Summary

The Conductors of Memory: ‘Museumisation’ and ‘Nationalisation’ of Folk Culture in the Netherlands (1815–1940)

INTRODUCTION

During the 19th century, a great interest in folk culture developed in many European countries. Such developments as the explosive growth of towns and cities and the new availability of manufactured goods, together with increasing uniformity, were not universally viewed as ‘progress’. They were also regarded as a threat to those traditional ways of life and values that people saw as the basis of national identity. Increasingly, it came to be regarded as being in the national interest to preserve elements of folk culture. During the second half of the 19th century, that interest prompted attempts to preserve parts of this culture in museums. The need for such preservation within the protected environment of museums was considered to be extremely pressing. People could see all around them that the influence of modern society was causing traditional ways of life to disappear, even in the most remote areas. During the final decade of the 19th century, the first open air museums were established in Scandinavia. Not only objects such as clothing and folk art were collected there, but also complete buildings, such as farm buildings and other examples of traditional rural architecture.

A recently published study by the French historian Anne-Marie Thiesse gives a review of the ways in which idealised conceptions of folk culture have played a role in the construction of national identity and in the promotion of a national spirit. From her review, it appears that the glorification of folk culture was a thoroughly international phenomenon, evident in almost every European country. It is striking how little attention Thiesse pays to the Netherlands. She cannot be accused of lacking an international perspective, as her survey covers almost all of Europe and fully includes other small countries. The fact that she says little about the Netherlands is probably because of the limited attention that has been given to the discovery of folk culture in Dutch historiography until today. This corresponds with the view (widely held in the Netherlands itself until recently) that little fuss was ever made of national identity here and that folk culture was never really relied upon as a source of images for the representation of national identity.

Is that view accurate? Central to this book is the role that the representation of folk culture has played in shaping Dutch national identity. This question has been inspired by, amongst other things, the existence of a not insignificant range of images of Dutch folk life, the many festivals of national costumes, tourist-related phenomena such as the villages of Marken and Volendam and the relatively early establishment of a national open air museum in comparison with other countries.

I have examined the place occupied by folk culture in the representation of the nation by conducting fresh research into original sources. The question focuses on the representation of folk culture at national level. Central to this research is not folk culture itself, but rather the representation of it, making this book comparable with a historiographical study. It concerns the ‘conductors of memory’. In particular, I have carried out research into the sources that can give insights into those national presentations and manifestations that were intended to function as public displays of folk culture, such as exhibitions, museum exhibits, performances, parades and official celebrations. I have examined who the organisers were, what aims they had in mind, where their ideas came
from and to which cultural circles they belonged. Furthermore I have paid particular attention to the cultural policy aspects of those presentations and to any political dimensions there may have been, whether hidden or otherwise. Insofar as is possible, the very important issue of the appropriation of the images by the public has also been considered. I use the term ‘appropriation’ in the sense that Michel de Certeau uses it: a process of reception of meanings and values in which the receiver does not remain passive, but integrates and uses the received meanings in his/her cultural code (or group code). The term is also broad enough to include situations where that appropriation occurs at the ‘receiver’s’ own initiative, in contrast with the term ‘reception’, which presupposes ‘one-way traffic’.

The process of ‘museumisation’ plays an important role in this book. This term means more than housing objects in a museum. It can also happen outside a museum. In that case, it means doing the same with buildings and their interiors as is done with objects inside a museum, i.e. removing them from the context in which they were originally used and preserving them, insofar as is possible, for future generations. In their new context they obtain a new significance, becoming objects worth seeing. This approach, propounded by the German researcher Eva Sturm, offers a useful analytical model for historical research into the representation of folk culture.

One of the most interesting aspects of the ‘museumisation’ process is that it is, amongst other things, a tool for nationalisation. ‘Museumisation’ brings with it a delocalisation of objects, or to use the terminology of Kirshenblatt, a ‘detachment’ from their original environment. When objects removed from various places throughout the country are brought together into a new setting, a national collection is brought into being, which can represent the theme ‘unity in diversity’. What is ‘national’ is then in fact represented by objects of local or regional origin, which thereby obtain a national significance.

This book has been divided into three parts: ‘Folk Culture Nationalised’, ‘Folk Culture Enclosed’ and ‘Folk Culture Mobilised’.

In Part 1, ‘Folk Culture Nationalised’, the central question is how, during the course of the 19th century, local cultural expressions came to be classed as national heritage and collected at national level through a process of ‘museumisation’. The province of Friesland played an important role in this respect; it was there that, for the first time in the Netherlands, objects were collected from the perspective of folk culture and the first exhibition of folk culture was held.

Chapter 1 deals with conceptions about folk culture in relation to the study of Germanic antiquity, as they were prevalent amongst the ‘Frisian Association’. At the end of the 18th century and the start of the 19th century, there was a change in the orientation towards the past. Whereas previously cultural roots were mainly found in classical culture, i.e. Greek and Roman antiquity, in the romantic era people concentrated more on the origins of their own peoples, believing they could be found in the ancient Germanic past. It was thought that folk culture still contained traces of that past. Folk culture was elevated from something ‘rough’ and ‘uncivilised’, something that had to be fought against, to something to be cherished and preserved. An example of that ‘elevation’ was the reconstruction of an old ‘Hindeloper room’ in the 1877 Historic Exhibition of Friesland. A local form of culture was thereby declared to be ‘Frisian heritage’. Artefacts of folk culture functioned as examples for the elite: it was thought that the original Frisian identity had been better preserved in ordinary people than amongst that elite, the members of which were increasingly adapting their lifestyles to French culture and Parisian fashion.

The idea to put a whole room from a ship’s captain’s home in Hindeloopen on display was derived from the 1876 Historical Exhibition of Amsterdam, for which the
architect Pierre Cuypers (1827-1922) had reconstructed a number of 17th century Dutch rooms. The evocation, which to a large extent fuelled feelings of identity and appropriation, came forth from his ideas concerning the perception of a total picture. It had an element of theatricality about it: its primary aim was to evoke and experience an image of how it must have looked in the past. Pierre Cuypers was greatly inspired by the staged, ‘theatrical’ museological concept of Alexandre Lenoir, one of the founders of the Académie Celtique and also founder of the Musée des Monuments Français, which was set up at the time of the French Revolution.

Chapter 2 deals with how the ‘Hindeloper room’ developed into the archetypal folklore interior of the Netherlands, was presented at world exhibitions and even found its way into German museums. The form that the presentation took – that of a completely decorated room with life-sized figures wearing traditional local costumes – raised many eyebrows internationally at the 1878 World Exhibition in Paris. In contrast to the famous dioramas of the Swede Artur Hazelius, visitors to the exhibition did not remain outsiders, but were able to experience the room from the inside. The scenes represented in the various exhibitions of folk culture were inspired by 19th century genre paintings.

During the 1870s, a number of Dutch people travelled to Scandinavia and visited Hazelius’ ethnological museum. The attention paid to folk culture there was used as ammunition by those in the Netherlands arguing for more focus on the preservation of national costumes and other objects of folk culture within museum collections at national level. It is striking that the collections of folk culture in the Netherlands did not exist in their own right, but came to be an extension of presentations of the 17th century, the Dutch ‘Golden Age’. Folk culture and references to the Golden Age stood alongside each other and became intermingled at various national and international exhibitions, which were intended as displays of Dutch identity. At arts and crafts exhibitions, folk culture functioned as an example, in order to give arts and crafts a stronger Dutch national character.

The chapter ends with the 1898 Exhibition of National Costumes, on the occasion of the ascension to the throne of Queen Wilhelmina. Political motives clearly played a role here. The national costumes on display were no longer just ‘national’ in the sense of indigenous, but were also a symbol of national unity. It was, therefore, not surprising that the traditional garments collected for this exhibition obtained a permanent place in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. During the wave of nationalism that swept over the Netherlands around 1900, particularly at the time of the Boer War (1899-1902), the use of folk culture as national symbolism reached a peak. Originally, it was mainly the Liberals who championed the formative value of folk culture for community spirit. The middle class establishment thought that folk culture bound people together through the continuity it was considered to have, regardless of people’s social positions or religious convictions.

Chapter 3 deals with how the process of ‘museumisation’ widened in scope from objects in museums to extend to the world outside the museum walls. Painters, particularly those of the ‘Hague School’ and their followers, were impressed by the simplicity of rural life and a great predilection developed for painting peasants and fishermen in traditional costumes. The paintings ensured a proliferation of imagery both at home and abroad. Foreign tourists flocked to the Netherlands, including tourists from the United States, leading to the phenomena of the tourist villages of Marken and Volendam, where the main attraction was the local population, wearing the traditional costume.

National awareness also expressed itself in the discovery of the countryside by city dwellers. That prompted a hunt for the ‘picturesque’. The focus of attention widened from national costumes and interiors to the picturesque buildings that were to be seen on journeys through the Netherlands, such as old farm buildings or 17th century facades in ‘dead’ towns. Some city dwellers decided to opt permanently for a life in the
‘great outdoors’. ‘Real life’ folklore was often more appealing than museum exhibitions. But the countryside was also brought to the city, such as for example in the 1913 Festival of National Costumes in Amsterdam, in which countryside dwellers performed for city dwellers. The beginning of a distance between those who performed and the audience was in evidence here. People began to see peasants and fishermen, who still lived ‘traditionally’, less as true representatives of the nation and more as a backward group, ‘different’ rather than ‘one of us’.

The final part of the chapter concerns the background to the ‘preservation drive’, which was initiated at national level at the start of the 20th century and which led to the ‘museumisation’ of urban and rural sites, of nature and of landscapes, ‘on location’. During a period of less than 15 years, the Dutch Antiquity Association (Nederlandse Oudheidkundige Bond), the Society for the Preservation of Nature Reserves (Vereniging tot Behoud van Natuurmonumenten) and the Heemschut Association (Bond Heemschut) were set up. It was more than a question of individual monuments. The Heemschut Association in particular placed emphasis on the complete surroundings. The organisation also involved folk culture in this connection. The establishment of the Netherlands Open Air Museum (Nederlands Openluchtmuseum) should be viewed within the context of this ‘preservation drive’. Members of the Dutch Antiquity Association and Heemschut played a leading role in its establishment.

Chapter 4 begins with the emergence of the concept of the ‘open air museum’. Its roots date back to the landscape gardens of the 18th century, while the ‘ethnographic villages’ at world exhibitions can be regarded as its predecessors. The setting up of the first open air museum in Scandinavia coincided with a flourishing of Scandinavian literature. That led to a predilection for Scandinavia amongst the Dutch cultural elite, which has been somewhat neglected in most Dutch commentary concerning this era. Scandinavia became a favoured travel destination for the Dutch and Scandinavian folk art drew a great deal of attention. It was in this context that Scandinavia’s open air museums became well-known in the Netherlands. The Netherlands was the first country (beyond Scandinavia and Finland) to which the concept of the national open air museum was exported. In 1912, the association that was to set up the museum was established; in 1918 the museum opened its doors to the public. The fact that the Netherlands was a trailblazer in this respect was probably due to a combination of the tight network of the ‘preservation drive’, the great interest in Scandinavia and the fact that the Netherlands did not become involved in the First World War.

Chapter 5 expands on a number of fundamental concepts concerning the phenomenon of the open air museum, giving the chapter in part a theoretical character. The fundamental questions are approached using the Scandinavian experiences of some of the leading players: founder Frederic A. Hoefer (1850–1938), director August A. G. van Erven Dorens (1872–1960) and Dirk Jan van der Ven (1891–1973), who became the museum’s propagandist. Because the Netherlands Open Air Museum was part of the preservation network, the element of cultural preservation was central to it. Unlike Skansen, its principal goal was not that of educating the public. Moreover, power had passed to a new generation, which had set its face against romantic evocation.

The criticisms that modern architects directed at the artificial and romantic nature of the phenomenon of the open air museum correspond largely with those of the archaeologist Sophus Müller (1846–1934) in Denmark. In the plans for the layout of the museum, attempts were made to meet the criticisms by avoiding romantic effects. The buildings were, in as far as is possible, arranged by province, while any imitation of their natural surroundings was ruled out. It was clearly a national concept in which buildings
from different parts of the country were placed in a national framework. ‘Museumisation’ was in this case a tool for the nationalisation of the various building styles and ways of life.

Chapter 6 deals with the Historical Patriotic Festival, organised by Dirk Jan van der Ven one year after the opening of the museum. The festival was intended as a celebration of peace, following the First World War. It lasted a week and attracted big crowds. The festival was a highpoint in both living folklore and the nationalisation of folk culture, in which traditions from all over the country were displayed together in a ‘national pot pourri’. Van der Ven had an alternative vision for the development of the Open Air Museum. He thought it should be more a school ‘for the powerful patriotic education of our people’ than a museum for preservation. The academic Committee of Assistance for the Open Air Museum considered that the revitalisation of folk culture and appropriation by the public at large should, on the contrary, be avoided, viewing them as pure entertainment. They considered the museum’s task to be to offer preservation to historic buildings and artefacts within the safe, enclosed environment of the ‘reservation’.

Chapter 7 deals with the development of the Netherlands Open Air Museum in the period between the two World Wars, in relation to developments in the Dutch museum sector at large. From the 1910s onwards, a new generation of Dutch museum directors gave central importance to the perception of beauty, going against the historicising trends of the 19th century. To clear the way for this, museums first of all had to be oriented towards beauty. During the first half of the 20th century, the greatest obsession of the Dutch museum sector was making a distinction within museum collections between objects of great aesthetic value and those of great historical value. That led to the primacy of art museums above cultural/historical museums. One of the first measures taken as a result of the wish to impose a strict division between artistic value and historical value was the transfer of the collection of national costumes from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam to the Open Air Museum. The artificial distinctions that were made between art and history, against which the historian Johan Huizinga voiced his strong opposition, and subsequently within the historical category between urban and rural culture, promoted a one-sided, exclusively rural representation of folk culture. Folk culture was driven from the centre to the periphery.

During the 1920s, the study of folk culture became increasingly limited to rural culture and in fact only to that of the archaic countryside. Although there were originally plans to broaden the focus of the Netherlands Open Air Museum – Van der Ven planned to develop the Open Air Museum into a great cultural historical museum, similar to Nordiska Museet in Stockholm – the choice of objects was such that it was clearly a museum of the countryside. This development ensured that, in a country which was predominantly middle class, there was little in it to encourage national identification. As a result, the Open Air Museum occupied a more modest place in society than, for example, Skansen in Sweden, where rural culture caught the national imagination to a much greater extent.

PART III of this book, ‘Folk Culture Mobilised’, focuses on how folk culture was mobilised for social purposes between the two World Wars and was increasingly pushed to the fore as a model for society by those circles which saw great dangers in democracy, mass culture and the modern cosmopolitan society. Van der Ven played a crucial role in this mobilisation. Following the failure of his attempts to become director of the Open Air Museum, he made his home ‘De Meihof’ into his own centre for folk culture.

Chapter 8 starts by dealing with the failed plans of Van der Ven for a folklore celebration of Queen Wilhelmina’s silver jubilee in 1923. It was clear that, following the increase in interest in folk culture around 1900, which reached its highpoint with the Historical Patriotic Festival, folk culture was no longer considered appropriate for
national festivals. Van der Ven’s plans for a celebration in the Open Air Museum lost out to a plan for a celebration in Amsterdam, where it was actually the modernity of the Netherlands that set the tone for the week of festivities. With images from folk culture lapsing into clichés, as a consequence of their widespread use for commercial purposes and as publicity material for tourism, folk culture had been robbed of that for which it had originally been admired: its unforced and unspoiled nature. People found that the image of the clog-wearing Volendam fisherman no longer fitted with the modern Dutch citizen; no longer did image and self-image correspond.

Van der Ven’s use of the medium of film did, however, herald a new phase of ‘museumisation’ and ‘nationalisation’, engendering enthusiasm both within academic circles and beyond. Representation using film led to a visual concretisation of the traditional countryside in the sense of Tönnies’ ‘Gemeinschaft’, which Van der Ven increasingly saw as a model for society. Van der Ven regarded the revitalisation of rural culture as a counterbalance to the ills of the era and as a way of engendering patriotism and unity. He had discovered film as a way of bringing the traditions of the countryside closer to urban dwellers, which could be interpreted as a form of ‘museumisation’ and ‘nationalisation’.

Through his countless publications and film presentations between the two World Wars, Van der Ven became far and away the leading popularizer of folk culture, far better known than the academic experts on the subject. His frustrations about the limited national importance attributed to folk culture during official national festivals must certainly have contributed to the fact that Van der Ven increasingly came into contact with those groups that blamed the ‘degeneration’ of society on cosmopolitanism, internationalism, parliamentary democracy and the multiparty system. During the 1930s, Van der Ven, who had many contacts in Germany, came to be impressed by fascism and Nazism, without himself becoming politically active.

Chapter 9 gives two examples of specific ways in which folk culture can be applied as a social model. The first example is the revitalisation of the traditional costumes in the Dutch province of Zeeland which led to an interesting controversy in the press. The expert in folk culture Pieter J. Meertens (1899-1985), who himself came from Zeeland, declared himself opposed to the artificial preservation of traditional costumes. The issue provides insight into the reasons why the local population wished to move away from the traditional costume; it also provides insight into the conservative views of society held by those who wanted to see traditional dress maintained. What they in fact wanted to see was the ‘museumisation’ of that part of the population still living in the ‘traditional’ way, in order to hold them up as an example to the ‘uprooted’ modern society.

The second example is the school for folk dance that Van der Ven set up together with his wife. Folk dance was regarded as encouraging community spirit and as a counterbalance to the religious differences and class struggles dividing society. During the second half of the 1930s, Van der Ven participated in demonstrations of folk dance in Nazi Germany and also showed his films for Nazi organisations.

Chapter 10, the final chapter, charts the rise of the study of local history and customs during the 1930s, a movement with a wider thematic scope than the study of folk culture, and which aimed to promote knowledge of the nature and culture of people’s direct living environment. Although it was principally an expression of regionalism, Van der Ven was also able to place this study in a national perspective and to secure a national pedagogical function for it. Between September 1939 and May 1940, when the Netherlands had not yet become involved in the war, Van der Ven gave lectures and film presentations for the mobilised troops, in which folk culture was deployed to raise morale and to teach the soldiers what they were fighting for. During the German occupation, Van der Ven tried once again, with the help of the occupying power, to become director of the Open Air Museum. Again, however, his attempts ended in failure. In
1941, the association that had until then owned the Netherlands Open Air Museum, was forced to hand it over to the state.

CONCLUSION

From this research, the conclusion can be drawn that folk culture has been deployed liberally in the Netherlands as well, particularly during the last quarter of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The history of the representation of the ‘Hinde-loper room’ shows that this was not always a matter of an ‘invention of tradition’ but rather a relocation (in the sense of movement and redesignation) of tradition from the local to the national and international levels. Partly through the art of painting, the image that the Netherlands projected abroad was pre-eminently that of a country of national costumes. Within the Netherlands, the Historical Patriotic Festival of 1919 marked a highpoint in the representation of national unity through folk culture.

Gradually, however, a significantly more distant and more critical attitude towards folk culture emerged. That flowed from a desire for recognition as a modern country but also from the fact that images of folk culture were so widely used that they degenerated into clichés. The image (the traditional Netherlands) and the self-image (the modern Netherlands) began to diverge and even came into conflict with each other. People wanted to distance themselves from the traditional image of the Netherlands, which had won such favour abroad. Expressions of folk culture such as national costumes were thereby degraded from images of the self to images of a disadvantaged social group, looked down upon by the ‘modern’ Dutch. That attitude may also have blinded people to the not insignificant role that folk culture played within the Netherlands itself in the image forming of the nation.

During the period between the two World Wars, Van Erven Dorens and Van der Ven represented two diametrically opposing movements in the ‘museumisation’ of folk culture. While Van Erven Dorens wished to offer protection for authentic relics within the enclosed space of the museum, Van der Ven took them to the streets during the Historical Patriotic Festival. Van der Ven wanted to revive folk culture and mobilise it as a social force. The two men also had conflicting attitudes towards Nazism and the occupying power. Van Erven Dorens was extremely cautious about contacts with Nazi Germany, while during the 1930s Van der Ven appeared enthusiastically before Nazi organisations. Through his contacts with the occupying forces during the Second World War, Van der Ven actually helped bring folk culture in the Netherlands into disrepute.

EPILOGUE

The book concludes with an Epilogue, which should be viewed separately from the report of the findings of my academic research. In it, I give a personal view on questions concerning the place of museums of folk culture in today’s society.

Memories of the Nazis’ use of folk culture during the Second World War remain relevant. Today’s experts on folk culture must be critical towards pre-war premises such as the continuity of folk culture, the rural community as bearers of authentic folk culture and the idea that folk culture was a culture of close communities without social divisions. That is all the more necessary due to the objectionable manifestations of national identity and ethnicity that continue to surface. A broadening of horizons from a national to a European identity will not be enough and in fact threatens to create a European jingoism, differing little in ideological terms from nationalism. Experts in folk culture must remain completely open to contacts with cultures from outside Europe as
well. There is also an urgent need for the study of folk culture to direct itself to far greater segments of society than traditional rural culture and for it to occupy itself with contemporary ways of life. Despite the undeniable importance of historical collections relating to country life, the Netherlands Open Air Museum will have to become involved with the cultures of much greater groups of the population. That may change the character of the museum significantly over the longer term, but in doing so it will present a more representative picture of living conditions in the Netherlands.

*Translation: Bookmakers, Nijmegen*