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Chapter 1

Introduction

Peter Jan Margry and Herman Roodenburg

In October 2006, the Committee for the Development of the Dutch Canon published its eagerly awaited report on what all Dutch persons should know about their country's history and culture, that is, how the Netherlands has developed over time, what achievements it has accomplished, and what it has represented and still represents in the world (Van Oostrom 2006).

Although from an ethnological point of view the report offers a striking instance of the constructedness of heritage, of heritage, the committee wrote a balanced and well-considered document, one that presents an open and flexible canon, not a grim and straitjacketed one. The committee did not wish to boost feelings of national pride: in fact, it rather surprisingly dismisses the concept of national identity, which it deems deceptive and dangerous. Instead, it argues that a canon known by all Dutch persons and taught at all Dutch schools could substantially enhance citizenship.

In its report, the committee surveys a few of the motives that led to its establishment by the Dutch Minister of Education, Culture and Science in September 2005. It mentions the Dutch schooling system, which in recent decades has left little room for teaching Dutch history and culture, and it points to the present mental climate in the Netherlands: the increasing fear of disintegration, of a nation threatened by both the unification of Europe and the comparably large numbers of immigrants, mainly arriving or rather having arrived from Turkey, Morocco, Suriname and the Dutch Antilles. As the committee explains, it does not consider its canon as an answer to the last-mentioned problem. It is not to function as a means to integration, as offering a sorely needed idea of the country in which these newcomers are now living. Nor should we see the canon as a means to induce the Dutch, who are confronted with the alleged threats of Europe (the Dutch voted against the proposed European Constitution) and of globalisation in general, to revalue their identity, to again pride themselves on what their nation has become and what it has achieved. The committee emphatically rejects such anxious calls for 'cultural dyke watching', arguing instead (and referring, for example, to Edward Said's *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*) for a confident and future-oriented role for its canon.

Of course, the Dutch mental landscape has altered over the last ten to fifteen years. As the committee reminds us, a similar committee, one that had been established to draw up a canon of Dutch literature to be taught at all Dutch schools, was thoroughly tarred and feathered as recently as 1989. Until the 1990s, it was generally regarded (and sometimes still is regarded) as dangerous, as ideologically suspect, to discuss

concepts of national or regional identity, or of ethnic identity or cultural heritage. These and similar notions were chiefly studied by anthropologists and by European ethnologists, those folklorists who since the 1970s have successfully redefined their discipline in terms of the contemporary reflexive and linguistic turns in the humanities and social sciences. Since then, thanks to ethnologists and anthropologists and to increasing numbers of historians, sociologists and other social scientists, the concepts have become widely accepted, not only in academia but in society at large, where simultaneously the mental climate has changed considerably.

Looking at the present-day Netherlands, it is evident that this mental break has accelerated in the past five years, partially as a result of two brutal political murders. In 2002, a new, charismatic right-wing politician – Pim Fortuyn – was assassinated by an animal rights activist; two years later, the movie-maker Theo van Gogh was murdered by a Muslim fundamentalist who had been born and raised in the Netherlands. Having shot van Gogh, the man used a butcher's knife to affix his political and religious pamphlet to the victim's chest. As the pamphlet's text pointed out, van Gogh 'deserved to die' because he 'insulted' Islam in a movie that is highly critical of the social position of Islamic women. The film script was written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former refugee from Somalia (where she had been raised as a Muslim) who had become a member of the Dutch parliament. In the pamphlet she was threatened with death.

In retrospect, van Gogh's murder may have resonated more strongly than Fortuyn's because to politicians and political commentators on the right it seemed to underline the contradictions between 'enlightened' Judaeo-Christian civilisation and 'backward' Islamic civilisation, a point of view contested by other politicians and commentators. However, both murders undermined the self-confidence of the Dutch (Kennedy 2005), enhancing the fears of disintegration, as described by the committee, and the country's political disorientation and instability (Van Luin 2005). The highly-praised 'polder model' of consultation and consensus, originally developed as a tool to manage a religiously 'pillarised' society, was seen to have failed as far as integrating into Dutch society the large groups of Turkish and Moroccan immigrants and their children (Model Making 2002). To many observers, the familiar image of a stable, open and liberal Dutch society had become barely recognisable (Carle 2006; Buruma 2006).

It is this society in flux (if not in confusion) that is addressed in the eleven chapters of this volume. In recent years, journalists, sociologists, political scientists and other scholars have sought to interpret the social and political contexts of both murders, situating the events within the large-scale processes of modernisation and globalisation and generally taking an etic perspective, relying mostly on extrinsic concepts and categories. In this book we present a different outlook, convinced as we are that a complex and rapidly changing society like the present-day Netherlands will never be properly understood unless one also looks at it from below, from the everyday. Ethnologists, without discounting etic perspectives, usually choose an emic perspective, focusing on everyday life and within these deliberate parameters on the intrinsic cultural categories that are meaningful to the individuals and groups

being studied. In other words, they concentrate on the description and interpretation of the cultural categories that both shape our everyday practices and are shaped within these practices. European ethnology studies the familiar, the everyday practices that upon closer inspection often turn out to be less familiar, less self-evident, than people are inclined to think. In addition, it always theorises on the basis of grounded empirical findings: theory and ethnography are strongly intertwined. And although the discipline builds chiefly on fieldwork and participant observation, it is also anchored in historical approaches (Bennis 2006: 23–31).

In fact, we set ourselves two objectives for this volume. First, by taking a careful look at a variety of everyday practices, both in the towns and in the countryside, we hope to provide a more detailed understanding of contemporary Dutch society, with all its social and cultural complexity. Second, we aim to provide an overview, a general impression, of contemporary Dutch ethnology, mainly presenting research from the Amsterdam Meertens Institute, the foremost locus of Dutch ethnology. By pursuing both objectives, we hope to contribute to a reframing of Dutch culture, to a fresh, clearly ethnologically informed perspective on the Netherlands by which we may circumvent the one-sided focus on the large-scale processes of modernisation and globalisation with all their implications of social determinacy, of a lack of human agency and, often, of a non-reflected teleological bias. It is precisely in its everyday dimensions that Dutch culture proves to be far more complex and dynamic than such theorizing suggests. Indeed, by adopting a perspective from the everyday we may well counterbalance the high-flown prose and overworked phrases of many a Dutch politician and political commentator. In their view, the Dutch are locked in a decisive battle between the Enlightenment and the forces of backwardness, in which these forces may variously refer to Islam (as argued by the political right) or to the Dutch countryside voting against modern times and globalisation (as argued by the political left).

Rather than offering a neat and rounded monograph, we decided to invite eleven ethnologists to present case-studies taken from their latest research, thus hoping to do justice to the complexity both of contemporary Dutch society and of Dutch ethnology. The result is a book in which practice and performance approaches have been applied to quite divergent aspects of the Dutch everyday. Taken together the fourteen chapters testify to a society that is characterised by the softness, fluidity or fragility of its structures, by a certain amount of freedom from social determinism (expressed in academic parlance in terms of the ‘invention’, ‘construction’, ‘politics’ or even ‘doing’ of culture); in short, by what Zygmunt Bauman has described as ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman 2002; cf. Burke 2005: 38–39).

Although the book is structured around three central themes – namely identity, performance, and heritage and authenticity – these themes are far from mutually exclusive. As the reader will notice, tied in with varying sub-themes (appropriation, inclusion and exclusion, otherness, tradition, etc.) they recur with more or less emphasis in nearly every chapter of the volume. Chapter 2 takes us directly to the heart of Dutch youth culture. Hester Dibbits considers the role of dress in group formation processes among Moroccan-Dutch boys. As she points out, their decision

to wear baggy street wear or Italian brand-name clothes seems related more to whether they construct a metropolitan or a Mediterranean identity than to creating a 'Moroccan' identity. In her analysis she also looks at language use and at aspects of physicality such as skin colour, hair colour or movements and gestures, arguing (against Ted Polhemus) that the construction of identity is not a feast of eclectic practices, and that one should always take account of an embodied past, of social and cultural constraints. Authenticity – or rather authentication – is another issue touched upon by Dibbits. As it turns out, credibility and authenticity are central notions to these boys. The ways in which they authenticate their dress determines whether or not they are included in a group. Given the latest trends in the world of fashion designers, Dibbits suspects that in the coming years Moroccan-Dutch youths may sport traditional 'Moroccan' garments, and add Western elements of their own.

Issues of inclusion or exclusion also feature in Chapter 3, in which Rob van Ginkel looks at the *Ouwe Sunderklaas* festival on the island of Texel (for a map of the Netherlands, see the Appendix). Arguing that identity also encompasses unintentional behaviour and thoughts, he prefers to speak of the articulation rather than the construction of identity. Construction also resonates with the notion of cultural building. To Van Ginkel, identity is primarily a relational concept, as he convincingly demonstrates in his interpretation of the festival. Held each year on 12 December, it differs considerably from the national celebration of St. Nicholas (chiefly a domestic event) on 5 December. At the Texel festival one may witness all kinds of rhymes, songs and sketches performed in the streets by hundreds of masked and disguised islanders. However, since the 1970s the event has grown more and more inward oriented. Thanks to the localness of the themes addressed in the texts performed, only the islanders understand them. Freed from the tourists who infest the island in the summer, the festival epitomises a story the islanders tell about themselves. It is about 'us' and 'them', about localism both springing from and being directed against globalisation.

While Van Ginkel objects to the notion of identities being constructed, in the newly reclaimed land investigated by Albert van der Zeijden, bricolage and eclecticism were very much what the literal invention of a new regional identity was about. In the decades following the Second World War, the drained Noordoostpolder (the job was completed in 1942) was considered a Dutch 'frontier', a challenging sociological experiment. Farmers carefully selected from all twelve Dutch provinces were brought in to build a new society. The new polder was declared a test plot for a Netherlands to come, for how regional and religious differences might be overcome. The experiment was steered and controlled from above and made a conscious appeal to public folklore, to the mediation of professional folklorists who, being chiefly past oriented in their research and contrary to the social geographers involved, played a fairly modest role. Looking in particular at the celebration of the popular feast of Van der Zeijden demonstrates how government officials, social scientists and the polder's own weekly newspaper, though intent on building a new regional identity through fabricating a new regional folklore, were nonetheless convinced that folklore should not be controlled from above but remain authentic and spontaneous.

In the last chapter of Part 1, the reader is taken back to the city. Hilje van der Horst explains how Turkish-Dutch families cherish their own notions of tradition and modernity, how through discourse and such dwelling practices as sitting, eating and sleeping they appropriate understandings of tradition and modernity (including the terms' imaginary geography in which the East and the West are simply opposed) in their own lives. Following Pierre Bourdieu she construes these practices as habitual and embodied, thus (like most of the contributors to the volume) adopting a mild constructionist stance. Referring to Daniel Miller and Regina Bendix, van der Horst concludes that modernity and tradition through the aesthetic vehicle of authenticity are strongly intertwined. The use of vernacular objects and practices because of the 'tradition' or 'authenticity' they are felt to embody is also an appropriation of modernity, an articulation of a sense of loss inherent to the very concept of modernity.

Part 2 of the book – 'Performance' – bears witness to the recent performative turn in the humanities and social sciences. Building on the dramaturgical model developed by Kenneth Burke, Erving Goffman and Victor Turner (and profiting from ethnologists like Milman Parry and Albert Lord or, in the 1970s and 1980s, Roger Abrahams, the many-sided Dell Hymes and Richard Bauman), the present breakthrough into performance has moved even further away from textual approaches and from the linguistic turn in general, not only insisting that theatre is not opposed to everyday practices but also leaving latitude for the unexpected, for the generation of new practices and meanings. As Diana Taylor wrote, performance 'suggests a carrying through, actualizing, making something happen' (Taylor 1994: 276; cf. Burke 2005; Fischer-Lichte 2004; Bachmann-Medick 2006: 104–143). Often inspired by phenomenological approaches (as was Bourdieu), issues of habitus and embodiment have come to the fore as well (Roodenburg 2004). Dutch ethnology recently adopted the new performance perspective as one of its central research concerns (Bennis 2006: 29).

In the first contribution to Part 2, Peter Jan Margry takes a look at the temporary and improvised memorial sites created after the assassination of Fortuyn. These sites were overloaded with flowers and images, as well as with texts and messages considered by Margry as active, integrated ingredients in the generation of new meanings. The texts and the other objects placed by the visitors instigated heated conversations in situ, a new style of communication, informed and strongly enhanced by the mass media of television and the Internet. It was such performativity that turned the sites into arenas of political resentment, into a non-violent uprising that seriously threatened the established power structures.

Abrahams and Bauman introduced the concept of performance when they became dissatisfied with ethnology's one-sided engagement with text-centred perspectives and proposed other perspectives concerned with the actual use of folk narratives and of folklore forms in general. Theo Meder, in his chapter on Dutch crop circle tales, takes a similar stance, but investigating the tales as *exempla*, as narrative testimonies to a spiritual truth, he includes insights from more recent research. Central to his analysis of this New Age subject is the notion of ostension, as introduced by Linda

Dégh and Bill Ellis. Ostension highlights how stories provoke events, how legends are literally lived. In his look at the world of ‘croppies’ and ‘cereologists’, Meder also refers to the metaphor of memes or mind viruses when he explains how such tales both spread and mutate, slowly moulding the views and practices of individuals and groups.

In the subsequent chapter we return to acts of violence in contemporary Dutch society. Irene Stengs takes a look at the world of ‘senseless violence’ (*zinloos geweld*), a moral category that became prominent in the 1990s and is comparable with that of ‘random violence’ as evolved in the United States. Aiming to assess the roles of narrative and ritual in the construction of senseless violence as a societal issue, Stengs analyses a number of events, in each case carefully sorting out how the victims through narrative and ritual came to be framed (or not) as victims of ‘senseless violence’. Arguing, like van Ginkel (and Anthony Cohen), that community and identity are always about inclusion and exclusion, Stengs focuses on a march held following the violent death of a Dutch-Moroccan thief not far from where Theo van Gogh had been killed by a radical Muslim with a Moroccan background. As she points out, the march was seized upon by young Dutch-Moroccans to renegotiate their social exclusion implied in the narratives and rituals of ‘senseless violence’ related to the murdering of van Gogh.

Finally, in Part 3, issues of tradition, authenticity and heritage are addressed. Like Meder, Martin Ramstedt addresses New Age spirituality, although he takes a rather different point of view. He notes the spiritual revolutions both in business and in Christian congregations, thus offering support for the thesis proposed by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead in their *The Spiritual Revolution* (2005). Ramstedt’s case-study is a former monastery in the south of the Netherlands that has been reinvented as the ‘Monastery for Spirituality at Work’ and now provides Dutch business corporations and government institutions alike with alternative spirituality. The monastery is just one example of many in the new spiritual economy, all adopting subjective-life spirituality as a means to salvage the essence of their religiosity. Ramstedt situates his analysis against the background of such large-scale developments as the religious *ontzuiling* (‘depillarisation’) and *ontkerkelijking* (‘unchurchisation’) of Dutch society. Both testify to a massive process of detraditionalisation.

Traditions are invented, the one more literally so than the other. Although Mother’s Day and Father’s Day were adopted in the Netherlands in the 1920s and the 1950s, respectively, as American ‘imports’ they have always been contested as being merely commercial inventions (good for the florists and the tobacconists) and therefore lacking in naturalness or authenticity. It is such vernacular understandings of authenticity (as opposed to the academic understandings) that form the subject of John Helsloot’s contribution. Agreeing with Anne Eriksen that tradition is always a discourse in the present, that it is best understood as a situated ‘act of authentication’, he analyses the yearly discourses on Mother’s Day and Father’s Day as crystallised in newspapers, women’s and youth magazines, etc., looking in particular at the processes of authentication that inform the perception of Mother’s Day and Father’s Day (on authentication, see also Dibbits and Van der Horst in this volume). As

Helsloot concludes, the processes may be seen as an ongoing ‘frame dispute’, a persistent argument about what frame is relevant for responding to Mother’s Day and Father’s Day.

Louis Peter Grijp addresses the paradox that while Dutch dialects are dying out or being blended (if not reinvented) as ‘regiolects’, the number of singers and music groups that use dialect is booming. So far, over one thousand singers and groups have been registered as doing so; most of them have adopted international music styles, ranging from rock, blues and country to *schlager* and *chanson*. In trying to explain this remarkable phenomenon, Grijp considers three models, namely those of dialect renaissance, of the musical construction of place (as developed by Martin Stokes) and of language choice in music. He presents two case-studies: he looks at the rock band *Normaal* – which sings in the dialect of the *Achterhoek*, a fairly remote region in the east of the Netherlands – and at Ede Staal, a ‘troubadour’ from the northern province of Groningen. Grijp analyses their music as a mode of glocalisation, as attempts to preserve one’s dialect or regiolect by merging it with global music styles, but he rejects the models of dialect renaissance and the construction of regional identity. In the present-day Netherlands singing in dialect is a matter of personal identity, of musicians feeling that they can best express themselves in their own dialect. They have unwittingly elicited a dormant supra-regional identity, a general ‘peasant feeling’, constructing the Randstad – the quadrangle formed by the country’s four largest cities (Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam, Utrecht) – as its ‘other’.

The Netherlands is famous for the great variety of its traditional costumes. In this, it is renowned both among tourists and among ethnologists, who started in the last decades of the nineteenth century to search among their country’s peasants and fisherfolk for the nation’s ‘untainted’ essence. Herman Roodenburg takes a look at a group of women on the former island of Marken who until recently wore (and in some cases, still wear) the garments. Unhappy with the one-sided beholder’s point of view prominent in most of the ethnological research on traditional costumes, whether informed by heritage or older perspectives, Roodenburg prefers a wearer’s point of view, defining dress as a ‘situated bodily practice’ (Entwistle 2000) and adopting a Bourdieuan stance. Relating the wearing of the costumes to the women’s home dress-making, to the ever-recurring bodily practices of sewing, knitting, embroidering and mending the garments, and to the close interweaving of bodily and clothing memories, Roodenburg demonstrates how to these women discarding the costumes would mean discarding a whole way of life.

The chapters collected in this volume cover a wide and exciting variety of subjects. They are the products of recent research or of research that is still in its infancy, which explains why some of the chapters form a fairly complete whole while others are more exploratory. Together with a closing historiographical and bibliographical section, these essays offer a fine and original impression of both contemporary Dutch ethnology and contemporary Dutch society.

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