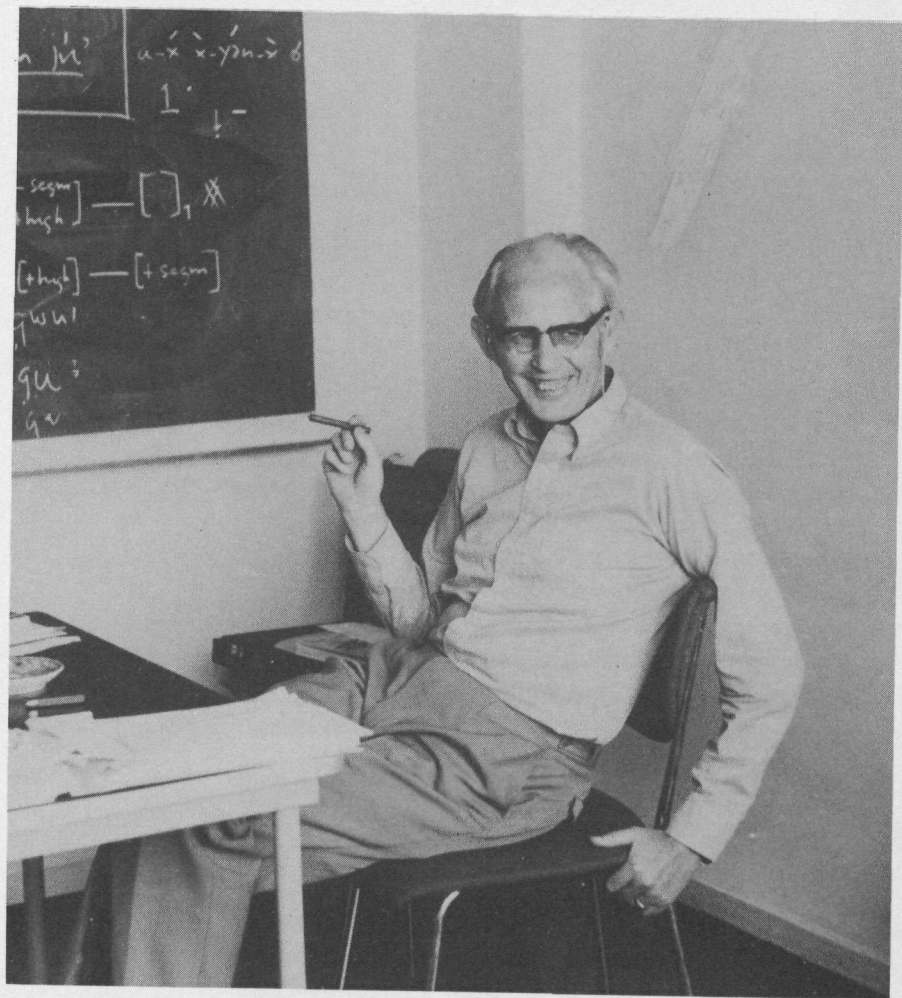
Surinam again and introduced a course in Creole Studies, with an emphasis on Sranan Tongo, in his department of African Linguistics at the University of Leiden. He had entered this department as assistant professor in 1964, and was appointed to the chair of African Languages in 1967.

During the thirty years of his professional career Jan Voorhoeve produced a mountain of publications, dealing with subjects ranging from the grammar, origins, literature and sociology of Sranan Tongo to the problems of the description and typology of African languages and their literature. Among his books we would mention especially a grammar of Sranan Tongo (1962), *Creole Drum* (1975), representing an excellent anthology of Surinam literature supplemented with enlightening scholarly commentary (which he co-authored with Ursy Lichtveld, of Amsterdam, and Vernie February, also of Amsterdam, who made the translations from Sranan Tongo into English), and *Contes Bamiléké* (1976), which contains Bamiléké stories, with French-language commentary and translations.

Jan Voorhoeve was also active in various professional organizations. At the time of his death he was President of the African Studies Centre at Leiden, Head of the Bantu Studies Section of the CNRS in Paris, and board member of the West African Linguistic Society, of the Benue-Congo Working Group, and of the Society for Caribbean Linguistics. Three weeks before his death he became a member of the board of the Institute for the Advancement of Surinam Studies (IBS).

His numerous friends remember Jan as a man who combined seriousness and a profound respect for the paramount values in life with a lucid sense of humour and of the relativity of things. His professorial gown suited him ill. He was happiest out in the field, working with enormous zest, but never by himself. In the academic atmosphere he had a tendency to pierce through the façades of pretence and indulge in merry but never malicious jest at academic formality and academic ceremony. His friends remember the characteristic chuckle which he reserved for pomp and circumstance. He was more himself outside the university — both an ordinary and a great man, with a great love of fun and amusement, and besides a very keen dancer. There is a story about a party in Cameroun at which the guests from various nations were asked to perform one of their native dances. Jan Voorhoeve, who was one of the guests, felt embarrassed at having to do a Dutch folk-dance, an exercise he had never been given to. So he performed a Surinam Creole dance, with his tall, lanky Dutch figure. Next morning there were children to be seen in the streets imitating his version of the Surinam dance . . .

His attitude towards religion constituted one of his main charms. He came from a strict Protestant background, and never found it



JAN VOORHOEVE †

necessary to break with religion. One had the feeling that he cherished it, the way a person may cherish a very aged parent or friend. But at heart he was a humanist.

Jan is survived by a beloved wife and four adult children.

Pieter A. M. Seuren  
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\* This bibliography lists exclusively those of Prof. Voorhoeve's writings relating to Surinam.

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