

## Chapter 4

# Public Folklore and the Construction of a Regional Identity in Newly Reclaimed Dutch Polders

Albert van der Zeijden

The view that the study of folklore, since its genesis as a scientific discipline in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has always been characterised by an important political-ideological component – related to nationalism, and to the construction of national and regional identities – is presently generally accepted among ethnologists. That the political use of folklore is however not without its problems became clear chiefly in the National Socialist era in Germany, where the discipline was employed on behalf of an aggressive racial politics (Dow and Lixfeld 1994). Since then this problematic past of folklore studies has been subject to evaluation in both Germany and in the Netherlands (Gerndt 1987; Dekker 2002; Henkes 2005). All of these developments have led to ethnologists being very hesitant about allowing folklore studies to become linked with cultural politics. Such a relationship is widely seen as a trap that is best avoided (Van Ginkel 2000).

It is thus remarkable that in recent years the socio-political functions and dimensions of culture and folklore have again been given a place on the political agenda. For the Dutch situation, we can say that the important turning point was the ministerial memorandum *Pantser of ruggengraat* (Armour or backbone), which the Dutch government propounded with regard to culture for the period 1997-2000, and in which it was proposed that everyday culture should be given a central role as a medium for social cohesion (Pots 2000: 341–349). In neighbouring Flanders (Belgium) a campaign entitled ‘The Culture of the People Today’ was established, the purpose of which was to realise ‘a dynamic application of popular culture for social development’ (Adriaenssens 2002; De Munck 2005).

There are various reasons behind this renewed attention for the political potential of popular culture and folklore. The large-scale migration of Turkish and Moroccan guest workers to the Netherlands in the 1960s and 1970s, and of large groups from regions such as Surinam and the Dutch Antilles, which were formerly Dutch colonies, has caused Dutch society to fragment on ethnic lines.<sup>1</sup> ‘Managing ethnicity’ and integration policies have become important cultural-political objectives as a result

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1 See on this subject also the contribution of Hester Dibbits in this volume.

of such developments in Western Europe (Bendix and Roodenburg 2000, Dekker 2000). Moreover, cultural heritage and folklore have been promoted as means for fostering social cohesion. In recent years this cultural-political trend has received further encouragement from the UNESCO convention adopted in 2003 for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which is intended to protect and promote folk culture, as well as protecting world-wide cultural diversity.

In this context popular culture becomes a part of what in America is termed 'public folklore', 'the professional mediation of folklore for the public' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2000: 1). This mediation is more than merely popularising folk culture for a wide public (Feintuch 1988; Baron and Spitzer 1992). There is also an aspect of maintaining, restoring, or creating social cohesion. In 2005, when hurricane Katrina left a trail of physical destruction in New Orleans and its vicinity, folklorists in America were also called in to heal the wounds that the hurricane had also inflicted on the society.

This new cultural-political discourse obviously calls up questions of all sorts, not only with regard to issues of authenticity and whether or not 'traditional' folk culture should be kept 'alive' by artificial means (Van der Zeijden 2004), but also about the political role that is being assigned to heritage, something about which historians in particular have had critical things to say (Lowenthal 1996; Van der Laarse 2005). Indeed, involving the history of public folklore more emphatically in these reflections – a history which is largely still to be written, with regard to the Netherlands – would be worthwhile. There are various possible approaches for doing this. Until now, an institutional or biographical approach to the historiography of folklore studies in the Netherlands has generally been chosen (Dekker 2002; Henkes 2005). One can, for example, elicit the history of public folklore through the biography of an important public folklorist (Bronner 1996) or the history of a public folklore institution such as the Nederlands Centrum voor Volkscultuur (Dutch Center for Popular Culture) (Van der Zeijden 2000). For this contribution I have chosen another approach, namely to examine a large governmental project: the land reclamation and cultural organisation of a large portion of the Zuiderzee (the arm of the North Sea which penetrated deep between the provinces of North Holland and Friesland, Overijssel and Gelderland), today the province of Flevoland. The Province of Flevoland, created in the 1940s, is the youngest province of the Netherlands; it has an area of 2343 square kilometres and presently has a population of about 350,000. The reclamation of the Noordoostpolder, the oldest section, with Emmeloord as its chief city, was completed in 1942. Eastern and Southern Flevoland, respectively, followed in the 1960s and 1970s, with the new cities of Lelystad (the provincial capital) and Almere. Thus we are dealing with newly created land, with a new population of what have been called 'pioneers', who came from all sections of the Netherlands.

To date, almost nothing has been published on this subject from an ethnological perspective. At any rate, for the older ethnologists the folklore in this new province was not an object for research. According to the prevailing opinion in that day, 'traditional' folklore simply could not exist there (aside from the two Zuiderzee

islands of Urk and Schokland, which were enclosed in the polder). The subject of 'social organisation' has been a research theme in the historiography of Flevoland (Flokstra 2000). But until now, however, there has been no discussion of how folklore was also propagated as a part of this social organisation, as a manner of fostering solidarity among a population from very heterogeneous geographic and religious backgrounds, thereby becoming part of a complex process of 'public folklore' and shaping identity. When the planners presented their ideas about the Zuiderzee Works, the dike building and reclamation, they placed the emphasis on its great significance for the nation as a project in which the new Netherlands would be taking shape (Te Velde 1992). Furthermore, comparisons were regularly made with the concept of pioneering in the United States: this polder was the Dutch 'frontier' (De Pater 2000). The project was set up as an example for the whole of the Netherlands, and was a magnificent opportunity for social engineering, which fit pre-eminently in the then prevailing social democratic ideology of the potential for reshaping man and society, using the insights of sociology as a scientific developmental discipline (Jonker 1988). It was also decided to involve several ethnologists, both professional and amateur, in the project.

Diverging from the usual definition (Baron and Spitzer 1992), but resulting from the above remarks about folklore and social development in the Noordoostpolder, in this chapter 'public folklore' will be, more or less in line with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2000), understood as the initiatives by governmental authorities and professional ethnologists, whether working in collaboration or not, to shape and promote solidarity in a group or society by means of an applied folklore. With regard to the Noordoostpolder this will involve not only initiatives by the government and ethnology, but also unofficial initiatives by the migrants themselves, and from the media. The central question that I wish to answer here is, in what way was public folklore employed as an instrument to shape a new regional identity? And what was the role of other social scientists, for example of social demographers?

### **The Politics of Settlement**

One must realise that the reclamation of the polder, and the cultural development of the Noordoostpolder which followed, was rigorously controlled from above. Both as a place, and as a society, the Noordoostpolder is ultimately a construct. The physical dike building and reclamation was in the hands of the Zuiderzee Works Authority. The Wieringermeer Polder Board, already a part of this Authority, was assigned responsibility for social-economic development (Van Dissel 1991). This Board had been the most important organising force behind the reclamation of the Wieringermeer Polder in North Holland in 1935. They were given the new task of developing the cultural and social organisation for the Noordoostpolder. The settlement or population policy was focused on encouraging the formation of a group identity in the new polder, and guiding this in the proper course. To this end, social scientists were brought in at all phases of the planning. This involved social

demographers such as Sjoerd Groenman, who during the war years worked for the Directors of the Wieringermeer, and wrote widely on social development and on settlement and cultural policy for the Noordoostpolder (Groenman 1953; Van Dissel 1991: 158).



**Figure 4.1** Closing the dykes during the draining of the Eastern Flevoland polder, 1956

On the initiative of H.N. ter Veen, who had received his doctorate in 1925 with a dissertation on the Haarlemmermeer polder as a settlement area, the Foundation for Population Research in the Reclaimed Zuiderzee Polders was founded in 1936. It was the task of this foundation to use information gathered from diverse disciplines to provide a scientific foundation for the projected settlement policies. It is interesting to note that in their remit dialectology and folklore were specifically mentioned as sub-fields from which it would be useful to assemble information.<sup>2</sup> The secretary of the Dialects and Ethnology Committees of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts

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<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the Foundation was ‘to collect and arrange for the collection of, and to study and arrange for the study of data involving the population of the settlement areas in the reclaimed Zuiderzee, in the fields of anthropology, psychology, genetics, dialectology, phonetics, domestic science, folklore, social demographics, jurisprudence, social hygiene and other sciences, as much as possible in mutual interrelationship.’ Cited in: Heinemeijer 1986: 12.

and Sciences, P.J. Meertens, had a seat on the board of the foundation, and directed the separate department on dialectology and folklore.<sup>3</sup>

In practice, the research in this department focused primarily on dialectology. In the 1930s it concentrated on the dialect in the Wieringermeer, and from the 1950s on the colloquial speech of the Noordoostpolder.<sup>4</sup> Folklore research was limited to the two former Zuiderzee islands. The most important result was a monograph on Urk which appeared in 1942 (Meertens and Kaiser 1942). Already in the first sentence of this book Urk is described 'in terms of its folklore, one of the showpieces of the Netherlands'. In the introduction Meertens writes that he wished to record 'what typified its people, both in language and in usages and customs' before the construction of the polder would threaten them with 'decline and erasure as rapid as it is certain'. He adopted the approach of folkloristics in that day, which since the last decades of the nineteenth century was devoting attention to fishing and farming communities such as Urk which were threatened by progress and the process of modernisation. By being swallowed up in the new polder, the island was indeed going to encounter modernity in a very direct manner. The ethnologists therefore saw it as their most important task to record its 'traditional' folk culture for posterity. The book described 'dying folklore', before it would definitively become history (Van der Ven 1932; Van der Ven 1930). The then scientific habitus of the ethnologist was primarily to look back. We shall see in the next sections whether they also saw a role reserved for social engineering.

The practical application and implementation of the settlement policy initially took place through institutions such as the Noordoostpolder Cultural Committee, under the aegis of the national government; after residents began to move into the villages, its tasks were taken over by town associations. In general, these town

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3 The notes of the Department of Linguistics, Phonetics and Ethnology are preserved in the archive of P.J. Meertens, residing in the Meertens Institute, Foundation for Population Research for the Reclaimed Zuiderzee Polders, inv. nr. 250, binders 1 through 12. The notes of the Department are in binder 4.

4 For the most important results, see the dissertation by Jo Daan, *Wieringer land en leven in de taal* (Alphen aan den Rijn 1950) and the monograph by M.Ch. van de Ven, *Taal in Noordoostpolder. Een sociolinguïstisch onderzoek* (Amsterdam 1969), both published by the Foundation for Population Research for the Reclaimed Zuiderzee Polders. In the latter collection there was originally supposed to be space reserved for the folk culture and the folklore in the boundary areas; see a letter by P.J. Meertens, March 13, 1957, 'Aan de medewerkers aan de monografie over het taalsociologisch onderzoek in de Noordoostpolder'. This letter is found in Meertens's archive in the Meertens Institute, inv. nr. 250, binder 2. The subjects listed in this letter are: feasts and customs, traditional costume, meals. By and large, ethnology fell short of fulfilling its promise. Efforts were still being made in 1965, through the appointment of a separate subcommittee for ethnological research, to have this aspect to emerge rather more clearly. See the 'Notulen van de vergadering van de sectie Taalkunde, Fonetiek en Volkskunde van de Stichting voor het Bevolkingsonderzoek in de drooggelegde Zuiderzeepolders op woensdag 10 maart 1965', in Meertens's archive in the Meertens Institute, inv. nr. 250, binder 5. The initiative had little result. In research the main attention continued to be given to dialects. Meertens left the service in 1968.

associations were set up as independent initiatives by the residents themselves, although there were individuals, named by the government, who could effectively encourage the process of community building (Flokstra 2000).

### Regional Associations

As of 1941 the practical initiative for cultural development lay with the local cultural committees, guided by regional and national authorities. With that year, the land had to literally be dried out, and prepared for exploitation. This was done by labourers hired in especially for the task, who were housed in workers' camps. A good deal was done for these camps by way of cultural education, because they were to exist for a good many years (the last of the camps was only closed in 1960). Among the many things the cultural committees in the camps were responsible for were the St. Nicholas festivities, the most popular children's celebration, observed on December 5.

In the period after 1950, when all the facilities in the villages were in place, the folklore of the 'old land' was kept alive primarily by local cultural associations set up by the migrants themselves. Sociologists saw the growth of these associations as an expectable response in the first phase of settlement, namely an attempt to maintain oneself in an environment where there were not yet any social relationships that were larger than the family (Groenman 1953: 29-30). The Frisian Association, established in 1950, organised both parties and theatre performances, which of course were in their own Frisian language (Flokstra 2000: 218-219). This Frisian initiative was quickly copied by migrants from the province of Groningen. In 1955 they founded the 'Oet en Thoes' association, Groningen dialect for *uit en thuis* (out and at home). As Tjeerd Flokstra demonstrated in his book *Samenleven in het nieuwe land*, the association wanted to emphasise that 'in totally different surroundings solidarity with the language of our birthplace remains strong' – which however, as was stressed at the founding meeting, did not mean that they wished to 'encourage apartheid in the polder' (Flokstra 2000: 222).

What were termed 'regional sports' offered a mixture of tradition and recreation. These were sports which represented an 'old tradition' for the participants, which was connected with the cultural identity of the region from which they had come. The best known of these were *ringrijden* (tilting at the ring) and *kaatsen* (fives – a variant of the game of squash), the former typically from Zeeland, and the latter typically Frisian. Tilting at the ring is a test of skill in which a rider, seated bareback on a galloping horse, seeks to run his lance through a ring hanging from a rope. Both *kaatsen* and *ringrijden* had their own place in the Noordoostpolder. In the summer of 1950 several farmers who had originally come from Walcheren organised 'ring-riding on horseback' at Marknesse. The news and information weekly *De Noordoostpolder* reported that several farmers from Zeeland 'couldn't simply abandon their old customs just like that'. A comment added to the announcement of the event is interesting: 'The idea that led to the organising of these festivities is certainly a good one. The new land will have to develop its own traditions, and when it can draw

from a source as rich as this, it is certainly worth the effort.’ A year later the initiative took on a larger form, and the hope was expressed ‘that this custom may become a tradition, in the new land as well’. Not long thereafter a contest was organised in Emmeloord and, finally, in 1956, there was even a polder-wide championship in *ringrijden* organised (Wolffram 1995: 84).

What *ringrijden* was for the Zeelanders, *kaatsen* was for the Frisians. In July, 1952, *De Noordoostpolder* reported that two ‘polder men’ from Marknesse and Emmeloord, who had originally come from Friesland, had won first prize during a *kaatsen* contest in the province of Friesland, and at the same time, that the Noordoostpolder’s own *kaatsen* association, It Suderleech, had been organised. It appears that rather than using the name Noordoostpolder, the Frisians preferred It Suderleech (Frisian for South Polder), to strategically express the thought that the Noordoostpolder really formed the new, southern part of the province of Friesland (Flokstra 2000: 217). This naming process makes it clear that regional political aspirations could play a role in the process of shaping identity. It also points to the existence of certain tensions, while the new polder was supposed to be one and united. The authorities did not find holding fast to an old, separate cultural identity to be desirable. The existence of organisations in which cultural roots to the provinces of origin were cultivated was therefore regarded as unwelcome. When the Frisians wanted to begin their own cultural association, *De Noordoostpolder* reacted with a slap: ‘No, Frisians, join hands with us and build a fresh, new polder community!’ According to the editor, the Frisians must show that they were prepared to ‘build a [collective] new future for this, our new land’, and not separate themselves.

### The Case of the Feast of St. Martin

The feast of St Martin, observed on November 11, 2004, provides a clear example of the way in which the cultivation of an individual’s own roots was combined with the process of shaping identity. In practice, the feast generated tensions that had an unfavourable effect on the desired cultural solidarity.

Today St. Martin’s Eve is a popular children’s activity throughout the whole province of Flevoland, on which children go from door to door with lighted lanterns, singing one or more St. Martin songs in exchange for candy. The first mention of the introduction of St. Martin’s Eve into the Noordoostpolder is found in the first volume of *De Noordoostpolder*, on November 16, 1945:

Emmeloord. On the evening of 11 Nov. the attention of many residents was attracted by hearing children singing along the street. Upon looking out they saw a number of children, each with a lantern, going along the houses singing about St. Martin, in hope of being rewarded for their song with a cookie or other refreshment. This is an old folk custom which is fashionable particularly in North Holland and Groningen, and which has been introduced here by former residents of those provinces. The children enjoyed considerable interest on this first Polder St. Martin’s Eve.

Two years later the same *De Noordoostpolder* reported that the feast was still unknown to many: ‘Many residents who do not know this custom were startled from their rest by the doorbell, and did not understand what was going on and what they were expected to do.’ The new residents very quickly heard from the children themselves, who were going door to door, what this was all about.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, a flyer was put together for those who were not familiar with the custom. For the strategic purpose of encouraging a sense of solidarity, the need to share information was paramount. After all, the new polder was comprised of a varied collection of people who had to learn to live with one another. Knowledge of one another’s culture and folklore was therefore necessary.

It was not only this brochure that contributed to this; it quickly appeared that *De Noordoostpolder* itself would play an important role in providing information. The editors had actually already expressed the intention that lay behind this. In its first issue, on Friday, June 22, 1945, the weekly announced that it sought to be ‘an element that brings together the people of the polder’, ‘translating that which is on our minds and that which binds us together’. To that end they tried to offer as complete a listing of all the activities that were being developed in the various communities as possible. To receive the paper, one had to take out a subscription. Since almost everyone was a subscriber, the paper grew into an important source for information.<sup>6</sup> It was published by a printer/publisher in the nearby Frisian town of Balk, who also published the *Balkster Courant*. It was one of the few private initiatives in a field where everything was rigidly structured and organised from above by the polder authorities (Hoekstra 1998 and Hoekstra 2000). The polder board gave permission for the publication, and went a step further by henceforth placing its own official notices in the paper.

In special columns the paper also assumed an advisory and educational role, in which folklore in the polder was regularly a topic. The subject was very frequently touched upon in the column ‘De Poldervrouw’ (The polder woman), which was intended to inform the housewives in the polder about specific topics. In 1949, a week before St. Martin’s Eve, ‘De Poldervrouw’ provided information about the feast for ‘those who do not know about it from their own experience’, and might be asking themselves whether ‘it is a good thing to send children out to beg’. This feast was not the only one on which guidance and information was given; other popular celebrations passed in review. Regarding the feast of St. Nicholas, the columnist suggested that it was best observed ‘in the bosom of the family’, particularly from the point where children no longer believed it was St. Nicholas who brought them

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5 S.J. van der Molen calls this the most important explanation for the rise of the St. Martin rounds in the Noordoostpolder. ‘Internal migration’ often makes children ‘small propagandists in places where the youth did not yet know the custom’ (Van der Molen 1961: 16). Another example is Deventer, where the custom made its entry through migrants from Groningen; see ‘St. Maarten oud en koud vraagt niet een turfke. Migranten herinnerden stad aan een oud gebruik’, in: *Deventer Dagblad*, November 10, 1961. The newspaper article is found in the cutting file of the Meertens Institute, Amsterdam.

6 Oral communication from regional historian Kees Bolle, January 24, 2006.

their gifts, and began to make gifts to give to others. Seen from this perspective, the advice of 'De Poldervrouw' can be characterised as an attempt to instil such values as politeness and self-sacrifice, with as its most important motive that 'the experience of being together as a family should remain in our children's memory as a warm and beautiful time'. The advice that St. Nicholas should not be used to scare children into good behaviour also fit into this sphere.

An important purpose of this educational folklore was to inculcate bourgeois values such as deference and a sense of family responsibility. In that sense, introducing folklore into the process needs to be understood as both a part of a civilising offensive and as an encouragement to unity and civic responsibility. But there was still another significance that comes to the fore in *De Noordoostpolder*: an element from which identity is derived. For example the feast of St. Martin would become widely accepted in the Noordoostpolder because of the many tints it represented. This emerges emphatically in the following quote from *De Noordoostpolder*, from Friday, November 18, 1949:

For those who come here as strangers, it is most wonderful to see how an old tradition is still observed in this new place. It is typical that every corner of our land has different variations on the same St. Martin customs. Thus in the singing of the children one can hear that our new land has a very mixed population.

The mixture of the various dialects in which the songs were sung can be seen as a symbolic representation of the identity of the new polder province: unity in diversity.

## **Public Folklore**

There was a growing realisation among governmental institutions that folklore could make an important contribution to the construction of the society in the Noordoostpolder. Soon this became a part of the cultural politics of the authorities. In the town of Marknesse, a study committee was set up to guide 'the development of cultural life' along the proper lines. Under the telling headline 'Each town must develop its own folklore', in late 1951 *De Noordoostpolder* reported on this. The Committee had been inspired by the St. Martin's Eve rounds and the initiative in Marknesse to introduce Zeeuwse *ringrijden* to the polder. With these in mind, the Committee reported the following:

The committee regards initiatives to develop folkloristic manifestations as very much to be applauded. These initiatives deserve the support of the whole population because they can enrich our village life. Already some attempts have been made in this direction, namely *ringrijden* on horseback, a custom which comes from Walcheren. The St. Martin's Eve rounds have thus far only appeared tentatively, but deserve encouragement. Playing musical chairs on horseback, which has already been done at some village festivals, appears to be popular, and also deserves to be supported. The Committee regards the imposition of such customs from above to be useless. They must arise from the population

spontaneously, but if they prove popular then deserve support. Every region, yes, indeed perhaps every town in the Noordoostpolder will have to develop its own folklore. Because of the very mixed population, simply importing things from the old land will lead to nothing.



**Figure 4.2** ‘Ringrijden’ the Noordoostpolder, 1950

*Photo Collection Roel Winter.*

In this way, as a means to foster cohesion, folklore was drawn into the terrain of cultural development. But unavoidably one ran into the following contradiction: folklore must also be spontaneous, and not imposed from above. All those involved felt that this question of spontaneity was of great importance. Artificiality was wrong. *De Noordoostpolder* also had its say on this, as emerges unambiguously in this short notice on the St. Martin celebrations:

Less successful however was the well-intentioned attempt by the school personnel to give some direction to this and make a sort of pageant of it, thus guiding the belling around at homes in certain channels. Their attempt to involve all of the children is also of course praiseworthy; still, those who did not know the songs well enough got little out of it. What we heard was a potpourri of St. Martin’s songs from the provinces Limburg, Groningen and North Holland. In this manner the individual character of these songs is lost, which is to be regretted, and is also not the intention. A spontaneously celebrated St. Martin’s Eve therefore seems to us to correspond better to its folkloristic character.

The Amsterdam educator and amateur ethnologist J. Kruizinga, who after the war wrote a considerable amount in newspapers and weekly magazines about

St. Martin's Eve customs and was also the author of a well-known handbook on folklore, 'frowned on playgrounds or youth centres, educators or parents organising St. Martin's processions.' On the other hand, he suggested that some guidance was not necessarily bad, particularly when cultural organisations would intervene to see that St. Martin's Eve activities should not end up in 'drinking parties, begging processions and rowdiness' (Kruizinga 1953: 10). It was precisely in the case of children's celebrations such as St. Martin and St. Nicholas that Kruizinga saw the potential for 'measured canalisations' (Kruizinga 1953: 10). Kruizinga found himself on the knife edge between the pragmatic practice of folklore and education, and was therefore much less averse to 'canalisations' than professional ethnologists in the Dutch Folklore Committee, as we will see below.

Greater attention to cultural development work in the Noordoostpolder fit within a national trend in the 1950s, in which cultural development efforts were in vogue throughout the Netherlands (Pots 2000: 265-272). Parallel to what was happening in the mid-1950s in other provinces, the Cultural Council for the Noordoostpolder was established in 1955. These councils were intended to stimulate cultural activities among the population. They initially focused on what was termed 'regional' culture. In practice, this regional culture was chiefly reduced to 'folk culture'. For instance, the councils developed various initiatives to investigate the St. Martin's day observances and breathe new life into them.<sup>7</sup> This cultural development work was important in all the provinces, but in particular in the Noordoostpolder, where the regional culture had to be built from the ground up.

That the cultural development of the polder was also an important point for the above mentioned Foundation for Population Research was proven by a conference organised in 1953 on the cultural aspects of the land reclamation and settlement policies. The importance of the vernacular language (dialect) and folklore for the organisers was evident. The 'existing folk culture, which people brought with them to the polders, was according to them the foundation from which a new culture can blossom' (*Verslag* 1953) The ethnologists in the Linguistics, Phonetics and Ethnology Department discussed well in advance the contribution that ethnology could make at this symposium.<sup>8</sup> This department was comprised of several of the most prominent Dutch ethnologists of the day: P.J. Meertens, W. Roukens (director of the Netherlands Open Air Museum and also holder of an endowed chair in ethnology at the Catholic University in Nijmegen) and S.J. Bouma (at that time director of the

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7 An example of the interest in ethnology from provincial Cultural Councils is found in the article 'Sint Maarten', in: *Maandblad Noordholland, Uitgave van de Culturele Raad Noordholland* 3 (1960). See also the initiative in 1981 by the Cultural Council of Overijssel for research into St. Martin customs in the province of Overijssel. See 'Sint Maarten', in: *Meppeler Courant*, November 11, 1981. Both cuttings are in the cutting archive of the Meertens Institute.

8 Department members Winand Roukens, S.J. Bouma and P.J. Meertens themselves took the lead in this. See the 'Verslag Vergadering Sectie voor Taalkunde, Phonetiek en Volkskunde op 26 Juni 1952 te Amsterdam', in Meertens's archive at the Meertens Institute, inv. nr. 250, binder 4.

Zuiderzee Museum). Roukens proposed ‘to understand cultural aspects as broadly as possible’, while it was Bouma’s opinion that both the old and new folklore must be part of the discussions, specifically referring to the observation of St. Martin’s Eve.<sup>9</sup> At the conference itself however folklore was barely discussed. Only Meertens gave a lecture on dialectology.

The terminology used at the conference indicates it was chiefly focused on the politics of culture and settlement. The lectures were presented as ‘preferential recommendations’ and it was the intention that ‘guidelines for future policy might come out’ of it.<sup>10</sup> In his presentation Meertens reveals he was primarily interested in the process of dialect change in a new environment. He noted that it was inevitable that in the new land dialects would evolve in the direction of a standard Dutch, in the course of which he also referred to a number of social factors, such as the fact that migrants in a new pioneer society would want to make a totally new start ‘that does not tolerate continuing in the old ways’ (Meertens 1952–1953: 364). The lecture demonstrates that ethnologists and dialectologists were seriously interested in the process of adaptation and change in the new polder land. But Meertens offered no opinion on the question most relevant to policy, whether the government should follow a particular political course on language, for instance focusing on discouraging dialects or, on the contrary, on preserving them. He deemed this aspect touching on the politics of language, ‘a somewhat dangerous field’, which he wished to avoid as a dialectologist and ethnologist. He did however note that when it comes to discouraging or breaking the use of dialect, caution was advised, because for the speaker the dialect has a great emotional value (Meertens 1952–1953: 376–377).

Meertens did have a certain interest in policy and cultural-political questions that were connected to his discipline. As secretary of the Consultation for Dutch National Folk Life, an advisory group associated with the Ministry of Culture in which issues of this sort were discussed, he exchanged experiences and ideas with, for instance, the tourist sector (Van der Zeijden 2000: 24–26). But in his contribution he ignored policy questions of all sorts, although according to the sociologist who wrote the introduction to the collection, H.D. de Vries Reilingh, they should be the guideline for the research that was being addressed by the Foundation for Population Research. Meertens also did not take up the more generally debated question, namely the manner in which the new polders would affect the old folklore. De Vries Reilingh said the following about this: ‘With a radical change, one can conceive either that in response people stubbornly cling to old traditions, or will let go of them in the face of more homogenising outside influences.’<sup>11</sup> In his introduction De Vries Reilingh spoke of the objective of the applied sciences, ‘namely, building bridges

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9 ‘Vergadering van de Sectie voor Taalkunde, Phonetiek en Volkskunde op Vrijdag 20 Februari 1953’, in Meertens’s archive at the Meertens Institute, inv. nr. 250, binder 4.

10 From the folder for the ‘Congres over de culturele aspecten van de inpoldering der Zuiderzee’, on Saturday, September 26, in the Krasnapolsky Hotel in Amsterdam.

11 H.D. de Vries Reilingh, ‘Inleiding’, in: *Elburg afgesloten van open water*, xv.

between science and policy'.<sup>12</sup> According to De Vries Reilingh it was the task of the government to 'balance on the knife edge', to be energetic but also restrained, so that it did not endanger the 'fundamental freedom' of the citizens. But: 'thought must be given to the future, and plans will have to be made'.<sup>13</sup> Meertens preferred to maintain academic distance, and not move too much in the direction of what is now being termed 'public folklore'. He wanted to investigate, but not guide. In this, he increasingly distanced himself from the social demographers, who were primarily oriented to underpinning political and policy choices. Nevertheless, some of his listeners detected a certain disappointment on Meertens's part over the threatened loss of separate dialects (*Verslag* 1953: 54). This indicates that for Meertens, the idea of a 'dying folklore' still haunted him.

### **Managing Religious Diversity**

In the Netherlands of the 1950s, 'public folklore' was primarily a complex combination of initiatives from the people themselves, the government's cultural politics and, although the ethnologists were restrained about it, a dash of applied ethnology. Folklorists such as Kruizinga, mentioned above, fulfilled an educational role in articles in daily newspapers and weekly magazines in which they comprehensively discussed the background of folkloristic feasts. Such articles also appeared in *De Noordoostpolder*. In addition to St. Nicholas (December 6) and St. Martin (November 11), national holidays such as the Queen's Birthday celebration (April 30) and the regional Polder Day, on September 8, marking the draining of the last water from the polder, were also used to generate social cohesion. Creating a basis of support among the heterogeneous population was not always easy, given that the local festival committees were regularly subject to considerable criticism from the residents. Emmeloord's observance of the Queen's Birthday in 1947, for instance, was not patriotic enough for some, because only one verse of the national anthem was sung (Flokstra 2000: 234-235). Folklore thus did not always function as a binding factor, and could also be a cause of interdenominational discord.

The planners of the Noordoostpolder had deliberately opted for a population that was as diverse as possible: the residents of the polder were to be a cross section of the population of the whole of the Netherlands, not only geographically but also in terms of religion (Van Dissel 1991: 149-150). Because there was the risk that religion could be divisive for the new community, special plans were developed in regard to it. The idea was even proposed to aim for a total religious segregation, in which each village would consist of only one confessional group. In a certain sense that would have been a reflection of the situation in the Netherlands as a whole, where in the south the Catholics were entirely dominant. Ultimately the choice was made for an equal division of the denominations over the Noordoostpolder. As it happens, most of the migrants were from the adjoining Protestant provinces, and from Protestant

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12 De Vries Reilingh, 'Inleiding', xiii.

13 De Vries Reilingh, 'Inleiding', xii.

Zeeland. This created a less preferred overrepresentation of Protestants. This in turn became an important political issue, with the Catholic People's Party in Parliament keeping a close eye on whether Catholics were not being given too small a share of the pie (Van Woensel 1996: 42–47; Van Dissel 1991: 150, 171–172). The Catholic archdiocese however made considerable efforts to motivate as many Catholics as possible to move to the Noordoostpolder.

It was precisely in the 1950s that religious discord would again increase in the Netherlands. The division of Dutch society into 'pillars' on the basis of religion or ideology (in Dutch, *verzuiiling*) was still more or less intact (Luykx 2000: 186–210). In 1953 the celebration of the reestablishment of dioceses in the Netherlands in 1853 was seized upon to anchor the Catholic segment of the population still more strongly in Dutch society. In this period, folklore was being used as a weapon in the process of Catholic identity politics too. At the initiative of the Catholic youth movement Jong Holland – which not by chance had chosen St. Martin as its patron saint! – St. Martin parades were organised in Utrecht, into which the folklore associated with the St. Martin's Eve practices was consciously integrated (Helsloot 2001). In the Noordoostpolder this and other initiatives would lead to increased tension, which came to the surface during the St. Martin's observances on November 11, 1951. That year, by chance, St. Martin's Day fell on a Sunday. A neutral sounding notice in *De Noordoostpolder* observed that in such a case, it was customary to 'hold the St. Martin's Eve on the preceding Saturday'. That was chiefly a Protestant wish: for Protestants, Sunday rest was an unquestioned obligation.<sup>14</sup> The Catholic authorities saw things differently. The notice drew an angry response from Pastor Koopmans, the priest at one of the local Catholic parishes, who in a letter to the editor reminded everyone that St. Martin was a Catholic saint, and that the feast of St. Martin was thus a *Catholic* feast, and thus a feast that would best come into its own on a Sunday. Pastor Koopmans (1900–1969) was an untiring propagandist for the interests of the Catholic population of the Noordoostpolder. Among other things, he went into action for recruiting Catholic farm labourers for the polder, because they would be most suitable for working for the Catholic farmers.<sup>15</sup>

It is evident from a strong reaction to Koopmans's letter to the editor a week later that the subject was no less sensitive among Protestants. Mrs. W. Eissens-Bakker, a teacher, wrote that in connection with St. Martin's Eve she had organised a contest at school, in which the most beautiful St. Martins lanterns were awarded prizes. In the course of this, she had also told something of 'the ancient tale of St. Martin'. For the children, and for herself, the celebration had a more general

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14 The questions were tabled by parliamentarian Bruins Slot. From the answer by Minister Struycken it appears, though, that various provinces had exemptions, not only for customs such as *palmpaas* processions and carnival celebrations, but also for the feast of St. Martin: J.H. Kruizinga, 'Sint Maarten is nog springlevend. 11 november lichtjes avond', in: *Het Parool*, Saturday, November 9, 1957.

15 Beginning in 1945 Koopmans was the pastor for the Noordoostpolder, first in Emmeloord and between 1949 and 1958 in town of Krabbenburg. Regarding him see De Bruin 1995: 15–26 and 78.

significance. In the words of Mrs. Eissens, ‘Don’t think that the children who were singing on that evening were thinking for even one moment about an old bishop. They were celebrating the feast for its own sake, for the glow and the good cheer, which is precisely all the more important in these sombre autumn days. They knew the origin of this traditional observance, but it does not go beyond that.’ Further, she subtly twisted the knife by noting that she had reason to believe that the custom of St. Martin’s Eve had been introduced to the Noordoostpolder by Protestants from Groningen and North Holland. ‘I don’t know who introduced St. Martin’s Eve in the other towns, I only know what happened here. I also know that it was precisely most of the Roman Catholic children from the South of our country who were unfamiliar with the custom of “lights”.’ In short: Pastor Koopmans shouldn’t complain and shouldn’t try to claim the feast to his own denomination.

In the same year in which the question of St. Martin played itself out, there was also a conflict in Emmeloord over the Corpus Christi procession in May, which was being held in the Noordoostpolder for the first time. Protestants asked indignantly if there had been permission given for such a public Catholic display. At the time religious processions in public space were forbidden by law, and often were the causes for interconfessional conflict. Relations between Catholics and Protestants in the Noordoostpolder were especially sensitive because of the rapid growth of the population there, with the eyes of the nation on it to see if the religious groups would indeed eventually find a balance.

The editors of *De Noordoostpolder* did their best to allay the conflict around the St. Martin’s observance. In a commentary from 1951 the editor suggested that the origins of St. Martin’s Eve may well have been Catholic, but that

His Reverence should not take offence that for those who think differently, **this** meaning [namely, that it is the feast of a Catholic saint] has moved to the background and that for them the celebration of the feast of St. Martin is a folkloristic, and not a religious event. His Reverence should rejoice with us that in Emmeloord, and perhaps elsewhere in the Noordoostpolder, an old tradition is being maintained by children from **all** segments of the population, and from **all** denominations, and that this St. Martin’s feast is being celebrated in a way that we all learned at a tender age.

As it happens, the publishers of *De Noordoostpolder* were themselves Protestant. However, they saw folklore as separate from religious differences. The editors were of the view that St. Martin’s Eve had become an innocent folkloristic custom, practised without reference to its religious roots. This being the case, it could function as a feast for all residents of the polder. This view was further supported by projecting the origins of the St. Martin festivities back into Germanic antiquity, to a period in which there had been no Christianity, let alone the confessional polemics that eventually developed. Not only this feast was provided with prehistoric, Germanic roots, but Easter and other traditional customs were brought in *De Noordoostpolder* into relation with Germanic rituals, with the egg folklore as the most striking example.

The question which remains to be answered is the background of this way of explaining things. German ethnologists call it *Rücklauf*, the process by which old

theories about the Germanic origins of popular cultural usages which have long since been disregarded by professional ethnologists as incorrect, are nevertheless still embraced – sometimes even more fervently – by the media and amateur ethnologists (Moser 1962; Moser 1964). The popularity of the ‘Germanic’ explanation must be placed in the much broader perspective of what is termed ‘brokering modernity’ (Köstlin 1999; Roodenburg 2000: 101–103) – the supposition that in folklore changes are in a certain sense neutralised and made acceptable by exposing a quasi-deeper traditional substratum, which can go back to prehistoric times. In this way, as we saw, folklore offered a way of overcoming religious differences, a method of ‘managing religious diversity’, which was no unnecessary luxury in a religiously divided society like the Netherlands.

### **‘A Bit of National Pride’**

The high point of the application of folklore in the Noordoostpolder, and also of the various regional associations, lay in the 1950s, extending into the 1960s. After that it slowly receded. By the late 1950s the Frisian association was already facing a crisis. Only the Drentse association, ‘t Nije Landschap (the New Landscape), still exists today. According to Flokstra, this can be attributed to the fact that this association increasingly developed into a theatre society with a general character, which from as early as the 1970s already counted members who did not have a Drentse background (Flokstra 2000: 224). The second generation of migrants had less need for regional associations, and became members of general theatre societies and sports clubs. They did not feel the connection with the old land that the first generation had. Born in the Noordoostpolder, a ‘land of origin’ had less meaning for them.

Beginning in the 1960s, St. Martin also got his feet on the ground in the new parts of Flevoland. According to the newspaper *De Flevolander*, we can thank ‘those residents of Flevoland who came from the Noordoostpolder, that the feast of St. Martin is now also celebrated in Flevoland... so that a tradition has already come into being, which will never disappear.’ On the other hand, the newspaper also spoke of the need to observe the feast, implicitly suggesting there is a need to cultivate such traditions.<sup>16</sup> In the 1970s the St. Martin tradition changed, and was used primarily to collect money for good causes. In Lelystad, for instance, it was the ‘Action Committee Flevoland for Active Development Cooperation’ that promoted the idea that ‘in place of the usual massive quantities of candy, children should collect a (symbolic) sum of money in the form of five and ten-cent coins’, to be turned in for the Third World. The Committee emphasised that ‘in this case, it is not the income from the action that is important, but so much more the idea that children learn to be

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Jeugd van Flevoland viert vanaf eerste jaar het Sint Maartenfeest. Oude volksgebruiken in nieuw gewonnen gebied’, in: *De Flevolander*, November 10, 1964. Cutting archive, Meertens Institute, Amsterdam.

aware that a “a guest at the table” is better than collecting candy for themselves’.<sup>17</sup> The call from the Action Committee fell on responsive ears in many schools. This ‘idealistic’ content for the St. Martin feast fit wonderfully with the idealistic and progressive ‘60s and ‘70s, in which the Netherlands professed to be a model of social consciousness. The connection with a ‘land of origin’ in the meantime was being felt less as Flevoland developed its own identity.

The creation of a Flevoland identity came clearly to the fore when in 1987 a new edition was published of a famous survey under the editorship of P.J. Meertens in which the ‘character’ of the population of the different Dutch provinces was discussed in detail. The original survey of 1938 of course could not yet have discussed Flevoland. Only a chapter on the Zuiderzee fishermen was then included (Van Wijhe-Smeding 1938). In the new edition of this weighty tome the newly reclaimed province Flevoland had however to be given its place. The contribution was written by Pieter Terpstra, the same person who in 1945, as a young journalist, had taken the initiative in starting the news and advertising paper *De Noordoostpolder*. Terpstra wrote that he found it difficult to say anything about the peculiar character of the residents of Flevoland, because ‘with regard to this region, one can hardly speak of “history” yet, let alone be able to determine anything about the character of its people’ (Terpstra 1987: 14). Yet he did make an attempt, in which he characterised Flevoland as a reflection of the Dutch population. After all, Flevoland had come from all over the Netherlands, and thus Flevoland should be just as mixed as the Netherlands itself. ‘One finds a bit of the Dutch national character there, but the polder did not take on a character of its own’ (Terpstra 1987: 236). Or did it? According to Terpstra, what all Flevoland has in common ‘is the daring to break with their old, familiar surroundings, to seek new opportunities in the wide open spaces’ (Terpstra 1987: 237).

In the experience of the Flevoland, and in the experience of other Dutchmen and women, Flevoland was the land of the pioneers (Kuiper 1982), who had built something new from the ground up – like the ‘reconstruction’ of the Netherlands in its battle with the sea. Here something great had happened, which drew even international attention; Flevoland represented ‘a bit of national pride’ (Terpstra 1987: 236). This is also the feeling expressed in the creation of the Nieuw Land Heritage Centre in Lelystad, opened in 2005, and which was also central in the visit by Queen Beatrix, on September 27, 2005, marking twenty-five years of her reign. Beatrix expressed then that superlatives were inadequate to describe how much admiration she had for the work that has been accomplished in the newest province of the Netherlands, which, in the early 1950s, when she visited it as a princess, was still more or less an island in the IJsselmeer with a couple of wooden sheds.<sup>18</sup>

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17 ‘Gast aan tafel. Stuivers in plaats van snoep’, newspaper cutting from 1972 in the cutting archive of the Meertens Institute.

18 [www.nos.nl/nosjournaal/25jaarbeatrix/provinciebezoeken/flevoland](http://www.nos.nl/nosjournaal/25jaarbeatrix/provinciebezoeken/flevoland).

### The Lesson of the Noordoostpolder

In this chapter I have sought to show how ‘public folklore’ functioned in the development of a new sense of solidarity in the reclaimed Noordoostpolder in the first decades after the Second World War. The Noordoostpolder was once conceived as a test plot for what the new Netherlands could become. From this chapter it emerges that the Noordoostpolder was also a test plot for what was later to be termed public folklore, a cultural politics in which the government and applied ethnologists contributed to a process of shaping a community, in this case around the feast of St. Martin. Various actors played a role in this: the migrants themselves, who initially came together in their own cultural associations in which the folklore of their land of origin could be cultivated; the newspapers and schools, which sought to guide the process in the proper paths by providing information, making suggestions, or deliberate steering. Last but not least, there were the governmental authorities (local and national), churches and other social institutions, which armed with data from the scientists drew up their own plans, in which the government explored the boundaries between spontaneity and direction from above. It also emerged from this chapter that ethnologists were involved in shaping the policy, but that their attitude was generally hesitant and restrained. Even the interesting question, which was in fact asked by the social demographers, of what the influence of the modernisation process would be on ‘traditional’ folklore, was left out of consideration. The folklorists of Meertens’s generation restricted themselves chiefly to documentation, and, at that, to documentation of that ‘traditional’ folklore that was threatened with disappearing, in such places as the former Zuiderzee island of Urk and the old Zuiderzee town of Elburg.

The authorities responsible for developing the society in the Noordoostpolder chose a more pragmatic approach in which they chiefly sought to take advantage of initiatives from the new residents themselves. For instance, the popularity of *ringrijden* and the St. Martin’s Eve rounds were seized upon and given a place in the cultural development process as a means for strengthening social cohesion. They did not go much beyond endorsing what arose from the population. The government too was careful. The report of the committee in Marknesse observed that ‘the imposition of such customs from above’ was senseless and that these customs ‘must arise from the population spontaneously.’ As we have seen in the newspaper reports from *De Noordoostpolder*, great importance was attached to a ‘spontaneously’ celebrated ‘authentic’ feast of St. Martin. Folklore was supposed to be ‘authentic’, otherwise it wasn’t ‘real’ folklore.

It is also striking that the initiative for the most part lay with private individuals. It was, after all, the migrants themselves who set up their own cultural associations. The local and regional authorities only responded to the developments, but did try to guide them in the proper channels as much as possible. The central concern of the government was to cultivate social coherence and a collective polder identity. When they saw that folklore could provide a means of accomplishing this, they gratefully seized upon it.

Still more striking than the role of the government however is that of the local newspaper, the privately owned news and advertising paper *De Noordoostpolder*. The role of the newspaper went far beyond the provision of information. The newspaper acted as an interpreter of the folklore; in the process they reached back to old (and out of date) scientific theories about the Germanic origins of the folklore. Further, in a certain sense the newspaper acted as the tutor for the new society, and offered guidelines on how the celebrations should take place.

Drawing connections through to the present, we can ask if much has changed in the policies of the Dutch government with respect to 'public folklore' in the intervening years. With regard to the question of spontaneity, with in the background the large question of 'authenticity', ethnologists in the Netherlands are still rather careful and restrained, and most experts in the field of folk culture and ethnology do not place much faith in control from the top down. In a recent report on *Immaterieel cultureel erfgoed in Nederland* (Immaterial Cultural Heritage in the Netherlands), compiled at the request of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, this is even spoken of as 'a peculiarly Dutch approach' (Muskens 2005: 23, 32). What of course has changed since Meertens's generation is that the dynamic of popular culture has become much more the starting point for ethnological research. It is no longer 'traditional' or 'disappearing' culture that is central, but the dynamics of cultural identity, change and integration (Bennis et al. 2002).

In an ethnically fragmented society, social cohesion is once again become a central policy objective. This is particularly true for the management of religious and ethnic diversity. If in the Noordoostpolder the issue was the differences between Protestants and Catholics, today it is a question of managing a society comprised of diverse religious and ethnic groups, all of which have, or seek, a different degree of integration. There is a widespread feeling that the social problem of youth unemployment and criminality is caused by insufficient socio-cultural coherence and integration. Possibly the newest province in the Netherlands can once again take the lead in finding a solution. In any case, that is the opinion of the burgomaster of Almere, by far the largest city in Flevoland. In an interview in a weekly news magazine she called Almere 'the test plot for the future, multicultural Netherlands' (Van Deijl 2006). It is the same concept of the experimental plot that had already taken root before the Second World War, during the plans for the inpoldering of the Zuiderzee. In terms of ethnicity Almere is just as heterogeneous, and just as little integrated, as the other large cities of the Netherlands. Following a scientific investigation by sociologists and anthropologists from the University of Amsterdam, in 2001 the community began an 'action programme for social cohesion', intended to promote social coherence in Almere.<sup>19</sup> Governments are increasingly calling in the aid of scientists, and want their recommendations for policy to be as concrete as possible. Scientists can not always satisfy this demand. For instance, the researchers Kees Schuyt and Léon Deben reported that the community was 'slightly disappointed'

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19 See the website of the city of Almere <http://www.almere.nl/smartsite.dws?id=13430>, consulted on February 17, 2006.

because it was not possible to give their research a sufficient 'political translation'. It is obvious that the contribution of public folklorists would lie primarily in strengthening what is termed the 'identity dimension of social cohesion' (Deben & Schuyt 2000: 72).

At the moment, public folklorists are playing a significant role in the media. In her recent book *History and Memory in American Magazines*, the American media researcher Carolyn Kitch focuses on the important role that the media play as an intermediary in the construction of social ideas about the meaning of the past (Kitch 2005: 4–5). According to Kitch, their role is not so much that of a conduit with a one way flow, as in conducting a dialogue with their audience of readers. It is striking that in this dialogue public folklorists are allocated an important role as 'experts on tradition'. In newspapers and on television programmes Dutch ethnologists are regularly asked to interpret current developments in today's society and explain their meaning. In this way they contribute to 'a social narrative' about the past, and through that to the construction of a socially shared cultural identity. Something similar also applies to the government financed heritage institutions such as the Nieuw Land Heritage Centre in Lelystad. This Centre sees its task as 'telling the story of the greatest polder in the world'. Telling substantiated stories about immaterial heritage (whether shared or not): is that not the most important task of public folklore?

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