

Towards overcoming methodological nationalism

An assessment of the Dutch 'national' festival of St Nicholas from an international perspective

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A Dutch politician and an Innsbruck shop window: the problem

My long-term interest in the festival of St Nicholas in the Netherlands (for a summary description in English, see Wheeler & Rosenthal 2005:213-229) apart, a direct impetus for writing this presentation came from two recent, contrasting, experiences in this field. In april this year, populist Dutch politician and former immigration secretary Rita Verdonk officially presented her new political 'movement' – on purpose she avoided the words 'political party' – named 'Proud of the Netherlands' (*Trots op Nederland*). In her speech, that was preceded by playing the Dutch national anthem, she stated as her main political ambition the preservation of Dutchness (*het Nederlandse karakter*), diagnosed by her as being under threat of erosion. In order to bring home this abstract notion to her audience, she said, tellingly: 'They even want to abolish the *Sinterklaasfeest*'.¹ These 'they' were not specified, but it was obvious to everyone that she referred to new Dutchmen, in particular those of African descent that, indeed, object to the abominable, racist, representation of black men in one of the festival's main characters, *Zwarte Piet*, St Nicholas' black servant.² The festival of St Nicholas was evoked as an, easily understandable and readily acceptable, short-hand or symbol of Dutch cultural heritage, and a rallying point for those willing to defend that national heritage. As such she provided, of course, a further example of a phenomenon only too well known in 19th and 20th century European history (cf. Cox 1993:12; Billig 1995:71-72; Niedermüller 1999:101; Van Ginkel 1999:66,279; Kaschuba 2001:20-21; Anttonen 2005:103).³

When visiting Innsbruck in november 2007, I was struck, not so much when noticing in a confectioner's shop window small candy (*marzipan*) figures of St Nicholas and his companion, in Austria, the devilish *Krampus* – I knew of that, as well as by the contents of another shop window, for carnival gear. This time of year, it displayed

costumes for dressing up as bishop St Nicholas, Krampus and Santa Claus. I could take that in too, but what really surprised me was that the props for making the top of a bishop's staff bore labels in Dutch (*Sinterklaas krul*), they apparently been made in Holland, or Flanders/Belgium. Could an element of Dutch national heritage that easily be converted into a commercial product for an international market? Here was the evidence.



Innsbruck, November 2007. (Photograph: John Helsloot).

I am convinced that any other (elder) Dutchman would be equally intrigued and puzzled. It is this cognitive embarrassment that I want to problematize here, taking myself both as an object, a common 'romantic participant' in Dutch culture, and as a subject, an 'empiricist observer' (Lindholm 2008:141), or ethnologist reflecting here on methodological nationalism. Analytically, the problem refers to the tension between descriptive and expressive/impressive notions (Wijers 2000:115) of Dutchness, i.e. a phenomenon to be *found* in the territory of the Netherlands, and *ideas about* this occurrence.⁴

The Dutchness of St Nicholas: certainties and uncertainties

Rita Verdonk did not speak of ‘our’ festival of St Nicholas or, by implication of that possessive pronoun, of claiming a special or even unique relationship between *Sinterklaas* and the territory of the Netherlands. Still, implicitly, this notion was omnipresent. It’s only when this special connection is taken into account that her statement made any sense at all, and could resonate with national ‘Heimatgefühl’ (Noyes & Abrahams 1999:79). For the idea that *Sinterklaas* is an icon of Dutch culture, ‘a national otherness’ (Löfgren quoted in Van Ginkel 1999:5), is widespread among the Dutch. To quote some public pronouncements from the last decades, that could be easily multiplied: ‘What could be more Dutch than the festival of St Nicholas?’; ‘it’s unique in the world’; ‘a typically Dutch tradition’;⁵ ‘the Netherlands is the *Sinterklaas* country (Dane 2002:638).

The oldest version of this belief that, as yet, I could find dates from a treatise on the saint and his festival from 1831. In it, the learned author established that ‘especially in our fatherland there is a children’s feast on St Nicholas’s day’, this being unknown elsewhere (Van Hengel 1831:29, cf. 30). In 1853, another writer bluntly ascertained that St Nicholas ‘is a feast that has its origin in the Netherlands’ (Teenstra 1853:220).⁶ Because these authors do not substantiate their views, it is tempting to contextualise these in the intellectual mood of the day: the surge of nationalistic feeling after the secession of Belgium in 1830 and the fear, expressed in 1855 by a folklorist (J.H. Halbertsma), of ‘the coming melting of European nationalities’ (quoted in De Jong 2001:66). This cultural nationalism is unmistakable, however, in equal claims of the Dutchness of St Nicholas since the 1860s, when the festival was diagnosed being threatened by the growing popularity of Christmas German style (Dekker 1982:168-169). The same phenomenon repeated itself in the 1990s, this time with the American Santa Claus as the perceived usurper (Helsloot 1996). On each of these occasions, of profound uncertainty about Dutch national identity in the face of ‘foreign’ forces – and their accomplices at home, the Dutchness of *Sinterklaas* was defensively delineated and confirmed, at least in the media.

The extent to which these conceptions were actually shared by the Dutch population has, as far as I know, never been properly investigated. However, during the 1990s upheaval, I sent out an ethnological questionnaire to the Meertens Institute's informers with questions on this issue.⁷ A majority considered the festival a typically Dutch phenomenon indeed, because, as they stated, it was simply unknown elsewhere. Others, however, denied this and pointed to its occurrence in neighbouring parts of Belgium and Germany. However, *Sinterklaas* in the Netherlands was deemed unique by the sheer intensity of the celebration, its national scale, and its specific ritual style. Interestingly, there was an intermediate group that either professed their ignorance in this respect, or did subscribe to the view, while simultaneously qualifying it by phrases like 'I think so', 'as far as I know', 'it is said so', 'it's more an emotional matter'. Summarizing these popular ideas about the Dutchness of St Nicholas, one might conclude in general: 'The festival was so obviously such a manifestation that it could be stated as a fact without too much backing evidence' (Connelly 1999:9-10).⁸ This 'knowledge' belongs more to the realm of 'common sense' than that of an explicit nationalistic ideology, and is best described as an expression of 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995) or 'informal nationalism' (Frykman 1995). Is it 'too banal to bear the weight of interrogation?' (Noyes & Abrahams 1999:77).

St Nicholas outside of the Netherlands

How, then, to relate, as an ethnologist, to this professed popular certainty-cum-uncertainty about the Dutchness of St Nicholas? One response, deriving from an older strand in ethnological thinking, could be to put this idea to an empirical test, to subject it 'to some means of verification' (Guss 2000:14).⁹ Is the festival of St Nicholas really being celebrated in the Netherlands only? The simple-mindedness, or essentialistic fallacy (cf. Billig 1995:31),¹⁰ underlying a question thus phrased is brought home rapidly after even a cursory review of the (surprisingly copious – this reaction reflecting, of course, my own nationalistic bias!) relevant ethnological and historical literature. Apart from the excellent monograph of Mezger (1993), this literature consists of national studies, on occasion offsprings of national mapping or *Volkskunde-Atlas* endeavours, and numerous regional or local studies, covering geographically mainly Northwestern and

Middle Europe, and dealing historically with the period from the 15th century to the present day.¹¹

Approaching these studies – and sidestepping the problem of their relative incomparability because of differences in theoretical and methodical outlook and scope – with a focus on ‘St Nicholas’ quickly proves itself inadequate.¹² Yes, the basic idea of children getting presents for their good behaviour on December 6th, or 5th, in the name of St Nicholas, who is either mysteriously invisible, dispensing his gifts in shoes, socks or plates set out by the children, or through the chimney, or enters the home in person, that is through someone embodying his role, is ubiquitous. ‘Sein Tag bedeutete für die Kinder den einträglichsten Geschenktag’ (Meuli 1932-33:1839).¹³ This ‘St Nicholas’ may outwardly resemble a roman catholic bishop or appear in some other, odd or bizarre, attire, this especially so as regards his usually also present companions.¹⁴

For underlying or running parallel with the idea of a ‘visit of St Nicholas’ was the visit of a group of disguised and unruly youngsters (cf. Zender 1965:16,17), more often than not demanding a gift than dispensing one. This masquerade or *Maskenbrauchtum* could manifest itself on St Nicholas Day, but equally on many other dates, from November to mid-January. From the point of view of steadfast citizens and villagers, this was a noisome, disorderly and unholy ritual. Accordingly, they sought if not to eradicate, then at least to adapt and transform this ritual to their own tastes and ideologies, be these the Reformation and Counterreformation, Enlightenment and Romanticism, commercialization and the promotion of tourism, or, not to forget, (popularizations of) the discipline of *Volkskunde*. Because this social and ideological onslaught was qualified by historical contingencies and geographical particularities, as regards denominational differences, social structures and local economies, there resulted a complex landscape in respect of ritual expressions and ritual occasions, and of representations, both in iconography and performance, of imaginary dispensers of gifts. Among the latter, however, the figures of St Martin, St Nicholas, the Child Jesus or *Christkindl* were dominant – together with their many syncretistic outward forms and names, though increasingly with competition, from the mid-19th century, of the *Weihnachtsmann*.¹⁵ For, as an occasion for family ritual, Christmas proved itself a ‘magnet’ (cf. Spamer 1937:49), starting in the German countries and developing further in the United States, that

eventually marketed, the *Sinterklaas* inspired, Santa Claus to the world at large.

Validating the Dutchness of St Nicholas?

How, again, to situate St Nicholas in the Netherlands within this wide array of winter rituals? Clearly, the deterritorialization of culture is not a characteristic of only recent postmodern times. Could there be a ‘kernel of truth’ – a topic in stereotype studies (Kruithof 1975:72) – in claiming his Dutchness? Striving after ‘die Erkenntnis der Eigenart einer Volksgruppe’, Matthias Zender, a representative of the older geographical approach in ethnology, stated in the 1960s: ‘erst in der abweichenden Gestaltung gleicher Traditionsformen und in der andersartigen Funktion und Einstellung wird die Besonderheit sichtbar’ (Zender 1965:6,7).

Taking recourse to this slightly more refined manner of comparative essentialism, one might focus on the constituent parts of the festival. To quote, for example, the ‘one-and-only’ – because appearing on national television – Dutch *Sinterklaas*: ‘it consists of so many unique elements, that one encounters nowhere else in the world: versifying, processions, songs, surprise parcels, marzipan, chocolate letters, gingerbread men (*speculaaspoppen*), spice nuts’.¹⁶ To this list could also be added St Nicholas’s black servant *Zwarte Piet*. Here one enters some more solid ground – both figuratively and literally. Some confectionary products may indeed be available in the Netherlands exclusively. Making surprise parcels accompanied by teasing or funny rhymes on the receiver’s character is also a possible qualifier for uniqueness – but for the fact that this ritual practice, called *julklapp*, is also performed in Christmas celebrations in Sweden, and, in the 19th century, in Northern Germany (Gawlick 1998:80). Adults giving each other presents in the name of St Nicholas seems less common or unknown outside of the Dutch area (cf. Hörandner 1978:18). Is it, then, not in individual elements as such, but more in their specific alignment or pattern, as also stated by some of my informers, that one can establish a factual basis for the festival’s uniqueness in the Netherlands? In addition, one could advance the, possibly unequalled, massive scale of, and participation in, the *Sinterklaas* ritual. St Nicholas’s yearly solemn entry on Dutch soil is not only broadcast live on national television, but equally, and simultaneously, performed in, nearly every town and village in the Netherlands. Historical fluctuations notwithstanding,

some 50-70% of the Dutch population is reported to partake, one way or another, in the celebration of the festival. In sum, at least at the level of popular rhetorics: ‘Unified in practice, the community creates a unity in feeling’ (Noyes & Abrahams 1999:80; cf. Frijhoff 2008:335).

As Zender already, and rightly so, advanced: ‘(es) genügt aber nicht zu wissen, ob und wo eine Lebensform “vorkommt” oder bekannt ist, sondern Einordnung und Stellung im Volksleben erst vermitteln uns Erkenntnisse und besitzen Aussagewert’ (Zender 1965:4).¹⁷ This raises comparative analysis to a level almost beyond reach of an individual researcher, not only empirically, by demanding a full knowledge of the culture hosting the phenomenon in question, but even more so theoretically, ‘because each social formation is necessarily crosscut by gender, class and age, blurred and fragmented by migration, mingling, and the multiple identities of its members’ (Lindholm 2008:143), as was already stressed by Zender (1965:6-7) too.

Falling back, for expediency’s sake, on the ‘functions and attitudes’ he highlighted, one might point to the cosyness (*gezelligheid*) the festival embodies and performs, as testified to, for instance, by the institute’s informers. Like *Sinterklaas*, this *gezelligheid*, and its companion homeliness (*huiselijkheid*) are equally advanced by Dutchmen as unique markers of their culture. Combining them analytically – this being operated by participants themselves as well: ‘a cosy homely festivity, unparalleled all over Europe’,¹⁸ ‘*Sinterklaas*, the pre-eminent homely festivity’ (Driessen 1997:68) – might seem to reinforce or further validate the idea of the Dutchness of St Nicholas. Appealing to similar emotional qualities and social functions, equally perceived as unique, the ‘Englishness’ and the ‘Germanness’ of the celebration of Christmas in these respective countries have been claimed by their enactors (Connelly 1999:9-43; Kaschuba 2003:181). This line of reasoning, however, strikes back at the original argument, for not only it repeats the problem in different terms, but even serves to undermine it. For according to historian and expert Anton Schuurman, homeliness is not ‘typically Dutch. What is typically Dutch is the fact that we [Dutchmen] pride ourselves in this concept and identify with it’ (Schuurman 1992:759). ‘It is this subjectivity, this us-feeling, that colours our self-image and our image of others’ (Van Ginkel 1997:39)

Reconceptualizing the Dutchness of St Nicholas: overcoming methodological nationalism

In acknowledging this, the initial problem, of my bewilderment in Innsbruck, comes full circle, both on a level of factual data and of ethnological analysis. Searching for an empirical yardstick or empirical congruences instead of family resemblances (Blok 1976) proves itself to be, in the end, a *cul de sac*. ‘All those efforts of ascertaining the peculiarity of a nation seem to miscarry because rarely or never one can speak of unicity’ (Van Ginkel 1997:38-39, cf. 1999:298). Overcoming methodological nationalism implies sidestepping this ‘pre-postmodern’ urge of factual verification. It is ‘old ethnology’,¹⁹ like it was, and occasionally still is, practised in the service of fostering nationalism all over Europe, by inventorying and labeling cultural practices as national traditions, in ‘a sort of ethnography-turned-inward’ and ‘disregarding the epidemic mobility characterising culture’ (Leerssen 2006b:195, 2007:60; cf. Leerssen 2006c; Thiesse 1999:157-224; Anttonen 2005:93). Nowadays, of course, ethnologists, together with historians, have properly diagnosed this ‘ideological traditionalizing’ (Noyes & Abrahams 1999:90-92),²⁰ i.e. the mythical or constructed nature of these conceptions.

As David Picard pointedly writes: ‘the content expressed through these narrations does not directly inform about the uniqueness or specificity of a community or group’, or nation, one might add. Concomitant with the purposely ethnocentric nature of these ideas, however, he stresses that communities ‘do normally believe in the truthfulness of these stories and forms of narration; in the “authenticity” of the “cultural heritage” which in reality has been the output of a selection and interpretation process’ (Picard 2005:120). It is precisely because of their situation in the belief system that, as Reginald Johnson (1993:106) observed, ‘rhetorics about national heritage and about cultural homogeneity remain (...) very hard to dislodge’. Approaching this epistemological ambiguity from another angle, Anne Eriksen has redefined the concept of tradition as ‘not an essence from the past, but a discourse in the present: what is said to be tradition *is* tradition’. Quoting Richard Bauman, she argues that tradition is best understood as ‘an act of authentication’ (Eriksen 2005:297-298; cf. Lindholm 2008:86).²¹ From similar perspectives, this act is described as one of ‘practical traditionalizing’ (Noyes & Abrahams 1999:84-90), ‘appropriation’ (Leerssen 2006a:16), ‘identification’ (Meurs 2007) or ‘framing’ (Weinhold, Rudolph & Ambos 2006), always within a wider communicative

process involving ‘others’. In this reconceptualizing effort, ethnology may even be in danger of losing its primacy or ascendancy over the cultural behaviour it studies, as evoked in this 1999 comment in a very local advertiser on Limburgian (a province in the Netherlands) identity (in which Limburgian might easily be substituted for by Dutch): ‘Don’t look for the factual existence of things typically Limburgian, but for what people think is typically Limburgian’ (quoted in Wijers 2000:115).

The *act*, not the *fact*, then, is at issue. Here I am linking up, of course, with the debate, ongoing for some time now, on agency (cf. Noyes & Abrahams 1999:79), also apparent, for instance, in the ‘folklorism’ phenomenon (cf. Smidchens 1999; Rooijackers 2000:181-182). This agency, however, of claiming Dutchness does not take place *ex nihilo*, in a void. It may stem from conscious, politically inspired motives (Anttonen 2005:103), as in the case of Rita Verdonk. More likely than not, however, the act is situational, social and unreflected – as in performances, ‘where – to put the matter simply – agency and reflexivity are transferred to the practice itself’ (Köpping, Leistle & Rudolph 2006:26), but also beyond actually performing;²² motivated by desires of inclusion and exclusion or of drawing boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Driessen 1997:70); and, most of all, originating in that, often fatal, concoction of internalized childhood memories and embodied emotions (cf. Löfgren 1989:14-15), and ‘the construction of “bygone days” in conversation’ (Noyes & Abrahams 1999:84; cf. Wijers 2000:123);²³ vaguely digested notions deriving from the teachings of ethnology and national history, untested personal observations, or sheer ignorance.²⁴ All of this taken together (cf. Frijhoff 2008:355) guides, directly or indirectly, perceptions of similarity and difference, or as in the case at hand, the predisposition to see *Sinterklaas* as uniquely Dutch or as merely a variation on a broader, internationally shared, pattern of ritual behaviour in winter.²⁵

Disentangling this muddle, its endurance, (re)production and operation over time, or ‘the complex interplay between facts and fictions, between data and meanings, between context and memory and experience’, to quote cultural historian Willem Frijhoff (2008:330), writing on Dutchness,²⁶ will be a proper task for today’s ethnology, including my own ongoing research on the peculiar case of the Dutchness of St Nicholas.

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Notes

¹ *De Pers*, April, 4, 2008.

² This was clear from her subsequent phrase, in which she satirized the erection of the Amsterdam slavery memorial. Black Dutchmen perceive *Zwarte Piet* as a symbol of Dutch complicity in slavery (cf. Helsloot 2005).

³ For politicians like Verdonk, ‘Ritual [...] functions, so it seems, like a sort of ware house where they find a storage of psychologically and socially efficacious symbols and themes, only waiting to be recombined in accordance with their agendas’ (Köpping, Leistle & Rudolph 2006:26).

⁴ The question whether ‘kulturelle Elemente überhaupt einen distinktiven Wert haben’ or ‘nur subjektiv als distinktiv empfunden werden’ (Cox 1993:8).

⁵ *Sinterklaas*-historian Frits Booy, *Trouw*, November, 15, 1997; former television-*Sinterklaas* Adrie van Oirschot, *De Gooi- en Eemlander*, November 18, 1989; a local *Sinterklaas*-performer, *Gelders-Overijsselse Courant*, November 21, 1978. As having a special interest in St Nicholas, the prejudice of these spokesmen will be noted.

⁶ Cf., ‘Using the language of origins, they [folklorists] make an argument for persistence into the future’, (Noyes & Abrahams 1999:90).

⁷ Meertens Institute Archives, Ethnological Questionnaire 65 (1994) 8i and 8j. As is often the case in ethnological questionnaires, not designed to be representative as in social science research, the answers only allow for tentative, hypothetical conclusions, indicating a range of possible attitudes.

⁸ The knack in this quotation is that Connelly is referring here to the Englishness of Christmas!

⁹ ‘Ultimately, historians have [...] to cope with the difficult task of disentangling analytically fact and fiction’ (Frijhoff 2008:329).

¹⁰ In a double sense: of not only concentrating on outward forms – ‘ein analytisches Zerschneiden der Kultur’, especially ‘im äußeren Gepräge der Kultur’ (Wiegelmann 1984:8) – but also on favoured items, due to ‘a selection process by which particular forms are canonized as official traditions’ (Guss 2000:15; cf. Anttonen 2005:56-57).

¹¹ See the special section of St Nicholas studies consulted in the references.

¹² ‘Wir werden also gut daran tun, für früheren Zeiten nicht dieser oder jener Maskengestalt, nicht der einen oder anderen Benennung nachzugehen, sondern vielmehr anzunehmen, daß es ein Brauchmuster gab. Danach war die Vorweihnachtszeit ein Termin für Maskenbräuche [...]’ (Schwedt 1989:173-174).

¹³ This generalization, unspecified but referring to German speaking countries in the pre-modern period and beyond, is quoted here merely to counterbalance similar statements referring to the Netherlands exclusively.

¹⁴ ‘È impossibile sia datare sia localizzare con certezza la nascita dei cortei mascherati, così come non si sa esattamente quando abbiano fatto la loro comparsa nel corteo del santo i suoi inquietanti accompagnatori’ (Dinzelbacher 2006:156).

¹⁵ This whole ‘Bündel kompliziertester Brauchverlagerungen und -vermischungen [...] jemals zu entflechten, dürfte so gut wie unmöglich sein’ (Mezger 1993:201-202).

¹⁶ Acting television-*Sinterklaas* Bram van der Vlugt, *Trouw*, November, 15, 1997.

¹⁷ Cf.: ‘Auf der Makroebene ist nämlich mit verschiedenen kulturellen Milieus zu rechnen, in denen die einzelnen Kulturformen recht unterschiedliche Stellungen einnehmen können’ (Simon 2003:20).

¹⁸ Meertens Institute Archives, Ethnological Questionnaire 65 (1994) 8j, L 183.

¹⁹ ‘To claim nationalistic significance for material that, according to [Bengt] Holbek, does not correspond to the national boundaries in its area of appearance, is “misuse of folklore”, which “is still promulgated by less-informed writers and propagandists”, but which “has gradually been abandoned within professional circles in the course of this century”’. For Anttonen, however, this is not going far enough: ‘whether the use of folkloristic material for territorial claims is ‘misuse’ or not cannot be judged solely on the basis of the material’s correlation – or lack of it – with given territorial boundaries. Holbek’s point undermines the power of symbolism and metonymy, which do not require such exact correlations. Symbolism and metonymy are argumentative relations’ (Anttonen 2005:87,88).

²⁰ That may, in some cases, coincide with efforts ‘from below’, as Noyes and Abrahams (1999:87) rightly stress: ‘Folklorists did not discover the [English] mummer’s play in the nineteenth century because nationalist or evolutionist ideology told them to go out and look for relics of the past: rather, the folk themselves pointed up the importance of the custom’s continuity [...]’.

²¹ This is also the main focus of the project ‘Heritage dynamics: Politics of authentication and aesthetics of persuasion in Brazil, Ghana, South Africa and the Netherlands’, directed by Birgit Meyer (Free University Amsterdam), seeking to understand how ‘a form of cultural heritage [...] becomes part of a lived experience that conveys – like a “second nature” – a strong notion of authenticity’ (Ms. Project description, september 2007).

²² On this tension between ‘reflexivity *in* ritual and reflexivity *on* ritual’, see e.g. Köpping, Leistle & Rudolph 2006:24-28.

²³ ‘It [Sinterklaas] may be celebrated in other countries just as well. It’s a Dutch festival, because we grew up with it’, Meertens Institute Archives, Ethnological Questionnaire 65 (1994) 8j, G090a. Cf., ‘The Patum [a festival in Catalonia] is old because it feels old: it is deep in the community and the landscape because it is deep in the body, lived as much in the guts and the genitals as in the eyes and ears. It is also biographically deep, recalling earliest childhood and the first consciousness of bonded and separate identities’ (Noyes & Abrahams 1999:90).

²⁴ Cf.: ‘Die Überbewertung des vermeintlich Eigenen und die Abgrenzung und Ausgrenzung von Fremdem durch gezielte Ignorierung, Nichtbetrachtung oder sogar Verachtung (...)’ (Cox 1993:11).

²⁵ Cf. Driessen (1997:71) on this tension as regards *gezelligheid*.

²⁶ Or, as in the case of authentic cuisines and national identities, the ‘labyrinths of resistance, pride, entrepreneurship, power, money, and imagination’ (Lindholm 2008:86).