

History below sea level

Summary

History below sea level focuses on contemporary heritage practice and identity construction in the Dutch IJsselmeerpolders. As an area of land reclamations reclaimed from the Zuyder Zee in the course of the twentieth century, the IJsselmeerpolders have a reputation for being cold, sterile environments with no history, and therefore, no identity.

History below sea level is divided into three parts, and successively focuses on the role of memory culture, museums and heritage practice in the construction of historical identity for new communities on new land. Identity is interpreted as a narrative construct: we make sense of ourselves and the world around us through (shared) stories about the past, present and future. But identity also has a spatial dimension: after all, through narrative we continuously shape the world around us. Therefore, in *History below sea level* the polders are conceptualized as a narrative environment: a physical and imagined cultural landscape that is continuously produced, experienced and interpreted in relation to narratives about Dutch history and Dutch identity in past, present and future. These narratives are not only (re)produced, experienced and interpreted through the landscape, but also through a network of museums, exhibitions, monuments, objects, people and their cultural (memory)practices that are set within the narrative environment of the polders.

The historical framework that is set out in chapter one, shows us that the history and spatial development of the IJsselmeerpolders perfectly reflects the political ‘state of the nation’ throughout the twentieth century. The closing and partial draining of the Zuyder Zee and the subsequent period of planning and engineering was a time of big transition that was narrativised into stories of loss and collective trauma as well as stories that communicated an unprecedented belief in progress and national development. Three dominant narratives or myths are identified here: the myth of the battle against the water, the pioneer myth and the myth of the polders as an authentic, primeval Dutch landscape. These myths dominate local historical culture and reflect some of the key values that were supposed to describe characteristics of the new land and its inhabitants: courage, entrepreneur- and tradesman ship, patriotism and valour. Not coincidentally, these key values were already part of a much older, 19th century nationalistic discourse that was also instrumentalised in the political debates that preceded the adaptation of the Zuyder Zee bill. The myth of the battle against the water, the pioneer myth and the myth of the polders as an authentic, primeval Dutch landscape (or: primeval myth) would become leading in the spatial and cultural development of the polders.

Following Jeffrey Alexander’s theory of symbolic interactionism (2006), the heritage practices of the IJsselmeerpolders are analyzed as social performances of community, that use the identified myths as

narrative framework and script to make cultural meaning ‘stick’. A successful performance can only be achieved when the elements of performance – the narrative framework (consisting of background scripts and specific narratives), actors, audience, means of symbolic production, *mise-en-scène*, and social powers – are fused. A fused performance allows audiences to experience ‘flow’: the performance is perceived as authentic and natural and ideally leads to the appropriation of the performed scripts. The analyzed case studies show us that the heritage practices of the IJsselmeerpolders are relatively unsuccessful performances: they rarely achieve flow, making the performances of community seem inauthentic and failing to persuade the audience.

Part I revolves around the use of the myth of the battle against the water as a background script in local memory culture and heritage practices in the IJsselmeerpolders in past and present. In chapter three, the grassroots celebrations of the 10th and 70th anniversary of the Noordoostpolder in 1952 and 2012 are analyzed as performances of community and their success is measured by the fusion of the elements of performance. The celebrations of 2012 consisted of an opening speech by the town mayor, an opera called ‘The Pioneer’ and an initiative called the ‘Canon of the Noordoostpolder’. In 1952 similar activities were developed: an official opening ceremony, an open-air play called ‘The Eighth Day’ and an outdoor exhibition about the history of the polders. Both these anniversaries have background scripts that reflect the myth of the battle against the water and the pioneer myth, and communicate stories that celebrate the farmers, labourers and small businessmen that left their homes to build a new polder society. Within the celebrations of 2012 and 1952, the history of the polders was presented as a ‘*histoire de longue durée*’: a long term process of social, cultural and technological progress and innovation. The celebrations of 1952 – unlike those of 2012 - were successful because together the different activities formed a fused performance of community. The most important factors in the success of 1952 were the relatively homogeneous character of the early polder society and the undisputed social power of the Directie van de Wieringermeer, the government body responsible for the development of the polders. In 2012 the polder society had become more complex and the social powers (i.e. the local authorities) manifested themselves as external forces that facilitated the performances, instead of being a natural part of it.

The social powers are also omnipresent in chapter 4, that deals with the ‘top-down’ celebration and commemoration of the engineers involved in the reclamation and development of the IJsselmeerpolders. More than the grassroots initiatives of chapter 3, the ‘official’ commemorations of polder history in chapter 4 tend to focus on the technical achievements of the engineers and the national importance of the Zuyder Zee project, thereby connecting local history to the bigger narrative of national history. The celebration of technical achievements and the ‘great men’ that made it all happen, is particularly visible in the ongoing ‘monumentalisation’ of hydraulic works in the polders like dikes, sluices and pumping-stations. These became the spatial focus of local memory culture. The myth of the

battle against the water and the pioneer myth formed the background script of the official celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the Afsluitdijk and the political discussions about the preservation of an artificial island that housed the first inhabitants of Lelystad, also known as Werkeiland Lelystad. The 75th anniversary of the Afsluitdijk was a fused, large-scale commemorative performance that took place in front of the cameras of the National Broadcasting Service (NOS). The analysis of the performances surrounding the anniversary shows us that the symbolic meaning of hydraulic works in the polders has gradually taken over from their functional meaning. Dikes, sluices and pumping stations are now considered important historical land marks that remind us of the ongoing battle of the Dutch against the water. As such, these hydraulic works serve as a stage and as means of symbolic production in local as well as national commemorative practices.

The celebrations and practices at local heritage site Werkeiland Lelystad on the other hand, were de-fused performances and, therefore less successful. The constant battle between the involved parties and their competing views on the correct representation of local history and the importance of the island as a 'lieux de mémoire', resulted in an impasse and has made a fused performance of community virtually impossible up to today. The analysis of the Zuil of Lely finally, shows that discord does not necessarily result in unsuccessful or defused performances of community. The public discussion about Hans van Houwelingen's monumental work of art and its representation of ir. Cornelis Lely was fierce, but it finally transformed the Stadhuisplein of Lelystad into a performative space that the locals used for formal and informal gatherings and commemorations of events from the polder history.

In Part II I analyze how the pioneer myth is used in the construction of the narrative environment of De Verbeelding in Zeewolde and Museum De Paviljoens in Almere. The narrative environment of both museums was based on a background script that reflects archetypal attitudes towards landscape categories such as the countryside, wilderness and the city, as well as the previously identified myths that specifically deal with the polder history. Open-air art route De Verbeelding was located in the countryside and used art to reflect up on transformations in the natural and cultural landscape. Museum De Paviljoens was located in *New Town* Almere, and collected art in relation to the urban landscape and modern architecture. De Verbeelding was initially intended to provide Zeewolde with a cultural identity and to elevate its inhabitants by incorporating high quality art in the public town space. Over the course of the years however, the Bildung-ideals of the 1980s were gradually replaced by a more professional and art-historical discourse and a focus on the embodied experience of art in the public space. In Almere, local authorities started collecting art in the early 1980s, to provide the city with a cosmopolitan and progressive identity. The early acquisitions formed the foundations of the collection of Museum De Paviljoens, a museum of modern and contemporary art that struggled for survival during its entire existence. Both museums used the pioneer myth as an ongoing inspiration for their museum practice in a

somewhat paradoxical way. On the one hand the pioneer myth was used to celebrate the new land as a *tabula rasa*: a place where adventurous pioneers can build their own future and where contemporary art flourishes, on the other hand the myth was used to undermine the ideal of new land by placing it in the historical context of Dutch expansionism and the heroic, ongoing battle against the water.

Both De Verbeelding and Museum De Paviljoens tried to facilitate fused performances of community within their narrative environment, using contemporary and conceptual art as their main means of symbolic production. For this purpose, the ideal of the pioneer was re-conceptualized as a more inclusive historical identity, appealing to anybody with a desire to build a future in the new land. In both De Verbeelding and De Paviljoens, museum and public space were integrated into one narrative environment. However, the inherently political nature of the public space, in combination with competing views of the involved political actors about the function of art in society, lead to fragmentation instead of fusion. In extreme cases, the physical confrontation between art and society within the narrative environment of the museum even lead to vandalism. The fragmentation was so problematic that eventually, both museums had to cease all activities. The material remnants of both museums remain part of the polder landscape until today, communicating only a small part of the original stories and histories. The narrative environment of both museums will gradually shrink, until they will completely disappear from the polders.

While the case studies of Part II were located in the youngest towns of the Netherlands, the final part of this dissertation focuses on the former islands Urk and Schokland, and the way the primeval myth is used as a narrative framework for historical and contemporary heritage practice on the former islands and their surroundings. For centuries, cultural representations of Urk, Schokland and their inhabitants were dominated by people in positions of social and political power, such as academics and politicians. Around the turn of the 19th and 20th century, the islands were frequently used as symbols of economic and cultural decay, while at the other hand they were seen as places where one could find the most pure and authentic form of Dutchness. For this reason, especially Urk was frequently visited by academics interested in the biology and geology of the island, but also by physical anthropologists, that were interested in the bodies of the inhabitants.

Schokland was evacuated in 1859. Urk is still a living community that became part of the new polders in 1942. The Dutch government was skeptical about the perspectives of the former islanders once Urk would cease to be an island: the Urkers were poor, ill-educated fishermen who had lost their main source of income. Some sociologists even advised the government to evacuate the whole island and relocate the inhabitants. For many of the islanders, the continuing governmental interference in their community and the ongoing scientific research on their physical and mental qualities that continued well into the 1940s, was painful. According to the Urkers, the results of the research stigmatized them as

inferior people. Even more so, the results were misused to deny them a fair chance in the new land, as the islanders were considered unsuitable for farming.

As a reaction to the dominant negative stereotypes surrounding their community, the Urkers started to foster their culture. In chapter 7, it is argued that during a restitution case surrounding six human skulls that took place between 2008 and 2009, these skulls became the material representatives of a collective identity with a highly positive symbolic value. The skulls were connected to a painful history but the restitution was considered a form of retribution and a possibility to celebrate and share local culture and traditions with the outside world. So from a narrative of exclusion in the 19th century, the primeval myth gradually became a narrative of inclusion in the 21st century. In chapter 7 it is argued that the restitution case can be analyzed as a successful, fused performance of community. The primeval myth served as the background script for specific narratives that were used to express religious and cultural identity in relation to stories of historical injustice. The skulls were the means of symbolic production and became the center of a public debate between two main actors: the committee Skulls of Urk and the University Museum of Utrecht. The social powers finally fused the performance when the ethical committee of the Dutch Museum Association decided that the skulls had to be returned to the community of Urk.

In the final chapter the primeval myth is related to the history and development of world heritage site Schokland. The recent history of Schokland and its museum is closely connected to the changing function and meaning of archaeology in the historical culture of the IJsselmeerpolders. In the course of the 20th century, archaeology developed itself from a discipline that was mainly focused on the excavation and study of the material remnants of disappeared or endangered cultures, to a professional and mature academic discipline that operates within an (inter)national legal framework and that has widened its scope to a more holistic perspective on the landscape as an historical entity. The changes within archaeology were immediately reflected in the development of Schokland as a heritage site, but also in the collections and presentations of its museum, which was the main operating base of polder archaeology. Over a period of seventy years, the function and meaning of Schokland gradually shifted from a somewhat coincidental but convenient storage location for the archaeological objects that were found during the reclamation and cultivation period, to a renowned and respected historical-archaeological landscape with a world heritage status. The historical and archaeological qualities of Schokland were not only acknowledged, but also determined the future development of the whole surrounding area.

In the early 1980s the Schokkervereniging was founded, a group of descendants of the former inhabitants of Schokland that made every effort to include the – up to then largely neglected - history and heritage of the Schokker community in the stories that were told on the island and in the museum. In 1995, Schokland was placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, not only because it has vestiges of

human habitation going back to prehistoric times, but even more so because the island symbolizes the heroic, age-old struggle of the people of the Netherlands against the encroachment of the waters. With this motivation, UNESCO officially institutionalized the myth of the battle against the water, the pioneer myth and the primeval myth as the narrative framework that defines the contemporary meaning of Schokland as a heritage site. Since 1995, the management of Schokland has been focused on creating a fused performance of community on the island, through partial reconstruction of the old town and renovation of original elements of the island. In a successful performance however, the script needs to be fused in two directions, with background culture on the one hand and audience on the other. If the script creates such fusion, it seems truthful to background representations and real to the audience. Up to now, Schokland hasn't been fully appropriated by the local community because the script is fused in one direction, not allowing a psychological identification with the local audience.

In *History below sea level* the heritage practices of the IJsselmeerpolders are analyzed as social performances of community, that use three local myths as narrative framework and script to make cultural meaning 'stick'. The history of the polders reflects an unprecedented belief in progress and the ability to create one's own future and destiny. Contemporary heritage practice in the polders seems to depart from the idea that identity, much like the ideal society, is something that can be created by communicating stories about a shared past. The analysis of local heritage practice however, proves that an interesting script is only the beginning of a successful performance of community. Today's polder society is complex, as is the political network that governs it. The one-sided fusion of the mythical scripts that form the narrative framework of local heritage performances, do not allow for psychological identification with the local audiences. Finally, local politicians and heritage practitioners have fundamentally different view on the role of culture in society: for the former culture is a means to create community and identity, for the latter culture is a form of individual and communal expression that cannot always be controlled. Both views do not necessarily exclude each other, but more political guts is an absolute condition to make it work.