

*Migration and Material Culture: the domestic interiors of
twentieth century migrants and their descendents.*

A research project financed by
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This programme is based upon the assumption that comparative empirical research on the material culture of migrant groups and their descendants can help us to gain new insights into the complex process of the construction of cultural identities. Despite the fact that material culture has generally been considered to be one of the classical objects of social science and the humaniora, studies of cultural or ethnic identity formation have focussed on rituals, folk-stories, music and language. Research on domestic decoration, the possession and arrangement of furniture and the meanings attached to the use of objects in the domestic sphere has been scarce. This programme poses the question if and how the domestic material culture of different groups of migrants and their descendants reflect their origins, and how changes in that respect can be interpreted in the context of identity construction, invention of tradition, the influence of the media and the global spread of “western” goods.

a. Scientific relevance

There is barely an aspect of Dutch society that is not analyzed today in terms of culture. The concept is addressed in formal contexts like organizations and informal ones like generations. Culture also plays an important role in the popular predictions on and explanations of confrontations between Dutch society and second or third generation immigrants. How to deal with cultural diversity and the social construction of cultural identities has become a central political issue.

Up to now, research on cultural diversity and cultural identities has near exclusively focussed on the immaterial realm (attitudes, values, norms) and especially on the assumed one-way adaptation of so-called Dutch or 'modern' values and attitudes by immigrants and their children. Although the insight that culture as a concept should be seen as a dynamic and differentiated complex is generally accepted, empirical analyses often testify to static and essentialist notions of so called ethnic cultures.

Arguably the hardest problem faced by research on culture, cultural (ex)change and the construction of cultural identities is the development of sound indicators and valid operationalisations. If we agree that so called ethnic cultures should not be regarded as static monolithic “black boxes”, what does it mean that young Turks who are born in the Netherlands are behaviourably “Dutchified”, while being proud of their ethnic Turkish origin? Is a concept of plural identities useful when we try to analyze stages in the ongoing process of the construction of cultural identities, in which the reduction of social distance is complemented by an increase in cultural distance and the forging of ‘ethnic’ identities and ‘ethnic’ markers?

This programme tackles these problems via the assumption that research on material culture and changes in that realm, provides new insights into the construction of ethnic identities. The convincing argument of Bourdieu in *La distinction* about the importance of home decoration and furniture as indicators of socio-economic status and habitus is applied to ethnicity. Research on “the meaningful way in which people deal with material objects” - our definition of material culture (cf. Dibbits 2001) – enables a view from the ‘inside’ into the complex processes of cultural change and their underlying conditions, within ethnic groups and within society at large (cf. Pohl 1998). Domestic interiors are defined as an arena in which the tensions between individual preferences and social pressures are symbolically expressed in material possessions to create a sense of belonging, through the use of ethnic markers, the invention of traditions, and the differentiation between frontstage and backstage spaces.

Results from the TCULT project suggest that different ethnic communities living in the same neighbourhood have scarce knowledge of their separate traditions and customs. They share the sentiment that huge differences are hidden behind the facades of their houses. The proposed programme will test the reality of this kind of stereotyping on the one hand, and on the other hand will study the influences of supply, advertising, media, fashion and fusion processes in general.

By passing the threshold between the public domain and the private space and our focus on what Paul Schnabel has coined as ‘C-culture’ (Schnabel, 1999), we expect new data on the degree of cultural specificity that has been retained or reinstalled, the social construction of ethnic identities and the differences between ethnic groups and generations. Our focus on material possessions (the real or newly invented cultural heritage) and their use, facilitates also the reconstruction of the past and the migration history of the ethnic groups involved.

b. Description of the research problem

The central problematic of the programme is the relationship between the dynamics of material culture and the formation of ethnic identities. This relationship is not clear cut.

The scarce research on this topic suggests two hypotheses. Some studies on immigrants in European countries report that changes in the realm of consumption of material goods precede changes of attitudes or values (cf. Yalcin, 1995). Others conclude that, on the contrary, immigrant families still favour their ‘own’ cuisine and domestic decoration, as a symbolic expression of their origins, long after their more public behaviour and views have become aligned with those of the majority of the population, (cf. Roth, 1999).

These seemingly contrasting hypotheses indicate the possibility that changes in (the arrangement of) furniture and domestic decoration reflect a specific process of adaptation and distinction. This process is expressed in the following hypothesis: during the first period after arrival migrants adapt their material culture by surrounding themselves with objects belonging to the country of residence. However, the use and meaning attached to these objects may vary. In the longer run, when public differences (education, career, political influence) decrease and relationships with the ethnic majority increase, furniture and domestic decorations will be used as ethnic markers vis-a-vis the members of the own ethnic group and outsiders. The ‘narcissism of small differences’ (cf. Blok 1998) explains why this kind of often subtle and symbolic ethnic markers are used to express cultural identities and to create a sense of belonging.

To test the hypothesis two casestudies (of Dutch ethnic minorities) are going to be compared: a. Turkish migrants and their domestic interiors and b. Hindustani-Surinamese

migrants and their domestic interiors. To select the two groups, three criteria were used: clearcut differences between countries of origin, migration histories and the presence of at least two generations (with their own households).

In each case study the research focusses on the same issues:

- a) Arrangement of furniture, household effects and domestic decoration and the use of the different rooms in the house;
- b) Housing career in country of origin and in the Netherlands;
- c) Frequency of direct (family) and indirect (media) transnational contacts;
- d) Existence and use of a house in the country of origin;
- e) Availability in the Netherlands of consumer goods from the country of origin;
- f) Embeddedness in own ethnic community in the Netherlands

Not only the objects and the house as such will be studied, but also their actual use, and the meaning attached to material possessions in general, including religious/ritual use and meaning. We expect to find important differences between ethnic groups and between generations with respect to the meaning and significance of domestic possessions.

Although the actual empirical research will be confined to the domestic interior, the resulting data will be related to the outcomes of other studies, e.g. the NMPS-TCULT-programme, on the relation between cultural forms of expression and the construction of ethnic identities. The proposed programme is conceptualized as an important step in the ongoing research on group continuity and dynamics and the relationship between the (re) construction of culturally defined identities in the public and private domains.

c. Innovative aspects

This programme is the first to combine traditional historical and ethnological research traditions in the field of material culture (e.g. research on probate inventories) with anthropological and social psychological research on the construction of cultural identities and the symbolic expression of identity. Its unique combination of methods and perspectives is expected to generate insights that are relevant for the issues to be studied, but also for the disciplines involved and the wider field of consumption and cultural studies in general.

The programme involves a systematic comparison of different ethnic groups, with different migration histories and a study of the intergenerational transfer of 'ethnic' possessions, to gain insight into what is often considered a black box or closed private sphere. This innovative approach could be an inspiration for research in other fields, such as the study of language, music or other symbolic expressions of cultural identities.

d. Methodology

The proposed research focusses on the household and the differences between generations. For each of the two projects two categories of households are selected: forty households of 'first generation' migrants and sixty households of their adult children. The first group of informants ('the first generation migrants') will be selected from one or two specific neighbourhoods with large communities of Turkish and/or Hindustani-Surinamese immigrants and slight variation in regional origin of the migrants. Criteria for the selection of the second category ('the second generation') are relevant differences such as: level of education, estimated income, domicile, origin of marriage partner. This design enables the

description and interpretation of the domestic interiors of hundred households and the study of the intergenerational transfers and changes for each case.

The data will be collected by combining different research methods. Basic data are inventories of furniture, household effects and interior decorations of eighty households. This will offer a comparative data set that can be analyzed systematically. The inventories will be amplified and confronted with observations, data from questionnaires and informal interviews and from oral history, with the help of pictures and floorplans of interiors. Both the objects and the meanings attached to the objects will be card-indexed. To this end information is collected about the acquirement of relevant objects (Was it a gift? And by whom was it given? Was it inherited? Or where and when and by whom was it bought?), their connotations (modern/ traditional, etc.) and their properties (fixed or movable, old or new, colors etc.). The data will be complemented by photographs of each interior, and structured interviews will yield information on migration history and social relationships in the country of origin and in the Netherlands.

The programme thus combines research methods from various traditions in the social sciences and the humaniora. In each project the combination of historical, anthropological, sociological and ethnological techniques will produce data that can be analyzed statistically (the inventories and questionnaires), but that can also be used as case studies and as input for 'thick descriptions'.

e. Interdisciplinary co-operation

Two quite different research institutes combine their efforts to create a research group with the experience in the fields of material culture studies and of consumption, ethnicity and migration that is required by the programme. The Meertens Institute is well known for its expertise in the field of historical research on material culture. During the past years it was one of the main participants in the NMPS-project TCULT (Bennis e.a., 2002). SISWO/Institute for the Social Sciences has a long tradition in the co-ordination of academic networks in the fields of consumption, historical sociology, and ethnic minorities. The academic roots of the participating researchers reflect this unique institutional co-operation: everyone's mono-disciplinary academic training has been followed by work in multidisciplinary research.

f. International affiliations

Research on 'Migration and material culture' has gained international attention since the 1980s (a.o. Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 1987; Pohl, 1998; Roth, 1999). The international SISWO network "Material Culture Studies" evolved into a tight-knit group, that organized an international symposium on 'The Global and the Local' in 1993. More recently, this theme was debated on by several participants of the international ethnological Sief-conferences in 1998 (Amsterdam: 'Roots and Rituals') and in 2001 (Budapest: 'Times and Places'). Two of the projectleaders organized a session on migration and material culture for the European Social Science History Conference (spring 2002).

g. Policy and Practice relevance

Observations on the integration of ethnic minorities stopping at the threshold of their homes from time to time enter Dutch public debate. They are associated with a certain moral panic. We do not know what happens behind the closed doors and therefore we expect the worst.

This programme focusses on the private sphere and on the domestic life of ethnic groups. This in itself is important knowledge and as such relevant.

Also, the programme yields information on the history of migrants and their families. Only recently historical museums and archives started paying attention to the cultural heritage and heirlooms of newcomers and outsiders. This has led to some interesting local and supra-local projects, e.g. a large project card-indexing the cultural heritage of migrants and refugees. This research programme offers an important contribution to these initiatives, a.o. by its theoretical reflection on the concepts of 'cultural heritage' and 'cultural preservation' and by its descriptions of interiors of different generations.

The proposed research will also be relevant for the development of new policies on housing and architecture. The coining of the concept *culturele planologie* reflects an increased attention to 'ethnic' preferences in the planning of new houses and neighbourhoods. Inspiration for this approach is being found in the countries of origin of the migrants and in specifically vocalized wishes of some ethnic communities. This rather anecdotal and ad hoc information will be supplemented by the detailed and evidence-based information on the use of dwellings by different generations and their preferences generated by our projects.

Finally, the research offers interesting information for the field of ethno-marketing, e.g. to identify new niches for ethnic entrepreneurs.

h. Relevance for the stimuleringsprogramma Sociale Cohesie

Ethnicity has the double function of integration (of the ethnic group) and of distinction. So called ethnic traditions or cultural heritages are the symbols and the instruments of this double function. This programme addresses the question whether and how these traditions are preserved and invented in the domestic sphere and how they serve the construction of culturally defined identities. We do not expect to find that identities are linked with a clear set of outward signs in any systematic way, but our research will generate relevant material on the (symbolic) boundaries between migrant groups. We focus on the material possessions that play a symbolic role in the process of identity construction and on the relations by which they are determined. Our study of so called social creativity strategies (for distinction) as well as of fusion processes will yield a detailed picture of changes over the generations and between ethnic communities and individual households. The combination of our focus on material culture with data on the impact of social relationships, group pressures, level of education, income, etc. enables results that can be confronted in the synthesis of the proposed programme. Moreover, the analysis of different strategies of distinction and of the areas of ambiguity/plural identities complements other research on cultural heritage in the NMPS programme.

i. Literature

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j. Themes of the research projects

Project I: Migration and domestic material culture (Synthesis)

This project addresses the general theme of the programme, by comparing the results of the two casestudies in the context of the central problem: the relationship between the use and meaning of material possessions in the domestic sphere of migrant groups and their cultural heritage. In this project the data of the casestudies will be combined with a secondary analysis of other relevant data on domestic material culture. Analyses of differences and similarities and changes over the generations will focus on relevant variables such as: migration history, socio-economic status, gender and age, religion, the network of family-members and friends, and the neighbourhood.

While the two casestudies focus on the changes over the generations of migrants, the synthesis is the project where these changes will be analyzed against the background of the developments in traditional Dutch domestic material culture, especially the interior decoration of born and bred Dutch with the same socio-economic background as the first generation migrants.

Research in this context will take into consideration the traditional functions of Dutch interiors and the historic changes which have taken place in this domain since World War II. Relevant topics in this respect are class differences and social mobility, the relation between the furnishing and the owning c.q. renting of a house, the importance of gender in decisions on furniture and decoration, etc.

We expect that this comparison between migrant groups (including changes in the countries of origin) and autochthonous developments will yield data on the relevance of social class and cultural heritage for the central research problem, that can be compared with recent studies in other countries (see a.o. E. Katschnig-Fasch, *Möbliertes Sinn. Städtische Wohn- und Lebensstile* (Wenen, 1998) and Hanna Straube, *Türkisches Leben in der Bundesrepublik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1987).

Projectleaders: dr. H. Dibbits, drs. C. Bouw en drs. K. Roukens

Funding: Meertens Instituut and SISWO/Instituut voor Maatschappijwetenschappen

Project II: Turkish migrants and their domestic interiors

In 1964 Dutch government entered into an agreement with Turkey to recruit Turkish workers for the Dutch labour market. Since then, many Turkish workers have settled in the Netherlands. Initially they were housed in boarding-houses or industrial labour-camps. Later they were joined by their families and moved to rental houses in different parts of the country. They maintained close relations with members of their family in other European countries like Germany and in their country of origin. Many own houses in Turkey and spend their holidays there. The importance of this relationship with the native country will be explicitly looked at in the project (cf. Çağlar, 1998). What choices do people make who have to furnish a house in Turkey (often their own property) as well as a house in the Netherlands (often rented)? Another important topic in this project is the inter-ethnic context in which the Turkish migrants have to define themselves in the Netherlands. For example, one would expect the development of a Pan-Turkish domestic culture connecting people from different regions with quite separate traditions. Here, the presence of an different Islamic group from the Meditteranean – Morrocon migrants – seems relevant. Do the Turkish migrants strive for distinction in their domestic interior? Or do they buy furniture and decoration in Moroccon shops? Are there any signs that a new ethnic identity – Dutch TuMar- is developing? Some pilot research for this project has already been completed (Dibbits, 2000; Hasirci, 2001).

Projectleader: dr. H. Dibbits
Research: oio
Funding: NWO and Meertens Institute

Project III: **Hindustani-Surinamese migrants and their domestic interiors**

Around 1975, the year in which Surinam became independent, thousands of Hindustani and Javani came to Holland, often directly from the districts. Nearly all stayed and only returned for holidays and family visits. However, the emotional bond with their native country remained strong and so did the bonds with their relatives relatives who stayed behind. In recent years, Surinamese Hindustani appear to develop a growing interest in their Indian roots, as indicated by a growing demand for products from India. This project will address the general questions of the programme, but also the relationship between the Hindustani and the Surinamese Creoles and their strategies for distinction and community building.

Projectleader: prof. dr. H. G. de Gier
Research: oio
Funding: NWO and SISWO

j. Coherence of the programme

Each project of the proposed programme addresses the same set of core questions. The same techniques will be used to collect the data. This framework facilitates systematic comparison and the design of an analytic model for interpreting and explaining similarities and differences. Each individual case will deliver insights into the significance of domestic material culture in the (re)construction of ethnic identities, and lively descriptions of domestic life and the (symbolic) meanings of household effects. The surplus value of the programme is the development of a general and abstract model on the relationships between domestic interiors and the changing boundaries between The incorporation of 'time' and 'generation' into the project enables us to monitor changes in those boundaries, in group continuity and dynamics and in the relationship with the country of origin for each of the two groups separately, and a between-group comparison within the contexts of Dutch society and global developments.

k. Description of the research format and time schedule

2003	
Jan-Feb	Design of projects I to III and of pilot research Selection of neighbourhoods First contacts with museum (see dissemination)
March-April	Pilot interviews and evaluation
May-June	First stage of fieldwork (interviews, etc.)
July	Closed conference on work in progress
July-August	Research trip to country of origin informants
August-December	Second stage of fieldwork
2004	
Jan-April	Third stage of fieldwork
May-June	First analysis data
July-August	Writing of first reports/papers
Sept-Oct	Closed conference
November	Analysis/writing
2005	
December	Academic presentation (synthesis+international symposium)
2006	
June	Public presentation (book and exhibition)
December	Dissertations

l. Dissemination

The findings of the research will be made available to different audiences: an international symposium on migration and material culture, the publication of books on the three migrant groups and a synthesis will target the academic world, an exhibition in a museum and another book the general public. Using such a diverse set of dissemination instruments is expected to make the research results available to academic peers, policy-makers and practitioners, the media, and the interested lay person. The research can be presented as a new view on the flexibility of 'ethnic' cultures and the dynamics of cultural heritages. Several museums have expressed their interest.