

CULTURE OR COMMERCE:  
FRAMING HERITAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF  
MUNICIPAL SUBSIDIES.  
THE ANNUAL ST. NICHOLAS PARADE IN THE  
NETHERLANDS

---

JOHN HELSLOOT

---

*This article focuses on the practical effects of ethnology's framing of ritual. It examines the attitude of Dutch municipalities towards subsidizing the annual St. Nicholas parade. Some are in favor, considering the parade an element of tradition. Others are opposed, arguing that the parade is a commercial activity. Because the parade, and much other ritual, has both cultural and commercial facets, the author encourages ethnology to design a more fitting, encompassing concept.*

Keywords: ritual, framing, cultural policy

*Članek obravnava praktične učinke etnološkega uokvirjenja rituala, pri čemer posebej raziše odnos nizozemskih občin do subvencioniranja Miklavževega sprevoda. Nekatere so mu naklonjene, saj jo imajo za sestavni del tradicije. Druge pa mu nasprotujejo in trdijo, da je sprevod komercialna dejavnost. Ker ima parada, pa tudi mnogi drugi rituali, tako kulturno kot komercialno plat, avtor pomaga etnologiji ustvariti ustrežnejši, širše zastavljen koncept.*

Ključne besede: ritual, okvirjenje, kulturna politika

The understanding of rituals and festivals was greatly advanced in recent years by the focus on performance and performers, by investigating how these actually *work* for participants. At the same time, it is clear that this approach only highlights certain aspects of rituals. It does not (and does not claim to) tell the whole story. A festival or a ritual is an arena involving not only performers, but other more distant players or stakeholders as well. Therefore, the theme of the conference Researchers and Performers Co-Designing Heritage was well chosen, by taking a wider view and signaling the sometimes neglected or hidden role of researchers in framing and designing phenomena presented by performers as cultural heritage.

“When doing research in this area,” Regina Bendix wrote, ethnologists sometimes “encounter arguments, often outdated, from their own disciplinary history. These have been taken up as tools to legitimise the need for one or another practice to be reclassified as intangible heritage.” She advocated “[c]ase-by-case ethnographic documentation” in order to “identify specific actors, to follow how they initiate and fight for (or against) particular value additions, and denote how they deploy knowledge transfers from cultural scholarship that is usually outdated” (Bendix (2009a: 254; cf. Bendix 2008: 117, Tauschek 2009a: 77). In this respect she referred to “the constant attempts to cleanly separate idealistic from economic instrumentalisations of heritage” (2009: 259; see Klamer 2004 for such a stance). How this works in the actual practice of the “heritagization” process was recently shown, for instance, by Markus Tauschek (2010) in his study of the Binche carnival, and is also manifest in the case study I present here.

## THE ANNUAL ST. NICHOLAS PARADE

An important event in the ritual year in the Netherlands is the festival of St. Nicholas, celebrated on 5 December. Preferably on the evening of that date (but also on preceding days, or, if it fits better with scheduling, even later on) some fifty to sixty percent of Dutch people, both adults and children, indulge in giving and receiving gifts. The basic premise of the ritual is that the imaginary figure of St. Nicholas hands out presents to all children that have behaved well, and punishes those that have been naughty. This idea is expanded to the world of adults as well, who in the name of St. Nicholas exchange gifts on this annual day of reckoning in an atmosphere of benevolent charivari.

In order to uphold the belief that he is simultaneously a real person, St. Nicholas, in the company of Black Peter, his servant(s) in blackface, makes a live appearance in schools, at voluntary associations, in old people's homes and hospitals, and to those that can afford it in private homes. However, St. Nicholas does not live in the Netherlands. Children are told that St. Nicholas makes a journey by steamboat from imaginary "Spain," where he resides, for his annual visit to the Netherlands. Two or three weeks before 5 December, on a Saturday or a Sunday, St. Nicholas and his Black Peters can indeed be seen arriving. One location, preferably a picturesque "old Dutch" port-town, is chosen by national television to broadcast this arrival. On the quay St. Nicholas, dressed in the full—if somewhat fanciful—attire of a Roman Catholic bishop, is solemnly welcomed to the country by the local mayor. After that he makes his festive entry parade through the streets of the town on his gray horse. The Black Peters, all wearing similar brightly colored sixteenth century–style costumes, meanwhile dance, jest with the children in the watching crowd, and present them with traditional gingerbread cubes. The parade ends at a location where St. Nicholas is treated to various amusements and will shake hands with children and their parents. Today this broadcast is watched by between one-and-a-half to two million people.

However, and contrary to normal logic, St. Nicholas not only arrives and makes his parade in the town of the television broadcast, but, more or less simultaneously, in virtually every Dutch town and village. St. Nicholas is a bringer of gifts, but at the same time he is a national icon. Few Dutch will disagree that participating in the St. Nicholas ritual is a vital marker of Dutch identity. Every Dutch child is socialized into the ritual, at home and in schools, producing a strong emotional attachment that continues to hold sway in later life. These feelings are recharged when one has children of one's own. That is why it is considered important that children, wherever they live, can see St. Nicholas' arrival and parade with their own eyes. The ideas of the national and the local coincide here. Therefore, in almost every location of some substance in the Netherlands the festive arrival and parade of St. Nicholas are staged, lasting one to two hours and following a basic general pattern, but also allowing for permissible variations, as local circumstances demand—for instance, in the absence of a port St. Nicholas will arrive by train; if he cannot ride a horse, he comes in a carriage or by car—and as local means allow.

## FINANCING THE PARADE: THE ROLE OF MUNICIPALITIES

To those watching the spectacle, parents with young children in particular, this event simply “takes place.” Because they usually seldom reflect on who is behind all this, the parade fits in well with popular romantic conceptions of folklore as a “spontaneous” or “anonymous” manifestation. It is a public event, freely accessible to anyone. There is no specific “owner” of the parade. It is only when a sense of disjunction occurs, a threat is experienced, or a fear of loss (Bendix 2009a: 254; 2009b: 187), that reflexivity—the precondition for heritagization to take off—may arise. This happened conspicuously in the capital city of Amsterdam in 2009. A large budgetary deficit prompted the organizers of the parade to announce that they would have to cancel the parade that year. Alarmed by this, members of the municipality and the town council appealed to local trade and industry to provide the missing funds. It was a golden publicity opportunity, they argued, to act as the “savior” of the parade. A few companies took the bait and the parade was duly held.

This instance of “vernacular safeguarding”—not confined to Amsterdam, but, also in later years, to other municipalities as well—raises the question of who is financially responsible for the continued public appearance of St. Nicholas. Implicit in this question (or preceding it) is the question of the nature of the parade. It is here that ethnology’s legacy comes into play. The parade is staged, on the one hand, by local bodies of shopkeepers (gift-giving is an important facet of the festival) and, on the other hand, by local committees organizing festive events and associations of St. Nicholas aficionados (cf. Helsloot 2009). In both cases, they try to raise the necessary funding on their own, and the committees are often sponsored by shopkeepers. Although many people volunteer to stage the parade, costs are necessarily incurred. The beautiful costumes of St. Nicholas and the Black Peters must be purchased, rented, repaired, and cleaned. The boat, carriage, or horse transporting St. Nicholas must be paid for. The same applies for the music band(s) and occasional floats making up the parade, as well as the gingerbread cubes, and the candy or small presents often given to children at the close of the parade. Even the man impersonating St. Nicholas, if he has a reputation of being especially good in this role, or the Black Peters will sometimes demand a fee. In the face of all these costs, which vary according to the ambitions they have in making the parade spectacular, organizers do not always succeed in making budgetary ends meet. At that moment, they may turn to their municipalities and ask for financial support.

In Switzerland, Martin Leimgruber established that “[c]ultural policy is primarily a matter for the municipalities” (2010: 182). The same holds true for the Netherlands. In order to determine how local government bodies react to such a request, in October 2009 I sent out an e-mail questionnaire to all 440 municipalities in the Netherlands, asking them whether or not they subsidized the St. Nicholas parade in their communities, and on what grounds.<sup>1</sup> A majority of 65% answered my questions. It turned out that, of these,

---

<sup>1</sup> I published the results earlier in Dutch in Helsloot (2010).



Figure 1. Parade of St Nicholas through Amsterdam, 2006. (Photos by J. Helsloot)



Figure 2. Parade of St Nicholas through Oostzaan, 2006.



Figure 3. Parade of St Nicholas through Rotterdam, 2006.

57% supported the parade financially, through a subsidy ranging from tens to tens of thousands of euros, and 43% did not. Extrapolating these figures, one could say that Dutch municipalities are neatly divided on this issue. In a country that embraces St. Nicholas as a national icon, this came rather as a surprise to me.

### THE CULTURE-COMMERCE DICHOTOMY

Those municipalities sanctioning expenditure from public money basically justified their subsidy because they frame the St. Nicholas parade as a vital part of Dutch tradition, popular culture, or cultural heritage. In line (albeit implicitly) with UNESCO's Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage, at the time not yet ratified by the Netherlands, they were willing to uphold the parade—or, in UNESCO's terminology, to ensure its viability. In their view, the parade represented an intrinsic cultural value that was theirs, as local government authorities, to take under their protection. In addition, they pointed to the social benefits emanating from the parade. Bringing together hundreds or thousands of people, united in good spirits by their desire to watch St. Nicholas' arrival and presence, the ritual is framed as fostering a sense of community and solidarity, and stimulating social participation and integration—all figuring high on the agenda of municipal policy.

Other municipalities, however—those not subsidizing the parade, or refusing an appeal for financial help—took a diametrically opposed stand. One, for example, flatly denied any positive effect of the parade whatsoever on social cohesion. More importantly, their conception of the very same parade is entirely different. Sidestepping its cultural pretensions, they frame the parade as essentially “commercial.” Their plain logic seems inescapable. The parade is commercial because its organizers or sponsors (i.e., shopkeepers and local trade) are commercial agents with their own private business interests. They are indirectly economically benefitting from people’s expenditures on gift-giving, occasioned by St. Nicholas’ arrival in town. For the public, and inescapably for parents of young children, the parade signals the start of the St. Nicholas period for buying presents by 5 December. Local government, entrusted with the taxpayer’s money, is not allowed to engage in commercial ventures. Interestingly, in half of the municipalities not subsidizing the parade, this is because they were not asked to do so. In localities where shopkeepers organize the parade, this seems to mean either that they have no budgetary difficulties or that they agree with the definition of the parade as a commercial event.

This latter reasoning is partial, to say the least. The spectators, largely parents with small children, are defined one-dimensionally as potential customers and consumers. It deliberately excludes the idea that other emotions (such as those surrounding the idea of participating in a “typically Dutch” ritual, or of co-performing tradition as an audience and thereby experiencing a sense of togetherness) may be evoked by watching St. Nicholas’ arrival and parade. By doing so, municipalities are not disinterested. It is in the very nature of any government body to exclude claims on its budget by any means, especially nowadays, when resources are sparse. Framing the St. Nicholas parade as commercial—that is, beyond the range of municipal funding—is an expedient device, sanctioned by law, to effectuate this. To the contrary, framing it as heritage may be the result of the very realistic observation, depending on locally different circumstances, that its organizers are not tied to commercial interests, or are connected only in a limited, indirect way. However, I believe that such approaches would fail to grasp the real issue at hand.

In Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s terminology (taken from Tauschek 2009a: 75; 2010: 252–253), this is the dichotomy between non-economic valorization and economic valuation of cultural heritage. Ethnologists understand that this culture vs. commerce dichotomy is not generated at the very moment of municipal decision-making. Local politicians and civil servants are also heirs of western intellectual history, which effectuated this split from the eighteenth century onwards (Brons 2005; cf. Leimgruber 2010: 166). The conceptualization of a separate base and superstructure in Marxist theory is a prime example. It resulted in the rise of several scholarly disciplines taking culture (in ethnology’s case, folk culture) as a realm of its own, *sui generis*. Thereby they generally tuned a blind eye, both theoretically and in actual research practice, to very concrete, material, economic, or commercial aspects or dimensions of the “pure, authentic” folk culture they cherished, out of political, mostly nationalistic, motivations (Bendix 1997; Leimgruber 2010: 172;

for a recent example of redressing this balance, see Walz 2011). Even today, Regina Bendix notes, “many cultural anthropologists have grave reservations about the economic value-adding processes they observe” (Bendix 2009a: 266). It should come as no surprise, then, that laypeople, familiarized in a long process of popularization with ethnology’s teachings, take the same view when they encounter what they have learned to perceive as tradition, folk culture, or cultural heritage (Bendix 2009a: 259; Pors 2009: 156; Schouten 2009: 167; Tauschek 2010: 316; Dibbits et al. 2011: 83).

## TOWARDS FRAMING HERITAGE IN AN ETHNOLOGICALLY NEW FASHION

One could take a detached view and study the commercialization of tradition with renewed vigor; for example, as Leigh Eric Schmidt did in his book *Consumer Rites. The Buying and Selling of American Holidays*. Or, like Markus Tauschek, one could investigate how the opposed frames of traditional and commercial work out in different historical contexts. Alternatively, one could engage in a new effort of co-designing heritage, which is increasingly influenced by UNESCO policies today (Bendix 2008: 119; cf. Leimgruber 2010: 176, Van der Zeijden 2011: 378–379). Perhaps this is true not so much in concrete cases as at the more abstract level of framing or conceptualization.

UNESCO’s stand on cultural heritage corresponds to that of many Dutch municipalities dealing with the St. Nicholas parade. When “market value [is] being placed on the intangible cultural heritage instead of its cultural value,” the door will be opened to “inappropriate commercial exploitation” (*What is* [2008]: 4–7; cf. Tauschek 2009a: 67). Regina Bendix and Markus Tauschek (2009b: 447; 2010: 181, 316–318) rightly consider this view “out of date” because it presupposes the idea of a pure or authentic core of heritage that must not be contaminated or corrupted by forces foreign to its nature (Van der Zeijden 2005: 13). One could equally, and with good reason, regard UNESCO’s definitions as detrimental to its main objective, the safeguarding of cultural heritage, because in the case of the Dutch St. Nicholas parade it leads to unexpected consequences. As Markus Tauschek (2009a: 76) wrote, “scholars not only analyze but also construct the local thought through their scholarly gaze.” Precisely because the idea of cultural heritage is gaining currency in public opinion, it also comes back with a vengeance at the local level. On several occasions, local shopkeepers have declined to pay for the parade today, arguing (and possibly thereby simultaneously camouflaging their own financial difficulties) that cultural heritage is not their business, but should be taken care of and funded by local government out of public money. When the Netherlands ratifies UNESCO’s 2003 Convention, I predict that this reasoning will gain in force, thus endangering the St. Nicholas parade in the end.

However, as the Dutch cultural heritage specialist Frans Schouten provocatively wrote: “It simply cannot be denied any longer: folk culture simply *is* commercial.” He also added: “Was there ever folk culture that was *not* commercial?” (2009: 164). This is perhaps

overstating the case, but he is certainly pointing in the right direction. As already advocated by the American ethnologist Simon Bronner (2009: 138) and Markus Tauschek (2010: 318), in considering cultural heritage, in our own manner of scientific conceptualization we should overcome thinking in binary categories and analytically sidestep the culture-commerce dichotomy. Not only it is misleading to ignore the important part played by shopkeepers and businesspeople in upholding tradition or heritage, it might equally be called unfair. Interestingly, the field itself already seems to hesitate about the validity of this dichotomy. Just a few civil servants wrote to me that they had difficulties in coming to grips with the issue of whether or not to subsidize the St. Nicholas parade. They were of two minds about this and recognized that the parade's status was ambiguous, having simultaneously both cultural and commercial qualities. They struggled to decide what aspect was tipping the balance.

Instead of reducing the tensions that this ambiguity produces, in my view we should try to intensify these. This will hopefully produce a breeding place for jointly designing heritage in a new fashion. Its task is to “dedifferentiate” “institutional spheres [that have] become increasingly interconnected with each other” (Sandikci and Omeraki 2007: 612, referring to Alan Bryman). As Anthony McCann wrote, the “large commercial sector has developed ways of dealing with folklore and traditional culture that affect their production, dissemination, and preservation. These institutions must also, therefore, be brought into the process of devising and implementing policy in this area” (cited in Jacobs 2010: 41; cf. Bendix 2009b: 182). I myself still have not come up with a new encompassing concept. Traditional ways of thinking prove to be very strong. Perhaps someday, however, we will be able to transcend ethnology's legacy in this respect and reframe heritage in a new way.

## REFERENCES

- Bendix, Regina  
 2007 *In search of authenticity*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.  
 2008 Expressive Resources, Knowledge, Agency and European Ethnology, *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 17, 114-129.  
 2009a Heritage between Economy and Politics. An Assessment from the Perspective of Cultural Anthropology', in: Smith, Laurajane and Natsuko Akagawa (eds.), *Intangible heritage*. London-New York: Routledge, 253-269.  
 2009b Inheritances. Possession, Ownership and Responsibility, *Traditiones* 38, 181-199.
- Bronner, Simon J.  
 2009 De economie van volkscultuur, in: Hester Dibbits et al. (eds.), *Splitsen of knopen. Over volkscultuur in Nederland*. Rotterdam: NAI, 130-138.
- Brons, Lajos  
 2005 *Rethinking the Culture-Economy Dialectic*. The Hague: Lajos Brons.
- Dibbits, Hester, Sophie Elpers, Peter Jan Margry and Albert van der Zeijden  
 2011 *Immaterieel erfgoed en volkscultuur. Almanak bij een actueel debat*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.



Helsloot, John

- 2009 Safeguarding Sankt Nikolaus? 'Top down' und 'bottom up' im Bestreben das niederländische Nikolausfest zu bewahren, in: Karl C. Berger, Margot Schindler and Ingo Schneider (Hrsg.), *Erb.gut? Kulturelles Erbe in Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft*. Wien: Verein für Volkskunde, 225-232.
- 2010 "Wie wil er nu niet als redder van Sinterklaas te boek staan?" Gemeenten en de intocht van Sinterklaas, *Levend Erfgoed* 7:1, 28-34.

Jacobs, Marc

- 2010 De geest van de UNESCO-conventie van 2003: het geheim ontsluit. Over consensus, participatie en omgaan met intangible cultural heritage, *Faro. Tijdschrift over Cultureel Erfgoed* 3:4, 30-47.

Klamer, Arjo

- 2004 Cultural Goods Are Good for More than Their Economic Value, in: Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton (eds.), *Culture and Public Action*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 138-162

Leimgruber, Walter

- 2010 Switzerland and the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage', *Journal of Folklore Research* 47, 161-196.

Pors, Bart

- 2009 Volkscultuur en commercialisering', in: Hester Dibbits et al. (eds.), *Splitsen of knopen. Over volks-cultuur in Nederland*. Rotterdam: NAI, 156-163.

Sandikci, Ozlem, and Sahver Omeraki

- 2007 Globalization and Rituals: Does Ramadan Turn into Christmas?, *Advances in Consumer Research* 34, 610-615.

Tauschek, Markus

- 2009a Cultural Property as Strategy. The Carnival of Binche, the Creation of Cultural Heritage and Cultural Property', *Ethnologia Europaea* 39, 67-80.
- 2009b Writing Heritage. Überlegungen zum Format Bewerbungsdossier', in: Karl C. Berger, Margot Schindler and Ingo Schneider (Hrsg.), *Erb.gut? Kulturelles Erbe in Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft*. Wien: Verein für Volkskunde, 437-448.
- 2010 *Wertschöpfung aus Tradition. Der Karneval von Binche und die Konstituierung kulturellen Erbes*. Berlin: Lit.

Van der Zeijden, A.

- 2005 Volkscultuur als immaterieel erfgoed: folklore tussen vermaak en betekenisstockening, *Vrijtijdstudies* 23, 7-16.
- 2011 De politiek van immaterieel erfgoed: een besprekingsartikel, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 124: 369-379.

Walz, Markus

- 2011 "Nicht zum Geld Verdienen, sondern zu Ehren des Christkindleins"? Absatzmarketing als Ursache der Krippenverbreitung, *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 65, 445-475.

*What is Intangible Cultural Heritage?*

[2008] Paris: UNESCO.

## KULTURA ALI TRGOVINA: UOKVIRJENJE DEDIŠČINE V KONTEKSTU OBČINSKIH SUBVENCIJ. MIKLAVŽEV SPREVOD NA NIZOZEMSKEM

*Po zgledu Regine Bendix in Markusa Tauscheka članek tematizira učinke, ki jih ima etnološko uokvirjenje rituala na kulturno politiko na primeru usakoletnega prazničnega Miklavževega*

*sprevoda na Nizozemskem. Sredi novembra priredijo sprevod v skoraj vsakem nizozemskem mestu ali kraju. Škof sv. Nikolaj na sivem konju, ki ga spremljajo črni služabniki, tj. črni Petri, se pokaže javnosti in otrokom dokaže, da je v resnici on tisti, ki prinaša darila. Približno 50–60 % Nizozemcev se vsako leto 5. decembra obdaruje v imenu svetega Miklavža.*

*V zadnjih letih imajo organizatorji sprevoda včasih težave s financiranjem: za pomoč se lahko obrnejo na občinske oblasti ter zaprosijo za subvencijo. Na mojo elektronsko pošto leta 2009 je približno polovica občin odgovorila, da je naklonjena subvencijam: menijo, da je Miklavžev sprevod sestavni del tradicije oz. kulturne dediščine. Druge občine pa ubvencioniranje zavračajo, saj po njihovem mnenju sprevod promovira porabništvo, je v interesu trgovcev in zato komercialni pojav. Za to razlikovanje med kulturo in trgovino, povezano s sprevodom, je soodgovorna tudi etnologija, saj je pri oblikovanju ritualov v smislu »tradicije« namenoma spregledala komercialne aktivnosti, značilne za popularno kulturo. Celo UNESCO je pri svoji konceptualizaciji nesnovne kulturne dediščine sledil tem smernicam. V primeru Miklavževega sprevoda bi lahko konceptualna pre-zrtost komercialnega vidika ogrozila nadaljnjo organizacijo sprevoda in bi trgovcem ponudilo dokaz, da nimajo nobene vloge pri vzdrževanju tradicije. Avtor zato etnologijo nagovarja, da tudi v okviru izvajanja Unescove Konvencije nesnovne kulturne dediščine (2003) zasnuje nov, širše zastavljen koncept rituala, ki bi ustrezal tako njegovi kulturni kot tudi komercialni plati.*

---

Dr. John Helsloot, Senior researcher, The Meertens Institute, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), Joan Muyskenweg 25, 1096 CJ Amsterdam, john.helsloot@meertens.knaw.nl