

## **‘Evil people’: a late eighteenth-century Dutch witch doctor and his clients**

*Willem de Blécourt*

As a part of the increasing interest in ‘popular’ culture, historians have become more conscious of the presence of witchcraft after the witch trials. Most of the time their attention, however, is restricted to simply indicating witchcraft occurrences. For newcomers in the field a methodological trap also looms. The name of that trap is ‘superstition’ and its character is an often undeclared but determining element in the history of witchcraft studies. The self-educated Dutch folklorist, Tiesing, writing in 1913, tackled the problem openly: ‘people did not consider as superstition everything they do now, because they were firmly convinced of things and events . . . and that which is considered as conclusive, is no superstition for those who believe it’. This practical and relativising remark did not take root. The civilising offensive, in which Tiesing participated himself, overgrew it. ‘Who in witches and ghosts believes, is of his mind bereaved,’ a schoolteacher rhymed in 1949, and his opinion met with increasing approval. In Drenthe, as in other provinces of the Netherlands, it was the local elite, consisting of schoolteachers, physicians and ministers, who joined in battle against ‘superstition’ or ‘misbelief’. They constituted an echelon of the Society for the Public Welfare, who had already held a competition in 1798 to eradicate the ‘prejudices about Divinations, as well as those about Charming of Devils, Witchcrafts and Hauntings’.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I want to not just proceed beyond the witch trials, but also beyond superstition. For witchcraft should not just be considered as an idea, but also as an action. Using a local case study I will chart the complex of expressions and actions concerning witchcraft and, through the reconstruction of the social, economical and political backgrounds of those involved, relate it to various contemporary contexts. I am furthermore interested in the channels of communication through which the reports about witchcraft have been transmitted. I want to stress at the start that generalising statements and conclusions will only be possible after a synchronic and diachronic comparison between several studies have been conducted in a similar manner.

The time is the end of the eighteenth century, the place is Meppel, and the man Derk Hilberding is a witch doctor nicknamed ‘Popish Derk’.<sup>2</sup>

### **The judicial context**

In 1712, the paragraph in the Laws of the province of Drenthe concerning the punishment of (harmful) witchcraft was deleted. However, the crime of scolding someone for being a ‘Thief, Murderer, Witch [male or female]’ remained, and was punishable by a fine of up to fifty gold guilders. This slander paragraph once contained the principle of the *talio*, the accusatory procedure that forced a slanderer either to prove or withdraw insults that accused someone of a crime, thereby harming his or her good name and honour. When (harmful) witchcraft stopped being a crime, if only for the judiciary, this slander law was primarily used to maintain social order.

According to the Drenthe lawyer Van Lier, writing in 1773, it served ‘to prohibit the superstitious or malevolent use of the word Witch, and similar words’. In the layered system of law in Drenthe, a slander trial did not always end up before the highest judicial institution, the central and only permanent court, the *Etstoel*. After the (compulsory) reporting of a complaint to the *goorspraak*, a lower moveable court held every half-year in each county, parties could reach an agreement or let the case slide.

Another paragraph retained during the revisions of the statutes in 1712 concerned fortune-tellers and soothsayers, especially those ‘who dared to recover stolen or lost things by charming or other deceiving or illicit means’. These kinds of people, among whom cunning-folk and witch doctors were also counted, were to be flogged and banned. Even consulting them was punishable with a fine, which increased with the number of consultations made. Thus in eighteenth-century Drenthe witchcraft was punishable in three ways: for publicly identifying suspected witches, for consulting specialists in the field of unwitching, and for practising as a fortune-teller or witch doctor.

### **We also use his medicine**

In the settlement of Meppel in 1762 Derk Hilberding, an unmarried man of Vreden in Germany, married the widow Jacomina (Mia) Snavels. His wife was a member of the Dutch Reformed church while he was a Catholic.

Regarding the next twenty years of his life little more is known about him other than that a number of his children were baptised, and that most of them died young, although in 1788 two of them, a son and a daughter, were still alive. The tax assessment for his ‘hearth stead’ was fixed on the lowest payable level of one guilder, and he earned his bread as a weaver’s hand.

The first recorded event linking Hilberding with witchcraft was a neighbour’s row. On 10 September 1782 the weaver Hendrik Havezaat, who was

nicknamed 'Swissy' because he originated from Kaltenbach in the canton of Zürich, reported that Lucas Fidel had called his (Havezaat's) wife, a 'hexe' or witch. At that point Fidel was about fifty-eight years old and he was provided for by the social welfare of the church. In turn, he reported 'that the children of Hendrik Havezaat offended him all the time' and that there had been a giant row between Havezaat and Hilberding. In the light of later developments it does not seem too far-fetched to suppose that Hilberding had suggested that Janna Kusters, the weaver's wife from Nordhorn, had been instrumental in bewitching one of the members of Fidel's family. The row seems to have been an internal affair between migrants, neighbours and colleagues; it was not continued in court.

Six years later, on 29 September 1788, the local bailiff made a note in the records of the *goorspraak* that, at his request, Jan Preuver had reported to him that Popish Derk told people that they were bewitched and that he had subsequently healed them. The same information was reported in a complaint made by Willem Kappers. These reports formed the basis of a trial against Hilberding that resulted in his banishment for life from the province of Drenthe. As it was formulated in the verdict, he had:

visited several people suffering from languishing illnesses and forced onto them, out of a dirty strive for profit, that their ailments were caused by evil people and they therefore were bewitched, and had next pretended daringly that he could cure them, and in order to gain more credence had not refrained from, while practising many externally superstitious performances and calling on God's holy name, applying medicines by the name of *heiligdom* [consecrated piece of wax] and holy water . . . [pretending they were] miraculous, and even accusing of witchcraft citizens who were of good repute and fame.

The supplements to this verdict enable us to understand fairly well how Hilberding operated.<sup>3</sup> He appeared to have had a series of patients whom he tried to convince, one by one, they were bewitched. In this series Jan Preuver and his wife occupied a central place.

For quite some time Preuver had been suffering from severe pains in his intestines. He had used medicines from the surgeon Kuijper, which had not helped. He had had remedies from a doctor who had lodged at Claas Brouwer's, but had not obtained relief by them either. Then he heard that Popish Derk was curing people. Together with his wife, who had likewise been suffering for some time, he visited him. Hilberding told them that 'with God's blessing he could cure them both, but that their ailment was caused by evil people'. In answer to the question who had done it, he said: 'you have to be careful with the wife of the baker Piet Schuphof'. Later at Preuver's home the healing ritual was held. Derk knelt down, mumbled or prayed something, and put something the size of a grain of rye on the tip of a knife. 'It should not be touched by the teeth,' he said, when he put it in their mouths,

‘in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost’. Then he gave them some liquid out of a little bottle to rinse their mouths with. ‘They had to read the First Chapter of the Gospel of St John’. Soon afterwards Derk also brought them a packet of herbs, to be brewed in spirits, and a bottle from which they had to take drops in the evening. Both Preuver and his wife felt markedly better afterwards. To support his diagnosis, Hilberding advised Preuver and his wife to cut open their pillows. Strange ‘things’ were found inside, ‘that were marvellous, like the feathers had been braided’. Because Preuver’s mother also found ‘those things’ in her pillow, she also swallowed a grain on the tip of a knife as a precaution.

The success of Hilberding’s treatment was obviously broadcast. Berent Beugelink had an ill child of less than a year old. Preuver advised him to look in its pillow and he too found ‘little things’ or ‘wreaths’, which he discussed with Hilberding at Preuver’s home. The witch doctor applied the same treatment, advising him ‘to keep the door closed to the wife of sargeant Habik’. Because this was difficult to carry out, Beugelink sent his wife and child to Uffelte, a village nearby, for a few days. Minicus Geerts, a labourer in the employ of the carpenter Roelof Tijmens, was another who had felt unwell for quite a long time. He had used medicines supplied by the apothecary Radijs and from doctor Cok in Steenwijk. Nothing had helped, so he too consulted Hilberding at Preuver’s home. Hilberding listened to his complaints and said: ‘Yes, continue with using medicines, you will at first think that you have improved a bit, but you have to use medicines very long before you will get rid of it. Evil people did it to you.’ At this point in time Minicus was not interested in the latter and was only concerned with the cure: ‘if I could only get cured than I do not care how I got it’. After his course of treatment had finished, however, he did enquire who had made him sick. ‘I do not know’, Hilberding replied, ‘better stay out of the church next Sunday, and do not meet too many people’.

Grietien Hendriks, the wife of the cobbler Harm Thalen, had been tormented for years by pain in her intestines. In Amsterdam, where she had served as a maid, and afterwards in Meppel, she had fruitlessly taken various medicines till she heard about and consulted Popish Derk. He was of the opinion ‘that evil people in Amsterdam had done it to her and that she was bewitched. If you had gone immediately to a Roman Catholic church and had drunk a teacup full of holy water, than you would not have had any trouble’. Her husband did not believe this, ‘but that it sufficed if his wife was cured from her ailment’. Hilberding performed the same ritual for her as well, and remarked that the remedy came from a Catholic monastery and that the bottle contained holy water.

Geesje Arents Bloemberg, the wife of Jan Mulder, also heard that Preuver and his wife thought themselves bewitched and used medicines supplied by Popish Derk. ‘How could you who are sensible people, give credence to such

things', she asked. In reply they tried to convince her, 'with much force of arguments'. Her youngest child, who was unwell, could easily have the same 'inconvenience', suggested Geesje. The Preuvers said she should cut open the pillows at her home, and then she would find the tell-tale 'wreaths'. Once back in her own home, Geesje felt 'much affected' and told her maid that the Preuvers 'had tried to make her have such thoughts, but she could not believe such things'. The maid did not want to hear about it either as the youngest child had 'just started to gain some weight again'. They nevertheless decided to cut open the pillows, in which they found a multitude of 'round wreaths'. Upset, Geesje returned with the wreaths to Preuver, who advised her to visit Popish Derk and obligingly ferried her in his punt to Hilberding's home across the channel. Hilberding was not home, but his wife promised to send him along as quickly as possible.

As soon as Geesje was home again, the neighbours came round to have a look at the wreaths. The wife of Willem Kappers, with whom Geesje had very good relations – 'as if they were sisters', was still there when Hilberding finally arrived. He refused, however, to do anything in the presence of Mrs Kappers. The insinuation was that she was the cause of the trouble. Geesje initially objected saying that Mrs Kappers was 'much too big a friend of hers' and she could not 'ban her from the house'. Besides, that very same day, a Sunday, Mrs Kappers was going to help her cut beans. But Hilberding was adamant that 'That woman should stay away for a day or four'. The maid, who halfway through this exchange had withdrawn to the back of the house together with another female neighbour, was allowed to remain, but Mrs Kappers was asked to leave. To her the back door was now firmly closed. Only after this did Popish Derk perform his ritual acts.

### **Belief, superstition and behaviour**

The practice of fortune-telling and beneficial magic was, like the unofficial exorcising of devils, punished by the pre-Reformation Church. When this aspect of church law was subsequently incorporated within secular law the meaning of such 'white magic' shifted: the distinction between ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiastical counter-witchcraft was replaced by the distinction between the Reformed Creed and superstition. By the latter Protestant ministers meant Catholic practices rather than irrational opinions. The fortune-tellers and cunning-folk thus saw their ranks swelled by popish sorcerers – at least according to the opinion of the only institution to report on this: the Reformed Church.

At the end of the eighteenth century Hilberding's actions were still branded 'superstitious'. The judges further opined that he had enticed 'citizens who were unknowing and of fickle belief' to commit an 'outrageous superstition' that should 'not have a place in these enlightened times'. They would have

concurred with the words of the Enkhuizen physician Gerbrand Bakker. In the same period he called for the eradication of everything ‘that was still left of the miserable witchcraft prejudice’. A wreath, or a ‘little crown’ as he called it, was ‘nothing other than a lump of coarse feathers, which by grubbiness and by being compressed too long, clung together. Everything strange which one finds in pillows or in mattresses has been put in there by humans, be it for fun or for other reasons’. Around the same time, the minister Beekhuis from the Frisian Garijp also highlighted the ‘natural causes’ of such phenomena. Wreaths formed because feathers became greasy through heating and sweating and because bits of fat had inserted themselves at washing. He suggested that pillows be thoroughly shaken, and as a form of proof advised that a control sample be taken by cutting open the beds of healthy people. By classifying witchcraft as ‘superstition’ it belonged to another genre for the local elites. But in practice people involved in witchcraft accusations had less stereotypical opinions. The wish to be cured dominated the aspect of belief. The witch doctor – who was not always known as such – was only one healer in the medical market. Physicians, surgeons, apothecaries and quacks were all consulted in cases of lingering illnesses. It could be suggested in this respect that confidence in the efficacy of one category of medicine represented a choice *between* one or other of the systems of ideas available. This rule, however, is not compelling. Even when the remarks of witnesses under examination were influenced by the need to appease their examiners – the local sheriff and his officials – it still appears that Hilberding’s patients were aware of the opinion that one should not believe in witchcraft, and that they expressed this opinion at relevant moments. The adoption of a symbolic frame of reference was at least selective, if not also temporary.

Only in the eyes of the civilisers did ‘superstition’ stand as a negatively defined system opposed to official belief and science. In the daily lives of the ‘common folk’, official and condemned systems of belief were actually mutually complementary or exchangeable. People were capable of commenting upon beliefs and assessing their applicability. So, seen from the position of actual people, opposing frames of reference blurred into choices, which in practice were not necessarily contradictory. Lucas Fidel, for instance, continued to receive welfare from the church, even though the guiding Heidelberg catechism condemned witchcraft in question ninety-four. Minicus Geerts, the carpenter’s labourer, was ordered not to enter the church for one Sunday, which suggests that he usually attended service. It is also questionable whether for the others the experience of Hilberding’s ritual was seen as tantamount to denouncing the creed of the Reformed Church.

The connection between ideas and actions can only be made when we forsake vague social categories such as ‘one’ or ‘the people’ and instead consider cultural expressions as products of individuals. Witchcraft was not a universal heritage of an anonymous community, but a means of orientation within daily

life. Like any other expression, it cannot be considered as autonomous, which is certainly the case with a classification that does not reach beyond 'superstition' or 'folk belief'. Because it concerns actual people it is moreover possible to study their mutual relationships, and in that way make more explicit the social categories to which they belonged. In other words, additional material can be found about the behaviour and backgrounds of those who thought they were bewitched, of those accused of the bewitchments, and about the motives of the person who was professionally engaged to unwitch. The next step, then, is to look for the similarities and differences between the participants. Is it possible to identify constants regarding issues such as origin, family, age, gender, marital status, education, trade, political persuasion, character or income? Next to these synchronic points of attention the more diachronic, processual questions also deserve to be elaborated. Is it possible to discover intersections in the life histories of the participants, other than matters of witchcraft? Is it possible to consider witchcraft accusations as expressions of social conflict? Did conflicts between the participants already exist before the accusations, or were they on the contrary initiated by the accusations? What kind of reactions can be identified? What effects did the measures of the provincial and local governments have? To understand expressions concerning witchcraft within the contexts of those who produced them and those to whom they were addressed, it is also necessary to be able to situate these contexts within a more encompassing series of connections. Here, I restrict myself to sketching the situation in Meppel in the period concerned.

### **The township of Meppel**

Meppel at the end of the eighteenth century has been described as a 'closely boarded township'.<sup>4</sup> In the legal sense, though, it was no town. For judicial verdicts people had to rely on the *Etstoel*, which was established in Assen. Nevertheless, citizenships were sold in Meppel for five *guilders* and twelve *stivers* a person. The place was located on a transport crossroads. Towards the south the Meppel channel ran to Zwartsluis, from where Hasselt, Blokzijl and Amsterdam could be reached. A ferry to Amsterdam ran twice a week on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The Hogeveen canal ran eastwards, and to the north another canal to Assen had recently been dug between 1769 and 1780. Both canals facilitated the large-scale transportation of peat. Over land, Meppel was on the postal route from the south to Frisia and Groningen. In 1774 a traveller described Meppel as 'very tidy'. From 1780 onwards they had street lights and from a regulation in 1787 it is clear that the council made an effort to tackle the mucky state of the streets and the water supply. Everyone who did not have room for refuse behind their houses had to put it, rather than throw it, in front of their doors in the morning, to be collected by cart-men. In 1788 the number of occupied houses, described as 'hearth

steads', amounted to 881. They were dispersed over eleven districts, each made up of around eighty houses. The districts were ordered in a spiral pattern. The first district was located in the north-west, the seventh in the south-east, the ninth in the south-west and the eleventh in the centre, due west and north-west of the church, which stood in the fourth district. Reports to the *goorspraak* took place district-wise, taxes were collected by district, fire-fighters and night watches were organised by district, and in 1795 the inhabitants were counted by the district. In that year there were 3656 inhabitants, of whom 1144 were men and 1179 were women above twenty years of age, who lived in 913 houses. The number of houses increased seven per year on average, though building stagnated slightly towards the turn of the century. There was a small death surplus between 1742 and 1795, and the number of births only began to exceed the number of deaths from around 1790. A contemporary statistician noticed this phenomenon. 'At Meppel', he observed, 'many maids, bargemen, weavers and factory labourers come to live from elsewhere, and this naturally means that the number of yearly deaths has to be bigger than that of births'. Many people lived in Meppel on a temporary basis, and many of those born there, such as maids, moved away for some time to places like Amsterdam. These fluctuations are hardly expressed by the total number of inhabitants and neither is mobility within Meppel. New inhabitants, around fifteen heads of family or single persons a year, came mostly from the surrounding countryside of Overijssel and the peat areas of Drenthe, while the rest came from other towns in the region and from across the border in Germany.

Bargemen constituted the biggest occupational group in Meppel (around 15 per cent, their workers included). They were organised in two guilds and their living quarters were located mainly in the west, alongside the Channel. The labourers, dockers and day-labourers (8 per cent) were concentrated in the same districts as the bargemen. In contrast, the weavers (10 per cent) and the carpenters (4 per cent) were more widely distributed across town, though there was a slight concentration of weavers in the east. In the period concerned, weaving was one of Meppel's most important forms of industry. There were linen weaving mills, where sailcloth was made for the East India Company. There were bedtick mills, as well as satin and tablecloth-weaving factories. Before 1790 over 400 looms would have been present, not counting domestic looms. Women and children were thus certainly working there, although they do not appear in the surveys. Because of this, little can be concluded about the division of labour between men and women. Quite often widows took over the activities of their husbands, which makes one suspect that they were already involved before. Normally, however, men and women had separate activities. In a marriage contract, for instance, in which the partners committed themselves to care for the children from a previous marriage: where both boys and girls had to learn how to read and write, the



boys were expected to master a trade and the girls to acquaint themselves with needlework and knitting.

As well as the weaving mills there were also some dye and bleaching works and significant numbers of tailors, hatters and button-makers. Furthermore the place harboured a dozen breweries and gin distilleries and a similar number of windmills for several purposes. Some 7 per cent of the occupational inhabitants, as noted in 1797, were engaged in commerce. Other occupations mentioned include: inn keeper, baker, cart-man, cobbler, tanner, soap-boiler, rope-maker, broom-maker, butcher, painter, glazier, diamond cutter, midwife, apothecary, rattle watch, lock-keeper, blacksmith, Chandler, or saddler. From the 1788 hearth registers it is possible to deduce that 60 per cent of the main inhabitants practised an independent trade, 32 per cent worked in some kind of salaried employment and 8 per cent were paupers. In social and economic respect Meppel was certainly a town. It had a Latin school, a bookshop and two well-attended comprehensive schools. The majority of the inhabitants belonged to the Reformed Church. Already before the French occupation in 1795 a small Lutheran church had been established, and in 1799 some 200 Jewish inhabitants inaugurated their synagogue. Politically the people of Meppel were, like elsewhere in the Netherlands, divided into 'patriots', who were to support the French occupation, and the monarchist Orangists. In the middle of the 1780s both groups clashed regularly, especially in 1785, when Willem V, of the house of Orange, made his entry into Meppel. Against this general portrait of the town, we can situate Hilberding, those he accused of witchcraft, and his patients.

### **The bewitched**

Three out of the four families under study here had ties with Amsterdam. Preuver was born there and his wife, Lijsje de Vriese, had served there as a maid, as had the wives of Roelof Tijmen and Harm Thalen. This was not exceptional in itself. Commercial connections existed between the two places (peat and sailcloth) and there was an excellent ferry service. In the ten years from 1783 up until 1792 a little over one hundred issues of intended marriage occurred in Amsterdam in which one or both partners originated from Meppel. Regarding the flow of people moving in the other direction, around seven attestations a year were issued by the churches regarding people moving from Amsterdam to Meppel. Since the amount of people from Amsterdam settling in Meppel was much smaller in those years, the figures presumably concerned people who temporarily worked in Amsterdam. Hilberding's patients, at least those described here, were not selected by chance. Jan Preuver and his family were directly involved in introducing Hilberding to Minicus Geerts and Berent Beugelink. All lived close next to each other by the *Sluispad*. This path ran west along the old branch of the

Meppel Channel, from the lock to Brewer's Street. At the back of the houses were fields while the fronts faced the Channel. They, therefore, only had neighbours to the left and right. In the early 1780s Preuver acted at the *goorspraak* as a representative of his district and in 1792 he was nominated to be a deacon. He was a pole- and block-maker, and we can consider him and the carpenter Roelof Tijmens more or less as colleagues. Berent Beugelink, a bricklayer, was, as is shown by the baptismal record of his first child, related to Preuver's wife. Family ties also constituted the link with the families of the bargeman Jan Mulder and the cobbler Harm Thalen, both of whom lived in two other outlying areas of Meppel, in the first and eight districts. Lijnsje de Vriese, Preuver's wife, referred to Geesje Arents Bloemberg, Jan Mulder's wife, as 'cousin' (supposedly an expression for a third degree relationship). Harm Thalen was Roelof Thijmens' brother-in-law, as their wives Jacobje Hendriks and Grietje Hendriks were sisters. Within the district the mutual lines of communication ran through neighbours and outside it through female relatives.

Apart from Minicus Geerts the men were all self-employed craftsmen between thirty and forty-five years old. A number of the women had served as maids before their marriage. They were members of the Reformed Church, and were at least semi-literate. Jan Preuver could read and write and obviously expected his customers to be able to read as well. We know from a travel account that he had hung a poetic advertisement on his barn and that he composed rhymes for special occasions. Roelof Tijmens could write his own signature, as could Harm Thalen, who moreover, as was agreed at his (second) marriage, wanted to send his son to school 'to be taught decently to write and to do maths, as well as the principles of religion'. Jan Mulder and Geesje Arents Bloemberg were also capable of signing their names. They all originated from Meppel or from villages in the near vicinity. As far as their political affiliation can be traced, it seems they leaned towards the Orangists. The triumphal arches and crowns that bedecked Meppel to welcome the arrival of Willem V on 11 November 1785, were made at Roelof Tijmens' place 'since they had a barn of 40 feet long'. On the day he accompanied the royal coach but was not involved in the disturbances because, he said, he had three children. Bargemen and related craftsmen such as carpenters and labourers were generally sympathetic to the Orangists.

### **The witches**

Hilberding accused three women of witchcraft, albeit in an indirect way. Were there any similarities between them, other than being the subject of witchcraft accusations? Did Hilberding employ a specific system of identification? In any case, he did not mention men as being responsible, only 'evil people' in general or specific women. The ages of the three women at the time of their

being accused were twenty-three, forty-four, and 'old'. Age was not a common factor, then, though being married may have been. The occupations of their husbands, baker, soldier and tailor, only point to a constant factor in a negative sense: they were not connected with bargemen or carpenters. On average, their financial position was below that of their supposed victims. With regard to religion and literacy, however, they seem to share the same profile as the bewitched.

More determining than the classification of being 'poorer' are two other factors: origin and place of residence. All three women were immigrants from beyond Meppel and its hinterland, as was Hilberding for that matter. Schuphoff and his wife were originally German. Habik (or Habiech)'s place of birth is unknown and was thus almost certainly from outside the Netherlands. Willem Kappers came from Rheden, in Guelders; his wife's parents had lived in Hoogeveen, but had migrated there. In this respect they stood as a group apart from those bewitched. Did Hilberding feel safer when he mentioned their names, rather than the more local inhabitants of Meppel? Or were his opinions related to a more general image?

By accusing neighbouring women he kept within tradition. It is significant that the families concerned did not remain neighbours. Two of three accused women moved home just after the witchcraft affair: Schuphoff and Kappers moved to different districts in Meppel. Beugelink also moved to another part of the town. At first sight, Geesje Tinholt, Schuphoff's wife, who Preuver suspected of witchcraft, was the exception. For she was *not* Jan Preuver's neighbour, at least not an immediate one since the *Oeverstraat* where she lived was located at the same side of the Channel as the *Sluispad*. Apart from Hilberding's personal considerations – after all he had to point out a credible 'witch' – social space may offer an explanation. In the two other cases, Beugelink *versus* Habik and Mulder *versus* Kappers, we are dealing with families who lived next to each other for a short period only, and who did not occupy a prominent place within Meppel. Jan Preuver, on the other hand, had been able to build a position of respect in his neighbourhood over the years. His social standing, although marginal within Meppel as a whole, was considerable within his district. For this reason the cause of the witchcraft that threatened his social position may have been sought in the next district, instead of in the next house. Because of her reputation for unruly behaviour (she was reported to have misbehaved herself at a funeral), the foreigner Geesje Tinholt would have made a good candidate witch in the minds of Hilberding and Preuver.

### **Out of a dirty strive for profit**

It is difficult to ascertain whether political motives also played a role in the accusations. But it seems unlikely. None of the 'witches' or their immediate

family was explicitly involved in the disturbances in November 1785. It is, nevertheless, not improbable that, when identifying women as witches, a witch doctor was influenced by existing social and political frictions. An example of this will be discussed below. The possibility that Hilberding used his powers to blacken the names of Meppelers he found displeasing, suggests the absence of other ways of settling conflicts. Yet there were plenty of alternatives. The *goorspraak* reports clearly show that people openly insulted and fought each other, and that quarrels could be officially and unofficially settled. I did not find any indications that Hilberding had bad relations with the people he accused in 1788 (nor with others, apart from the 1782 case) and the same applies to his patients. Hilberding does not come across as a quarrelsome person.

The evening of the day before Prince Willem arrived in Meppel, Hilberding was visited by a broom-maker's hand who complained that the patriotic exercise association was to welcome the prince. Hilberding had told him 'that they should make sure that everything proceeded with Love, then tonight people might have a happy evening because of his Highness'. But the hand did not agree, and replied: 'when they thwart us, then things will happen, for we will sharpen the saws and axes, and when the saws are sharp at the wrong side then we can hew with them as well as they can with their sabres, for the Prince has to become Count of Holland'. On the day Hilberding did not stand in the first row to greet the arrival of the prince. He only went to have a look after someone had already died from a gunshot.

In the absence of clear social or political motives money may have been a reason for Hilberding taking up witch-doctoring alongside his mundane occupation. He had served as a weaver's hand with the manufacturer Willem Essink. In 1781 Essink decided to cut his production, leading to job losses. It was around this time that Hilberding began to earn an extra income through healing. It is not possible to prove the link between these two facts. But the financial aspect of Hilberding's illegal activities does deserve more precise attention. Usually he agreed with his customers beforehand what sum of money they should pay in fees. Jan Preuver was charged the most. He paid ten guilders for the medicines and the ritual, with the agreement that he would pay another fifteen guilders later. Minicus Geerts and Geesje Bloemberg both agreed to pay Hilberding six guilders. Harm Thalen paid a ducat and Berent Beugelink was twenty-six stivers poorer for his consultation. These were comparatively large sums. The local midwives, for instance, earned between seventy-five and one hundred guilders a year. With an average of around one hundred baptisms a year this amounted to about twelve stivers for each birth. In 1800 it was reported that the normal wage for labourers was fourteen stivers during the summer, twelve during autumn and ten stivers in the winter, and for a craftsman twenty stivers (one guilder). Around 1790 the price of a bushel of rye, in those days the main staple,

fluctuated between thirty and forty stivers. Depending on this, the price of twelve pounds of coarse rye bread was seven or nine stivers. The fine for fighting was twenty-four stivers; when a child was born too soon after the marriage of its parents, the fine was ten guilders. In 1785 Jan Mulder paid 697 guilders and fifteen stivers for his house, and in 1779 Harm Thalen paid 815 guilders for his. Loans of a few hundred guilders were usual. Hilberding's fees were thus high in comparison to a labourer's income and to the daily costs of living, but not compared to the tariffs of official doctors. The physician of Hoogeveen charged three to twenty guilders for assistance at births, dressing wounds or bloodletting.

For the authorities Hilberding certainly was not a profitable customer. On 13 November 1788 his transport to Assen, where his verdict was pronounced, cost the local council nine guilders for the wagon, four guilders and four stivers for the accompanying soldier and watchman, and two guilders, twelve stivers and eight pennies for 'refreshments on the road'.

### **Interlude**

Hilberding's accusations provoked tensions rather than expressed them. For the court his words and actions had been the reason

why irreproachable people were offended in their good name and fame, even the best citizens innocently have been made suspect, the ties of good harmony and friendship between neighbours and citizens have been severed, which could cause the most detrimental effects for society.

The authorities may have turned a blind eye to his practice of medicine, but they strongly opposed the far-reaching social consequences of the witchcraft accusations he generated.

On 7 October 1788 the wife of Hendrik Overes, a neighbour of the wool manufacturer Willem Essink (Hilberding's employer), complained that Jan Abraham Schuurman had called her husband 'kees with the crooked legs' and had threatened 'to knock them straight again' ('Kees' was the common nickname for a patriot). He had also 'punched her on the chest three times' and called her '*hexenpak*' (member of a witch family) and 'black hole' (meaning that she had been, or should have been in prison). The two had a history of quarrelling. In May 1770, for instance, Overes had emerged from Schuurman's house with a 'bloody head' after a conflict of opinion about late payments. According to Schuurman, Overes had 'done him violence in his home, had called him scoundrel and also invited him in front of the door, upon which he had hit him 5 or 6 times, thinking he was allowed to defend himself in his own home'. In 1783 Overes reported that Schuurman had punched his labourer Sjoerd and that Sjoerd 'had hit Hendrik Overesch, because of which Hendrik Overesch had fallen down and got a bump on his

head'. Overes' political sympathies lay with the patriots. He was not the only one to have troubles with Schuurman. In 1774 someone had scolded the latter for being a 'flayer', a derogatory name for a leather worker. And at the end of 1781 his children had a 'problem' with the grandchildren of the widow of Jacob van der Veen, after which she reported him. Schuurman had little love for patriots, as is already apparent from his words 'kees with the crooked legs'. On 12 November 1785, a day after the entry of the prince, he asked Cornelis van der Stal whether he would remain a 'rifleman', that is to say a member of the 'patriotic exercise association'. When Cornelis confirmed this, Jan hit him. This clarity of the political affiliations of the two is in contrast to the vagueness of the witchcraft accusation. The term '*hexenpak*' which was addressed to his wife probably did not imply anything more than a mere insult.

Witchcraft was more openly present in December 1792. On the eve of Saint Nicolas (5 December) 'wreaths' were burned in the house of Engbert Harms in order to discover who had bewitched his child. The wife of Jacob van der Woude had entered and consequently been taken for a 'witch'. This had happened in the presence of Coop Worst and his daughters. Consequently Jannes Aartsen, the uncle of the child, had asked his neighbour Potgieter whether 'a witch doctor lived in Zwol'. In this case there are no extensive witness depositions. But it is possible to reconstruct events from other sources. In the first place, all the participants were close neighbours, although the shipwright Coop Worst lived a bit further away in the district than the others. Engbert Harms, a seller of puppets, had married Janna Aartsen on 22 October 1788. The bricklayer Jannes Aartsen was his brother-in-law. Their first child was baptised on 3 February 1790, the second on 19 January 1791 and the third on 5 August 1792. The first two children died shortly after birth. This series of misfortunes would have contributed to the suspicions of bewitchment when the third child fell ill, and later died in 1793. The only thing that is known about the 'witch', Cornelia Annes Kunst, was that her husband was supposedly a nephew of Engbert Harms's mother-in-law. The burning of wreaths to detect witchcraft led to less predictable accusations of witchcraft than when a professional witch doctor dropped a hint. Everyone could enter a house, although in the evening it was more likely that it would be a female neighbour or a relative. It was not reported whether Jannes Aarsen found a witch doctor in Zwolle. The resort to the wreath ritual, after which the 'perpetrator' could be forced to unwitch, does not point to immediate professional interference.

### **Six weeks alone in the back kitchen**

After his banishment from Drenthe, Derk Hilberding moved to Zwolle, where his daughter died. At the end of 1791 he was also forced to leave this town

because of his healing activities, and so he settled with his wife and son in Staphorst. It would seem that at this point in time they were not doing very well financially, since they were receiving church welfare. Things got worse. On the evening of 13 June 1793 'Catholic Derk' was caught in Hoogeveen by the local sheriff and transported to Assen the next day.

Over time Hilberding had enlarged his circle of patients to the settlements around Meppel and healed bewitched people in Staphorst, Wanneperveen, Kolderveen, Meppel, Yhorst, De Wijk and Hoogeveen. He told the Court of Justice in Assen that he knew the art 'to heal some illnesses as for instance painful ailments, tapeworm and more of the kind, and that he had learned this art from an old monk'. Later he elaborated that the monk was a father from the 'barefooters' (Capucins) in the east of his native town Vreden. To the question why he had returned from his banishment, Hilberding answered 'because the patients, who very much wanted to be helped, had requested it'. He asked for clemency, but this he did not get. At a place on the outskirts of Assen he was tied to a pole and whipped. Then he was banned for life from Drenthe (there was uncertainty about his previous conviction).

One of his clients in Meppel was Eentje Worst, the daughter of the shipwright Coop Worst. This girl had also been suffering from some time. She could not hold down any food. She was treated by Dr Van der Sande, a Dr Hulte in Zwolle, and a weaver named Michel without finding any improvement. In the autumn of 1792 she discussed this with Derk Hilberding at the house of Harm Soer. The healer thought for a bit and said he could help her, but 'when the medicines were blessed and only then'. The next day her father collected three 'powders' from Hilberding, 'which had to be put under Salt, as to prevent them from contact with the air'. Afterwards she swallowed something described as a 'Dragon' and 'a little bottle full of oil'. They paid six guilders up front, and later a further three guilders and then another twenty-four or twenty-five stivers. The remedies helped. Barta Worst, Eentje's older sister, declared that an hour after Derk had given her sister something to swallow, she had eaten 'a toast with a piece of bread, without being troubled by it, and that she afterwards could stand food and has now again recovered'. Although they had cut her pillow open and had found wreaths, Hilberding did not tell her who had bewitched her. He limited himself to the general category of 'evil people' who had 'done' it to her. To be protected from their influence she had to 'sit alone', she was not allowed to come 'in through the front door, or in the company of strangers'. This advice was followed. Eentje informed the sheriff that she had 'sat six weeks alone in the back kitchen and that strangers had not been allowed, although some family members had been with the witness during that time'.

It is impossible to clearly determine the sequence of the events involving the Worstes. The relationship between the two unwitchment techniques is

therefore somewhat unsure. The date of the test at Engbert Harms's house is known and Hilberding's treatment would have taken place around the same time, 'before the last autumn or new year's eve', as Barta Worst told sheriff Kniphorst on the morning of 5 July 1793. The fact that Jannes Aarsen inquired after a witch doctor seems to be decisive. He would not have needed to do this after Hilberding's name had become known, although Hilberding may have been the witch doctor in Zwolle his neighbour Potgieter had heard of. According to Eentje Worst she had talked to Hilberding at Harm Soer's, not at Engbert Harms'. It was not even attempted to interrogate the last about Hilberding, although it was known that he thought that his child had been bewitched.

Hilberding's role in the accusation of Cornelia Kunst, the wife of Van der Woude, in 1792, will have been indirect at the most. Perhaps people remembered the wreaths of Geesje Bloemberg, who in 1788 lived only a few houses removed from Coop Worst – several neighbours had come to look at them at the time. Possibly more people knew that wreaths were a sign of witchcraft and that when they were burned the witch was drawn to her victim. However it may have been, the category 'witch' which Hilberding applied, partly overlapped with the possible 'witch' that could be discovered by burning wreaths but was not totally identical with it. Evil people belonged to 'strange folks', people whom one could meet outside, 'outside the door' and to whom entrance could be refused. Friends and next of kin did not resort to that.

### **Change and continuity**

Meanwhile political tensions continued to build in Meppel. On 17 September 1795 a day was organised in Meppel to celebrate the 'alliance' between the French and the 'Batavians'. The patriots had now gained the upper hand and marched through the town with music and two hundred girls dressed in white. At the end of November all the inhabitants were counted. From the list it appears that the weaver Derk Hilberding, his wife and son were back living in district five despite his banishment. At the end of March 1796, however, he was imprisoned for a third time. This time he had tried to deliver a pregnant girl from 'kreeplings in the body', which were the result of witchcraft. In April he was interrogated.

'In 1788 you have gotten yourself in prison because you would unwitch a bewitched child of J. Mulder. What kind of order would there be, if the judge would dare to not imprison you now as then?' Why had he returned?

Hilberding answered that he 'thought that the freedom implied that he was allowed to live in the Land [of Drenthe] again',

'Do you believe yourself to know remedies, which in case someone is bewitched, are powerful enough to stop the bewitchment?'

'Yes'.



'Do you know that we are against this witchcraft here?'

The detained was of the opinion 'that it was allowed to cure someone who was ill'.

'Have you not been caught because of it the first and the second time and been convicted?'

'Yes'.

'How do you dare to take on this old superstitious foolishness again and give free reign to the cursed superstition to fool the people about the whims of bewitchment and to venture to know remedies that will surely cure the sufferers?'

The detained said 'that he had acted badly'.

This interrogation was repeated in front of a 'full people's meeting' on 22 May 1796. On both occasions Hilberding's answers were most elaborate when discussing his art.

'How do you know that people are bewitched?'

'When someone had a closed body, the purge that was ascribed did not work, that was a test of bewitchment'.

'How do you cure people, by what means?'

'The medicines can be obtained at the monasteries in Vrene [Vreden] and Borst in exchange for tea and sugar and not for money, the medicines were known under the name of St. Hubes [Hubertus] bread', which finely grated was mixed with some powdered beans.

'How do they operate?'

'The remedy took away the pain, or increased it for a little while and provided then full recovery, but then one had to use purgatives to clean the body'.

These answers sound sincere. Hilberding meant what he said. The fact that he personally visited his patients supports this conclusion. But for the Drenthe authorities witchcraft was a relict of old, less enlightened eras. 'Their adherence to old customs, even in inconsequential affairs, is so strong, that it often almost turns to superstition,' the lawyer Tonkens wrote about the Drents: 'no one has so far succeeded to eradicate their belief in Witches and Werewolves etc.' The court condemned the healer to six years in the house of correction in Groningen. He died there on 9 October 1801. His wife remained in Meppel, was again supported by the church but finally ended up in the poorhouse, where she died in February 1807.

### **Much too close is much too close**

The above case possesses various aspects worth exploring in more detail. In the winter of 1795–96 Wobbigje, the daughter of Gerrit Knipmeier and Hilligje Jans, started to suffer from a 'discomfort' in her belly. Pregnancy was perhaps suspected. First she consulted Doctor Van der Sande, but without results. Next she had a bloodletting at the hands of a surgeon named

Radijs, and when that did not help she resorted to Derk Hilberding. He told her that she was not going to give birth, but that ‘evil people’ had ‘done’ it to her: ‘She was bewitched’. Jan Jans Bouknecht, Knipmeier’s labourer, with whom Wobbigje was courting, paid Derk seven guilders for a packet of herbs, three powders and a bottle of oil, to be kept in a box of sand with salt over it. These medicines did not have any effect. New medicines, for twenty-four stivers, did not lead to a recovery either. According to Hilberding, Wobbigje had again been ‘under the face of the witch’ and so she had to receive further treatment, which cost five guilders. He added: ‘it has to be broken, it should go out the way it came in’. By ‘it’ he meant an animal, probably a chicken, rat or mouse. Later in court Hilberding explained that he had handled similar things before. Once he had cured a woman who had thrown up something that resembled a duck, another had expelled an adder or a snake, and his own wife had once ‘discharged a thing through her urethra that looked like a calf’s head and at the end like fish bones’. He told Wobbigje’s mother ‘that he had cured women who had gotten rid of the discomfort though the back way, others who had lost it like a woman in labour’.

Hilberding did not call the witch by name. He let the family Knipmeier guess. ‘She does not live far, do you know a woman whose first husband has been suffering for some time and then died, and whose present man is not free either. Now they should have a guess’. They decided upon Hilligje Koster, the wife of Jan Detlef Arp, who lived diagonally across from them. Hilberding did not confirm this in so many words, but hinted that she was indeed the witch by saying such things as, ‘much too close is much too close’. For Hilligje Koster was a full cousin of Gerrit Knipmeier. Because of this Wobbigje was not allowed to leave through the front door because she was not allowed to have her aunt ‘look upon her’. The use of the back door was permitted. During the treatment Hilberding let slip the following remark in the presence of Wobbigje’s mother: ‘the history with Kleibakker’s daughter [the wife of Willem Kappers] should be over by now, it was better if he would meet her half way, now he had more on his side [he was better equipped], they would stay away from them’. Jan Bouknecht remembered that Hilberding had given him some recipes to counter the witch. He said she would get ‘insufferable pains’ when they boiled the urine Wobbigje had passed in the morning. She would even die ‘if he took a black hen and took its heart out when it was still alive, and then put the hen in a new pot with a lid on it covered with a cloth and put it on the fire to simmer’.

The woman across the street was not accused directly. She heard it herself from the greengrocer Leffert Benninge, who had told her that Hilberding had,

on a certain evening told the people present in the house of Gerrit Knipmeier that if they wanted to know who the witch was they had to knock on the

door of the old hat maker at a certain hour when they would find a black cat without a tail on Gerrit's threshold and her [Hilligje Koster] not at home.

In the end Wobbigje Knipmeier did turn out to be pregnant. Although Hilberding had let her 'use' a cup of soot two weeks before and on the evening before 'had let them lay regularly woollen cloths, drenched in warm sweet milk stiff and strong, on her belly', and maintained that she was bewitched, she appeared not to have carried a monster but a 'shapely life son'. That was on Thursday 24 March 1796. The following Tuesday the witnesses' depositions were taken. On 4 April it was reported at the *goorspraak* 'that the daughter of Gerrit Knipmeier had given birth without being married' and two days later, on Wednesday 6 April, the child was buried. On 3 July of the same year Wobbigje married Jan Bouknecht.

This time Hilberding had not selected a poorer neighbouring woman, although Hilligje Koster, whose father came from Nordhorn, did belong to the same group of immigrants he had accused earlier. He did not hesitate either to accuse a member of the family of his patient. To him, however, it may have been more important for his choice of witch that Hilligje was also related to Janna Coster, the wife of Hendrik Havezaat who was insulted for 'hexe' in 1782, and to Grietje Kleibakker, Willem Kappers's wife, by whose agency he had been banned in 1788 for the first time. Kappers acted as witness at the second marriage of Hilligje Koster; his wife's mother, Hendrikje Alberts, was a sister of the mother of Hilligje Koster. Hilligje's father, Jan Coster, was supposedly a brother of Janna Koster; they both had roots in Nordhorn. In this light the pronouncements of Hilberding achieve a more concrete meaning and it appears that his accusation was also based on feelings of revenge against a group of relatives. When the accusation was deliberate, it also become doubtful whether in this particular case Hilberding had been sincere in his diagnosis. The question also arises as to the effects and reliability of official medicine.

### **A cultural field of tension**

The local attitude towards witchcraft can be analysed from four overlapping and complementary points of view: ecclesiastical, medical, legal and social. The church council of Meppel does not seem to have involved itself deeply with these witchcraft affairs. Although no extended reports of the meetings have survived, only a list of decisions, they do not indicate that any disciplinary measures were taken against Hilberding's patients. They were almost all members of the church and they all paid for their own chairs in church, like the accused. Jan Preuver, as well as Peter Schuphof, was even nominated for the position of deacon in 1792. Hilberding's Catholicism – he was one of the few Catholics in Meppel – was not an obstacle to his wife receiving church

welfare. Even the 'propaganda' in favour of Catholic medicines and rituals espoused by Hilberding did not influence the church in this respect. An explanation for this may perhaps be found in the fact that the church in Meppel at this time was going through a period of religious strife, with local ministers taking different sides. Compared to the reaction of the civil authorities regarding the political troubles and Hilberding's activities, this seems unlikely, however. The church had basically stopped being concerned about witch doctors a century earlier.

If for Hilberding's patients the notion of a bewitchment did not conflict with their religious beliefs and practices, equally their attitude towards physicians effectively prevailed. As was written in the *Present State of the Land of Drenthe*, 'The people are usually their own medical doctors and surgeons.' 'They use simple medicines, of which experience has taught, that they have a good effect.' As we have seen, as well as self-medication a series of healers were consulted, especially when it came to languishing illnesses. Meppel was one of the few places in Drenthe with its own doctor, Bernardus Willem van de Sande. This man, who in 1792 had failed to improve the condition of Eentje Worst, and in 1795 had not managed to deal with Wobbigje Knipmeier's pregnancy, had in 1784 finished his studies in Groningen with a dissertation about the eardrum. In 1792 he had even won a competition, organised by the government of Drenthe, concerning the practice of midwifery and the organisation of midwives. This competition was in part instigated in response to the number of children's illnesses in Meppel, which in 1788 and 1789 had caused a severe increase in infant mortality. A link between this demographical data and the refuge that some Meppelers took in alternative medicine is not immediately present. For them the accumulation of misfortunes in their immediate surroundings and their experience with combating them counted more than the general state of health. Witchcraft was a possible model of explanation for individual cases of illness, temporarily chosen on the basis of a mixture of existing suspicions and experimental persuasion. It could be put into practice and easily explained. The authorities' labelling of witchcraft as 'superstition' clearly lost out to the presence of wreaths of feathers. And when Hilberding ascribed an otherwise incurable ailment to witchcraft, and succeeded in providing a cure on the basis of that diagnosis, it would have had more effect than any governmental measures. The option of a final negative assessment was kept, however. The measures of the government had several aims. The fight against what was called 'superstition' from a scientific point of view, and the repression of what from a religious point of view was characterised as Catholic and 'superstitious', only constituted one argument. There is little to be found regarding a systematic approach; Hilberding's banishments were not accompanied by publicity campaign against witch doctors. A more general campaign against witchcraft was likewise missing, and the law against consulting

fortune-tellers and the like was not stringently enforced during the period. The incidental measures taken against one unwitcher and unofficial healer, which focused on symptoms, primarily concerned counteracting social unrest caused by the accusations – the repair of 'the ties of good harmony between neighbours and citizens'.

Punishing and banishing Hilberding reduced the range of possible frictions between neighbours. At the same time medical choice decreased and a healer was deprived of his income and his individual freedom. Apart from abuse and a possible act of revenge, the activities and answers provided by Hilberding do not give the impression that he always intended to swindle – he took too many risks for that to be his primary motivation. The structural social effect of governmental measures needs to be studied and described over a longer period of time. But the presence of witchcraft accusations that were only indirectly related to Hilberding's cures shows, in any case, that in the short term the measures had only a limited effect. In 1800, for example, another relative of Hilligje Koster was insulted for '*hexenpak*'.

For those accused of witchcraft there existed the legal route to obtain satisfaction. None of the Meppeler reports, however, resulted in a slander trial, which at the time was still the case in a few smaller villages and hamlets. Maybe the trial of Hilberding was considered as implicit reparation of honour, but it is also possible that the social relations within Meppel made a revocation of the insults unnecessary. In a place of transition people were less dependent on each other, and moving to another district offered an alternative to legal procedure.

Seen on the level of actions, witchcraft mainly appears as a way to mark out social contacts. Through an accusation people from the immediate surroundings were classified as 'evil'. To associate with such people was unwise; to grant them access to your home was asking for trouble. The witch doctor had a catalysing role in defining this kind of person. It is not impossible that he put into words already existing discords. Yet through his accusations he evoked new frictions. Witchcraft accusations hardly offered an outlet for social tensions; they rather produced them. A witchcraft accusation entailed a change in behaviour. In particular the boundaries that people observed towards each other were altered. This could be in effect for a long period or just for the length of the healing. To safeguard his child from the presence of Habik's wife, Beugelink sent his wife and child to her family in Uffelte for a couple of days; later they moved. Minicus Geerts was given the advice 'not to meet too many people'. Similar advice was also given to the other bewitched and was usually followed – the clearest example is Eentje Worst's stay in the back kitchen. The house was considered as a private domain from which evil influences had to be banned and the threshold was the magical boundary. But where some doors were kept shut for some (female) neighbours others were especially opened. Jan Preuver's house, for instance, functioned

as a meeting place for suffering people, in particular neighbours and female relatives.

To determine the differences between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ neighbours, we should first take account of the kind of accusation. In the material collected here, we can discern three situations in which an accusation occurred. First, when by or via a mediator (in this case Hilberding) a specific suspicion was expressed. Second, when after a ritual of recognition (burning feather wreaths), performed by the bewitched and their immediate family and friends, someone attracted suspicion merely by entering. And third, when someone was insulted without any suspicion of bewitchment – a possible example of this is the conflict between Schuurman and the Overes family. In the last situation the witch or *heks* was the one with whom or with whose family earlier rows had taken place. In the second situation the possibilities are broadened to everyone who crossed the threshold at the crucial moment. In both cases neighbouring women were primarily involved. Those at whom a direct accusation was aimed were also female neighbours, who in contrast to the accused in the two other situations, appeared to have as their most noticeable similarity their origin from outside Meppel and its immediate countryside. Comparison with other cases should establish whether it concerns a more general characteristic or a personal preference of Hilberding.

This also applies to his accusations against relatives.

In conclusion we can state that for a better knowledge of witchcraft in all its aspects, it is desirable to consider each time and place as a symbolic frame of reference beside other frames of reference. Next to this it appears important to consider the behaviour shown during expressions of witchcraft, to take account of the different social opinions about witchcraft, and to trace the backgrounds and motives of the participants in witchcraft affairs. In this way we do not just obtain a more adequate knowledge of witchcraft, but enable ourselves to understand the meanings of witchcraft in their historical contexts.

## Notes

1 This is a translated, condensed and edited version of ‘Toverij in Meppel aan het eind van de achttiende eeuw’, published in Willem de Blécourt and Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra (eds), *Kwade mensen. Toverij in Nederland* (Amsterdam, 1986). See also Willem de Blécourt, *Termen van toverij. De veranderende betekenis van toverij in Noordoost-Nederland tussen de 16de en de 20ste eeuw* (Nijmegen, 1990), pp. 145–52. Because of matters of space references have been kept to a minimum. Readers who want to follow up published and unpublished Dutch language material are directed to the footnotes in the original article.

2 For discussion on witch doctors in a European context, see Willem de Blécourt, ‘Witch Doctors, Soothsayers and Priests. On Cunning Folk in European Historiography and Tradition’, *Social History* 19 (1994), 285–303; Owen Davies, *Cunning-Folk: Popular Magic in English History* (London, 2003), ch. 7. For some examples of other

Dutch cunning-folk operating in the period see de Blécourt, 'Four Centuries of Frisian Witch Doctors', in Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Willem Frijhoff (eds), *Witchcraft in the Netherlands from the Fourteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Rotterdam, 1991), pp. 161–2.

3 The dossiers used for my description and analysis can be consulted at the Rijksarchief of Drenthe: Archief Etstoel 9, doss. 437 and Etstoel 32, doss. 486 and 519.

4 See M.A.W.Gerding (ed.), *Geschiedenis van Meppel* (Meppel and Amsterdam, 1991).