

Time and the anthropologist; or the psychometry of historiography

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I.

I first came upon her through an ad in the newspaper. "Somnambule", it said (in Dutch), "Mrs. D.P., the well-known clairvoyant, tells everything through first and second crystals, without questioning you". Then followed the consulting hours (10 am - 10 pm) and address (*Haagsche Courant*, 5 September 1925). In order to discover the identity of Mrs. D.P., I consulted the residents' register which has been kept in the Netherlands since the middle of the nineteenth century. While some of the other fortune-tellers of The Hague were impossible to trace from a single address since they lived in multi-occupied houses and moved too often, Mrs. D.P. could easily be identified as Dirkje de Korte, married to Petrus Pruijmers, a magnetist. Married women kept their maiden name by law but they used their husband's in everyday life. Pruijmers' trade as a magnetist confirmed the identification. Although somnambules and magnetizers were then for the most part operating independently and by the 1900s somnambules usually induced their own

trance (De Blécourt 1994b), working partnerships could still be found occasionally.

The register also showed that Dirkje Pruijmers was born in the province of Utrecht in 1881 and had lived in Amsterdam before she moved to The Hague. She had four children born between 1903 and 1913. Public records like these may provide rather limited information but establishing at least a full name is the first step towards a possible reconstruction of a historical personality.

My concern for somnambules and fortune-tellers is professional; it is my present job to research irregular medical practitioners in the Netherlands in the second half of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century. In the course of this research, I decided to concentrate on women healers, who intrigued me because they had to fight against a double oppression, a consequence of their gender and their illegal practice of medicine. The research revealed a substantial number of women healers who surprisingly practised in the big cities rather than in the countryside. They also turned out to be specialists, rather than conforming to the common im-

age of the generalist. The study of woman healers also forced me to take seriously apparently marginal groups like fortune-tellers, almost exclusively women, without whom a view of health care would be incomplete (cf. De Blécourt 1993: 55).

Apart from sheer curiosity about forgotten groups of women, my principal aim is to discover why they were so popular and with whom. This will not, however, occupy me much here. The case of Dirkje Pruimers and some of her colleagues serves mainly to illuminate several issues that loom large in historical anthropological research.

II.

The Swedish ethnographer Orvar Löfgren calls historical anthropology the "no man's land between the humanities and the social sciences" (1987: 7). Some early modern historians use it as an excuse to apply anthropologically derived (mainly symbolic) approaches to their interpretation of fragments of the every-day life of ordinary people. Robert Darnton's threefold, "open, imponderable and limited" (Levi 1992: 104), and, it could be added, ahistorical exercise on the 'cat massacre' is one of the examples that present themselves here (cf. De Blécourt 1994a). "The point is", Peter Burke writes, "that the questions anthropologists ask and the concepts they use compensate for certain deficiencies in traditional history" (1986: 190). While toying with the idea of doing "'fieldwork' among the dead" (idem 1987: 15), he defines historical anthropology mainly in terms of microhistory. So does Carlo Ginzburg, who, like the other historians mentioned, emphasizes the notion of cultural distance and the introduction of exotic features in European historical research. "Behaviors and beliefs traditionally seen as senseless, irrelevant, or at best marginal curiosities (for instance, magic and superstition) have been analyzed at last as valid human experiences", he observed

(Ginzburg 1982: 277).

If I were looking for a justification of my interest in fortune-tellers, I could hide behind Ginzburg. As it is, his remarks on historical fieldwork are more relevant to my discussion. "Trial records", he states elsewhere, "can be compared to the first hand accounts of an anthropologist, assembled from his fieldwork, and bequeathed to future historians". He continues: "One treats it as precious, though inevitably insufficient, documentation: an infinity of questions the historian asks himself - and would address to the accused and the witnesses had he a time machine at his disposal - the judges and inquisitors of the past did not formulate; nor could they have formulated them" (1988: 115-6). Notwithstanding the similarity, the evidence the inquisitors left is "deeply distorted" and their files "cannot be a substitute for tape recorders" (Ginzburg 1990a: 158, 159). "All we can do is use the notebooks that record the fieldwork conducted by ethnographers who have been dead for centuries", Ginzburg writes in yet another publication (1990b: 95). With reference to a paper by the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, he wishes to elaborate the analogy between history and anthropology in a different direction (ibid. 112). But the historian Ginzburg seems too much caught up with the reliability of evidence. Rosaldo, however, puts the spotlight on what in my view constitutes the most central issue of the intersection between history and anthropology, one which Ginzburg conveniently ignores: ethnographic authority.

Comparing the writing of the historian Le Roy Ladurie (who used the inquisitor's notes) with the work of the outmoded anthropologist Evans-Pritchard (who used his own), Rosaldo finds that both "suppress the interplay of power and knowledge" (1986: 97). In their search for data, the contexts of the production of knowledge are disregarded, the physical and cultural dominance of the inquisitor as well as the colonial domination that encapsulated the anthropologist's work. In the final products of both their own authority is inserted instead. Rosaldo's critique

subtly warns the historian of the dangers when entering a neighboring discipline. Do not mess around with anthropology if you are not prepared to have your work dissected and demolished, could be one interpretation of his message. Another one could point to theoretical and methodological developments in anthropology.

Since Evans-Pritchard, who according to Ginzburg wrote "the classic book on witchcraft" (1990a: 157), anthropologists have not only become aware of the imperialist component of their endeavors and have discussed their own role in the acquisition of information, but have also rediscovered historical processes. It has become more natural for anthropologists to consider the historical dimensions of present-day puzzles, than for historians to take account of anthropological work. Even those historians who secretly long to be present in the past and thus to become fieldworkers among the dead fail to tackle the problem of eth-nographic authority.

In a sense, anthropology has always concerned history. "A discourse employing terms such as primitive, savage (but also tribal, traditional, Third World, or whatever euphemism is current) does not think, or observe, or critically study, the 'primitive'", Johannes Fabian argues convincingly, "it thinks, observes, studies *in terms* of the primitive" (1983: 17-8). In anthropological discourse space is temporalized and anthropology's object is situated in a social evolutionary past. Through fieldwork, anthropologists and not historians invented the ultimate time machine. Yet by denying the Other (the anthropologist's object) an existence in the present, a "sharing of present Time", "hardly anything could ever be learned about another culture" (ibid. 32, 33). Coevalness, the intersubjective communication between the researcher and the researched, is a necessary condition for the anthropological construction of knowledge. How then does this apply to situations in which the researcher is supposed to communicate with the dead?

III.

The ads of fortune-tellers were collected by taking samples from one of the main newspapers published in the Hague. At first a couple of days at five yearly intervals were chosen, later the intermediate years were covered as well. Dirkje Pruimers re-emerged in my search through the issues for the summer of 1922 (she had arrived from Amsterdam in the spring). This time the message said: "Psychometric clairvoyance is an extraordinary gift that occurs only once every century. Such a specially gifted trance medium is Mrs. Pruimers" (*Haagsche Courant*, 1 July 1922). A few years later she had slightly changed the description of her occupation. Like every other fortune-teller, she also needed to distinguish herself from her colleagues and competitors. "An unusually gifted, clairvoyant medium. Employs spiritism in cases of business, inheritance, broken engagements, etc.," she advertized in 1923. "Performs séances, also in closed circles, under the guidance of a magnetist" (3 July 1923). If there had been any doubts about the identification of husband and wife, these should have been dispelled.

The way Dirkje Pruimers described her occupation and the fact that she divulged her surname, instead of merely using initials or a fancy pseudonym, indicates her wish to cater for the well-to-do. This is apparent from her fee too, 2½ guilders, which was relatively expensive. In the 1920s only a few fortune-tellers proclaimed psychometry as their speciality. Somnambulism, which had come to signify clairvoyance in a state of trance, was also a term scarcely used. Most fortune-tellers catered for the lower classes, who hardly seem to have been impressed by strange names. Thus somnambules were referred to as *slaapsters* in Dutch (literally: women who sleep). If there was a social hierarchy among fortune-tellers, psychometry would have ranked top, with somnambules slightly below. "No expert", was how one somnambule advertized (*Haagsche Courant*, 6 July 1914),

implying that she did not want to be mistaken for an abortionist, clearly the least prestigious among fortune-tellers. Psychometry was aimed at the more affluent section of society, at those, for instance, who dabbled in spiritism and read the journal *Het Toekomstig Leven (Future Life)* and for whom somnambulism had become outmoded. "Advice is only given on serious matters", announced a psychometric colleague of Mrs. Pruimers, who lived in a villa in a suburb of The Hague (*Haagsche Courant*, 1 July 1922). Another fortune-teller, also a somnambule and a psychometric medium, moved to the same avenue (1 May 1930), showing how success was also expressed by choice of residence. Professional self-confidence was reflected in style of advertising. For instance, in 1930 Dirkje Pruimers, comfortable in her career, advertised her services simply as "Clairvoyant. Crystal-gazer. Medium in every field" (1 May).

Advertisements hardly explained the meaning of psychometry. Readers were supposed to know. Sometimes, however, a few details were given. For instance, one astrologist promised to supply "psychometry with the aid of photographs" (*Haagsche Courant*, 3 May 1928). The second somnambule referred to above provided "psychometry with the help of objects and photographs" (2 May 1928). To delve deeper into this issue, it is necessary to escape the limitations of one source.

IV.

Searching for a solution to the problem of coevalness in historical research and to overcome temporal distance between researcher and object, I was reminded of the concept of historical sensation. Originally coined by Johan Huizinga (1872-1945), considered the most famous Dutch historian, it has recently been recovered and elaborated by Jo Tollebeek, a historian of ideas. In a paper published with a colleague it is argued that to use historical data for present-day purposes

amounts to a 'non-authentic interest' in the past. Consequently the past is treated in a instrumental, anachronistic and a-historical fashion. Real historical interest, they believe, is an interest in history for its own sake. The meanings of historical events and the relation between them, however, are provided by the historian, who has an almost boundless freedom of manipulation and interpretation (Tollebeek & Verschaffel 1993).

The apparent contradiction between the two positions of the historian is due to the different stages of historical labor. The first one is the historical sensation, the feeling of immediate contact with a past event, which only lasts a few moments, the historical equivalent of culture shock. Tollebeek quotes Huizinga to illustrate the idea: "It is possible, that such a historical detail of an engraving, but it could also be a deed, suddenly supplies me with an immediate contact with the past, a sensation that goes as deep as the purest pleasure of art". By a sixth, 'historical sense', the impression is created that the past is tangible and visible; the contact with the past is 'sensationally' clear (Tollebeek & Verschaffel 1992: 18). Potentially every object that stems from the past can evoke this fascination, even the most insignificant object. It thus concerns not its content or meaning, it is argued, but its 'materiality' (ibid. 19-20). In another article Tollebeek invests localities with this power (Tollebeek 1993).

The historical sensation involves a double decontextualizing, both from the object (the historical relic) and the subject (the historian). It is a necessary condition for the "intimacy of the meeting" between the two (Ankersmit 1993: 11). Again in Huizinga's words: "... an almost ecstatic experience of not being myself any more, of dissolving into the world outside myself, the touching of the essence of things, the experience of Truth through history" (Tollebeek 1990: 213). Only afterwards, during the second stage of the historical enterprise, the images of the past are reconstructed, reformulated by the historian, guided by his questions and dependent on his personality (ibid. 219-25).

Huizinga's scattered remarks about the historical sensation have been classified as 'mystical' and 'irrational' by later historians (Otto 1995: 45-6). Nevertheless, it is still the only way to link historical reality with the historian's experience of it (Tollebeek 1993: 73). But does it result in satisfactory history writing? Not so by present-day standards. Huizinga would have ignored "the contrasts and even conflicts between the cultures of different social groups". He also "did not always place these images firmly enough in their social and political context" (Burke 1986: 188). Huizinga's exegetes will probably counter that this critique mainly applies to the second stage of the historical process and that the historical craft has changed since Huizinga's time. The difficulty of a historical sensation is precisely its loss of contexts, its instantaneous nature and, most of all, its focus on objects instead of people.

V.

The expression 'psychometry' referred to a person's (usually a woman's) presumed ability to receive impressions or to see images related to the history of an object, or to people to whom it had belonged, when touching that object. The practice originated in the mid-nineteenth century in the United States of America and reached western Europe in the wake of spiritualism. Around the middle of the twentieth century it became the most popular means of clairvoyance, surpassing cartomancy, palmistry, crystal gazing and the like in the Netherlands (Zorab 1964: 160). One reason was, that it had undergone a fundamental change of meaning. It now signified synchronic psychic knowledge about absent persons when handling physical objects that had been in contact with them. Psychometry became fashionable to such an extent that (male) psychic researchers felt the need to relabel the now vulgar expression of psychometry as 'retrograde psychoscopy' (Dietz 1936: 193) to indicate their expertise. Its

popular application generally moved away from the past and if fortune-tellers like Dirkje Pruimers were concerned with it at all it would have been limited to the personal history of their clients. Nor were psychic researchers much inclined to experiment with a clairvoyant's view of the past because they could not verify her results as they could with prognostications (ibid. 194). Only a few decades earlier psychometry had promised to revolutionize the study of history.

Thus an early twentieth-century pamphlet, translated from the German, stated the following:

"The history of mankind should be measured in millions of years, instead of in thousands, as is the case now. Egypt's sand, stones and Pyramids would, if investigated psychometrically, present a totally different image. (...) The surviving sword of Cromwell is filled with impressions of this great personality and in the hand of a fully matured psychometrist would reveal many surprising things. The relics of Napoleon I are not for nothing held in high esteem; for they contain thoughts and facts that, when psychometrically researched, will be of immeasurable value to a biographer" (Kennedy van Dam 1904: 19).

But these claims did not lead to a blossoming of psychometric history writing, although a few attempts were made and theories were developed to explain the ability of mediums to perceive events along the time-axis. Dutch researchers, for example, derided the psychometrist who had seen camels and elephants among an ancient Egyptian parade. "They are products of a phantasy, which in trance is capable of extraordinary achievements", it was inferred (Dietz 1936: 198). In a more serious vein telepathy and clairvoyance were considered as alternatives. One of the leading figures in spiritist circles (as well as in animal rights, vegetarianism, nature-therapy and Christian anarchism), Felix Ortt, suggested the idea of the time path (1930). Objects left a track through time that could be traced by a psychometrist. "Along the time

path he meets people, who have been in touch with this object, or he encounters situations this object has been in, and he 'sees' these people or situations *now* as they were *then*, when his spirit, following the time path, meets them" (Ortt s.a. 21).

In their publications Dutch psychic researchers preferred general theoretical considerations to detailed reports. The new science of parapsychology had to conform to the paradigms of respectability and factuality and any association with occultism had to be avoided. When opinions needed to be substantiated there was always foreign research to fall back on. Occasionally there were even foreign mediums to experiment with. Verbatim accounts of sessions with Dutch clairvoyants are thus extremely rare, at least before World War II.

VI.

Historical anthropological research invariably involves a little luck. Looking for material on illegal abortionists (another group of irregular women healers), I discovered the reports of a member of the vice squad of The Hague, dating from 1925. Posing as a prospective client whose girlfriend was pregnant, he had been visiting masseuses and fortune-tellers in order to find out whether their advertized trade served as a facade for abortion practices. This provided a very rare glimpse into the world of fortune-tellers. Dirkje Pruimers was consulted by the policeman in November.

"She exercised her art with the help of crystal balls. During my visit two balls were lying on the table. One was a little bigger than the other. According to her explanation those balls came straight from America. The difference between them was, that the lines of a human's hand, through which the ball was rolled, were kept for twelve years in the big one and for three years in the small one. At her request I rolled the big ball through my

hands. Then she took it from me and started gazing in it. She said she saw many particular things. I told her that I was listening attentively. Next she talked at length about my life. She spoke for about half an hour, only interrupted by a single question from my side. Much has been said which is of little importance for this report".

She did not, by the way, know how to deal with abortion requests.

By that time Mr. Pruimers had already left her to cohabit with another clairvoyant, sixteen years her junior. Acting as a medium or a somnambule, literally under the spell of her husband, the magnetist, had eventually proved too much of a strain on her and had led to conjugal fights. The policeman's report also throws light on the changes in her advertisements. (The husband's girl friend, too, made a career as a somnambule and psychometric medium but later also left him and teamed up with a notorious woman healer. Mrs. Pruimers' early social pretensions seem to have been motivated by her husband).

There was another amazing find. One of the leading Dutch psychic researchers revealed in 1937, after he had secured his academic position, that eight years before he had had a session with the crystal gazer. "She prefers to use people and portraits as her main inductors. During the tests she gazes into the crystal, bringing herself into a state of intermediary hypnosis" (Tenhaeff 1937: 216). He found the results mediocre and did not think she really saw images in her crystal, but he did not denounce her as a fraud. His verdict was that she made some accurate guesses and showed some intuition, combining normal with paranormal knowledge.

The police officer and the researcher can be considered as equivalents to Ginzburg's inquisitor. Both men followed their own agenda and negated "the temporal materiality of communication through language" (Fabian 1983: 164). Both were in a position of authority, not only towards the woman, but also towards the material, its selection and storing. But in order to understand what really

mattered to healer and patient, the historical anthropologist needs to read between the lines and to become aware of the unreported. Where primary evidence is lacking, his or her argumentation becomes more important.

The main contrast between Ginzburg's (or Darnton's, or Burke's) historical anthropology and the one I am presenting here lies in the research process. (It does not matter whether it concerns the early modern or the modern period). My quest for fortune-tellers did not start with archival gold mines. It was primarily concerned to find historical clues, centering on actual individuals and not on techniques. While I did not achieve a direct contact with the dead Dirkje Pruimers, or experience any historical sensation, the discovery of the files and reports filled me with excitement. The process of getting to know her was a gradual and sometimes prosaic one, starting with mere initials and finishing with a fairly full portrait of a woman who managed to survive by applying her magical skills (and I do not pretend to have seen every possible source). Even if it is not totally for her own sake, I am saving her from oblivion and giving her a place in historiography. But she may have the final laugh, for as a psychometric medium, frequenting spiritist meetings, she would have known how to communicate with the dead.

VII.

The 'disconcerting similarities' (Ginzburg 1990a: viii) between the concepts of historical sensation and psychometry are probably no coincidence. The discrepancies in the respective elaboration of these concepts are even more striking. I would suggest that historical theory would become more interesting if the speculations of psychic researchers were incorporated (as psychic research would profit from cultural relativity). But both have to exist within an academic frame where rationality rules. "To a large extent, Western rational disbelief in the presence of ancestors and the

efficacy of magic rest on the rejection of ideas of temporal coexistence implied in these ideas and practices" (Fabian 1983: 34). The trick of clairvoyants (and Huizinga) may rather have amounted to a mediation of materialized time, its outcome was (temporary) coexistence indeed.

Whatever the assets of a coeval, intersubjective practice of history, it implies a (social, cultural) construction of time. Anthropologists would have no trouble acknowledging that "history is culturally produced in the sense that it never exists independent of our interpretations of it" (Lindqvist 1992: 14). This essay's attention to seemingly marginal and exotic elements of twentieth century Dutch society also stems from my conviction that historical anthropology needs to cope first and foremost with opinions about time, for history is defined by them.

A consultation with a fortune-teller entailed personal discussion of past or future times. Present time was suspended and the "'demanding' structure of clock time" (Munn 1992: 104) was momentarily ignored. Clients may well have emerged better equipped to tackle their daily worries, about their business or broken love affairs or whatever. As to the fortune-tellers themselves I would suggest that even with the demands of a twelve hour working day, these experts of time had the power to define it in their own way.

Acknowledgment

Several people have contributed to the making of this paper. I would like to thank Frank Huisman for convincing me not to complicate it too much, Els Naaijkens for pointing out the latest work on Johan Huizinga, Cornelia Osborne for polishing my thoughts as well as my presentation, and Jenny Willis for correcting my English.

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