

# THE DANGERS OF DANCING

## Foreign vs. Folk Dances

### and the Politics of Culture in the Netherlands, 1918–1955

*Rob van Ginkel*

This article deals with cultural confrontations and ideological contestations concerning the perception and reception of foreign ‘modern’ and domestic folk dances in the Netherlands between 1918 and 1955. Many contemporary intellectuals were cultural pessimists who regretted the demise of ‘organic’ ties between people. They idealized rural ‘folk culture’, and criticized the ‘cosmopolitan’ culture they ascribed to urbanites. They launched civilizing missions with respect to performing foreign dances, while presenting ‘traditional’ folk dances as a socio-culturally beneficial alternative. However, folk dances also proved to be a site of contention and conflict, particularly concerning their ‘authenticity’ and practical use.

*Keywords:* popular dance, folk dance, the Netherlands, cultural pessimism, culture politics

#### Introduction

A nation that does not respect its own culture or know how to make sacrifices for it will in the long term go to the dogs. The danger of a psychological invasion from the East or West is not in the least hypothetical: we must mount an intellectual, cultural defence against it (Pollmann 1947: 5).

Two years after the liberation of the Netherlands from German occupation, the Catholic folk dance and folk song expert Jop Pollmann, who apparently was still under the sway of the war rhetoric, used these militant words.<sup>1</sup> In his view, Dutch culture was under siege and clearly needed to be protected from foreign influences. Dangers were lurking everywhere and threatened ‘national’ cultural expressions such as domestic folk dance and folk song. Dutch people could listen to jazz in many pubs and they could

dance to this music in scores of dancehalls (*dancings*) and similar venues. According to Pollmann, times were so pressing that the country’s cultural and intellectual elites had to become engaged in a formidable combat in order to withstand cultural threats from outside the national borders.

Such cultural anxiety and moral concern were hardly new. During and after the First World War, similar views had been widely expressed in the Netherlands. If one were to believe cultural and intellectual elites, immorality had a firm grip on the country’s inhabitants. Those who dared take a look in dancehalls would see moral corruption beyond belief, or so they thought. They were truly convinced that dances such as Charleston and foxtrot, which seem so innocent and harmless today, could cause profound moral damage to dancers and spectators alike. There was even talk of a ‘dancing problem’. Petitions were sent

to the government to intervene, and simultaneously private initiatives attempted to revitalize folk dancing: an example of cultural politics Dutch style (see van Ginkel 1997, 1999). What usually triggers cultural nationalists into collective action is a sense of social demoralization and conflict that they perceive as the outcome of discontinuities in national culture and the adoption of foreign culture elements and values. The goal of cultural nationalists is to preserve, rejuvenate or recreate the cultural individuality of the nation, which they consider to be jeopardized by external cultural domination or internal moral corruption (Hutchinson 1987: 1, 1999: 399–400). In the process, moral politics and the politics of culture and identity become inextricably entangled. This is exactly what was at stake with respect to ideas about foreign and folk dances in the Netherlands.

‘Dance’, writes Susan Reed, ‘is a powerful tool in shaping nationalist ideology and in the creation of national subjects, often more so than are political rhetoric or intellectual debates’ (1998: 511).<sup>2</sup> This may be true enough, but Reed’s sweeping statement seems to ignore the fact that (folk) dance as a ‘symbolic repertoire for national self-representation’ (Klimt 2005: 104) has multiple agendas and interests and is often a field of dispute, contention and conflict. The present article deals with such ideological confrontations and contestations, specifically concerning dance entertainment in the Netherlands within the broader framework of cultural politics. It asks why and how dance became the site of so much controversy in the Netherlands. The period under study roughly covers 1918 to 1955, an era in which many Dutch intellectuals turned out to be cultural pessimists (see van Ginkel 1999). They were distressed at the demise in modern times of what they believed to be traditional, organic ties between people. They idealized rural community life, including the ‘folk culture’ they ascribed to it. According to these cultural pessimists, folk dances and other expressions of folk culture could be used as a means to counter the spiritual and moral ‘superficiality’ of modernity and the ‘cultural dissolution’ it was believed to bring about.

The politicization of culture in connection with

dances in the Netherlands has only received fleeting attention thus far (see, however, Derks 1982, 1991; Vos 1993; van Ginkel 1997, 2000; de Jong 2001; Brummel 2004; Henkes 2003, 2005). My focus is not on folk dances and ‘modern dances’ or dancing as such, but on their perception and reception as well as on the means and modes in which they were propagandized or combated.<sup>3</sup> This involves an analysis of written accounts regarding both ‘exotic’ modern dances and domestic folk dances. In particular, I will devote attention to the appropriation and ideological use of ‘folk culture’ by cultural elites who initiated an offensive against popular or mass culture (*massacultuur*) and its alleged ‘excesses’. By doing so, it will become evident that elites did not just launch civilizing missions via their attempts to disseminate ‘high culture’, but also through their advocacy of folk culture. This ‘cultural enlightenment’ was of a very specific nationalist character. The article first deals with the reception of and response to foreign dances by intellectuals and politicians. Next, attention will be devoted to folk dance propaganda, especially in youth organizations. Folk dancing was stimulated as an alternative to modern dancing. Thirdly, the folk dance theories of folklorists will be scrutinized, including their misuse prior to and during World War II. Lastly, the focus will be on the revival of the folk dance movement in the post-war era and the demise of ‘folk’ cultural politics in the late 1950s. I will conclude with some thoughts on the question of whether or not folk dance propagandists must be regarded as cultural reactionaries opposing any kind of modernization.

### Dancing like Beasts

In the Netherlands, the first half of the twentieth century must have been a swinging time, at least if we take dancing into account. During and especially after the Great War, one-step, two-step, shimmy, foxtrot, Boston, Charleston, cakewalk and tango had reached the Netherlands via American troops deployed in France. Almost overnight, these dances became immensely popular. The first Dutch jazz bands were established around 1920 and within a few years it was possible to listen to dance and entertainment music on the ra-

dio. Initially, it was particularly youngsters from the well-to-do urban bourgeoisie who performed these dynamic modern dances, but soon they were disseminated to all walks of life throughout the entire country. They were dubbed 'modern' because they did not originate in the 'Old World', but emanated from North and South America. Illustrated magazines featured illustrations and descriptions of the modern dances, so that their readers could learn the steps. In addition, dance masters organized courses and demonstrations. Dancehalls catering for young dancers were quickly established, while many restaurants and cafés also provided facilities to dance. Apparently, these establishments met a need, a need that had increased along with rising affluence, mass consumption and leisure time. The entertainment of dancing offered young people an escape from tight social control in daily life, away from the prying eyes of parents, teachers, priests, ministers and other overseers (see, e.g., Derks 1982, 1991; Maatjens 1995).

This escape from supervision gave cause for considerable concern. Moralists were deeply worried about dancehalls. They perceived them as seats of evil, the materialization of burgeoning and fast growing corruption and immorality (van Dorp 1914). Soon, they spoke of 'dance desire', 'dance addiction', 'dance epidemic', 'dance mania', 'dance craze', 'dance rage', 'dance frenzy', 'dance degeneration' and even 'dance psychosis'. In the eyes of 'decent' citizens as well as government and religious authorities, modern dancing constituted a serious danger to mental health and moral comportment. Clergy deemed modern dancing disgusting and devilish, associating it with excessive alcohol consumption and sexual misbehaviour. They received support from worldly authorities such as politicians, mayors and police commissioners, who also feared moral corruption, particularly among lower-class girls, who already had a reputation for being sexually permissive. Until the introduction of modern dances, bodily contact between women and men who danced was restricted to a minimum and traditional social dancing demanded discipline and restraint, a legacy of court culture (van Ginkel 1997; Brummel 2004). This was about to change swiftly with the advent of modern

dancing, but improvisation and corporeality gave rise to profound moral anxiety and concern.

In 1917, someone sounded a warning note regarding 'the candidly expressed bestiality in step dancing' (see Brom-Struick 1926: 280). From the pulpit in Protestant and Catholic churches, admonitions were issued against the modern, 'pagan' dances because they allegedly brought about sinful behaviour. Catholic journals, in particular, offered dance masters ample opportunity to give vent to their disapproval of modern dances. For instance, a journal entitled *Mannenadel and Vrouweneer* (literally, Male Aristocracy and Female Honour) published a dance master's Letter to the Editor in which he stated that those who danced the Charleston 'demean themselves to the most uncivilized primordial phenomena of mankind' (Casto 1926: 83). For a long time, the Catholic Broadcasting Corporation (*Katholieke Radio Omroep*) tabooed dance music. As the priest J.H. Hooyman said in a speech celebrating the corporation's first lustrum in 1930, dance music would make 'Satan's serfs sing along in the concert of temptation. Souls will be heated and turned restless and if you do not check on them, your children will dance the death dance of their soul in your very own home' (quoted in Maatjens 1995: 66). Although in many respects hardly conservative, even the women's liberation movement deemed modern dances to be 'degeneration'.

It was the fact that the origin of various modern dances was believed to be 'Negro culture' that caused commotion.<sup>4</sup> In an era of candid racism, many perceived this culture as 'exotic', 'low' and a threat to 'white civilization'. Black people were said to be dancing 'mean' because they aroused passion on purpose and – as Willemien Brom-Struick (1926: 281) maintained – this was 'an abnormality even among the decadent phenomena'. In this connection, a general practitioner hailing from Amsterdam used words such as 'lewd, shameless and perverse' 'doings' and 'mental contamination'. He found fault with a national newspaper reporter who had dared write positively about the Charleston and its dancers in Harlem (USA) (van Dieren 1931: 25–28). However, these were still fairly innocent statements compared

to those launched by some others. Henri Borel, a well-known contemporary critic, spoke of 'pornographic dances' and 'pornographic music', which were an 'expression ... of the most vulgar, rude, utterly perverse and cunning sensuality' (1927: 47). He regarded it an absolute aberration that the 'civil' Dutch could be enchanted by such dances, especially since they originated in 'barbaric Negro tribes, exciting themselves to erotic madness, both sexes giving rein to brutal primordial instincts' (ibid.: 50).

Reports about performances of so-called 'Negro revues' in Dutch cities and of Josephine Baker in Parisian night clubs fuelled this resentment and caused consternation in puritan Dutch society. For instance, Protestants sarcastically maintained that "civilization" has progressed so much that the uncivilized, pagan Negro dances and music are imported. And when this no longer sufficed, they fetched male and female Negroes who danced on stage almost in the nude' (quoted in Wunderink 1980: 16). Although few probably ever witnessed such events, they still cross-cut the bourgeoisie's neat classification schemes: 'Negroes' were associated with Africa, paganism and wildness. In this view, they did not belong in Christian and 'civilized' Dutch society. The Catholic cultural journal *Roeping* published the following effusion: 'The modern dance dances the movement, dances the impetuosity: the impetuosity that turns into delirium, into hysteria' (Heerkens 1927: 184). In the author's opinion, Josephine Baker was the prime example: 'Her dance smells of the jungle, the sand and roasted human flesh'. She embodied 'the unrestrained instinct, the horny hysteria and the sensual fury'. The author did not consider this to be dancing: 'One does not show one's body in such a provocative and insolent fashion. One does not play with one's instincts so utterly inhumanly, bestially, furiously, ragingly. This is the beast, the ever so human beast in man' (ibid.). In 1929, Baker rendered a theatrical performance in the Netherlands. Her sparse clothing and the sensuous music caused a stir and led to indignation, especially among staunch religious believers.

In order to emphasize the 'beastliness' of modern dancing, critics referred to the names of some dances. For example, the Catholic culture critic Gerard

Brom – Willemien Brom-Struick's husband – mentioned 'the mechanic stepping and shuffling of sticky pairs', which in his view hardly expressed 'feelings other than lower instincts, and which are indicated impertinently by animal names such as foxtrot, turkey trot, *pas de l'ours* [bear step]' (1927: 7). These 'lower instincts' were stimulated in a variety of ways. The 'sultriness of nightly dancehalls', the shrouded red lights, the passionate music, the ample availability of alcoholic beverages, the smell of perfume and the atmosphere of dancehalls boosted sensuality and provided stimuli to the visitors' dance craze, while the 'extremely airy women's clothing' did not do much good either (ibid.).

Similarly, syncopated rhythms in dance music were said to make the blood flow faster, to lead to exuberance and abandonment of all self-control. According to Jop Pollmann, whom we have already encountered in the introduction of this article, these 'unnatural' rhythms caused mental and physical disquiet, and they were indicative of the poverty of modern culture:

One amuses oneself to lamentations, to passionate desires, to Bacchantic lust, to monstrous deformity. One relaxes in mortal fear, in misgivings of affliction, in bloodthirstiness, in poignant irony, in agonizing remorse, in sobbing grief. One claims to be chaste while dancing to a rhythm expressing passionate embraces. One dances to a physical mishap, to vindication, revenge. One seeks for joy in a rhythm that is fundamentally at odds with genuine joy (Pollmann 1927: 494).

Uncontrolled bodily movements unsettled Pollmann. In addition, there were the 'devilish' instruments (the saxophone in particular), the extended instrumental improvisations that supposedly aroused the senses, and the questionable lyrics referring to lovemaking. However, it did not take much to offend moralists. In all his prudery, Pollmann deemed words such as 'I love you' to be a grave moral problem (ibid.: 494–495). In short, in the eyes of moralists many things were wrong with modern dance music and modern dancing.

### **'The Evil of the Dance Excesses'**

Critics of cultural modernity were of the opinion that popular dances would do only harm to the Dutch youth, who were exposed to 'demoralization' and would possibly degenerate or decivilize (*verwilder-en*). Something needed to be done urgently. Similar views were held by the *Tucht-Unie* (Society for Law and Order) – an elite nationalist society combating alleged lawlessness. In this connection, it raised public attention to the 'dance problem'. The Tucht-Unie claimed that State intervention was badly needed; if this did not happen, burgeoning moral corruption would ensue. It proved rather easy to find supporters for this viewpoint. Annie Meijer, a Catholic MP, raised the issue in Parliament. The establishment in 1930 of a 'Government committee concerning the dance problem' (*Regeerings-commissie inzake het dansvraagstuk*) followed. In his speech marking the committee's inauguration, Prime Minister Charles Ruys de Beerenbrouck said:

Many do not dance to express the joy of living, less still to enjoy an aesthetic pleasure; they dance to suppress their superficial lives or sorrow in a dusty and stuffy light, to escape from the least sensational pleasures family life used to offer after a day's work. They dance a dance that can merely lead to doom in many mental and inner lives (Rapport dansvraagstuk 1931: 140).

Although from its very inception the committee apparently knew what was wrong, it still had to commence an investigation.

Once the research had been conducted, the committee concluded that the dancehall was 'an extremely dangerous location', in some cases even a 'filthy mess'. Dancing in such places constituted a 'disease' that had to be struck 'at the root'. The 'danger of contamination' by 'demoralized types' was not imaginary. Sexual desire and possible loss of self-control – especially in the relationships between higher-class boys and lower-class girls – contributed to 'the evil of dance excesses' and led to a loss of the 'code of honour and decency that is anchored in public opinion' (ibid.: 19–31). 'For the morally weak',

the report stated, 'the public dancehalls can even be considered the stepping stone to prostitution' (ibid.: 90). The perception of 'evil' was inextricably intertwined with the fact that modern dancing was a dance of couples, not a social dance. Such dances *à deux* could easily evolve into mating dances, or so many firmly believed. The Government committee sought to restrain modern dance entertainment. It proposed improving the geography of the dancehalls and their social environment, to introduce supervision, and to prohibit admittance of people under the age of eighteen. Moreover, it deemed 'wild and passionate music' unbecoming. Some of these proposals and suggestions were heeded, especially those regarding minimum age. However, in practice little changed because municipalities were responsible for policies concerning local entertainment. In border areas, in particular, the restrictions were lenient because local authorities wanted to prevent massive cross-border traffic to German or Belgian dancehalls (Derks 1982: 106).

So as to draft their report, the members of the Government committee had interviewed representatives of municipalities, juvenile court magistrates, guardianship boards and the police. It is striking that their answers indicate that few if any municipalities actually encountered 'dance excesses'. In fact, nothing untoward seemed to happen in the dancehalls. The committee's metaphorical references to modern dancing as a 'disease' were profoundly exaggerated and rhetorical. Nonetheless, in a sociological fashion it attributed the success of dancehalls to more general social conditions. The demise of the fabric of organic community ties was believed to be a consequence of social differentiation and specialization, which in turn had brought about social dislocation, corruption of morals and disruption of individuals. 'America' was the bad example and in the Netherlands the 'danger of contamination' by American 'free-thinking' loomed large (Rapport dansvraagstuk 1931: 9ff). In expressing these opinions, the committee summarized views that had meanwhile become fairly widespread.

## Cultural Pessimism and the Fear of Modernization

During the inter-war years, conservatism and cultural pessimism reigned supreme in the Netherlands. War and revolution elsewhere in Europe had terminated a time of hope and optimism. Pessimism was fuelled by anxiety about the foreboding consequences of internationalization, industrialization, mechanization, rationalization, bureaucratization, urbanization and the rise of new means and modes of communication. The pervasive expectation was that these modernization processes would ultimately bring about an anonymous mass society. This in turn gave rise to feelings of fear and resistance in confessional as well as non-confessional social circles (van Ginkel 1999). One can find expressions of them among Protestants and Catholics, Conservatives and Socialists, Democrats and Anti-democrats. Many believed that modernization would lead to socio-cultural homogenization. There was talk of a 'metropolitan asphalt culture', an 'atomistic society' full of 'mass people devoid of culture', 'growing superficiality through a general cosmopolitan civilization' and of 'social uprooting', 'decivilization' and 'barbarization'. Throughout Europe, there was unease with modernity, and pessimism in Dutch elite circles was fuelled by the famous and widely read books by Oswald Spengler (1918–1923), José Ortega y Gasset (1933) and Johan Huizinga (1935). Cultural critics found fault with new phenomena such as cinema, ready-made clothing, dancing, radio, gramophone and music such as jazz and *Schlager* as expressions of popular culture.

Cultural pessimism and cultural critique were translated into anti-rationalism and anti-modernism. It was feared that modernization would undermine traditional relationships, eventually leading to social disintegration. According to pessimists, rural communities were particularly exposed to such threats. The countryside began to industrialize, urbanize and to become bourgeois. Many believed that this would lead to vanishing traditional norms and values and social constellations. Scores of culture watchers were deeply concerned about a 'caving in' of local, regional and national cultural forms and

cultural expressions. Whereas proponents of modernization believed they brought 'civilization and progress' to the 'backward' rural population so that they would be a part of modern times, reactionary and conservative romantics mourned the waning of what they perceived to be 'ancient' cultural patterns (see also van Ginkel 1999).

In the 1920s and 1930s, Dutch sociologists, folklorists and other intellectuals felt a profound apprehension about 'mass culture' and published myriads of impressionistic accounts concerning the demoralized youth, who were supposedly addicted to modern dancing and film. Such addictions had to be countered (Jonker 1988: 212ff; de Rooy 1984: 615). One option was to 'domesticate' foreign influences, to tame their potentially disorderly elements, as is clear from the above-mentioned State attempts to regulate dancing and dancehalls. Another was to provide alternatives. Through youth movements, among others, an offensive was launched against 'social disintegration'. To no small extent, attention was focused on folk song and folk dance. During the inter-war period, many intellectuals perceived folk dancing as a means to 'awaken' a supposedly 'dormant' national consciousness, to enhance a community spirit and – not least – to provide an alternative to the pernicious modern dances. Therefore, it is no coincidence that it was in the inter-war years that several publications on folk dancing appeared. The authors were mainly students of folklore and ideologists of youth movements. I will turn to the latter first.

## Dancing towards Community: Youth Movements and Folk Dance Revival

The social-democratic Labour Youth Council (*Arbeiders Jeugd Centrale*, abbreviated *AJC*) and the Catholic *Heemvaart* student movement – an exponent of the Catholic renewal movement – turned against 'the city' and the 'excesses' and 'sham civilization' they believed that it embodied. Their parole was a return to nature, away from the city and bourgeois conventions and norms of decency. Rationalism, materialism and individualism had to be counteracted. Both movements primarily sought reinforce-



ment of social cohesion among their followers. They shared a strong emphasis on *Gemeinschaft*. For the Catholic youth movement, this fitted seamlessly into the wider corporatist ideal of Catholics, while for Social Democrats the ideal of labour-class solidarity was at its root. In particular, the movements focused on emancipating and culturally moulding the youth.<sup>5</sup> In their quest for a new, ascetic way of life they gravitated towards folk culture – and towards folk songs and folk dances in particular. They propagated a sober style of clothing and house-furnishing. *AJC* and *Heemvaart* ideologists believed that stimulating folk dance and folk songs would deepen the sense of belonging and togetherness and counter superficial popular culture. That is why they attempted to combat jazz and Charleston through a revival of folk song and folk dance.

However, as a matter of fact their aim was not so much ‘revitalization’ of old or disappearing folk dances, but to *practise* folk dancing as such. Most of the folk dances these movements used were foreign, as *AJC* and *Heemvaart* were inspired by the revitalization of folk dancing in Germany, the Scandinavian countries, and England. Lacking their own traditional folk dance repertoire, the movements’ ideologists ‘imported’ these foreign examples and adapted them to their own purposes. Some dances were even entirely based on the fantasy of ‘dance inventors’. Thus, it was not cultural ‘authenticity’, but practical usefulness that predominated: folk dancing had to be functional.<sup>6</sup> There was no perceived need to revitalize or revive folk culture as a whole. For example, participants in folk dance events did not dress in traditional costume. Nonetheless, in the view of *AJC* leaders much of traditional Dutch folk culture had been destroyed by the impact of capitalism and its bourgeois and urban civilization. Like so many others, Socialists too complained about the masses, uprooted people, individualism and barbarism. New social ties, partly based on old ones, were deemed necessary to substitute for the division of labour and class divisions that had accompanied the rise of capitalism. This turn to an idealized community life was translated into folk dance propaganda. From the organization’s inception, *AJC* ideologists,

among whom Koos Vorrink, Anna Sanson-Catz, Piet Tiggers and his spouse Line Tiggers, deemed folk dancing and folk singing to be of paramount significance for the creation of a community spirit and feelings of solidarity and to check individualism and social decay (Harmsen 1975[1961]: 191; Wiedijk 1986: 77; van Praag 1990: 27–28, 93ff; Vos 1993: 192ff; Meilof 1999: 325ff).

The Catholic *Heemvaart* movement expressed similar views. Accordingly, in the 1920s its folk dance specialist, Willemien Brom-Struick, rejected modern dances for their sensual, worldly and decadent character. She proposed to use ‘natural’ folk dance as a means to enhance popular taste, to enlighten common recreation and to improve the artistic level of entertainment (Derks 1982: 115–116; Vos 1993: 219ff). She propagated folk dancing as a decent alternative to the ‘obscene’ foxtrot, steps and other modern dances. Brom-Struick wanted to ‘make a point by reviving the folk culture of song and dance’ (1926: 283). Her husband Gerard Brom even maintained that a complete change of lifestyle was necessary: ‘This is not just about a few steps and jumps, something petty or about appearances, *it is about nothing less than disinfecting society*’ (1927: 8, italics mine, RvG). Once more he ridiculed modern dances, referring to them as ‘barbaric degeneration’, and he continued: ‘In contradistinction, the choral dance [*rei*], the sprightly choral dance, born in the midst of fresh nature and strong people, will lend versatility to the Dutch, who will bravely recognize their own character in it’ (ibid.). Binary oppositions of, *inter alia*, good versus evil; own versus strange; civilized versus barbarian; moral versus perverse; bodily discipline versus uncontrolled movements; outside versus inside; natural versus decadent; idealism versus materialism; light versus dark; community versus individual; integration versus disintegration were often implied in juxtapositions of folk dance and modern dance. The fact that there were hardly any well-documented ‘authentic’ Dutch folk dances, and that most dances performed by youth movements were appropriated rather eclectically, apparently did not matter. What counted first and foremost was the belief that the dances originated

in a harmonious pre-industrial community and could compensate for the estrangement endangering contemporary society. Controlled movement and togetherness, not costume, age or origin, were the significant parameters.

It must be emphasized that *Heemvaart* and *AJC* were not the only youth organizations in which these viewpoints were held and expressed. More generally, modernization had brought about widespread feelings of estrangement coupled with the perception of the loss of an imagined pre-industrial harmony. All religious denominations regarded popular culture as a threat and they looked for alternatives to this 'empty' urban culture in a 'pastoral, pre-industrial folklore', transformed according to 'the standards of their own ideology' (Knulst 1986: 63). Despite the lack of success in revitalizing folk dancing – even youngsters who participated in folk dance meetings often went to a dancehall afterwards (Derks 1991: 396) – attempts to achieve this objective were continued. For example, Folk High Schools (*Volkshogescholen*) aimed at the formation and reinforcement of a Dutch national community and folk culture, and they did so via 'meaningful leisure activities' such as folk dancing and folk singing. In contradistinction to the ideologically-based youth movements that aimed at *internal* integration, these Folk High Schools sought means of *national* integration (van Ginkel 1999: 107–111). Folklorists did the same.

### **Folklorists and the Cultural Politics of Folk Dancing**

In their anti-rationalism and nostalgic nationalism, folklorists also propagated 'folk culture' as an alternative to bourgeois civil norms.<sup>7</sup> They were in search of a primordial folk culture and 'national character', which they idealized and mythologized. In their romantic and idyllic image, they expected to discover such a culture in the countryside. Folklorists thought they would find tightly integrated and harmonious communities there, with deeply rooted traditions. Departing from such views, they constructed a pastoral myth, a Dutch Arcadia. Often, folklorists entertained a static view of culture for ideological reasons. To them, the core issue was not

*whether*, but *how* to maintain folk culture. The question they raised concerned the kind of national task that was necessary to this end. The growing interest of urbanite cultural and societal elites in rural folk life arose from nationalistic sentiments. That is why they believed that folk culture had to be cherished, conserved and promoted.<sup>8</sup>

A case in point is the 1919 National Historical Folk Festival (*Vaderlandsch Historisch Volksfeest*) that was celebrated in the Arnhem Open Air Museum, which had opened its doors the previous year. The folklorist Dirk Jan van der Ven was the driving force of this event, which attracted hundreds of participants and an estimated 400,000 spectators (from a total population of less than seven million). During the folklore show, several folk dance groups performed in traditional costume. The festival aimed at amplifying national feelings through glorifying rural culture. In the folklorists' view, folk culture was not the culture of the entire Dutch 'folk' (*volk*, that is, people or nation) but only a part of it, to wit the rural populace. According to folklorists, rural culture was the least 'degenerated' (*verbasterd*) part of national culture. It could be used instrumentally to infuse cosmopolitan mass culture with a sense of national pride and to overcome the politico-religious and class divisions that in their view hampered the unity of the Dutch people (de Jong 2001: 519).

Following the National Historical Folk Festival's huge success, a cinematographic company requested van der Ven to shoot a series of folklore documentaries. One of these was devoted to 'Dutch peasant dances'. In an accompanying brochure, van der Ven explained 'the folkloristic meaning of several ancient dances' (1923: 1). Although he immediately admitted that not a single dance was 'ancient', he still deemed the dances he filmed to be

the last remnants of nationally, regionally or locally coloured and altered, once generally diffused and today rudimentary preserved ceremonies, which – though often faded and degenerated – still bear the essential features of an old worldview, in which the festive field and tree cults marking the seasons united its practitioners with song and dance.



In many folk dance performances transmitted from generation to generation, one can recognize their pagan character. Therefore, it is of great scholarly importance that we document such survivals everywhere in veracious films and that we record the melodies (ibid.).

As a counterpoint to the 'levelling modern times', van der Ven would probably have liked to see the entire Dutch nation dance such 'originally pagan' dances. The revival of folk culture was his goal, and this revival could 'forcefully foster a healthy nationalism' (ibid.: 15, 16). Ironically, of course, his approach was modern par excellence, organizing a mass event and using the media, photography and film as he did. Van der Ven was quite successful: his documentary was received well by reporters and the general public and led to the establishment of several urban folk dance clubs aimed especially at creating a community spirit among the urban working class.<sup>9</sup>

It was van der Ven's wife Elise van der Ven-ten Bensel who was particularly involved in folk dance revival. She admired Cecil J. Sharp, the pioneer of the folk dance revival movement in England. In 1911, he had established the English Folk Dance and Song Society. The van der Vens visited Sharp in 1923 and attended one of his folk-dance courses.<sup>10</sup> Sharp's students practised Morris and sword dances and the van der Vens were so impressed that they decided to begin similar courses in the Netherlands. They lived in a former farmstead, dubbed *De Meihof*, in the village of Oosterbeek. From 1927 onward they organized folk dance courses on its premises. The van der Vens sought to position folk dancing as a means of cultural elevation and national unification of the Dutch people. They believed it to be a binding force that could bring together people from all walks of life, while they also thought that it might contribute to international reconciliation and fraternization via exchange demonstrations of various national dances (Henkes 2003: 150–154, 2005: 78–85). That is why they opted for 'neutrality', admitting participants of various national and politico-religious backgrounds. Their courses were attended by, among many others, Line Tiggers of the *AJC* and Willemien Brom-Struick

of *Heemvaart*, who used the dances they had learnt for the practical work in their respective organizations.

### Folklore: Authenticity and Hegemony

In April 1930, a Netherlands Institute for Folk Dance and Folk Music (*Nederlandsch Instituut voor Volksdansen en Volksmuziek*) was established. Its Board of Directors included Willemien Brom-Struick, Anna Sanson-Catz, Elise van der Ven-ten Bensel and some others. Line Tiggers was also invited, but she declined. The organization's goal was to disseminate folk dance and folk music through the education of dance leaders, the establishment of folk dance clubs, folk dance demonstrations and so on. Soon, however, the institute was divided by internal strife. Elise van der Ven-ten Bensel had to leave its Board in 1931 following a conflict concerning the organization's policy. Unlike Brom-Struick and Sanson-Catz, who emphasized the practical utility of performing folk dances, van der Ven-ten Bensel stressed cultural 'authenticity', which she only attributed to English folk dances that in their symbolism allegedly had maintained their 'original' Germanic roots.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, she intended to introduce 'folkloristic explanations' as an integral part of the institute's activities. In practice, this would have implied that her spouse Dirk Jan van der Ven would play a major role in the organization, and this went against the grain of the other board members. The latter were also of the opinion that van der Ven-ten Bensel was extremely difficult to cooperate with.

Elise van der Ven-ten Bensel went her own way. In 1932, she founded the Netherlands Central Bureau of Folk Dancing (*Nederlandsch Centraal Bureau voor Volksdansen*). The aim of this organization was to study, conserve and revive folk dancing. Van der Ven-ten Bensel supervised the Bureau, whose headquarters were *De Meihof*. For the Bureau's Commission of Support she succeeded in recruiting some highly respected scholars and folklore specialists, among whom were the Protestant theologian professor Gerardus van der Leeuw and the renowned Germanic scholar and folklorist professor Jan de Vries. Van der Leeuw, who was also a well-known anthro-

pologist, had published a book on dance in distant cultures, entitled *In den hemel is eenen dans...* (There is a Dance in Heaven...) (van der Leeuw 1930). Elise van der Ven-ten Bensel greatly admired this book. On top of that, van der Leeuw was squarely opposed to modern dance, which he regarded as a triumph of body over mind. He, too, believed that folk dancing would be able to cure the alleged contemporary societal ills.

Van der Ven-ten Bensel utterly disliked the kind of folk dance revival Tiggers and Brom-Struick propagated. She despised 'the undocumented writing about "national" dances, about "own" folk dances of certain youth groups, which frequently seem to think that there can be no genuine folk dance outside their organizations' (1931: 16). According to her, detailed research would show that this could not be substantiated, 'and', she added, 'in that case the folk dances will no longer be contrasted with the deeply despised modern dances that are stigmatized as sinful' (ibid.). Thus, van der Ven-ten Bensel proved to be less moralistic than most other folk dance revivalists, while in other respects she also cherished her own opinions. Although she applauded community dancing, she did not deem the dances used in youth organizations worth reviving, because they were 'degenerated folk dances' (1933: 23). Even folk dance enthusiasts would not be impressed by them. Borrowing the expression of the German folklorist Hans Naumann, she dubbed these dances *gesunkenes Kulturgut*. In her view, countrified and garbled forms of salon dances such as quadrille, waltz and polka were unfit to serve as the fundament for folk dance revival. She deemed it necessary to retrieve 'original' forms, 'unspoiled folk material', in other words, 'the nation's cultural substratum'. She condemned urbanites dressing up in peasant costume and giving 'most unfortunate' and 'distasteful' dance performances as if they were folk dances. Folk dancing, she argued, was not a mere show, but needed to be experienced through participation in old forms. Van der Ven-ten Bensel disliked kitsch 'clog dance performances', especially if they were portrayed as 'national' folk dances. Strikingly, she did not explain how this stance was compatible with the National Historical

Folk Festival's folklore show that her husband had organized or with the large-scale folk dance demonstrations she herself initiated.

According to van der Ven-ten Bensel, there was hope: 'Since ... the old country dances that contain all the essential elements of folk art in melody and form have become known in the Netherlands, many have changed their attitude towards folk dance considerably' (1933: 23). So as to accomplish genuine change, however, the management of folk dance courses should be left to competent people, *in casu* to Elise van der Ven-ten Bensel and her Bureau. She stressed that the Netherlands Institute for Folk Dance and Folk Music and youth movements – which also organized folk dance courses – lacked such competence. The existence of two organizations did not only lead to a waste of time and money and to decentralization and fragmentation, but – much more worse in her eyes – to a 'degeneration of the folk dances'. Van der Ven-ten Bensel aimed to achieve a hegemonic position for her Bureau in the Dutch folk dance world. As an additional argument contra folk dance courses organized outside her Bureau, she pointed out that the dances were taken 'out of the folk cultural atmosphere in which they are valuable'.

Apparently, the folk dance courses organized in *De Meihof* could be held in this 'folk cultural atmosphere'. To give an example, this happened as follows: 'In the Summer of 1932 the Huissen [Dutch village] citizen soldiery arrived and spontaneously greeted our course participants flying their flags, while the colour-parties of the "St. Gangulphus" and the "St. Laurentius guilds" waved their banners around the blazing summer bonfire' (ibid.: 33). In other words, the folk dancing of the course participants needed to be 'ethnic' (*volks*, literally 'folkish') and to go along with folklore and feasts connected with the ritual calendar and life cycle.<sup>12</sup> In her book *De volksdans herleeft* (The Folk Dance Revives) from 1933 the folklorist devoted considerable attention to the symbolism of various European folk dances, and following Gerardus van der Leeuw she emphasized their magical-religious meaning. However, 'after so many ages of homogenization and Christian influences',

this ritual meaning had withered away and only survived 'in a faint form' (van der Ven-ten Bensel 1933: 7). In her view, only folk dances that had preserved some of their pre-Reformation features were worth reviving (see also Henkes 2003: 149).

It was her husband Dirk Jan van der Ven who was particularly prone to point out such 'ancient' cultural patterns and to establish connections with 'Germanic' ornaments, 'a treasure-trove of symbolic forms that originate in prehistoric Nordic culture' (van der Ven 1938: 16). He deemed folk dance to be an expression of 'folk alliance' (*volksverbondenheid*), a 'cult act' in the service of community. To quote a rather characteristic passage:

The joy of physical movement as an expression of the individual spiritual union with the universe is an absolute precondition for the flowering of a powerful and healthy folk dance. Along with the increasing individualism in the past century of technology and cold rationalism, much of the people's sense of nature and community was lost, and this was reflected in the demise of the folk dance and the rise of the couple's dance. Precisely there where an awakened youth celebrate their joy together in an organic youth league, we see a revival of the folk dance movement even in the cities, while those who have not yet been converted inwardly to this community cult individually disapprove of and even take a hostile stance towards the folk dance movement (1938: 17–18).

The phrasing may seem akin to the words used by the *AJC* and *Heemvaart* leadership, but the underlying ideological connotations differed completely. In this article, van der Ven still wondered whether the symbolism of folk dances constituted an indication of 'the superiority of the so-called Nordic race', but soon he would become entirely convinced of it. With their folkloristic notions and activities, the van der Vens slid towards the 'folkish' ideology, to finally end up in National Socialism. In this respect, their conceptions began to divert completely from those of Catholic and Socialist youth idealists and folk dance propagandists, whose ideas were embedded in

their own respective worldviews and organizations, but at the same time in a national framework.

### **In Praise of Primitivism: National Socialist Folk Dancing**

In the late 1930s, several Dutch folklorists were enchanted by the Nazi folk mythology. By this time, Dirk Jan van der Ven was strongly oriented towards German *Volkskunde*, folk culture and folk dancing, whereas in this respect his wife entertained some hesitations – though not so much about Nazi cultural politics as about the aesthetic quality of the German folk dances (Henkes 2005: 85–87). Nevertheless, the van der Vens became ever more involved in folk dance demonstrations and lectures in Nazi Germany. They had become convinced of the predominance and superiority of a Germanic cultural heritage in north-western Europe. They adapted their language to the Nazi terminology and Elise van der Ven-ten Bensel increasingly subdued her admiration for English folk dance, at least in her publications. This would prove to be grist to the mill of Nazi cultural politics, which aimed at the formation of a Greater Germany. Prior to the onset of the war, the German SS had already infiltrated Dutch folklore and cultural institutions with the aim of enhancing Nazi cultural and political influence in the Netherlands. The final goal of the Nazis was 'germanification' of the Dutch nation. Following the occupation of Dutch territory, the German war authorities granted collaborating Dutch folklorists ample room to publish their ideas in National-Socialist cultural periodicals.<sup>13</sup> Among the authors were the van der Vens and Jan de Vries. The Germans also pursued the *Gleichschaltung* (enforced synchronization) in Nazi fashion of Dutch institutions. Under their auspices a folkloristic organization – the *Volksche Werkgemeenschap* (Folkish Working Group) – was established, which was joined by many students of folklore. It was a cover for the Dutch SS (*Schutz Staffeln* or Protection Squad), which in turn was part of the *Ahnenerbe* (Ancestral Heritage), the cultural and scientific division of the German SS.

The Nazi influence on Dutch folklorists was soon apparent. For instance, Dirk Jan van der Ven

surmised that the Dutch – who in his view were internationally oriented due to the influence of Socialism – rejected ‘everything tied to race and soil’, while bourgeois intellectuals ‘attempted to improve knowledge of our country and to conserve its beauty on a national and aesthetic basis, *but lacked any truthful folkish attitude*’ (1941: 6, italics mine, RvG). He referred to the ‘folk alliance’ (*volksverbondenheid*) with Germany: ‘Due to its geographic location, its history, its race and its culture’, he wrote, ‘the Netherlands constitutes as it were a delta area of Germania’ (ibid.: 182). Thus, van der Ven legitimized Nazi claims to Dutch territory on the basis of cultural similarity. He and his wife collaborated with the Germans in several organizations. If the pre-war ideas of the van der Vens were still ambiguous – oscillating between nationalism and internationalism, and an admiration for English as well as German folk dances – this was no longer the case after the occupation of the Netherlands. Increasingly, they put their folkloristic work in the context of a Greater Germanic culture area, the so-called *Volkstum*. Owing to their opportunism and despite internal differences of opinion in National-Socialist quarters, they succeeded in acquiring leading positions in the folk dance movement of wartime Holland.<sup>14</sup> In 1941, Elise van der Ven-ten Bensele was appointed national folk dance leader, finally achieving the lead position she had aspired to long before. The folk dance activities of her opponents, including Piet Tiggers and Jop Pollmann, had come to a standstill anyway; they had gone in hiding or had been taken hostage by the German occupiers.

The van der Vens’ National-Socialist sympathies are also apparent in their book from 1942, entitled *De volksdans in Nederland* (The Folk Dance in the Netherlands). They considered the folk dance to be ‘a connecting element and an expression of folk alliance’ (1942: 7). So far, so good: this function and meaning was ascribed to folk dance by many in the 1920s and 1930s, for example by leaders of youth movements of various persuasions and Folk High Schools. According to the van der Vens, however, these organizations had naively fought the ‘imported non-culture [*wancultuur*] of the international shuf-

fle, wiggle, Negro and beastly dances’ (ibid.: 298). The van der Vens regarded the activities of these ‘*extremist youth organizations*’, as they meanwhile dubbed *AJC* and *Heemvaart*, as false, because they sought to uproot the cultural heritage from its rural context, and to utilize it for the elevation of urban youth (ibid.: 308). In their view, it was noxious that there were ‘red’, ‘Roman Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ versions of folk dances. This struck at the root of what they conceived as ‘an undivided folk culture’. ‘Everywhere’, they argued, ‘the genuine folk dance was an expression of community life and it can only thrive in an atmosphere of folk alliance and sib-culture [*sibbecultuur*]’ (ibid.: 309). Small wonder then, that van der Ven-ten Bensele appreciated the work of collaborating Dutch National-Socialist organizations, ‘which seek to involve folk dance in the formation of a new festive culture’ (ibid.: 390).

The van der Vens believed that the folk dance evidenced a Germanic ‘tribal kinship’ (*stamverwantschap*): this was indicated by a shared symbolism in dance figures – including solstice signs such as circle, spiral, cross, bow and star. For instance, with respect to sword dances van der Ven-ten Bensele wrote: ‘People dance all sorts of figures such as chains, circles, gates, bridges and spirals, and all of these figures can be found as Germanic sacred signs on objects stemming from old-Germanic times’ (1943b: 353). For the German folklore journal *Volkstum und Heimat* she submitted a contribution on the dissemination of sword dances in Dutch National-Socialist youth organizations. In her view, this dance was a real ‘*Kameradschaftstanz*’ (1943a). She wanted to accept ‘the eternal folkish values in their significant forms for these and future times’ (1943c: 8). She explained her previous fascination for English folk dances as follows: because of its isolation and conservatism, England had preserved the ancient Germanic dances better than any other country. In this ‘new era’, however, one should not distinguish between Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, English, German or Dutch folk dances; all of them originated in a common Germanic culture (1943b: 356–357). However, the tide was turning and unfortunately for van der Ven-ten Bensele, the ‘eternal folkish values’ soon came to an

end. This did not prevent the van der Vens from continuing to express their views after the liberation. Van der Ven-ten Bonsel proved to have an exceptionally flexible mind: in 1949 she published a book in English, *Dances of the Netherlands* (1949), addressing an Anglo-Saxon audience as if she had never flirted with Nazi ideas. Surprisingly, a thorough revision of folkloristic conceptions did not come about immediately after the war. On the contrary: many ideas and practices were continued more or less unchanged, although for obvious reasons any reference to Germanic roots was henceforth strongly tabooed.

### **The Reprisal of Moral Panics: Dancing Disputes**

During a 1946 conference on 'The Future of Dutch Civilization', Social Democrat Wim Thomassen intimated: 'Before the war [modern] dancing was fashionable. Since the liberation it has become a craze. After a year it still rages on. (...) The public dancehall is and remains a danger, while people do not know each other and often lack responsibility' (1946: 196–197). He proposed to combat this evil by the means of folk dancing. In many respects the war had not created a radical break with the past. Cultural pessimism and pleas for a national cultural defence reigned unabated. During the German occupation, it could hardly have escaped the attention of the Dutch that folklore and folk culture had been used as culture-political instruments. However, this did not lead to a more careful stance of the authorities and intellectuals after the liberation: on the contrary. Even before the end of the war they planned to reinforce folk culture. This occurred in, for example, the National Institute, a cultural nationalistic non-governmental organization (see van Ginkel 2004). With freedom regained, cultural pessimism seemed to return in all its intensity. The lamentations about moral corruption and spiritual degeneration of the Dutch even seemed to gain in force and intensity.

The first post-war government also embraced this morality, which was strongly influenced by the ideas expressed in the Moral Rearmament movement. The Minister of Education, Arts and Sciences, Gerardus van der Leeuw (the very same theologian who had

joined Elise van der Ven-ten Bonsel's folk dance organization's Commission of Support), employed his so-called 'active culture politics' (*actieve cultuur-politiek*). According to van der Leeuw, national consciousness should be imparted to the Dutch people through national education. He perceived Dutchness to be not a condition, but a task, an ideal and a conviction. In van der Leeuw's opinion, the promotion of folk dance and folk song was instrumental in this respect:

Art has become overly intellectualized, too much a matter of elites. It is disconnected from the people's spirit, partly because the people's spirit is not properly educated, but to a larger extent because it [art] is estranged from the people's spirit. ... In the Netherlands of the new disposition, it should not be possible that a child cannot sing something decent in the street or that boys and girls who would like to dance know nothing other than the latest Negro fads. Alongside the Dutch language, the folk song and the folk dance ought to have pride of place in the folk school of the future (1945a: 149).

Detested 'Negro fads' and cultural renewal on a seemingly reactionary – that is, past-oriented – basis: the 1920s and 1930s revisited. Apparently, van der Leeuw was blind to the prior ideological misuse of folk culture. Not only did he stick to his old viewpoints concerning the function of folk dancing, he even wanted to politically use folk culture in a much broader domain. In his opinion, the State had to clearly control culture through its active cultural politics, though in addition it still had to rely on private initiatives.<sup>15</sup> To his joy and relief, this initiative was taken by the National Institute.

Shortly after the liberation, the Institute presented itself to the public. It noted a lack of national unity and aimed at a 'deepening of national consciousness and national community spirit' (Nationaal 1945: 3). The Institute began its task energetically. It developed and supported scores of nationalistic initiatives, among them the establishment of war monuments and the organization of commemorations and national festivals. In addition, it supported folk music,

folk song, folk dance and other expressions of folk culture. The Institute regarded folk culture as 'one of the most powerful means against growing cultural superficiality and national self-denial' and an important precondition to reinforce national community feelings (Verheul 1990: 59). However, folk culture was deemed 'ill' as a consequence of the 'cultural passivity of the masses' and the increasing triviality of popular culture. As Jop Pollmann, who was one of the Institute's ideologists, maintained: 'Whoever succeeds in curing folk culture activates an important lever: folk culture is national power. A powerful nation reinforces its folk culture...' (1946: unpag.).

The cultural pessimism and anti-modernism that had influenced so many intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s lived on unabatedly in the Institute's ranks. In general, the Institute's tone was defensive. Initially, the dissemination of a Dutch nationalist ideology was meant to check German influences, but soon all 'foreign influences', in particular communist and Anglo-Saxon ones, were counteracted. Even though Americans had been extremely important in liberating the country, there was a widespread fear of Americanization of Dutch culture, which, as we have seen, had already been evident in the pre-war era (see also Wilterdink 1991; Wouters 1996; van Ginkel 1999). The Institute's ideologists perceived a division between community-enhancing traditions and modern, superficial developments. Their viewpoints consisted of a curious mixture of pessimism and optimism: pessimism, because they feared cultural superficiality, demoralization and degeneration of the 'masses' devoting themselves to 'empty consumption' and 'stupid entertainment'; optimism, because they firmly believed in the possibility of solving problems through cultural intervention and planning. From their own elite and normative cultural conceptions, the Institute's leaders attempted to prevent the dissemination of what they regarded to be a 'wrong kind of culture' among the Dutch. Besides promoting Dutch culture, they aimed at morally and spiritually disciplining the people in order to prevent the diffusion of popular culture.

Nonetheless, Pollmann was aware of the fact that the Netherlands did not have a usable tradition of

folk dancing. In a similar fashion to before the war, the country would have to 'borrow' folk dances from abroad – especially from England. One might complain about 'the modern dance craze' and insist on 'real Dutch' dancing, but Pollmann knew that there really was no such tradition. For future purposes, the Dutch people had to invent their 'own' folk dance repertoire. However, Pollmann did not deem 'authenticity' to be very important. He rejected folkloristic theories of roots and relics. In his view, folk dance *performance* was needed, but not folk dance *theorizing*. In his words: 'Folk dance theory will inevitably become rubbish about (pagan) origins, folkloristic elements etc.: irrelevant if not also wrong (e.g., van der Ven). Actions speak louder than words!' (Pollmann 1946: unpag.). Pollmann saw the folk dance and folk song activities he helped lead as an '*action for the improvement of the entire folk culture. We think that this work is, more than ever before, imperative for the reinforcement of our feelings of belonging as well as the deepening of our national consciousness*' (1947: 5, italics in original).

Minister van der Leeuw strongly supported Pollman's ideas. He had expressed similar views regarding folk song and folk dance in pre-war publications and continued to do so in the second part of the 1940s. For example, he wrote:

We will have achieved a lot if the manner of dancing presently practised in many youth organizations is popularized on a large scale, and if the refreshing and healthy sphere of the folk dance substitutes the stuffy and unhealthy one of modern dancing. It is hardly proof that our civilization is blossoming when people in a Drenthe or North-Holland village, just as anywhere else in the world, dance to jazz or swing without something singular or enlightening (van der Leeuw 1945b: 5–6).

Van der Leeuw perceived modern dance as 'the mirror of a culture that had become completely void' (1948[1932]: 99) – a culture, moreover, in which body dominated mind: 'But it is a body without a mind, that is, a corpse' (ibid.). Although he did not deem folk dancing a panacea for contemporary



problems, in his view it could teach the youth physical and spiritual discipline and human dignity (van der Leeuw 1947: 62–63).

The National Institute's leaders also deemed this moral mission and disciplining offensive necessary. They saw it as their task to 'elevate the masses'. In their view, the 'cultureless masses' – and 'mass youth' in particular – were 'a sick spot in our society' and a 'danger for Dutch health and Dutch culture' (Algra et al. 1946: 205). In a similar vein as before the war, the metaphors they used often referred to the medical world – to diseases caused by the masses and, albeit implicitly, to the curative role of the moralists themselves. As the National Institute periodically characterized the mass youth: 'these "nihilists" constitute the great danger in a democratic national community' (*Binding*, 30 September 1946). In fact, however, the real risk was probably the cultural politics of the Institute and its ideologists.

### **The Demise of the Dance Moralists**

However, the National Institute was unsuccessful. It spent too much money, attempted to do too many things at once, was too centralistic and too bureaucratic, whilst having fierce competitors in ideologically-based confessional and Socialist non-governmental organizations. Van der Leeuw's successor at the Ministry of Education, Arts and Sciences, the Catholic Minister Jos. Gielen, stopped subsidizing the National Institute. Its fiasco was mostly due to its elite, paternalistic, conceited and self-complacent attitude, which was despised by the public at large. Hardly a year after its establishment, the Amsterdam headquarters of the Institute had to close down. The Institute's leaders bitterly attributed this demise to the 'cold indifference' of the Dutch people. In their opinion, they had entertained such magnificent plans and they wondered how it was possible that the Dutch were not enthusiastic – not even lukewarm – about their ideas. Consider what anthropologist Meerum Terwogt had to say about the Institute's activities: it wanted to awaken 'a vivid consciousness of the value of one's own cultural property' by stimulating 'good Dutch entertainment music', for instance by organizing 'chimes festivals

and organ congresses', by replacing [popular] 'songs' and 'swing' as much as possible by 'our richly varied folk song and folk dance heritage', by promoting 'really good films', by enhancing 'good amateur drama' and so forth (Meerum Terwogt 1946–47: 261–262). It just did not dawn upon the National Institute's leadership that the public at large perhaps did not have any need for such cultural political initiatives.

The Institute's demise did not mean the end of the moral mission through folk dance revival. In cultural nationalistic organizations folk dance and folk song have long remained in the picture as instruments of cultural politics. It was only in the second half of the 1950s and particularly in the 1960s that the role of such organizations was on the wane. By then, the boundless popular culture detested by moralists had been definitely and irreversibly victorious. Even folk dance propagandists had to acknowledge that. In connection with modern dancing, one of them – Corrie Hartong – demanded 'a tactful demolition of the barricades of spasmodic morality, false shame and other timidities' (1954: 49). Panic-stricken contemplations on social and mental corruption, cultural dissolution and degeneration turned unfashionable. The instrumental or functionalist view of culture, the idea that the promotion of folk culture would enhance social ties and make them 'organic', was abandoned. Simultaneously, the idea of an unchanging folk culture has increasingly been called into doubt. As a leisure activity and tourist attraction, folk dancing was transformed and re-contextualized into a theatrical performance for an audience. Few if any showed any reservations about this, while jazz and other popular music had meanwhile turned into a widely accepted and appreciated style of music. Although some moralists have continued to worry about the immorality of new popular music and dance forms (for example, rock 'n' roll, disco or house), their voices are hardly taken seriously, and they do not propose folk dancing as an alternative. As a means of socio-cultural integration, no one points to 'genuine' Dutch folk dances any longer. Moreover, it has become increasingly clear that the integrative force of popular culture is at least as strong as that of folk culture (Verheul 1990: 291).

Furthermore, folk-dance groups began to embrace folk dances from a wide gamut of culture areas and referred to their repertoire as 'world dance', intentionally divesting folk dancing of any link with cultural nationalism.

## Conclusion

As has become clear, dance can be 'a site of considerable political and moral anxiety' (Reed 1998: 506). The battle contra modern dancing and pro folk dancing was waged by pessimistic intellectuals who embraced a specific culture conception. These elites, who hailed from the entire gamut of religious and political denominations, denied the masses culture since they regarded the masses to be 'cultureless'. In their perception, popular culture was devoid of meaning. At the same time, they conceived the culture of the cosmopolitan upper classes as a boundless 'general' or 'bogus civilization', disconnected from the imagined national community. With their ideal of *Gemeinschaft* based on folk culture, cultural pessimists attempted to steer clear of the Scylla of 'culturelessness' and the Charybdis of a 'sham' or 'generalized civilization'. Their intention was to contain culture through sanitization. In their nostalgic and idealistic perspective, they attributed curative powers to a rural community life they deemed harmonious and to an ancestral but still vivid 'authentic' folk culture. Both were perceived as an antidote to the disharmony and estrangement they considered inherent in modern society. According to these cultural pessimists, folk culture provided the means to enhance community spirit and social integration, while popular and cosmopolitan culture would inexorably lead to increasing superficiality and disintegration. In folk dances they perceived an expression of folk culture and not only did folk dancing provide a bulwark against modern dances, but it could also restore 'organic' ties. Nourished by the fear of modernization, the pessimists disseminated their normative cultural ideals, miraculously turning their pessimism into optimism. They deeply believed in the potential of 'cultural malleability' (*culturele maakbaarheid*), in the cultural colonization of 'the masses' – and of mass youth in particu-

lar – through an instrumental use of folk culture. Intellectuals from a wide and diverse range of cultural-political persuasions embraced the utilitarian culture conception embedded in 'practical folklore' and shared a belligerent discourse in regard to foreign modern dances.

With the benefit of hindsight, it would be tempting to dub these ideologists of culture politics reactionaries. However, this would be a simplification. These ideologists were well aware of the fact that the process of modernization could not be countered. However, they attempted to control the concomitant changes in order to prevent these transformations from bringing about a complete disruption of society. They thought that folk culture constituted a sovereign remedy able to maintain, augment or recreate social ties. It was precisely this retrospective utilization of a past culture to mitigate excesses of modernization that made them representatives of what Edeltraud Klueting (1991) dubs '*rückwärtsgewandte Fortschrittlichkeit*' (an oxymoron meaning 'backwardly-oriented progressiveness'). As James Hutchinson writes, cultural nationalists 'act as moral innovators and are a recurring force, regularly crystallizing at times of crisis generated by the modernisation process with the aim of providing alternative models of progress' (1992: 101). Their orientation towards a past folk culture was not merely a nostalgic and idealized, even fictitious, construction of a tightly integrated national community, but also a utopian vision of a future harmonious society (see Löfgren 1987: 80). For example, youth organizations aspired to the ideal of emancipating their respective grass-roots members through the myths they constructed regarding a pre-industrial harmonious folk community. Such myths contained ideas about alternative lifestyles providing for social control and social cohesion and the recreation of egalitarianism and social harmony. Moreover, as mass organizations, youth movements themselves were markers of modernity *par excellence*.

Thus, cultural nationalists are not traditionalists *per se* but seek to unite traditionalism and modernism 'in the task of constructing an integrated distinctive and autonomous community, capable of

competing in the modern world' (Hutchinson 1987: 34). Although taking their inspiration from the past, cultural nationalists are also oriented towards the future. Their central tenet is that 'members of groups sharing a common history and societal culture have a fundamental, morally significant interest in adhering to their culture and in sustaining it across generations' (Gans 2003: 7). John Hutchinson rightly characterizes cultural nationalists as 'reformers in conservative dress' who 'seek to use tradition to legitimate social innovation through selective borrowing from others and to rally modernists to the cause of building on indigenous traditions rather than of obliterating them' (1999: 404). Despite invocation of the past 'the cultural nationalist seeks not to "regress" into an arcadia but rather to inspire his community to ever higher stages of development' (Hutchinson 1987: 9). There may be conflicts concerning the balance that has to be struck between tradition and progress and the manner in which cultural nationalists attempt to cope with the vicissitudes of modernity and 'alternative models', but 'the underlying thrust of national revivalism is dynamic, to reform tradition and articulate options by which modernization should be pursued' (Hutchinson 1999: 402). Hence, cultural nationalism is not reactionary or archaizing and it is a force that is not at odds with modernity (or post-modernity).

However, Hutchinson's analysis seems to disregard the fact that cultural nationalism is not monolithic. In the Dutch case, there were ideological differences with respect to the instrumental use of folk culture. Whereas Catholic and Socialist youth idealists emphasized the practical usefulness of folk dancing first and foremost in reinforcing social relationships and solidarity within their own ideational quarters, folklorists such as the van der Vens deemed the folkloristic 'origin' an important criterion to distinguish genuine from invented tradition. They were in search of 'eternal values' and they believed that such values were still alive in the folk (*volk*), that is, the rural populace. In their nostalgic worldview, all progress implied cultural homogenization and thus decline. From this perspective, they utterly disliked functional folklore or invented traditions, which

Catholic and Socialist youth movements had introduced for utilitarian purposes. These folklorists attempted to lean on what they perceived to be the 'source' or 'origin' of cultural phenomena. They projected this origin in times prior to the Reformation of Dutch society, in a 'primordial', 'pagan', 'Germanic' era. This mysticism made them extremely receptive to Nazi views, in which Germanic symbolism played such an important role. The van der Vens, who were already at odds with many other folk dance revivalists, estranged themselves from them to an even greater extent because of their Nazi leanings and language, which they used prior to but especially after May 1940. Whereas one segment of the folk dance revival movement used folk dances and folk songs to 'prove' Dutchness, another segment referred to the very same dances and songs as part of the mystical Germanic community cult of *Volkstum*.

This fact notwithstanding, even after the conclusion of World War II cultural pessimists continued to use folk culture as a weapon against popular culture. In their view, the freedom regained after five years of German occupation and the danger of Americanization certainly called for a moral mission, especially with respect to the Dutch youth. Folklore was believed to have a powerful potential to transfer a past life world into the present or to maintain and cherish what had survived of it for purposes of community building. As Susan Reed points out, 'Regulating purity and authenticity in folkloric dance in a patriarchal and protective mode is a common feature of state and elite interventions, often indexing notions of a defensive culture under siege' (Reed 1998: 512). However, the masses could not be disciplined and willingly adopted the new symbols of popular culture – be it music, dance, consumer goods or something else. Moreover, the interventionism the cultural and intellectual elites deemed necessary was based on an illusion. They themselves had helped create the moral panics that constituted the *raison d'être* for interventionism. They believed in a 'cultural crisis' and were simply unable to imagine that it did not exist. Due to the unstoppable dissemination of popular culture these cultural elites failed to control and contain the culture supply in their own

country. As a consequence, utilitarian conceptions concerning expressions of 'folk culture' eventually became unfashionable. Folklorists and other scholars who formerly sought to keep folk culture alive or to revitalize it turned to *studying* these phenomena, *inter alia*, their distribution, function and meaning, instead of concentrating on their usefulness in reinforcing a sense of community or national consciousness. However, in contradistinction to modern dancing, meanwhile folk dancing had lost its innocence.

## Notes

- 1 I owe thanks to two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to Harriet Impey for her meticulous editing.
- 2 According to Reed (1998: 505), in the 1960s and 1970s anthropological studies focused on the form, function and structure of dances (see also Kaeppler 1978), while since the 1980s the politics of dancing and the relations between culture, body and movement have come into the limelight. For some recent examples of the contemporary use of folk dance in culture and identity politics, see Borland 2002; Kaschl 2003; Wulff 2003, 2004; Klimt 2005; Roginsky 2007. One of the first anthropologists to focus on this matter was Richard Handler, whose pioneering study showed how the Quebecois' political rhetoric tied in with their use of folk dance, among other things, as evidence for cultural uniqueness and legitimate claims for national independence (Handler 1988).
- 3 The more common designation for 'modern dance' is popular dance. However, contemporary opponents of foreign popular dances that were appropriated from abroad usually referred to them as modern dances. In this article, I will follow the vernacular usage although I will occasionally dub them popular dances.
- 4 Julie Malnig notes that '[w]hile many of the steps and movements of the early rag dances [in the USA] were clearly borrowed from black vernacular dances, they became so "diluted" by 1910 as to be entirely different dances' (1997: 147, n.4). Interestingly, in the USA these dances also gave rise to moral outrage and WASP guardians of public manners and morals launched 'a militant counterattack on what they saw as a rising tide of degeneration' brought about by the 'vice' of jazz (Leonard 1960: 30). Early on, WASPs believed [black] jazz to be 'sensual rather than spiritual' and 'a corrupting influence in [white] civilization' (Kamin 1975: 280). However, through policies of containment and compromise jazz gradually gained acceptance in the white upper and middle classes (ibid.: 286).
- 5 At the time, both Catholics and Socialists were actively seeking to improve their position in Dutch society. Although the goals of *Heemvaart* and the AJC had much in common, the membership differed in one important respect. *Heemvaart* members were predominantly students with a middle-class background, whereas AJC members usually hailed from the urban labour class.
- 6 If we take authenticity to mean original, pure, uncorrupted, pristine or untouched, it is impossible to argue that there is such a thing as an 'authentic' culture, identity or tradition (Handler 1986, 2002). They are not immutable objective deposits handed down from the past, but continuously created and recreated, invented and reinvented (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). See also Bendix (1997: 9), who states that the crucial question is not what authenticity is, but who needs it and why as well as how authenticity has been used. Here, I will focus on its use in cultural politics.
- 7 Until rather recently, the controversial history of Dutch folklore studies remained largely unexplored. Since about a decade ago, this has changed and meanwhile several book-length publications have appeared in print (see van Ginkel 2000; de Jong 2001; Dekker 2002; Henkes 2005).
- 8 In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, folklorists throughout Europe were involved in such romantic and cultural nationalist salvage and revival ventures and quests for authenticity (see, e.g., Bendix 1997; Roodenburg 2000).
- 9 On the other hand, however, van der Ven's popularizing activities to promote wide public interest in folk culture were also controversial. Some scholars viewed him as a dilettante who was putting folklore studies to shame. They wrote off his successful folklore festival at the Open Air Museum as a 'banal masquerade'. More generally, personal conflicts in regard to methods, epistemologies and goals characterized early twentieth-century folklore studies in the Netherlands (see van Ginkel & Henkes 2003).
- 10 Van der Ven-ten Bensele probably derived many of her ideas from Sharp, whose approach to dance in turn owed much to anthropologist James G. Frazer, 'seeing in contemporary village customs the degenerate remnants of ancient rituals' (Corrsin 1993: 5). She was also inspired by Rolf Gardiner, who regarded folk song and folk dance as a 'healing form ... to our noisy, mechanical civilisation' (van der Ven-ten Bensele 1931: 18). In the early 1920s, van der Ven-ten Bensele studied English, obtaining a Ph.D. degree in 1925.
- 11 Ironically, she was initially rather critical of Kurt Meischke's book *Schwerttanz und Schwerttanzspiel im germanischen Kulturkreis* (1931), which she reviewed for *The Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*

- (van der Ven-ten Bensel 1932). Meschke and other German folk dance experts attempted to 'prove' the Germanic roots and essence of European sword dances. Van der Ven-ten Bensel criticizes Meschke for deeming sword dancing peculiar to the German spirit. However, the book probably became a source of inspiration for her.
- 12 In this connection, the term *volks* is the Dutch equivalent of the German word *völkisch*. It means 'ethnic', with connotations of populism or people's empowerment. In what follows, I shall translate it as 'folkish'.
  - 13 These included Nazi journals such as *Het Noorderland*, *De Schouw*, *Volksche Wacht* and *Hamer*. For a more comprehensive exposé of wartime folklore studies in the Netherlands, see van Ginkel & Henkes (2003).
  - 14 Initially, the van der Vens collaborated with SS institutions, but following a number of conflicts they turned to the Dutch National Socialist Movement, although they refrained from joining it as members (see de Jong 2001: 537–538; Henkes 2003: 154ff, 2005: 103ff).
  - 15 This constituted a break with pre-war politics in the sense that hitherto, the State had largely refrained from deploying its own cultural politics, leaving it to the discretion of the so-called societal 'pillars' (*zuilen*; that is, ideologically-based institutions) in Dutch society.
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- Rob van Ginkel is associate professor of anthropology at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. In 1993, he obtained a Ph.D. degree with a dissertation on transformations in two fishing communities on the Dutch island of Texel. His academic interests are in the field of maritime cultures, history and anthropology, and national and local identities. Recent publications include *Coastal Cultures: An Anthropology of Fishing and Whaling Traditions*. (2007, Apeldoorn/Antwerpen: Het Spinhuis) and *Wildness and Sensation: Anthropology of Sinister and Sensuous Realms* (2007, Apeldoorn/Antwerpen: Het Spinhuis), a collection of essays co-edited with Alex Stratting. *Another book – Braving Troubled Waters: Sea Change in a Dutch Fishing Community* (2009, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press) – is forthcoming.  
(r.j.vanginkel@uva.nl)