

Dutch Ethnology at the
Meertens Instituut
Amsterdam



Dutch Ethnology at the Meertens Institute

Relying on a historical and comparative perspective, Dutch Ethnology examines contemporary cultural phenomena and patterns that shape the daily lives and social relations of Dutch people. As perceived in the Netherlands, the discipline of ethnology (as one of the social sciences) investigates such phenomena and patterns within their historical, socio-cultural and spatial dimensions, devoting particular attention to the production of meaning, processes of appropriation and the construction of social identity. Aware of its often profound effects on society at large, ethnology tends to emphasise the apparently trivial or unobtrusive in culture. One of its central concerns is multiculturalism.

Researchers at the Meertens Institute cooperate closely at a national and international level with ethnologists at sister institutions and practitioners of the other social sciences.

Research

Located in Amsterdam, the Meertens Institute is the leading national institution for the study and documentation of Dutch language and culture. It also houses a variety of relevant collections, archives and databases. The Ethnology Department is noted for its multidisciplinary composition. Disciplines such as anthropology,

sociology, history, art history, musicology and social geography are all represented and support the department's interdisciplinary and theoretical orientation.

For the period 2000-2005 research is concentrated on five ethnological themes: Feast and Ritual, Oral Culture, Material Culture, Religious Culture and, a recent addition, Visual Culture. The specific projects falling under these themes are described in the Institute's current five-year plan (www.meertens.nl/etnologie/OZGplnNE.pdf). Dr Peter Jan Margry is the present director of the Dutch Ethnology Department.

(peter.jan.margry@meertens.knaw.nl).

Training and education

The Meertens Institute seeks to make its research results available in a form suitable for educational purposes, aiming in particular at graduates and undergraduates in the social sciences. The Institute recently published its own introduction in the field: *Volkscultuur, een inleiding in de Nederlandse etnologie* (Popular Culture: An Introduction to Dutch Ethnology) (Nijmegen, 2000). Another new development is the establishment of three special chairs at three universities: Gerard Rooijackers (Dutch Ethnology, www.meertens.nl/etnologie/minor.html),



An investigation into animal substitution in the context of feast and ritual: a gosling on the crown of the king of 'pull the goose' (popular amusement whereby the participants attempt to pull off the head of a now dead goose).

Fisherman of Volendam in traditional costume, end 19th century.



University of Amsterdam; Louis Peter Grijp (Dutch Song Culture: Past and Present), University of Utrecht; and Herman Roodenburg (Historical Anthropology of the Netherlands), Louvain Catholic University, Belgium.

Research concentrations

Feast and Ritual

The research and documentation on the theme of Feast and Ritual will provide insights into the symbolic and communicative aspects of more or less formalised cultural phenomena varying from celebrations to everyday etiquette. This will facilitate the analysis of the processes attached to them by which they are designed and accorded meaning at different times and places, and among various social groups.

Several projects examining Dutch feast culture are central within this study. They involve a dynamic field with strong connotations of identity and tradition, in which processes such as commercialisation and musealisation are making an emphatic appearance. Focusing on the theme of feasts and celebrations from both a contemporary and historical perspective gives rise to a related programme in which highly relevant and important questions of contemporary ethnology are investigated within their context.

Participating in this area are: research staff worker Eveline Doelman MA (full time); PhD student Marjolein Efting Dijkstra (3/5 time; www.meertens.nl/medewerkers/marjolein.efting.dijkstra); researcher Dr John Helsloot (4/5 time; www.meertens.nl/medewerkers/john.helsloot/); senior researcher Prof. Dr Gerard Rooijackers (2/5 time); and researcher Dr Irene Stengs (9/10 time; irene.stengs@meertens.knaw.nl).

Material culture

In the Material Culture theme, insight is gained into the precise role our everyday dealings with objects play in interaction with others. The point of departure is the realisation that material objects are not only physically, but also socially constructed – by the advertising industry, for instance – and even more so through the daily processes of appropriation or the many ways in which we surround ourselves with objects and literally live with them. We are dealing here not only with the production, but equally with the touching of, looking at, commenting on, usage, restoration, and storage or disposal of objects. In turn, objects structure our dealings with other people, both through their physical manifestations and through the values and meanings we attach to them. Presently, research is concentrated on dress and the body and on the material culture of the homes of people of non-Dutch background living in the Netherlands.

Participating in this area are: researcher Dr Hester Dibbits (4/5 time; www.meertens.nl/medewerkers/hester.dibbits/); PhD student Hilje van der Horst (full time; www.meertens.nl/medewerkers/hilje.van.der.horst/); and senior researcher Prof. Dr Herman Roodenburg (full time; www.meertens.nl/medewerkers/herman.roodenburg/).

Oral Culture

The theme of Oral Culture encompasses the singing of songs and the telling of stories in the past and present, in which not only the texts and melodies are important, but also the cultural context and the performance (delivery/interaction with the audience). The processes by which the phenomena are designed and

The increasing competition between the celebration of Saint Nicholas (5/6 December) and Christmas was a reason for Saint Nick and his helper Peter to symbolically stuff Santa Claus into their sack (which normally contains sweets for children).

confer meaning are interpreted from an ethnological and philological/musicological perspective. On the one hand, traditional oral culture and the forms in which it is expressed (fairy tales, ballads, etc.) are investigated, while on the other the research comprehends more contemporary forms of song and recitative culture in which contemporary subjects such as multiculturalism, new spirituality and torch songs are central. In the study of oral culture an effort is made to achieve a synthesis of ethnological, philological and musicological approaches. While it is true that the study of oral culture has traditionally had two relatively independent branches involving research into songs and folklore, in terms of method the research at the Meertens Institute is remarkably parallel. A documentary foundation is laid down for both, and may be accessed through substantial databases (the Dutch Song Bank and Dutch Folktale Bank).

Participating in this area are: junior researcher Martine de Bruin MA (3/5 time); research staff worker Marie van Dijk MA (4/5 time); special researcher Prof. Dr Louis Grijp (full time; www.meertens.nl/medewerkers/louis.grijp/); researcher Dr Willem Kuiper (1/5 time; and senior researcher Dr Theo Meder (4/5 time; www.meertens.nl/medewerkers/theo.meder/).

Religious Culture

The Religious-Ethnological theme concentrates on cultural phenomena and patterns in contemporary religious culture in the Western world, and in particular in the Netherlands. It is oriented to the analysis of and reflection on the process of change

with regard to religiosity, the attribution of meaning and sanctity, and the ensuing variations in function and processes by which the phenomena are designed and accorded meaning. The research focuses less on the 'traditional' mainstream of church-linked or institutionalised forms such as Protestantism or Roman Catholicism, devoting greater attention instead to informal, marginal or non-institutionalised forms of religiosity such as multicultural religious culture, and new forms of religiosity and spirituality and their normalisation (for instance, New Age and new religious movements). With regard to the theme of sacrality or holiness and rituality, attention is given to present-day shifts and changes in religious views and perceptions, including interconfessional and non-confessional forms of sacrality. Participating in this area are: senior researcher and research director Dr Peter Jan Margry (full time; www.meertens.nl/medewerkers/peter.jan.margry/); and post-doctoral researcher Dr Martin Ramstedt (4/5 time; www.meertens.nl/medewerkers/martin.ramstedt/).

Visual Culture

Visual Culture is a research theme in the process of being developed and due to be launched in the following research period as a new line of investigation.

To date, visual culture has rarely been the subject of systematic



Investigation of torch-song culture. What motivates the performers: (national or social) identity, a penchant for nostalgia and 'authenticity', aesthetics or sheer singing pleasure?

The inventory of a Turkish store in Amsterdam's Dapper neighbourhood: typically Turkish or an assortment of products adapted to Dutch culture?



ethnological research. More attention to the precise role played by visual representation in daily life and the meaningful way in which people interact with visual culture is, therefore, necessary. A pilot project should provide answers to the question of the theoretical and methodological parameters for designing such research, which will itself take place in the following programme period.

Participating in this area is: junior researcher Marjolein Efting Dijkstra (2/5 time; www.meertens.nl/medewerkers/marjolein.efting.dijkstra), since 2003.

Documentation and Databanks

In addition to research and education, the Meertens Institute also has a documentation task and assembles and administers ethnologically valuable archives and collections, cataloguing and otherwise making them accessible. The collection and archive summary affords insight into the material at hand. The Institute's library contains the largest collection of books (60,000) and periodicals (1000 titles) in the field of folklore, Dutch and European ethnology and related disciplines in the Netherlands.

In addition important research results, collections and sources may be accessed

digitally. Several of these large databases are available on-line:

- The Pilgrimage Databank (www.meertens.nl/bol/), the digital result of the large-scale research project Places of Pilgrimage in The Netherlands, contains data for further research into pilgrimage, devotions to saints, religious material culture and religion in general.
- The Song Databank (www.meertens.nl/lied) and the Folktale Databank (www.meertens.nl/vvb/introwb.html) afford access via the web to a part of the tens of thousands of orally transmitted Dutch folktales and folksongs that have been recorded by the Institute in written form or on audiotape.
- The Database of Probate Inventories (www.meertens.nl/boedelstek/index.htm) provides a vast amount of data on the material culture of Dutch homes from the 17th through the 19th century, as listed in household inventories.

Origin and institutional setting

The Meertens Institute represents the amalgamation of the Dialects Bureau, established in 1930, the Folklore Bureau, from 1934, and the Onomastics Bureau of 1948. Between 1930 and 1965 it was led by the inspirational Dr P.J. Meertens, for whom the Institute was named in 1979. The bureaus became a single entity in 1952, since when it has been under the umbrella of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (www.knaw.nl). The Institute was reorganised in 1999, and a whole new research programme was established.



Secularisation and immigration confer new functions and meanings to old pilgrimage sites: Helloo as a multi-functional sanctuary for Cape Verdeans in the Netherlands.

Presently the Meertens Institute comprises two research departments: Dutch Ethnology, and Variation Linguistics (including Onomastics) (www.meertens.nl/variatielinguistiek/). In addition there is the General Services, Documentation and Archives Division. This division is responsible for the acquisition, administration and processing of ethnological and linguistic archives and collections, for which the Institute functions as a national depository. The Meertens Institute also houses the secretarial office of SIEF, the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (www.siefhome.org).



Collective and public mourning following the assassination of a Dutch politician. An investigation into spontaneous memorial shrines as a 'performance of the self'.

Visiting address:

25 Joan Muyskenweg
1096 CJ Amsterdam
The Netherlands

Mailing address:

Post Box 94264
1090 GG Amsterdam
The Netherlands

Telephone: 00 31 20 462 85 00

Fax: 00 31 20 462 85 55

Email: info@meertens.knaw.nl

Website: For additional information,
please consult our website:

www.meertens.knaw.nl

