

## Chapter 3

# Celebrating Localism: The Festive Articulation of Texel's Identity

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### Introduction

Many anthropologists and ethnologists agree that there is a close connection between the celebration of festivals and processes of identity formation.<sup>1</sup> Festivals seem to be excellent vehicles for the manifestation, enactment, affirmation and articulation of identities because they are expressive, integrative, relational, interactive, communicative, distinctive and dynamic. They are expressive in that they convey and are a charter for a collective sense of self; they are integrative in that they can reinforce the social cohesion and the sense of belonging of their participants; they are relational in that celebrations entail the inclusion of insiders and the exclusion of outsiders; they are interactive in that there is interaction between performers and an audience; they are communicative in that they contain meaning and moral messages; they are distinctive in that they mark symbolic boundaries and aspects of otherness; and they are dynamic in that they can be charged with new meanings and their form and content can change. Festivals are public, clearly marked off from daily life, and practised through a combination of participation and performance (Gradén 2003: 10). Such cultural acts therefore lend themselves *par excellence* to the identity formation and identity politics of, for example, ethnic groups and at national, regional and local levels. As anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain remarks:

‘One of the most traditional and effective ways to stress the identity of a group is to celebrate a fête or ritual together. In doing so, one can feel “at home” among each other. One creates a “face” vis-à-vis other groups. The celebration of festivals is not only a reflection of one’s own identity; it is at the same time a model for the manifestation of an identity’ (1983: 12).

Thus, festivals show participants who belong to the ‘we’ group and outsiders who constitute this ‘we’ group. They provide ‘anchorage in a rapidly changing world, an incontrovertible identity’ (Boissevain 1991a: 5).

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1 See, for instance, Esman 1982; Boissevain 1983, 1991a, 1991b; Cohen 1985; Badone 1987; Errington 1987; Magliocco 1993, 2001; Santino 1994; Brandes 1998; Guss 2000; Gygli 2001; Mitchell 2001; Gradén 2003; Stacul 2003.

Although anthropologists have repeatedly demonstrated the integrative functions of rituals, festivals and feasts, less attention has been devoted to the fact that fêtes can also be ‘an arena for the symbolic naturalisation, mystification, and contestation of authority’ (Dietler 2001: 71). In other words, such festive events link people into a variety of relationships and are latently or manifestly important in ‘creating, defining, and transforming structures of power’ (Dietler 2001: 70). They can both legitimise and confirm established social order (Gradén 2003: 10) and challenge it. Folk festivals are arenas of social action that do not just reflect social change, but can also be conducive to transformative processes. They often express and mediate social issues and conflicts. Through such celebrations, participants are able to articulate certain beliefs, values, tastes and power relations in an encounter with themselves, onlookers and the powers-that-be (Dietler and Hayden 2001: 16-17). Consequently, it is important to study festivals and identity formation from a diachronic perspective. It is, as the Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren stresses, the ‘dynamic and dialectical approach to identity management that is important’ (1989: 9).

This chapter describes and analyses the development of the *Ouwe Sunderklaas* (Old Sunderklaas) festival on the Dutch island of Texel.<sup>2</sup> The Sunderklaas celebration, which is celebrated on 12 December, takes pride of place on Texel’s festive calendar. It is a cultural enactment in which the islanders articulate and communicate by means of festival and display what they feel is genuinely Texelian. Through its performance they show a sense of belonging in time and space, and it is one of the ways in which they ‘make place’. Since the early decades of the twentieth century, the Sunderklaas celebration has undergone remarkable changes in form, content and meaning. These transformations can be understood only in the context of the islanders’ changing self-awareness and notions of identity, which in turn must be viewed against the background of developments in the wider society and their consequences for the lives of the islanders. The transformations in the Ouwe Sunderklaas celebration not only reflect the response of Texelians to what happened in the world without; they have also contributed to a growing self-consciousness and assertion of local identity. In other words, the islanders simultaneously derive meaning from and give meaning to the Sunderklaas festival through their cultural performances. More generally, ‘festival explores and experiments with meaning, in contrast to ritual, which attempts to control it’ (Stoeltje 1992: 262). The Sunderklaas festival is an important means of articulating Texel as a special place – a local ‘world apart’, similar to yet different from the rest of the Netherlands. The Sunderklaas celebration is one of several ways in which the islanders express their localism, a feeling that can be captured in one phrase: Texelians belong to Texel, and Texel belongs to Texelians.

Anthropologist Jane Nadel-Klein states that localism refers to ‘the representation of group identity as defined primarily by a sense of commitment to a particular place

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2 The chapter is based on folkloristic literature, reports in the local newspaper (*Texelse Courant*, published since 1887), interviews with Texelians, and my own observations during the Ouwe Sunderklaas celebrations of 1989, 1990 and 2005 while I was doing anthropological fieldwork.

and to a set of cultural practices that are self-consciously articulated and to some degree separated and directed away from the surrounding social world' (1991: 502; see also Nadel-Klein 2003: 95). I subscribe to this definition. I prefer the concept of 'articulation' above the perhaps more usual notion of 'construction' of identity, because the latter seems to imply that people lend meaning to their identity in strictly intentional ways. This, however, is only partly true: identity formation is also the result of unintentional behaviour and thought. Identities are made and remade, but not necessarily knowingly and willingly. Thus, people usually celebrate festivals not with the explicit intent to construct their identity, but for other reasons. Yet, they can become important referents of identity. Moreover, the concept of construction could easily bring to mind the idea that people work with cultural 'building blocks', chosen more or less at will, to create identity. Appealing though this idea of bricolage may be, it obfuscates the fact that identities cannot be created wilfully. What is important is that identity can change, that it is a relational concept both socially and temporally: it refers to the process of becoming conscious of 'others' and 'self'. As such, it is part and parcel of historical transformations in the wider society. Localism, national culture formation and globalisation are thus complementary rather than opposing trends. However, the degree to which local identity is either stressed or de-emphasised may vary in particular situations and contexts (see e.g. Frykman and Löfgren 1987; Featherstone 1990; Cohen 1982, 1985, 1987; Sandsdalen 1988; Herzfeld 2003). The way in which the Sunderklaas festival has been celebrated over the past century casts a clear light on the islanders' changing awareness and assertion of identity, particularly in dialectic with national developments such as growing economic, social and cultural integration.

### **Texel – 'The Golden Knoll'**

Texel is the southern- and westernmost of the Frisian Islands, a chain of islands stretching along the Wadden coasts of the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark. It is situated some ninety kilometres north of Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands. The island is approximately twenty-five kilometres long and, on average, eight kilometres wide. Of its roughly 160 square kilometres, nearly a third was reclaimed from the sea during the nineteenth century. Its core consists of boulder clay and wind-borne sand deposits from the Pleistocene age. Sand dunes protect the island from the North Sea on its western side, while dykes protect it on the eastern side from the Wadden Sea, a shallow coastal sea consisting of channels and gullies, sandbars, mudflats and salt marshes. The variation in landscape is such that Texel is often dubbed 'the Netherlands writ small'. The island is separated from the mainland by the Marsdiep, a three-kilometre-wide sound. A frequent ferry service, provided by two modern double-decked roll-on, roll-off vessels, connects the island with the mainland. The boat trip from Den Helder to the southern tip of Texel takes just twenty minutes.

Today, Texel has approximately 13,750 inhabitants, who fondly refer to their island as *Het Gouden Boltje* (The Golden Knoll). There are seven villages, the largest of

which is Den Burg (some 6900 inhabitants), the smallest De Waal (400 inhabitants). The other villages are Oosterend (1400), Oudeschild (1275), De Cocksdorp (1250), De Koog (1220) and Den Hoorn (965). The remainder of the population live in hamlets or in the countryside. There are no recent statistics concerning religious denominations, but my rough estimate is that over forty per cent of the islanders are without a religious affiliation. Roman Catholics and Protestants comprise the largest congregations (representing thirty and twenty per cent, respectively, of the island's population); various branches of orthodox Calvinists and Baptists make up the remaining several per cent.

Agriculture and fisheries have long been important sectors of the local economy. Half of Texel's land area is used for agriculture, which has a gross annual turnover of €55 million. The fisheries have a turnover of €32 million. There has never been any large-scale industry on the island. Since the Second World War, tourism has assumed enormous proportions and now dominates the island's economy: the gross annual turnover of tourism is €90 million. At the height of the tourist season there are some four holidaymakers for every islander. Sandy beaches and the island's nature and culture attract many tourists from the mainland, mostly from Germany and the Netherlands. The villages on the North Sea coast (Den Hoorn, De Koog and De Cocksdorp) are especially popular. They have geared themselves to the tourist industry by providing a host of such facilities as campsites, bungalow parks, hotels, bars and restaurants. Currently, tourism employs some twenty-five per cent of the population directly, but the indirect impact and dependency on tourism are much higher, amounting to no less than seventy-five per cent (Van der Duim and Lengkeek 2004: 264).

The island is a municipality and, on the face of it, Texel seems to be not only a geographical and administrative unity, but also a socioculturally homogeneous one, a place where all inhabitants reckon themselves to be members of a 'we group' vis-à-vis a generalised 'they group', to wit *overkanters* ('other-siders'), as Texelians call them. The term *overkanter* is interesting in itself. It evidences a Texel-centric world view: from the perspective of mainlanders, Texel's location is eccentric and on the other side of the Marsdiep. However, the idea that Texel constitutes a homogeneous sociocultural unity is a myth carefully maintained vis-à-vis outsiders. Relative to 'other-siders' Texelians see themselves as a unity, but within the island society a plethora of social and symbolic boundaries are drawn. The distinction between 'genuine Texelians', 'Texelians' and 'import' is an important one – at least to the first category. The 'import' category consists of newcomers who have settled on the island fairly recently. 'Texelians' are those who were born on the island and have been bred there, but whose parents or grandparents were not born there. 'Genuine Texelians' are those who pride themselves on having many generations of ancestors who lived on the island.<sup>3</sup>

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3 This is not a uniquely Texelian phenomenon. Strathern writes with regard to the English village of Elmdon: 'Out of the amorphous and generalising image that "villagers" are all related, there is a precise equation between being a "real" villager and being a birth member of one of the "old" Elmdon families' (1981: 5). See also Nadel-Klein (1991: 506) for an example with regard to the Scottish village of Ferryden.

The notion of 'genuine Texelian' could only develop because there has been considerable immigration to the island. It is a relational concept that presupposes differentiated social knowledge of who can be ascribed to which category. The term 'genuine Texelian' appears to refer to roots in blood and soil. It also has a symbolic value, because those who count themselves as such take pride in it and feel that they belong to an in-group, which gives them the opportunity to distinguish themselves from others. In addition to the differentiation between 'genuine Texelians', 'Texelians' and 'import', the members of the first two categories distinguish categories among the inhabitants of the villages. They say that each village has its own character and that the mentality of the inhabitants of the respective villages differs markedly. Of course, there are several other domains of distinction, for instance based on residence in a neighbourhood, religious affiliation, occupation, age, gender, and so on.

The consciousness and the articulation of local identity gained real momentum after the Second World War, when tourism increased and hundreds of 'other-siders' immigrated to the island. Many elderly people told me that so much 'import' has settled in their village, that these days they hardly recognise anyone. In the past, they knew their fellow villagers quite well, and they miss the days when they could count on solidarity and neighbourliness. Although such stories are not devoid of exaggeration, many newcomers have established themselves in the villages during the past few decades. Especially (but certainly not exclusively) the older islanders experience this as a loss of community and regard the newcomers as intruders in their insular world. They often express a nostalgic longing for a 'better past'. But it is not just nostalgia that is indicative of a strong sense of localness. It is evident in local politics, too: a local political party – *Texels Belang* (Texel's Interest) – has won every municipal election since 1966. In the past two decades, it gained between twenty-five and thirty-seven per cent of the vote. Local interests are central to the party programme. Its vision of Texel's future clearly emphasises this localism: 'In these times of levelling and globalisation, there is a need for a characteristic Texel singularity, which requires that Texel remain recognisable yet not turn into a museum.'<sup>4</sup> The islanders, especially those from old Texel lineages, are quite proud of their island and 'genuine' Texel products,<sup>5</sup> while the green and black island flag is flown in many places. Another source of local pride is the island's ferry company – TESO or *Texels Eigen Stoomboot Onderneming* (Texel's Own Steamship Enterprise) – the vast majority of whose shareholders are Texelians. The islanders' most important public celebration (Ouwe Sunderklaas) is, as we shall see, also expressive of their localism.

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4 <http://www.texelsbelang.nl/inhoud/programma.php>, accessed 14 July 2005.

5 Meanwhile, there is a whole range of such 'authentic' products, including duvets made of 'Texelaar' sheep-wool, cheese, various brands of liquor, beer, soft drinks, bread, soap, honey and so on. There even is an organisation, Echt Texels Produkt ('Genuine Texel Product'), that represents the interests of local producers.

## Ouwe and Nieuwe Sunderklaas

The most important day of the year for many Texelians is undoubtedly 12 December, which is when they celebrate a festival called Ouwe Sunderklaas. Each of the island's seven villages maintains its own Sunderklaas celebration. A fairly large number of villagers figure as 'Sunderklazen'; they disguise themselves and wear masks. Garbed in their curious attires, they process through the village streets enacting performances, or *speulen* (plays). That is, they perform sketches, sing songs, and display or recite rhymes and other texts relating to Texel or village events of the past year in an original way. The 'players' may perform individually, in pairs or in larger groups. Children perform in the afternoon, adults in the evening. Many of the Texelians who do not participate as players join the crowd of onlookers, where they comment on the quality and originality of the performances and try to identify the Sunderklaas mummies. The festivities may last into the early hours of the morning, especially in the island's main village of Den Burg. Hundreds of masked and disguised islanders walk a fixed route through the village's centre. Often, the larger *tableaux vivants* meet with much appreciation, although particularly original individual and duo acts can also count on applause. A jury keeps score of the quality of the play-acting. Following the performances, most players and onlookers visit the cafés, and soon a carnivalesque atmosphere dominates the scene. Late in the evening the prize-winning participants are announced in local hotels or village social centres; the same will have been done in the afternoon for the youth. Old Sunderklaas is the yearly highlight in the celebration of calendar feasts and rituals on the island. Scores of Texelians who have migrated to the mainland return to the island to take part, and the following day the local newspaper devotes to the event several pages richly illustrated with photographs.

Until about 1955, there was also a Nieuwe (New) Sunderklaas festival, held on 5 December. It too revolved around a masquerade and a procession through the villages, and was basically the same in form and content as old Sunderklaas. In the afternoon, the disguised youngsters walked through the streets singing, shouting and blowing horns. They were dressed up as Pierrots, clowns, cowboys, Indians, old men or women, and so forth. There were recurring figures, such as 'charivarians', bear-leaders, barbers and chimney sweeps. At dusk, grown-ups in their symbolic role of *streetfegers* (street sweepers) appeared and chased the youth from the streets. These street sweepers were wrapped up in a gunnysack, carried a broom and clanked tremendously with chains. Once the youngsters had fled, the masked Sunderklazen made their appearance and went from house to house. Many doors were left open so that the Sunderklazen – operating alone, in pairs or in groups – could access the houses, where they were treated to delicacies and hot chocolate or alcoholic beverages. Obviously, they disguised themselves in order to be unrecognisable to the observers – often neighbours, friends and relatives – who had to guess their identity. To remain incognito, the Sunderklazen also distorted their voices. The masquerade per se constituted the core of the event and people from all walks of life participated in it. The performances were often combined with collecting money for charity (e.g. funds for widows and orphans). Late at night,



the players went to one of the pubs where a band played dance music. The celebration lasted until around midnight and was sometimes followed by a *démasqué* (*bekend maken*, or revelation), although many preferred to remain incognito.<sup>6</sup>

Little is known about the origin of either the New or the Old Sunderklaas festival. Nor is it clear why the adjectives 'old' and 'new' were used. Folklorists point to the family resemblance to similar celebrations elsewhere in the Netherlands and Europe, and establish a connection with the midwinter solstice and pagan fertility rites. They hold the view that these fêtes are relics of pre-Christian times (e.g. Van der Ven 1923, 1928). I will not go into these speculative arguments, which seem to originate in romantic nationalism rather than sound empirical evidence. Suffice it here to say that the earliest mention of Sunderklaas dates back to 1816. Nor will I deal with the function and meaning of noise and certain recurrent figures.<sup>7</sup> With respect to my argument, it is important to deal only with the changes in form and content of the Old and the New Sunderklaas celebration since the early decades of the twentieth century, and with how these transformations came about and must be understood.

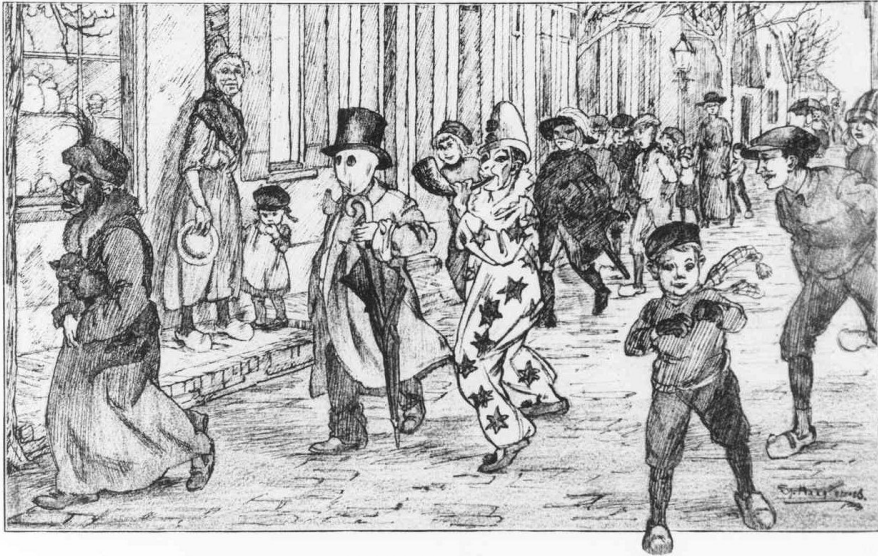
In the 1920s, a new trend gradually emerged: themes relating to international, national or Texel events of the past year were enacted in playful performances, whereas previously this had not been the case. For example, in 1926 many islanders discussed the introduction of electricity. Several players paid attention to this matter, some of them critically, in the Ouwe Sunderklaas celebration of that year. For instance, someone carried a text reading 'The people propose, but the councillors dispose' (*Het volk wikt, maar de raad beschikt*). Apparently, not everyone was pleased with the novelty. The mayor was not amused by such criticism and threatened to prohibit future Sunderklaas masquerades. Although local themes would henceforth crop up in the Sunderklaas celebrations, the majority of performances remained limited to the masquerade per se. Another trend was that the 'street sweepers' and other traditional figures – like the bear-leader, the chimney sweep and the barber – gradually disappeared from the scene. In addition, collecting money for charity became outdated as a result of the rise of the welfare state.

During the inter-war period, the desire to participate in the Sunderklaas festivals declined strongly. Especially the New Sunderklaas celebration was neglected. It survived longest in the main town of Den Burg. However, fewer and fewer people

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6 Similar celebrations took and take place on the other Dutch Wadden Islands (Vlieland, Terschelling, Ameland and Schiermonnikoog) on 4, 5 and 6 December. They include the aspects of masquerade, procession, specific characters, noise and revelation (see Van der Ven [1923]; Oskam [1986] and Vlaming and Witte [1980]). For a description of the Ameland version, dubbed Sunneklaas, see Verplanke (1977), Bus (1985) and De Jong (2004). On the Texel Sunderklaas festival, see also Dekker (1864) and Van der Vlis (1949: 215–219, 1977: 477–478).

7 On these aspects, see Van der Ven (1923, 1928). The folklorist Van der Ven has paid attention to the celebration of Sunderklaas on Texel and other Wadden Islands. His documentary, entitled *Zuiderzeefilm*, includes images of Texel's Ouwe Sunderklaas festival of 12 December 1927. Though in a brochure accompanying this film Van der Ven claims that they are factual, commentators say that they were staged (see Van der Vlis 1949: 218; *Texelse Courant*, 14 December 1927).



In den middag van 5 December ziet men in de Texelsche dorpen overal „de kleine Sinterklaasjes” gemaskerd rondtrekken.

**Figure 3.1** The New Sunderklaas celebration as performed by Texel youth in the 1920s

*The masquerade is the core feature. Illustration by Sjoerd Kuperus.*

participated even before the Second World War, and by 1955 this public Texel fête had been completely replaced by Sinterklaas, a popular 5 December event that was celebrated in the private domain on the mainland. But on Texel, Sinterklaas was not celebrated until the early twentieth century, when more and more islanders began to adopt the mainland custom and Nieuwe Sunderklaas gradually had to make way for it. Despite sharing the same date on the festive calendar and almost being namesakes, Nieuwe Sunderklaas and Sinterklaas are unrelated. Neither Nieuwe Sunderklaas nor Ouwe Sunderklaas had anything to do with the way mainlanders celebrated Sinterklaas. The Dutch Sinterklaas celebration – a children’s festival – was immensely popular throughout the country and is characterised by the exchange of gifts. Its protagonists are Saint Nicholas (the Bishop of Myra) and his Moorish servant, Zwarte Piet (Black Pete). These mythical persons play no role whatsoever in Texel’s Sunderklaas festival and the latter lacks the gift-giving aspect. This fact notwithstanding, among the islanders the popularity of Sinterklaas had been on the rise well before mid-century. In the early 1950s, the *Texelse Courant* and the *Vereniging voor Volksfeesten en Texelse Folklore* (Association for Folk Festivals and Texel Folklore) had attempted to revitalise the Nieuwe Sunderklaas festival, but to no avail. Saint Nicholas and Black Pete had gained a firm foothold on Texel. The newspaper was more successful in the revitalisation of Ouwe Sunderklaas. As of 1937, it put up a challenge cup and cash prizes for the best and most original performances, as a result of which the number of players rose



again. Village and other committees began to take part in preparations for the festival, too. However, it was mainly the 'anonymous' Texelians themselves who brought Old Sunderklaas back to life through their participation and performances. The celebration of the festival became so successful that some even saw opportunities to develop it as an event that might attract tourists during the winter season.

### Sunderklaas Turning Local

The *Texelse Courant* not only played an important role in the revitalisation of the Ouwe Sunderklaas celebration, but also stimulated the depiction and performance of themes concerning island life. Since December 1965, it has published lists of events of the past year, which can be used as themes in the Old Sunderklaas play. That is why local issues came into the limelight. Besides, the newspaper stimulated the 'localisation' by indicating that the festival could be 'genuinely Texelian' only if themes relating to Texel were employed. The paper explicitly stated that the celebration should mask some deeper sense or meaning and should be "'food for thought" concerning Texel events and situations' (8 December 1967). After some hesitation, this appeal gained support. The themes of the performances increasingly acquired a Texel character, and the number of participants and onlookers grew again. At the same time, the performances were relocated to the streets and pubs. With the exception of the celebration in De Cocksdorp, fewer and fewer players went from house to house to play. Moreover, the performances grew in scale and large groups started to dominate the Sunderklaas celebration, often performing on carts pulled by tractors.

Thus, reporters working for the local newspaper – native islanders – stimulated the development towards the localisation of Sunderklaas themes. Village committees and the Foundation for Folklore also encouraged performances related to local subjects.<sup>8</sup> In judging the various performances, they seriously considered whether these related to Texel or village matters and expressed wit and originality. If so, they stood an excellent chance of winning a prize. Ten years after the initial call in the *Texelse Courant* to put 'Texelian matters' at the core of the Sunderklaas play, the newspaper wrote, not without satisfaction:

The time-honoured folklore festival increasingly comes up to its modern ideal: an extremely playful comment on Texel's ups and downs of the year gone by. We hardly discovered any performances with a national or international character. Even among the youngsters home-related performances were favourite. [...] Once more, the established Texel institutions and persons were strongly criticised. (13 December 1977)

The turn towards island and local themes in the Sunderklaas performances shows that the topics of play needed reflection. It became an important goal to consider who

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8 It may seem obvious that Texel bar owners have stimulated the revitalisation of Ouwe Sunderklaas to serve their own economic interests. However, I have found no indication that this is indeed the case. Nonetheless, the local caf  s' turnovers on 12 December are considerable.

or what could be poked fun at in subtle or less subtle ways. The celebration provided a legitimate opportunity to satirically comment upon island affairs. Through the introduction of humour, this moral mirror became acceptable even to those who were poked fun at. This development towards an esoteric localism implied that the event was not suitable to attract holidaymakers and 'other-siders'. Although some Texelians had perceived outsiders as a way to provide the tourist sector with a fillip during the winter season, most islanders were loath to encounter such a 'tourist gaze' (Urry 1990) when celebrating *their* festival. They despise those who visit the island to participate in the Sunderklaas celebration, because these pryers mistake the fête for 'a kind of Carnival' arriving dressed up in curious attires but not participating in the play or understanding the finesses of its contents.

The trend towards localisation continued in the 1980s and subsequent years with the performance of village (rather than Texel) events of the past year, making the celebration recognisable and comprehensible only to insiders in the villages. This development intensified, also among younger players, under the influence of juries of village committees that awarded prizes almost exclusively to strictly local performances. Today, the festival is thriving. It has become an important vehicle to project the identity of Texelians to both the island society and, albeit indirectly, the outside world. The Sunderklaas festival is a clear example of a 'display event' as defined by Abrahams: a planned for public occasion 'in which actions and objects are invested with meaning and values are put "on display"' (1981: 303). A display event 'provides the occasion whereby a group or community may call attention to itself' and, perhaps more importantly, wishes to display itself (Gradén 2003: 10). The individual and group performances lend themselves *par excellence* to the expression of self-consciousness and to imaginative comments on local society. The Sunderklaas celebration is a dramatic enactment of local affairs, local problems and local conflicts (see also Esman 1982: 206).

The Sunderklaas performances are rarely without moralistic and critical purport. The function of the masquerade and the play has shifted from disguise per se to exposing local affairs and 'abuses'. The festival has increasingly acquired critical content, especially since the 1960s. It is now replete with playful comments, imaginative acts of satire and mockery, political messages and elements of parody, hyperbole and play with authority. In this respect there is a strong 'politicisation' of the festival. During every Sunderklaas celebration, several players ridicule officialdom. It thus entails a 'contestation of authority' (Dietler 2001: 71). The local government and the island's main institutions usually get it in the neck. The mayor and aldermen, the municipal council and local civil servants are rewarding subjects even though they are – with the exception of the mayor – locals. In the mid 1960s, for example, several performances mocked the local government's alleged squander-mania (symbolised by a player dragging along a cardboard hand with a huge hole in it) and idleness (a group of young people had converted a mobile workmen's hut into a 'town hall' decorated with catchy, often vicious and dubious slogans. One could peek inside it and see members of the council, dressed in odd costumes, dancing round an antique gramophone under the influence of alcohol).

The critical stance towards local government is especially notable in the island's main town of Den Burg, where intricate group performances are held and people from the outer villages gather late at night to continue the celebration. In these villages, performances relate mainly to local matters and persons, though in the past few years political decisions that have an impact on village life are also increasingly critiqued. Other favourite topics are the *Texelse Courant* and TESO (the ferry company). As I was able to observe, these subjects were also great favourites during the Sunderklaas fêtes of 1989, 1990 and 2005. In 1989, for instance, there was a performance by a group on a cart who imitated the renovation of the town hall. The building was decorated with many critical texts, the most striking of which ran: 'Finally some people are working in the town hall.' Several players poked fun at TESO. In a survey carried out by a national newspaper, the quality of the coffee served on the island's ferries gained the poorest mark possible. This induced several Texelians to rub salt into the wound on 12 December. They carried a coffee machine connected to a urinal. In the accompanying text, the acronym TESO was corrupted to *Texels Eigen Slootwater Onderneming* (Texel's Own Ditchwater Enterprise). During this Sunderklaas celebration, many Texelians denounced the increase in the ferry fares.

Also holidaymakers and tourism policy are usually tackled in one way or another. Tourists and 'other-siders' are not welcome to participate in or watch the Sunderklaas event.<sup>9</sup> During the 1990 celebration, one man expressed this quite clearly by displaying a text that read: 'I am genuine Texelian, because I do not perform with mainland folk.' Other performances relate to more private events, as in the case of plays referring to a somewhat obese woman who had been unfortunate enough to injure her bottom when she used the chamber-pot at night and the object broke. Another instance of such a performance has a strong moral dimension. Near Den Hoorn, a villager neglected the maintenance of his typical Texel sheep's shed (*schapeboet*) because he planned to demolish it. Much to the dismay of his fellow villagers, the building rapidly dilapidated. When the man and his spouse were away for a weekend in the autumn of 2005, some of the villagers decided to carry out repairs. It was the talk of the town for weeks, and during the local Ouwe Sunderklaas celebration players in several performances poked fun at the owner, rubbing it in again. The message was that it is unacceptable to waste much appreciated material heritage.

The vast majority of performances, however, have something to do with important island institutions, and over the past few decades, these themes have been firmly consolidated. They seem to fulfil the need for a symbolic levelling, whereby the high and mighty or otherwise prominent are put in their place through usually mild forms of ridicule. Referring to local events as they do, the Sunderklaas performances lack meaning for outsiders but are saturated with meaning for the islanders and villagers:

A local population can possess a largely unique culture that remains distinctive in that its symbolic manifestations convey meanings that are commonly understood only among

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9 The island of Ameland's Sunneklaas celebration on 4 and 5 December is also fiercely protected from the prying eyes of tourists (Wim Rosema, personal communication).



**Figure 3.2** Texel's Own Steamship Enterprise as a popular theme

*This photograph shows players in a 1963 performance who criticise the relocation of the ferry harbour. They poke fun at the island's new double-decked ferryboat and the ferry terminal, which has a flight of stairs to reach the boat's upper deck. The text reads: 'TESO advises you to go to Tirol for a week before the ferry starts sailing for you will experience that it's hard to climb the stairs particularly with a rough sea.' Photographer unknown; photo from the author's private collection.*

those people. Performances in such *esoteric cultures* relate only to the local milieu that shares a specifically local social knowledge. (Mewett 1982: 222, italics in original).

The fact that the festival is celebrated after the holiday season only adds to this. The event is concealed from the gaze of outsiders and tourists and the Texelians are among themselves, which facilitates the re-establishment of old ties and an expression of 'wenness'. But to understand the developments in the local festival, one should not look exclusively at the local level. The changes in the Sunderklaas celebration described above are inextricably intertwined with transformations in Dutch society and culture as

a whole and their consequences for Texel and the islanders' awareness of their identity (see also Van Ginkel 1995). In the following section, I will go into these interrelated developments and point out how they can explain the changing form and content of the Old Sunderklaas fête.

### **Sunderklaas as a Referent of Local Identity**

Around 1900, Texel was a relatively isolated island. This does not mean that it was a static and self-sufficient society, only that it was *relatively* isolated. For example, mainland novelties and influences penetrated the island in the latter part of the nineteenth century, but did not lead to dramatic changes in local sociocultural life. It was the establishment of the regular ferry service by TESO in 1907 and the subsequent streams of migrants, officials and tourists to the island that brought about far-reaching transformations.<sup>10</sup> Since then, the islanders have been increasingly able to note mainland acquisitions and achievements, either by going there or through the influence of the many newcomers and holidaymakers who invade the coastal villages and beach resorts during the summer season. Processes of state and nation formation also had an important impact. It was precisely because of this confrontation that the islanders could and did become aware of the singularities, the specificity of Texel's culture, and develop a stronger sense of their own identity. This process was strengthened when national newspapers found their way into more households, and radio and television became popular. A former local minister, J.J. Buskes, said about island society during the inter-war period, 'Suddenly [Texelians] encountered the culture of the mainland. ... They began to consider this culture as genuine and developed a sense of inferiority with respect to their own Texel culture' (*Texelse Courant*, 6 August 1952). Apparently, Texelians wanted to adapt to Dutch society as soon as possible. In 1955, Buskes's colleague Janse wrote that 'the characteristically, typically Texelian is disappearing more and more' (1955: 259).

This process of cultural homogenisation was also evident elsewhere in the Netherlands. Various sociocultural differences between rural communities were increasingly eliminated (Knippenberg and de Pater 1988; Van Ginkel 1999). In the mid nineteenth century, the Dutch countryside was a mosaic of communities, each with its own habits, customs, costumes and other cultural characteristics. The horizon of the rural population was limited. The members of a community oriented themselves primarily towards their own village and the surrounding area. Through the development of transportation and communication, mass production, increasing trade, tourism and the growing influence of the central government as well as the involvement of larger and larger groups in national politics, local and regional cultures gradually gave way to a national Dutch culture. The inhabitants of different areas

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10 Between 1850 and 1880 the number of inhabitants increased from approximately 5700 to nearly 6500. The figure declined to 5800 in 1903. Since then the population has increased continuously, as a result of the positive balance of births and deaths and – especially – through immigration.

came into contact more often and more intensively; they became more interdependent and increasingly seemed to resemble each other in a sociocultural sense. Thus, the condensation of networks of dependence and communication – and the concomitant increased economic, political and cultural integration of social formations into national, international and supranational units – appeared to bring about the demise of local cultures. In this process, civilising and disciplining offensives emanating from the urban bourgeoisie were also important. Through churches and schools, associations and municipal councils, among other institutions, the values and norms of the urban bourgeoisie spread to the countryside.

With regard to Texel, these developments may have led to the disappearance of the Nieuwe Sunderklaas festival. The Texelians adopted mainland habits and customs with alacrity. On the mainland, the celebration of Sinterklaas was a long-established tradition. The islanders felt that they could not be left behind, and began to celebrate Sinterklaas. The fact that they could not celebrate the Sinterklaas and Nieuwe Sunderklaas fêtes at the same time undoubtedly had an important impact on the waning of the latter. During the period between the wars, the Ouwe Sunderklaas festival also became less popular, but it did not coincide with a dominant mainland fête, as was the case with Nieuwe Sunderklaas. This fact seems important to understanding why one festival has disappeared while the other has not. On the contrary, there has been a revival of Ouwe Sunderklaas. Initially, national unification was attended by adaptation at the local level, but in the course of time people became aware of a possible demise of the local material and immaterial heritage. On Texel, this awareness clearly came about after the Nieuwe Sunderklaas festival had been replaced by the celebration of Sinterklaas. In spite of attempts to revitalise the Nieuwe Sunderklaas fête, Texelians chose to keep celebrating the mainland festivity of Sinterklaas. According to anthropologists Vlaming and Witte – who were born and bred on the island – Texelians in the 1950s and 1960s showed ‘a remarkable alacrity with regard to integration in and adaptation to the rest of the Netherlands’ (1980: 12). They hold the view that the broadening of the horizon of Texelians through rapid modernisation and integration with the mainland and the economic needs that could be alleviated by the tourist industry explain a lot in this respect. They say that ‘it [would seem] to follow naturally from these developments that people would identify less with old customs and habits’ (ibid.).

In this connection, sociologist Mike Featherstone contends that processes of cultural homogenisation should be linked with processes of state and nation formation. In his view, unifying a culture requires ignoring – or at best synthesising and blending – local differences (1991: 46).<sup>11</sup> However, such processes need not be unilinear and ‘a segmentary perception of social and cultural relations does not necessarily conflict with the unifying demands of statist ideology’, as anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2003: 306) shows with regard to Crete. What is true for nation-states also applies to

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11 In a note, Featherstone adds that regional, ethnic and local differences need not be eliminated (ibid.: 55–56, n. 5). We can see the same dynamics at work in the dialectic between the European unification process and the upsurge of national/nationalist sentiments (see Van Ginkel 1999).



regional and local cultures and identities. It is precisely processes of nation and state formation – and of European unification – that contribute to growing awareness in local communities of their own identity vis-à-vis other communities and the nation or other encompassing entities as a whole (see, for instance, Badone 1987: 186; Hastrup 1993: 180). In the Netherlands, as elsewhere, counterpoints developed as a dialectical response to national homogenisation and cultural unification. There has been a rise of movements aiming to protect or strengthen regional or local cultures.<sup>12</sup> Anthony Cohen points out that where political control, economic power and information management are increasingly concentrated at the centre and where the veneer of a homogeneous identity is distributed through fashion, mass production and the national media, 'one can expect to find an ever greater imperative among the constituents of society to emphasise and assert their distinctiveness from each other' (1986: viii). This applies especially where this distinctiveness is continuously threatened by disappearing structural boundaries – in a geographical sense through infrastructural developments, and in a cultural sense through standardisation and the denigration of local differences by those in power at the core. 'The more complete grows the concentration of power at the centre, the more vulnerable the periphery becomes, expressing its anxiety in a localism which stresses the distinctiveness of its character' (Cohen 1982: 7).<sup>13</sup>

This is exactly what has happened on Texel. It is precisely because of increasing external influences – not least tourism – that Texelians have become aware of the unique character of their island culture. The islanders began to realise that there were negative sides to adopting mainland fads and fashions. The increasing integration of the local community into larger social formations led to the feeling of a loss of autonomy and to an awareness of the imminent danger that their own culture and identity could fade into oblivion. The Texelians became aware that something valuable – but about which they previously had hardly reflected – was in danger of disappearing. This insight was reinforced under the influence of tourism. It can do miracles for self-consciousness and the appreciation of one's own culture and identity when outsiders show an interest in local society. At the same time, the presence of so many tourists increased the need to draw boundaries:

... the 'we images' and 'they-images' which are generated within local struggles to form an identity and exclude outsiders cannot be detached from the density of the web of interdependencies between people. Such struggles between established and outsider

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12 In some places this revival of regionalism or localism came about 'spontaneously', as for example on Texel. Although the local newspaper and a folklore association were catalysts in the revitalisation of the Ouwe Sunderklaas celebration, I would hardly regard them as real localist 'movements'.

13 However, the revival of cultural variety through the sharpening of symbolic boundaries does not mean that the process of nationalisation or homogenisation of culture and identity stagnates or is even reversed. This process can be understood only when studied through local contexts, since '[l]ocal experience mediates national identity, and, therefore, an anthropological understanding of the latter cannot proceed without knowledge of the former' (Cohen 1982: 13; italics in original).

groups ... will therefore become more common with the extent of contact with others, which bring groups of outsiders more frequently into the province of local establishments (Featherstone 1991: 50).

However, the islanders are too dependent on tourism to indulge continually in symbolic boundary-marking. A large proportion of the island's population has to make a living by selling 'uniqueness' and 'authenticity'. As it is celebrated when the number of holidaymakers is at a low point, the Sunderklaas festival offers an excellent opportunity to take stock of who is knowledgeable about island and local affairs, knowing literally 'what is at play' (*wat er speelt*) in the performances. This shared awareness creates in performers and audience alike a sense of place and a feeling of belonging to the island and village communities.

## Conclusions

Localist responses to the levelling dimensions of processes of integration and unification are not uncommon in the Netherlands (Van Ginkel 2003) or in the rest of Europe (Cohen 1982, 1986; Badone 1987; Nadel-Klein 1991, 2003; Herzfeld 2003; Stacul 2003). There has recently been a widespread 'heritage boom', which is part of 'an international preoccupation with reclaiming, preserving and reconstituting the past' and a national and local 'quest for defining identity' (Nadel-Klein 2003: 173). Heritage productions appear to be 'the quintessence of the particular and the local, a statement of uniqueness' (*ibid.*). There seems to be a dialectical relationship between the growing concentration of power at political centres and the increasing awareness of local people who experience cultural loss and resist this development politically and symbolically. In Dutch society this is evident from the rising popularity of local-level political parties as opposed to branches of national political parties, and from the emphasis on local uniqueness – usually with a focus on time-honoured traditions or neo-folklore. In this sense, the Texel case is hardly unique. What makes it stand apart, however, is the specific way in which localism has found its expression and its strong inward-directedness.

The islanders express a growing sense of their own identity through, for example, the celebration of Ouwe Sunderklaas. The festival marks and reinforces local identity in an era when adaptation to mainstream culture seems to lead to a loss of local culture. The process can be regarded as a counterpoint triggered by the increasing integration into Dutch society and, in a later stage, the European polity: 'celebrating a shared identity can convince members [of a local or ethnic community] of the primacy of their common heritage' (Esman 1982: 207). As a result of the growing number of players and the localisation and politicisation of the performances, in its turn this identity was made, remade and strengthened. The implicit message of the festival, for participants as well as spectators, appears to be 'We are Texelians and we know what's going on here', as the critical comments embedded in the texts and performances are comprehensible only to insiders. For the islanders, they are stories 'they tell themselves about themselves' (Geertz 1973: 448). It is precisely the display of knowledge pertaining to one's own

island society that can bring about and reinforce the feeling of belonging, of being part of a community. Through this performance, symbolic boundaries are drawn that indicate who does and who does not belong to the community. Whereas in the past the Ouwe Sunderklaas masquerade could be understood by everyone – including outsiders – this is no longer the case because of the growing localness and thus idiosyncrasy of the performances' themes. Consequently, through the dramatic enactment of local themes in the Ouwe Sunderklaas celebration, the festival has become an important referent of identity for Texelians.

Interestingly, the fête is strongly inward-oriented, whereas more generally speaking cultural performances are often aimed at attracting outsiders, including tourists (Esman 1982; Gradén 2003). The fact that holidaymakers overrun the island for most of the year is important in this regard. Texel depends on tourism to a large extent. In the summer months, island life is geared towards catering for the tourists and the local people do not see each other very often. To some extent, the social fabric of relationships is temporarily unwoven. This changes once the tourists have left. The islanders relish 'being among themselves' again for a brief period of time, and the Sunderklaas celebration offers an opportunity to re-establish old ties. This is also the reason why Texelians who migrated to the mainland often return to Texel to participate in the event. The islanders are of the opinion that outsiders have nothing to do with the festival since they cannot make sense of it. For most of the year, island folk have to 'stage authenticity' (MacCannell 1973) in a variety of ways, but they regard the Sunderklaas celebration as genuinely Texelian – as an experience in which they 'feel themselves to be in touch both with a "real" world and with their "real" selves' (Handler and Saxton 1988: 243). Ouwe Sunderklaas is a way to act out the ideals and values that are central to local society, a reflective statement for the islanders of what it is to be Texelian.

Through the politicisation of Ouwe Sunderklaas, the islanders symbolically express and resist growing supranational, national and local government influence and the accompanying loss of self-determination. They use their performances to focus attention on an important source of tension: local officialdom, which is usually the vehicle through which decisions made at higher levels of integration affect the islanders. The powers-that-be are thus challenged in a playful but unequivocal way. This kind of protest started hesitatingly in the 1920s, when a text like 'The people propose, but the councillors dispose' was still exceptional. But along with the increasing impact of forces from without, the performances and the texts displayed have turned into an unvarnished commentary, often poking fun at or ridiculing and criticising the local authorities – representatives of impersonal central authority. In this manner, the festival provides an opportunity to vent grievances in a ludicrous way but with serious undertones. This implies a sharpening of the symbolic boundaries between 'us' and 'not us', further inculcating local pride and articulating the islanders' identity. The Sunderklaas performances seem to be a register of knowledge about the island's events of the year gone by. Those who can tap into this resource and understand what is literally 'at play' on Texel and in its communities show themselves to be fully fledged community members. Playfully enacting to be

in the know is an important way of creating a sense of belonging, of articulating distinctiveness and of making place in an island society that is firmly embedded and integrated in larger socio-political figurations. The Sunderklaas fête thus provides anchorage in a world of estrangement, real or imagined.

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