Het topje van de ijsberg
Boschman, Nienke; Hacquebord, Louwrens; Veluwenkamp, Jan Willem

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From Tropical Africa to Arctic Scandinavia
A.H.J. Prins as Maritime Anthropologist

H.H.T. Prins and H.E.L. Prins

INTRODUCTION

Most anthropologists associate A.H.J. Prins with the African tropics, not with the European Arctic. It is true that his scholarly research took place primarily in East Africa. Yet, Prins is also known as a pioneer in maritime anthropology, and it is this particular specialisation that connects the geographically distant culture areas in his research program. During almost fifty years of scholarship, Prins travelled extensively and crossed boundaries between countries, centuries, and disciplines. Observing and interviewing Swahili seafarers, Teita peasants, Boni hunters, Maltese mariners, Dutch skippers, and Lapp fishers, he also delved into African and European archives. The weight of his research concerned East Africa’s peoples and cultures. Of about 75 scholarly publications, some 69 percent deal with Africa, 16 percent the Mediterranean and Middle East, 12 percent The Netherlands, and just 3 percent Arctic Scandinavia. Appearing toward the end of his long scholarly career, his publications about Scandinavia all have a maritime focus.

Although Prins did not publish much in Scandinavian anthropology, it may come as a surprise that he chose to dedicate his doctoral thesis, an often-cited comparative study of East-African age class systems (1953), to the Swedish ethnographer Gerhard Lindblom (1887–1969). Such incidental facts of personal history aside, how do we explain his deep interest in Arctic anthropology in light of his overall research output? What were the forces that drove him from the Indian Ocean to the Arctic Sea? Why did he collaborate with a small group of fellow Groningen scholars to found the Arctic Centre as an interdisciplinary research program?

BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Known as Peter, his nom de guerre during his years in the Dutch Resistance movement, Adriaan Hendrik Johan Prins was born on 16 December 1921 in the old Hanseatic town of Harderwijk on the Zuyderzee shore. When his father was appointed railway station chief in IJmuiden, the family moved to this North Sea coastal city. Only six when his father died, he and his sister settled with their
mother in her ancestral village of Barneveld. There, Prins grew up under the
eyes of his grandfathers – Veluwe painter Hendrik ten Ham E.J.zn and
Barneveld railway station chief Johan Prins. Childhood exposure to seacoasts,
departing trains, and the value of an observational eye helped determine his
later career choices.

As a widow’s son growing up during the Depression with the rise of Nazi
power in neighboring Germany, young Prins had few opportunities for distant
travels. One came in the summer of 1936 when he made a trip to the Norwegian
fjords aboard the Dutch liner Tarakan. Regularly serving as a Dutch East Indies
Muslim Pilgrim ship to Mecca, the Tarakan also made a few summer excursions
for schoolboys sailing from IJmuiden Harbour. Prins, endowed with artistic talent
quite common in his family, sketched and painted ships and the Scandinavian
seacoast during the journey. Doing so, he may have recalled stories about his
grandfather ten Ham’s teacher, the well-known Dutch painter Louis Apol, who
had sailed to the Arctic Sea as an artist aboard the schooner Willem Barents in
1880. Apol produced several oil paintings based on sketches he made to
illustrate the expedition’s published report. One of the oils, depicting a
Norwegian sealing schooner on fire after attack from Russian patrol vessels,
eventually became the property of Prins. It still hangs in the living room at “Huis
ter Aa”, the Prins residence in Glimmen since the mid-1950s.

By age 18, at home in the Veluwe’s vast forests and longing to see the
world, Prins dreamed of a forestry career on Sumatra or elsewhere in the Dutch
East Indies. Accordingly, he enrolled at Wageningen Agricultural University for
tropical forestry studies. However, with the outbreak of World War II and Japan’s
occupation of Dutch colonies overseas, he changed direction and studied social
geography at the University of Utrecht, with a special focus on the Indian Ocean.
In 1943, the Nazis ordered Dutch students and staff to sign a “loyalty
declaration”. Like many others, Prins refused. Suspending his studies, he joined
the resistance movement, becoming Chief of Intelligence in the VIth Brigade
(Veluwe). Following the 1944 Battle of Arnhem, he was secretly incorporated into
the Second British Army as First Lieutenant in a Special Force Detachment and
helped liberate his homeland.

After demobilisation in June 1945, Prins resumed his studies in Utrecht and
specialised in ethnology. A year later, having acquired his “doctoraal” degree, he
became a research assistant at Utrecht’s Institute of Ethnology under Professor
Henri Th. Fischer. By then, he had married Ita Poorter, whose family had given
him safe harbour at their Harderwijk home while he served in the underground
movement.
In 1947, at age 26, Prins published his first scholarly article on East Africa. That same year, as a former British army officer, he received a fellowship at the London School of Economics (LSE) for special anthropology training under Audrey Richards and Raymond Firth (who had succeeded his mentor Bronislaw Malinowki as chair of Social Anthropology). While at the University of London, Prins made lifelong friendships with scholars such as S.N. Eisenstadt, Derek Freeman, and others who went on to build international academic careers. Then, equipped with language training in Swahili, he ventured to Kenya as a British Colonial Fellow for fieldwork among the Teita, a tribal group not previously studied. Guided by the Senior District Commissioner Harold E. Lambert, a Cambridge University trained anthropologist specialised in the neighbouring Kikuyu, Prins was initiated into ethnographic research. He focused on topics such as kinship and social structure favoured by British functionalists, but it became soon evident that his enduring interest would be the maritime history and cultural ecology of seafaring peoples.


Early on in his scholarly career, Prins gained an international reputation based on his strong publication record. In addition to scores of encyclopaedia entries and scholarly articles in a wide range of international journals such as Man and Anthropos, he published in Dutch newspapers and magazines. Moreover, he illustrated many of his books and articles with his own ethnographic photographs, sketches, and pen drawings.

A year before earning his doctorate at Utrecht in 1953, he already published his first major book The Coastal Tribes of the Northeastern Bantu: Pokomo,

By then, Prins had turned his anthropological eye also towards the places he and his family considered home. In 1960, he published an annotated bibliography on the 800-year history of Harderwijk, the port city where he and his wife were born, followed by a cultural historical study of Zuyderzee skippers of the fortified port of Blokzijl (1969), the small city his wife’s immediate ancestors called home since 1795. He then gave his attention to the cultural history of the Veluwe village of Barneveld, home to his maternal ancestors for more than five centuries. This resulted in several publications in the 1980s, including his 1982 book on a 15th-century heroic knight *Jan van Schaffelaar: Requiem voor een Gelderse Ruiter*.

In 1984, Prins published his theoretical manifesto *Copernicaanse Cultuurkunde* on the occasion of his retirement as Groningen’s Anthropology Chair. This was also when his former students presented him with a Festschrift titled *Watching the Seaside: Essays in Maritime Culture* (1984), which includes a selection of his published articles. A year later, the Dutch government closed the doors of the 30-year old anthropological institute he had founded in the mid-1950s due to general budget cuts.

As an emeritus professor, Prins continued his research in spite of failing health. Two years into his retirement, yet another major maritime anthropological study appeared, titled *Handbook of Sewn Boats: The Ethnography and Archaeology of Archaic Plank-Built Craft*, followed by *In Peril on the Sea: Marine Votive Paintings in the Maltese Islands* (1989). In the early 1990s he researched
the maritime history of the city he had embraced as his own and wrote *Groningen: Middeleeuwse Hanzestad vanaf de Waterkant* (1994). Meanwhile, he had become deeply immersed in composing an historical analysis of the Knights of Malta as a late medieval transnational corporation with military religious estates on the Veluwe. Sadly, that effort was aborted when he suffered a debilitating stroke in 1994. However, he did manage to complete a detailed maritime historical study titled “Mediterranean Ships and Shipping, 1650–1850,” published as a long chapter in *The Heyday of Sail: The Merchant Sailing Ship 1650–1830* (1995), a beautifully illustrated British volume on traditional merchant sailing ships.

**ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARCTIC ANTHROPOLOGY**

With some justification, anthropology has been criticised as the “brainchild of colonialism.” Indeed, the discipline in The Netherlands was historically identified primarily with the indigenous peoples of its colonies in the East and West Indies – although Prins, unlike his Dutch peers at the time, did his first fieldwork in then British Kenya. Not surprisingly, the decolonisation movements in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere in the Post World War II period brought about a crisis in anthropology in the 1960s, forcing its practitioners to rethink their profession. Not always welcome in the newly-independent states, many European anthropologists turned to their own continent. These historical events also affected Prins. As this biographical sketch indicates, he gradually shifted his research focus from Africa towards the Mediterranean and Northern Europe.

With limited research opportunities in the former colonies, Dutch anthropology graduate programs in the 1960s searched for less remote and politically more stable culture areas to send their students to for practical training. With other Dutch universities selecting locations in the Mediterranean, Ireland, and so on, Groningen looked northwards to Scandinavia. This region was especially attractive for anthropological inquiry, as it was inhabited by traditional Saami reindeer herders and fishers – Europe’s own “exotic” indigenous people.

Although Arctic anthropology has become an important international specialisation, in the early 1960s there was not yet much interest. Because of its proximity to the Soviet Union, however, the entire circumpolar Arctic region became part of the Northern Hemisphere Security Area during the Cold War. In this geo-political context, funds became available for scientific research in the area. The Dutch had interest in the far north because of their history of Arctic
whaling, their search for the Northeast Passage about 400 years ago, and, more recently, and their involvement in the Spitsbergen tractaat which settled the Sovereignty of Spitsbergen.

Aware of these developments, and in search of new student training opportunities, Prins and a handful of his colleagues at Groningen, the country’s northernmost academic institution, staked out the European Far North as their academic arena. Together with the linguists André van Holk (Slavic Languages), Tjalling Waterbolk (Archaeology) and Andries Kylstra (Finnish Ugaritic), and the Scandinavianist Amy van Marken, Prins explored opportunities for creating an interdisciplinary research and teaching institute with a particular Nordic focus. In 1970 they founded the Arctic Centre.

Prins envisioned the Arctic Centre as a vehicle that could serve in identifying and setting up fieldwork training sites in northern Scandinavia and adjacent Arctic and Sub-arctic islands. Simultaneously, he established networks for his graduate students to be trained as museum anthropologists at various museums in, e.g., Oslo, Bergen, Tromsø, Göteborg, or Stockholm. At the time, the anthropological research emphasis at Groningen was on cultural ecology. Groningen anthropology students were expected to enrol in a three-month graduate research training period at the end of their second year during the summer season. This training could take place in a foreign museum or in the field. In contrast to museum training, students choosing to do fieldwork were organised as teams and focused on a shared research theme. For preparation, they took several courses in area studies, theory and methodology, and language training (Swedish or Norwegian).

As Lapland became the region of choice for ethnographic training at Groningen, Prins himself began to venture to the far north annually, in particular to study collections in Scandinavia’s anthropological and maritime museums. In the course of the next few years, several of his students became Scandinavia specialists, including the nutritional anthropologist Nellejet Zorgdrager (Drs: 1970) who did intensive research among Norway’s Saami.

Considering Prins’ geographic shift from the East African coast to the European Arctic, it is noteworthy that his maritime anthropology focus was influenced not only by his LSE professor Firth, but also by British anthropologist J.A. Barnes of the University of Manchester. Barnes, initially noted for his work in Central Africa, became famous for his 1954 study of the Norwegian sea-fishing community of Bremnes (near Bergen) in which he launched the concept of “network”. His research, seminal in the development of social network analysis associated with the “Manchester school” under anthropologist Max Gluckman,
had influenced Prins’ work on Kenya’s ancient coastal city of Lamu (1959, 1964). It also framed the work by his University of Amsterdam colleague Jeremy Boissevain, who applied social network analysis to his Malta ethnography.

When Prins turned his attention to northern Scandinavia, he focused on the subject he loved best: traditional ships, including those made and used by those Saami historically known as the Sea Lapps and River Lapps. By the mid 1970s, his first publication dedicated to Arctic Scandinavia appeared: Development in Arctic Boat Design: Efflorescence or Involution?. This paper grew out of the Netherlands-Swedish Symposium on Developments in Scandinavian Arctic Culture, a 1975 conference that Prins helped organise and host at the Arctic Centre.

Another publication by Prins concerning Arctic Scandinavia appeared as a “case study” in his already-mentioned 1986 book A Handbook of Sew Boats, published by the British National Maritime Museum. In a 1993 article “Louis Apol, Painter of the Arctic Ocean” published by the Norwegian Maritime Museum in Oslo, Prins offers some little known historical background about this earlier-mentioned Dutch artist’s journey to northern Norway and Nova Zembla in 1880. Writing with exquisite detail about a small Skolt Lapp sewn boat sketched by Apol in the lee of the skerries near the mouth of the Varanger fjord, Prins reveals his own deep love for art and sailing vessels. It was a love he carried from the coasts of his childhood to those of East Africa and the European Arctic.

CODA

A.H.J. Prins chose an adventurous life with a profession to match. Even for those who knew him well, it is a challenge to reduce his life to a clear summary. We started our biographical sketch by noting that it may come as a surprise that this anthropologist known for his research in the African tropics was also active in the European Arctic. So it is perhaps quite fitting to end our portrait with some paradoxical observations: Always restless, the man loved traditions; a committed conservative, he repeatedly broke social conventions; a builder of institutions, he was often an absentee landlord; patriarch of a large family and gregarious in company, he longed to be alone; generous, he could be self-centred; well-versed in many languages and an explorer of new horizons, he felt deeply rooted in the history of his homeland—in short, how could he not have recognized irony in the name of the rustic inn he frequented in Drenthe, The Resting Hunter?

The hunter found his final resting place on the pastoral cemetery of the late medieval church in Noordlaren he belonged to. Romantic scholar and gentleman
adventurer, Prins died in early 2000, six years after his first stroke that had left him almost wordless and unable to write or read. He was buried with a simple Indian Ocean dhow sailing ship engraved on his tombstone.

SAMENVATTING

Een van de oprichters van het Arctisch Centrum van de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen was Adriaan Hendrik Johan Prins. Prins was hoogleraar in de Culturele Antropologie aan deze Universiteit. Dit artikel geeft een biografische schets van zijn leven, en analyseert waarom hij als Oost Afrika specialist mede-initiator was voor het ontwikkelen van het Arctische werkterrein van de Universiteit. Een belangrijke factor daarin was de dekolonisatie in wat later de Derde Wereld ging heten. Dit leidde tot een zelfreflectie bij antropologen die zich altijd met niet-westerse maatschappijen hadden beziggehouden, en een heroriëntatie op de eigen regio en het eigen continent. Een tweede factor was de geringe mogelijkheid voor het emplooi van studenten in de voormalige koloniën. Ook de Koude Oorlog leidde bij Prins tot een oriëntatie op de noordelijke flank van het NAVO-gebied waarbij onderzoek en onderwijs in die regio kon gaan rekenen op financiering vanwege de overheid. Als laatste factor gold de nabijheid van de noordelijke gebieden voor studenten om hun veldwerk te kunnen doen omdat het toenemend moeilijk was goede stageplaatsen te vinden in de tropen, het traditionele werkterrein van de antropologiestudenten. Het eerdere, maar ook voortgaande onderzoek van Prins in Oost Afrika, en vooral nadruk op de maritieme antropologie, bleek in een traditie te passen die daarvóór was ontwikkeld op basis van veldwerk in Scandinavië. Zijn eigen eerdere Afrikaanse werk en zijn latere Noordelijke werk bleken daarom naadloos op elkaar aan te sluiten.
Tentoonstelling Sámi Ællin; the every day life of the Norwegian reindeer lapps (1971).
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