

## In memoriam

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# IN MEMORIAM

## **Franz Van de Velde O.M.I. (1909-2002): Polar missionary and pioneer**

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**Cornelius H.W. Remie\***

On February 22 of this year, the Roman Catholic missionary Father Franz Van de Velde departed this life in Merelbeke, Belgium, at the age of 92. His passing is not only a big loss for the Roman Catholic diocese of Churchill-Hudson Bay and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, but also for his relatives, for the people of Pelly Bay, Nunavut, and for the community of academics who study Inuit culture and society.

Ataata Vinivi, as he was known in the Kitikmeot and northern Hudson Bay regions, was born in Landskouer, Belgium, in 1909. Following his secondary school education at the Jesuit College of Aalst, he entered the Oblate novitiate in 1929 at Waregem, studied philosophy and theology in Jambes and Velaines and was ordained priest on June 29, 1935. In March 1937 he got his appointment for the Oblate mission of the Hudson Bay vicariate and in May of that year, he left for Canada accompanying Mgr. Arsène Turquetil who had visited Europe.

### **Ataata Vinivi, the missionary**

Arriving in Churchill in early August 1937, Ataata Vinivi participated in the festivities surrounding the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Oblate mission among the Inuit. On August 15, he was appointed socius of Father Henry, who had established the Pelly Bay mission in June 1935. As there were no facilities in Pelly Bay yet, Bishop Turquetil ordered him to spend the winter in Repulse Bay with Father Clabaut to study the language and to get accustomed to life in the Arctic. Before leaving for Repulse Bay, Father Van de Velde took part in the first synod of the Hudson Bay vicariate, held at Chesterfield Inlet at the end of August 1937.

Eager to reach his destination, he had to wait till early April 1938 before he could set out for Pelly Bay. It took him and his Inuk guide Pauli Kutsiutikko nineteen days to reach Pelly Bay, much longer than a normal trip would take. Concerned about the welfare of his socius-to-be, Father Henry had instructed Pauli to take utmost care, and

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that was what Pauli did. They finally arrived at the Pelly Bay mission on April 23, 1938.

Ataata Vinivi's energy and skills proved a great help to Father Henry. Being a good hunter and an excellent organizer, he quickly became responsible for the logistics of the Pelly Bay mission and in the next years he and Father Henry worked closely together to further develop the mission. Their missionary work had a dual focus: on the one hand they wanted to prevent Protestantism from spreading into the area, and on the other hand they did their best to dispose of Inuit paganism and turn the Nattilingmiut into good Catholics. Till 1949, when Father Henry left Pelly Bay to found a mission at Thom Bay, the area most threatened by the Anglicans, the emphasis was clearly on keeping out Protestantism (for a description and analysis, see the article by Remie and Oosten in this volume).

With the Thom Bay mission as a forward base from where Anglican influences in the area could be kept out, Ataata Vinivi could now fully concentrate on strengthening the Catholic character of the Pelly Bay community. With the help of his parishioners he built a stone church in Pelly Bay, erected a giant cross of steel drums on a nearby hill, and planted little chapels of the Virgin Mary all over the hunting territory of the Arviligjuarmiut. He introduced formal education, and although instruction was mainly religious, other subjects were taught there too! In all he did he closely involved his parishioners. And although he never admitted to me in the thirty years that I knew him that it had been his intention to build a model community, this was actually what he tried to achieve. Whether self sought or put in that position by others, Ataata Vinivi soon became a community leader in Pelly Bay.

As a leader, Ataata Vinivi took strong position when he felt that the interests of the Catholic community of Pelly Bay were threatened or put in jeopardy. Totally committed to his parishioners, he would rise up to their defence whenever he sensed that their rights were being violated. That occurred increasingly in the early and mid 1950s when the Canadian federal government changed its hitherto *laissez faire* policy towards the North into one of active involvement. The welfare colonialism that resulted from such involvement brought Ataata Vinivi into action time and again. Demanding the protection of the basic cultural and human rights of the Inuit, he didn't hesitate to publicly accuse those who violated them.

The apotheosis of conflicts between Ataata Vinivi and federal government bureaucrats came in 1960 when Pelly Bay was hit by two epidemics that claimed the lives of twelve of his parishioners, ten per cent of the total Pelly Bay population. The first epidemic, one of California flu, reached Pelly Bay via the DEW-line station that had been built near the village in the mid 1950s. A medical party that visited the community every year around Easter to check the health of the population and to take X-rays brought the second, more serious and deadly Asian flu epidemic, to Pelly Bay. The party had come there knowing that Asian flu had already claimed the lives of Inuit elsewhere in the Arctic. Ignoring the risks of a visit, they travelled according to schedule to Pelly Bay with the consequences we now know. When the news about the deadly epidemic spread, Ataata Vinivi was blamed for not having notified the outside

world. When the same doctor that headed the X-ray party that brought the Asian flu into Pelly Bay visited the community a month later, to gather information on the epidemic in order to whitewash his party's responsibility for introducing the deadly virus, Ataata Vinivi reached the very limit of his tolerance. Infuriated by the political manoeuvring, he wrote a stiff letter to the doctor's superiors in Frobisher Bay explaining what had actually happened in Pelly Bay. When he put the letter in the envelope he addressed it: To Murder Incorporated! His bishop reprimanded Ataata Vinivi for doing so but he told him rather straightforward that should there be another similar occasion, he would react in even stronger terms!

The many incidences that brought him into conflict with Hudson's Bay Company traders, RCMP officers, government doctors and administrators, as well as with his own superiors, created much stress. This, in addition to the heavy toll of years and years of hard work under often extremely difficult conditions, gradually affected his health. Partial loss of hearing and extreme fatigue turned the man who had done so much to build the Catholic community of Pelly Bay into someone who was considered *iliranaqtuq*, awe inspiring, and the time had come that he had to be replaced.

In 1965 Ataata Vinivi left Pelly Bay for Igloolik, where he spent the next four years. In 1969 he moved to Sanirajaq, Hall Beach, where he founded the R.C. Mission post. He stayed there till 1986 when his bishop, Mgr. Robidoux, sent him on retirement. The retirement was forced, but he was free to choose where to go: Montreal, Winnipeg or Belgium. And Belgium it would be. Leaving the Inuit people to whom he had dedicated his entire missionary life was a difficult step to take, all the more since the move back to Europe was to be undertaken only months before he would have been in the Arctic for fifty years. Yet Ataata Vinivi did not protest, for wasn't obedience one of the basic Oblate vows that he had taken when he had entered their ranks?

On 22 October 1986 Ataata Vinivi left the North for Montreal. "Good bye the Arctic" he remarked in a document called *Transatlantische reizen* (Transatlantic Journeys) that he wrote for his nephew Patrick. That was all. Visiting friends in Montreal and Ottawa, he learned on November 13th that the plane carrying Bishop Robidoux had crashed in Rankin Inlet. There were no survivors. He attended the funeral in Winnipeg and then returned to Ottawa and thence to Montreal where he visited a dying Inuk from Hall Beach. On November 28th, his birthday, he left for Belgium where he settled in his home village of Landskouter.

### **Franz Van de Velde, the ethnologist**

In a brief comment on his death in *Nunatsiaq News*, Lorraine Brandson, curator of the Eskimo Museum in Churchill, Manitoba, characterized Father Van de Velde as an avid chronicler of all kinds of information. She could not have been more right, for throughout his stay in the North Father Van de Velde collected an enormous amount of data on a great variety of topics. From those notes he emerges as a very keen observer and an inquisitive mind. To present an inventory of all he wrote would certainly require

a very long article. Here, I will restrict myself to his most important collections of data and their significance to our knowledge and understanding of Inuit history and culture.

A very important body of data concerns the collection of genealogies of the families that made up Nattilik society. For missionaries who had to conclude marriages according to Catholic canonical law, it was vital to know who was related to whom. Working with his elder parishioners, inquiring about their ancestors, where they had been living, etc., Father Van de Velde gradually built up a body of genealogical data that allows us insight into the long-term population dynamics of the Nattilingmiut. Historically, the data range back to the times when John Ross visited the area in 1830 during his quest for a Northwest Passage. Geographically, the data cover an area that includes most of the Central Canadian Arctic. They reveal demographic processes whose precise meaning still has to be assessed. What Boas, in his 1888 report on the Central Eskimo, considered to be a south- and westward expansion of the Nattilingmiut, can on the basis of Van de Velde's data also be interpreted as a steady incorporation of neighbouring groups. The data also reveal Nattilingmiut marriage practices and the fundamentals of Nattilik social organization.

Another area that Father Van de Velde inquired into was that of local geography. From the very time of his arrival in Pelly Bay he started collecting toponyms. Whenever he travelled the area Father Van de Velde would ask for the names of geographic features and inquire into their meaning, also collecting stories related to the place. Aware of the fact that orthographies can vary considerably, he registered the pronunciation of the toponyms on tape. When maps of the Rae Strait region became available in the 1950s, he established the exact geographical location of the toponyms he had collected and drew up detailed maps. Of the 662 toponyms he collected between 1938 and 1958, the federal government officialized 300 Inuktitut names in the 1970s. What will happen to the other names is uncertain. When I visited Pelly Bay in 1995, the children and grandchildren of Van de Velde's informants had already forgotten many toponyms. Sedentary settlement life had exacted its toll. To preserve the precious geographical data that relate to the times when the Nattilingmiut were nomadic hunters and fishers, Father Van de Velde's *Lexique Géographique* should be reworked and made available for use in schools in the Kitikmeot area as it is an essential element of Nattilingmiut cultural heritage.

Apart from genealogical and geographical data, Father Van de Velde collected a host of other types of information on various aspects of the Nattilik hunting culture. He noted down song texts, recorded songs on tape, kept lists of hunting spoils of his parishioners, and took a special interest in the polar bear population. His notes on the killing and sighting of bears provided important information for researchers from the Canadian Wildlife Service with whom he was in contact.

Father Van de Velde also made detailed notes on Pelly Bay material culture. He initiated in Pelly Bay the production and sale of carvings and traditional artefacts which found their way to collectors and museums all over the world. Assisted by Eric Mitchell, former president of Canadian Arctic Producers, an organization that promoted the sale of Inuit carvings and other works of art, he published in 1973 a fine

catalogue that can still be considered a standard work on Nattilik material culture. It is an indispensable source for museum curators who are dealing with artefacts from the Pelly Bay area.

His writings in the mission periodical *Eskimo*, on female infanticide, religion and morals, and sharing systems of the Pelly Bay people, aroused the interest of the anthropological community and brought him into contact with them. The first to visit him was the Dutch anthropologist Geert van den Steenhoven who studied Inuit systems of leadership and law. Having spent some time in the Barren Lands around Ennadai Lake and the Kazan River, van den Steenhoven visited Father Van de Velde in Pelly Bay in the summer of 1957. The visit was the beginning of a lifetime co-operation and friendship and resulted in the most important project that Father Van de Velde would ever undertake.

Discussing the changes that were taking place in the Arctic at the time, van den Steenhoven suggested that Van de Velde ask several of his parishioners to keep a diary. Such writings, van den Steenhoven reasoned, could provide very valuable insights into the process of change and document its human dimensions. Father Van de Velde reacted with scepticism: Inuit, he claimed, were focused on oral tradition and were not accustomed to writing. He forgot all about van den Steenhoven's request, but the latter was tenacious and kept repeating the request in his correspondence with Van de Velde. In order to demonstrate to van den Steenhoven that such a diary project was not feasible, he decided to ask Bernard Irqugaqtuq, a long time travel guide and friend, to keep a private journal. Bernard agreed to do so and Van de Velde provided him with the necessary writing materials.

Van de Velde systematically refrained from asking Bernard how things went. Not only was he sceptic, he also didn't want to influence him. He almost forgot about the project when Bernard left the mission to spend the summer inland, fishing in the lakes and hunting for caribou. Great was his surprise when Bernard, visiting the mission in early September 1958, presented him with an exercise book crammed with notes in syllabics. A quick glance made Van de Velde realize that he had something very valuable in his hands, and he encouraged Bernard Irqugaqtuq to continue his writings. That is what Bernard did. The final result was a private journal that covers the period extending from March 2, 1958, to November 27, 1964.

Father Van de Velde transcribed the syllabic texts with the help of Bernard himself. Transcription took place as texts became available. Whenever Bernard stayed at the mission post, Van de Velde invited him to read his own text. Since non-standardized syllabics were rather inaccurate, Van de Velde wanted to make sure that his transcription was a correct one. At the outset of the transcription sessions Father Van de Velde realized that Bernard was using language that he thought the Father would understand. In reaction to this, Van de Velde implored him to write as if he were writing for a native audience. Bernard promised to do so, and judging from the many, many inquiries that Father Van de Velde had to make about the syllabic text, Bernard lived up to his promises.

The private journal of Bernard Irqugaqtuq provided Van de Velde with an insight that surpassed by far his own observations. Through working on the diary he became to realize that his model community of Catholics was subject to unbridled factionalism and that traditional religious beliefs coexisted alongside Catholic doctrine he had helped introduce.

The next anthropologist that knocked at Van de Velde's door was Asen Balikci, who visited Pelly Bay on various field trips between 1959 and 1965. He was amongst other things in charge of an ethnographic filming project that resulted in the film series *People of the Seal*. Father Van de Velde often acted as an adviser, but somehow the chemistry between the two didn't work. The lack of credit that Balikci gave to Van de Velde in his many publications made for a strained and rather problematic relationship that is representative of many relations between anthropologists and missionaries. Professional arrogance and jealousy about missionaries' permanent access to the field may well explain the tense relationship.

I myself got into contact with Father Van de Velde in 1971 through Geert van den Steenhoven, at the time professor at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, Netherlands. Since I had expressed a profound interest in arctic ethnography, van den Steenhoven introduced me, in the summer of 1971, to Father Van de Velde, who was on leave in Europe. The outcome of this meeting was that I would join Father Van de Velde in his mission post in Hall Beach and help him out put his scientific notes and Bernard Irqugaqtuq's diary in order so that these notes and the diary, should the time arrive, be ready for publication. To that end, I spent more than a year at Hall beach with my family and visited Pelly Bay in the summer and fall of 1974.

Returning to Hall Beach in early 1976, I suggested to Father Van de Velde to make a compilation of his genealogical and historical data on Pelly Bay. He responded favourably to my request and produced, over a period of six years (1978-1984), a series of volumes called *Statistiques objectives sur la population Netjilique*. These volumes were the basis of a publication on Nattilik demography in *Arctic Anthropology* (see Van de Velde *et al.* 1993). The diary of Bernard Irqugaqtuq and the *Statistiques objectives* served as a main basis for my publications on Nattilingmiut female infanticide and Nattilingmiut religious change and continuity.

Given the delicate character of Bernard's diary — the document gives an insight into the dynamics of Pelly Bay society at a critical time in its development — Father Van de Velde and Bernard Irqugaqtuq agreed that the document should not be published before long. In the written agreement between Van de Velde and Irqugaqtuq as to this, no specific date was mentioned. As can be inferred from circumstantial data, there is an embargo on publicizing the document before 2010. As a matter of fact, Father Van de Velde, feeling that his end was nearing, asked me in June 2001 to start preparations for the publication of Bernard Irqugaqtuq's private journal, a task that will certainly take several years to complete.

## Appreciation and honours

Recognition of expertise and appreciation of work done is a reward that is bestowed to only a few during their lifetime. This happened to father Van de Velde in 1979 / 1980 when he was called in as an expert on Inuit culture by the Canada born sister of the Dutch Queen, princess Margriet and her husband Mr. Pieter Van Vollenhove. The two had visited northern Canada in 1978 and had made a documentary film during their trip to the Canadian North. To edit this film for presentation on Dutch television, the help of Father Van de Velde was called in. The cooperation resulted in a basic recognition of the Father's expertise, which was expressed in a publication entitled *Eskimos, mensen zonder tijd* (Inuit, people without time). The presentation of the book, a popular account of Inuit culture, took place in the Tea Pavilion of the Royal Palace "Het Loo" on March 25, 1980.

Encouraged by the tribute paid to Ataata Vinivi by the Dutch, his Flemish countrymen organized yet another celebration. On September 5, 1981, a statue of Ataata Vinivi was erected in his home village of Landskouter in the presence of Princess Margriet and her husband. In conjunction with the festivities, the author of this article organized ethnographic exhibits on northern Canada in Merelbeke and the city of Ghent.

The future still had more honours in store for Father Van de Velde. On 11 April 1984 he received the Order of Canada, on February 25, 1985, he was made a knight in the Belgian Order of the Crown, and in June 22, 1986, he was made a knight of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem. A year later, Father Van de Velde met with Baudoin, king of Belgium. Their private exchange of ideas made a deep impression on both.

## Father Van de Velde's post-arctic years

Although retired in Belgium as of November 1986, Ataata Vinivi kept busy. Taking stock of all of the stray notes and photographs that he took in the Arctic, he started ordering and compiling them systematically, sending the ordered fascicules and codices to the Oblate archives in Ottawa. On top of that, he accepted many invitations to lecture on Canada's North and on Inuit culture. For Ataata Vinivi this was just another form of pastorate. The odd honorarium that he received for his activities was invariably sent to Canada, courtesy of the Pelly Bay Mission to which he had dedicated his entire life.

A Flemish maecenas enabled him to visit Pelly Bay and Hall Beach a couple of times, but in the mid-1990s his health became so troublesome that he had to move to the Oblate community in Waregem. In 2000 he moved again, this time to an old age service institution 'Rustoord Lemberge' in Merelbeke, an institution his father had helped establish before the Second World War. He spent the last years of his life at a stone's throw from his native Landskouter, surrounded by relatives and friends who regularly paid him a visit. He died quietly in his sleep on 22 February 2002 and was buried in the family grave at Landskouter. Hundreds and hundreds of people from all



walks of life attended the funeral service. They gathered in and outside the little church in Landskouter to say farewell to Ataata Vinivi, the legendary Flemish priest and arctic pioneer who had done so much for the Canadian Inuit and for the study of their culture. May he rest in peace.

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