

Microhistory and the study of scolding.

Insults in the eighteenth-century Netherlands.

Willem de Blécourt

I.

In his collection of essays *The historical anthropology of early modern Italy*, Peter Burke has emphasised the importance of studying insults: 'A subject which will probably seem trivial to most readers now was taken very seriously indeed by contemporaries; honour depended on it. Insults thus offer a key to the history of mentalities or value-systems'.¹ While the last part of this argument may mainly depend on how the researcher will subsequently deal with insults, the first part is valid indeed. If 'honour' (and its infringement in particular) was important for people in the early modern period, a historical anthropologist can hardly ignore it. The obvious question is whether this applies as well to north-western Europe, especially the Northern Netherlands, as it does to 'Italy'. And if this would be so, would the concept of honour in the latter have been similar to the prevalent opinions about it in the former.² As Dutch research on insults has hardly been developed, it is too early to answer the last question in a more than speculative sense. This paper is not meant to be a comparative exercise. Given the importance of the study of scolding, I will concentrate on the approach of this subject. As an illustration I will use a case study.

The main lines of the argument I want to present here have been known for some time. As with research into any manifestation of culture, when investigating scolding it is relevant to pay attention to the ways in which it is embedded in the material and cultural aspects of the society under scrutiny. Although notions of change form a constitutive part of such a holistic approach,³ here I will focus on the synchronic dimension, also because of practical reasons. A diachronic description and interpretation always needs to be based on the analysis of an event, a specific case, or a brief period. If one wants to respect the opinions of the historical actors, it could even be problematic to transgress the limits of their temporal perspective.

At least two points deserve closer attention. The first concerns the question of the correlation between the cultural and political-economic aspects of scolding, the second refers to my doubts about the microscopic quality of former research into this subject. These two points follow from each other. Sometimes anthropologically orientated historians do not succeed in making a convincing case about the relationship between the different aspects (that is, if they don't get stuck in symbolical or morphological treatises), precisely because their analyses are not microscopic enough. To put it differently, the so-called 'thick description',

¹. Peter Burke, 'Insult and blasphemy in early modern Italy', in: *The historical anthropology of early modern Italy. Essays on perception and communication* (Cambridge [etc.] 1987) 95-109, cit. 96.

². Cf. Anton Blok, 'Rams and billy-goats: a key to the mediterranean code of honour', *Man* N.S. 16 (1981) 427-440; David D. Gilmore (ed.), *Honour and shame and the unity of the Mediterranean* (Washington 1987); Rosemary J. Coombe, 'Barren ground: re-conceiving honour and shame in the field of Mediterranean ethnography', *Anthropologica* 32 (1990) 221-238.

³. Cf. Jojada Verrips, 'Holisme en hubris', *Etnofoor* 1 (1988) 35-56.

which is often propagated following Clifford Geertz,⁴ is in fact in some cases not 'thick' enough to establish a valid connection between cultural phenomena (such as insults) on the one hand and, among others, economic and demographic factors on the other. This can be further clarified by having a somewhat closer look at Burke's essay on insults in early modern 'Italy'.

The main outlines of Burke's historical anthropological approach, that is to say his casting it in qualitative and microscopic terms, aimed at specific cases which should be interpreted according to the norms current in the society studied, can only be endorsed.⁵ It is possible, however, to criticise their specific realisation. Burke's intention is to describe cultural systems. 'The "thick description" of the anthropologists may be redefined as a form of translation, a making explicit, for the benefit of non-members, of the rules implicit in a given culture,' he states.⁶ With insults Burke finds it necessary to first reconstruct this system, 'at least in outline', before interpreting individual cases.⁷ The matter of how to reconstruct cultural 'systems' is important here (always presuming that it makes sense to postulate them). Burke here applies the so-called 'ethnography of communication', but, and this composes my main critique, he does this in a very peculiar way by taking a 'group culture' as his point of departure.⁸ He totally ignores the 'speech event', which the anthropologists who developed the ethnography of speaking or communication in the first place consider as one of the main features to focus on.⁹ When one contends to present a description 'that captures each society's unique cultural organisation of language and speech',¹⁰ then it cannot be done without paying attention to specific events (for instance the exchange of insults) and to answer questions like who insulted whom, how, where, when, why, to what effect, etcetera, for each slanging-match instead of in a general sense. This discrepancy between methodological substantiation and actual analysis is not accounted for. What is left is a superficial draft of

⁴. Clifford Geertz, 'Thick description: toward an interpretative theory of culture', in: Idem, *The interpretation of cultures* (New York 1973) 3-30. Anthropologists have severely criticized Geertz's approach, see among others: Bob Scholte, 'The charmed circle of Geertz's hermeneutics. A neo-marxist critique', *Critique of anthropology* 6 (1986) 5-15; William Roseberry, 'Balinese cockfights and the seduction of anthropology', in: Idem, *Anthropologies and histories: essays in culture, history and political economy* (New Brunswick & London 1989) 17-29; David Scott, 'Criticism and culture. Theory and post-colonial claims on anthropological disciplinarity', *Critique of anthropology* 12 (1992) 371-394.

⁵. The academic tradition he indicates can be questioned, however. See: Burke, *The historical anthropology*, 3-4.

⁶. *Ibid.*, 6

⁷. *Ibid.*, 96.

⁸. *Ibid.* 6, 95; see also: Peter Burke, 'Introduction', in: Peter Burke & Roy Porter (eds.), *The social history of language* (Cambridge [etc.] 1987) 120.

⁹. Dell Hymes, 'Models of the interaction of language and social life', in: J.J. Gumpertz & D. Hymes (eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics* (New York 1972) 35-71, esp. 66; Richard Bauman & Joel Sherzer, 'The ethnography of speaking', *Annual review of anthropology* 4 (1975) 95-119, esp. 100.

¹⁰. Joel Sherzer, 'Ethnography of speaking', in: Richard Bauman (ed.), *Folklore, cultural performances and popular entertainments. A communications-centered handbook* (New York/Oxford 1992) 76-80, cit. 78.

Italian insults which does not bring any closer insight into early modern Italian honour. Burke also leaves his readers to guess about the rules of communication which his analysis should have supplied. To quote the words of a reviewer that refer to the whole book: 'There is a great deal in these essays that is original and interesting, but often the subjects pass by too quickly and too lightly'.¹¹ Burke, one can conclude, in theory propagates a form of historical anthropology in which case studies and a microhistorical approach prevail, but does not apply it in practice.¹²

The study of phenomena that are now being arranged under the denominator 'culture' centers on the question about meanings and more specifically on the question of how the different meanings that were attributed to a certain phenomenon were connected to contemporary social relations, and this in a sense as concrete as possible. In other words, meanings are always situated and to ask for them in itself implicates a microhistorical approach, especially because this avoids the danger of the researcher's categories and interpretations dominating those of the researched. A first step at micro-analysis is to start from the names of those involved. 'The lines that converge upon and diverge from the name, creating a kind of closely woven web, provide for the observer a graphic image of the network of social relationships into which the individual is inserted'.¹³ Next a name needs to be traced in different sources. After all: 'Any single source, however good, gives a distorted picture compounded of omissions, wrong emphasis, misrepresentations and, occasionally, lies'.¹⁴ The composing of biographies (however small) provides the possibility of looking at insults in their contemporary contexts and of providing an insight into the contemporary meanings of those insults. As most studies about insults are based on only one sort of source and because previous authors usually have not taken the trouble to see whether people involved in a specific slander case were mentioned elsewhere in that source, it is clear that this type of research is hardly developed.¹⁵

¹¹. Judith C. Brown, [review], *Social history* 14 (1989) 110-112, cit. 112. Burke's own words apply here as well: 'Those scholars who wrote on the history of symbol systems usually did so, whatever their discipline, *without local or social depth*', Peter Burke, 'Historians, anthropologists, and symbols', in: Emiko Ohnuki-Tierny (ed.), *Culture through time. Anthropological approaches* (Stanford 1990) 268-283, cit. 273 (italics mine).

¹². The following strophe from 'Insult and blasphemy' provides a striking example: 'To return to microhistory, eighty-nine cases out of something like 16,000 is not very much' (103). 'Microhistory' is only of rhetorical value here.

¹³. Carlo Ginzburg & Carlo Poni, 'The name and the game: unequal exchange and the historiographic marketplace', in: Edward Muir & Guido Ruggiero (eds), *Microhistory and the lost peoples of Europe* (Baltimore & London 1991) 1-10, cit. 6.

¹⁴. Alan Macfarlane, 'Notes on general theory and particular cases', *Groniek* 16, nr. 76 (1982) 8-10, cit. 9. See also: Alan Macfarlane, Sarah Harrison & Charles Jardine, *Reconstructing historical communities* (Cambridge [etc.] 1977).

¹⁵. Apart from the article by Burke just discussed, see: David Garrioch, 'Verbal insults in eighteenth-century Paris', in: Burke & Porter, *The social history of language*, 104-119. Although other recent papers about insults have more depth, they also fail to approach the subject biographically, see among others: Carola Lipp, 'Ledige Mutter, "Huren" und "Lumpenhunde". Sexualmoral und Ehrenhandel im Arbeitermilieu des 19. Jahrhunderts', in: Utz Jeggle a.o. (eds.), *Tübinger Beiträge zur Volkskultur* (Tübingen 1986) 70-86; Martin Dinges, '"Weiblichkeit" in Männlichkeitsritualen"? Zu weiblichen Taktiken im Ehrenhandel in Paris im

In the next sections of this paper I will attempt to elaborate the issues mentioned here, starting my analysis with the scolding matches that have been handed down from one village, Kolderveen in the Dutch province of Drenthe, during the period of 1760-1780. Would the theoretical suspicion that qualitative, biographically ordered case studies could reveal a trace of the meaning of insults, indeed produce concrete results? It is, by the way, not very interesting to find out whether these cases were typical for a larger area or a longer period of time. Representativeness mainly refers to a collection of which the boundaries have been defined by the researcher, and not to situated meanings. Moreover, neither neighbouring places, nor earlier or later periods have been subjected to research into insults,¹⁶ so generalisations are precluded anyway.

The choice of place and area follows directly from my research into Dutch witchcraft; during 1983 I came across the cases that will be treated here, although I failed then to appreciate all their implications.¹⁷ Writing this article gives a good opportunity to delve deeper into them. In doing so I will, chiefly in the sections III and IV, rather precisely follow the texts of the sources found. I have chosen the option of rendering the source material in their original (though translated) form rather than presenting the reader with my final interpretation in order to enable her/him to follow the step by step analysis. The description of cases forms a decisive phase that has to be experienced before one can uncover the meanings of the insults used. In the following I will present the main sources, explain their (judicial) production, and their content.

II.

To insult someone -- which in the context of Drenthe meant to charge someone with a crime or at least to compare him or her to a criminal -- was liable to punishment. A description of the situation in the eighteenth-century country of Drenthe, an independent district within the Republic of the United Netherlands, will suffice here. I will not discuss the differences or the similarities with neighbouring jurisdictions.¹⁸

The Law of the country of Drenthe (*Landrecht*), re-established in 1712 and

18. *Jahrhundert*, *Francia* 18 (1991) 71-98; as well as the somewhat older booklet of Jim Sharpe, *Defamation and sexual slander in early modern England: the church courts at York* (York [1980]).

¹⁶. With the exception of insults connected to witchcraft. See: Willem de Blécourt, *Termen van toverij. De veranderende betekenis van toverij in Noordoost-Nederland tussen de 16de en 20ste eeuw* (Nijmegen 1990); Willem de Blécourt & Freek Pereboom, 'Insult and admonition: witchcraft in the Land of Vollenhove, seventeenth century', in: Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra & Willem Frijhoff (eds), *Witchcraft in the Netherlands from the fourteenth to the twentieth century* (Rijswijk 1991) 119-131. A short description of sixteenth-century Drentish insults can be found in: A.Th. van Deursen, 'De 16e eeuw, 1522-1603', in J. Heringa, a.o. (ed), *Geschiedenis van Drenthe* (Meppel/Amsterdam 1985) 241-296, esp. 281.

¹⁷. De Blécourt, *Termen van toverij*, 155-157.

¹⁸. In the Netherlands there was both heterogeneity of law, in the sense that every jurisdiction had its own, though often from other jurisdictions derived system of laws and decrees, and homogeneity of law, in the sense that local lawers built their commentaries of local laws as well as their argumentations in court cases on rules that were in existence elsewhere in the Netherlands. Historians of law still face the vast task of unraveling and charting of legal norms and practices.

promulgated in 1713, distinguished between two categories of insults. In accordance with the level of the fines they can be labelled heavy and less heavy. The first category consisted of the insults 'Thief, Murderer, Werewolf, Sorcerer, or Sorceress'. The fine for them was fifty gold guilders. 'Rogue, rascal, tramp, traitor and similar injurious words' were counted among the lesser insults. Those who pronounced one of these risked a fine of 25 gold guilders.¹⁹ As 'Fines of the Lord' they were due to the country's highest civil servant, the bailiff. Those who were insulted had to make do with a revocation by the insulter, and if so desired they could claim a sum of money for the poor in their village. The punishment for scolding thus contained a financial aspect, mainly for the benefit of the authorities, and a social aspect which was directed at the moral satisfaction of the insulted. The latter implied both the repairing of the relationship between the insulter and the insulted and of their place within society. But before words could be taken back, before 'nothing but honour and good' could be declared of the insulted, and before the fine could be collected, it had to be established that scolding had really taken place. For these (and other) cases, the inhabitants of Drenthe knew an ingenious system of law.

In earlier times at the *goorspraken* there was still some independent administration of justice by the inhabitants of the villages and hamlets of Drenthe, and verdicts were pronounced by them according to the rules with had been agreed with the overlord. In the eighteenth century only a few traces of this system had survived and the gatherings, which then took place twice a year, mainly served to collect information about crimes and to instigate individual complaints that could subsequently be dealt with by the highest, central and only court in Drenthe, the *Etstoel*. Every village of more than ten houses had to send four representatives to a *goorspraak*. They had to make known every punishable deed that had befallen during the past six months (since the previous *goorspraak*). As it was specified in the *Tegenwoordige Staat van het Landschap Drenthe* (The current state of the Country of Drenthe),²⁰ one had to report

all fights that had occurred in the same [village or hamlet]; as well as the scoldings, the abuse of Sundays, days of feasts and prayer, Blasphemies, illegal cohabitation, the giving of birth by unmarried females, as well as the giving of birth too soon after marriage, careless treatment of fire and light, smoking tobacco in prohibited places, hunting and fishing in closed seasons and by unlicensed persons; further all that matters to Justice, or to which fines of the Lord had to be paid.

Whoever neglected to report any of these deeds was liable to a fine of one gold guilder for each house of the village in which it had transpired.²¹ This rule ensured that little escaped

¹⁹. *Het Lantrecht van Drenthe* (Groningen 1713), book IV, art. 39 and 40. Cf. *Het Landrecht van Drenthe van 1614*, ed. J.E. Ennik (Meppel 1979), boek IV, art. 23-25. The two categories of insults were separated by resolution of 16th Februari 1648, Rijksarchief in Drenthe (RAD), Oude Statenarchieven, inv.nr. 6, part 3, fol. 217vo.

²⁰. [J. van Lier & J. Tonkens], *Tegenwoordige Staat van het Landschap Drenthe* (Amsterdam [etc.] 1792) 47-48.

²¹. *Landrecht* 1713, book I, art. 2. To those who want to consider this duty to report deeds that were liable to fines as an example of an increase of state influence during the eighteenth century, I want to point out that the custom already knew a memorable tradition, see: *Landrecht* 1614, book IV, art. 5; S. Gratama, *Drentsche rechtsbronnen uit de 14e, 15e en 16e eeuwen* ('s-Gravenhage 1894) 70 (art. 9), 134 (art. 44).

the attention of the authorities who collected the fines. Before every *goorspraak* local meetings were held. During them representatives were chosen or appointed and a list of the individual reports was drawn up. If one wanted to report something immediately, one could also send a note (or have it sent) to the relevant sheriff. In Kolderveen one had to see the sheriff of Meppel to that end.²² In practice the rule usually boiled down to reporting fights and brawls. The reports of Kolderveen that have come down to us from the period 1760 - 1780²³ contain -- apart from brawls, among those between non-inhabitants²⁴ -- scoldings, illicit hunting, births that had taken place too soon after marriage, a few robberies, serving drink on Sundays and breaking windows. Most cases were only reported; fines are only mentioned at a number of brawls and at the names of women who gave birth too early. Most fines fell into the category of 'beating', which costed a guilder and four pennies (there were twenty pennies to a guilder). Giving birth too early cost ten guilders (man and woman five each).²⁵ These reports are usually noted down as concise as possible. They nevertheless offer, in mutual combination as well as in those few more elaborate cases, a view on fragments from daily life, at least on those concerning fights and offences.

Next to the obligatory reports, at the *goorspraak* civil suits were initiated, among them about scolding. For it was decreed in the Law that 'everyone was free to register complaints about those who he deemed had failed him, in case of injuries or other personal actions'.²⁶ In these cases the procedure went as follows.²⁷ Someone who wanted to start a suit had a solicitor drawn up a verbal complaint. At the most three days before the *goorspraak* a copy

²². Examples of such individual reports from Kolderveen can be found in: RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 134, *goorspraak* Meppel, 1 April 1769, nr. 4; *goorspraak* Meppel 20 September 1776, nrs. 18 and 19.

²³. The documents produced at the *goorspraken* are dispersed over different archives, see: De Blécourt, *Termen van toverij*, 37 (note 11). The reports of the period under scrutiny can be found in: RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 134; Archive Van Heiden Reinestein, inv.nrs. 347A, 346. The documents from these archives supplement each other, even overlap at places, and taken together only show a few gaps. References in the following notes all concern Kolderveen, which is not specified separately each time.

²⁴. To mention just one instance: in the margin of the reports of Kolderveen from the Autumn of 1765 is written: '*Buiten Landers*' (foreigners). Here it concerns inhabitants of Giethorn, a place only a few kilometers removed from Kolderveen, RAD, Archive Van Heiden Reinestein, inv.nr. 347A.

²⁵. The fine for premarital intercourse (for which the birth of child too soon after marriage was the most concrete evidence) was imposed on the basis of the article in the *Landrecht* about 'Hoererye of Concubinaatschap' (whoredom or concubinage) (1713, book IV, art. 44). According to the notations in a copy of the *Landrecht* in the Amsterdam University Library (sign. I E38), at the Landday of 14th March 1671 it was decreed that when it concerned 'free people' who 'have intercourse in the flesh before their copulation and have the marriage solemnised afterwards', they could suffice with a fine of five guilders instead of the proscribed 25. This article was one of the laws that had been transferred from the church law to the country law at the beginning of the seventeenth century, cf. *Landrecht* 1614, book I, art. 2.

²⁶. *Landrecht* 1713, book I, art. 4.

²⁷. *Landrecht* 1713, book II, art. 3440. See also the description in: J.W.Th.M. Beekhuis-Snieders, 'Bestuurlijk ontwikkeling van Meppel sinds 1600', in: M.A.W. Gerding, a.o. (eds), *Geschiedenis van Meppel* (Meppel/Amsterdam 1991) 165-197, esp. 169-173.

had to be sent to the adverse party by the sheriff or his local assistant. In this complaint it was required to state clearly object and party. The defendant would then give his first reply at the *goorspraak* (in the margins of the complaints it is usually only scribbled that the defendant protested 'in writ' and requested a copy of the complaint; obviously it was not always delivered as decreed). The next step was to hold a *rocht* within three weeks at which both parties and their witnesses presented their case before the sheriff. If they had not yet come to an agreement, then again a few weeks later a formal verdict or *ordel* followed at the *lotting*, the session of the *Etstoel*, held twice a year. The verdict was written down in the protocols of the *lotting* -- the intermediate proceedings were dealt with orally as much as possible and also the pleas at the *lotting* were conducted in that way.²⁸

Most of the civil complaints concerned material businesses, controversies about sales or inheritances. Between 1760 and 1780 about thirty insult cases were brought before the *Etstoel*, three of which came from Kolderveen. Half of them were insults about larceny.²⁹ The other category that can be discerned is sexual crimes, particularly allegations of adultery and rape.³⁰ By the eighteenth century an insult usually didn't need to be revoked in public anymore (that is, when it was proved to have been pronounced and when it was not compensated by an insult of the plaintiff). It sufficed to revoke it before appointed representatives who lived in the same area as the opposed parties. One could only avert such a revocation if one showed remorse and asked the insulted for forgiveness in the presence of 'good' people, within 24 hours after having uttered the insults.³¹ After that time it was not possible anymore.³² If apart from the revocation an insulter wanted to avoid the fine as well, he or she was required to prove the reality of the allegations. This system may have been airtight in theory, in practice it depended mainly on how much effort the insulted was willing to put into it. I do not have any evidence of the authorities taking the trouble of collecting fines for insults that were not brought before the *Etstoel*. Official restitution of honour was an individual matter, which was in eighteenth-century scolding matches rarely pursued.

The sources show that there were more exchanges of blows than of insults. Among the inhabitants of Kolderveen during the period in question about thrice as many brawls as scolding matches occurred, at least according to the reports at the *goorspraken*.³³ Insults were

²⁸. *Tegenwoordige staat*, 42.

²⁹. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, volume 54, fol. 128, 198; vol. 56, fol. 67, 83vo, 139vo, 192; vol. 57, fol. 140vo; vol. 58, fol. 142vo; vol. 60, fol. 164, 165, 188; vol. 61, fol. 8, 13; vol. 62, fol. 101. Only the first folio on which the case appears is mentioned here, also when it is stretched along several folios.

³⁰. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 55, fol. 61; vol. 56, fol. 51vo; vol. 57, fol. 201; vol. 58, fol. 29vo; vol. 62, fol. 108. The same applies as in the previous note.

³¹. *Landrecht* 1713, book IV, art. 39.

³². See among others: RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 14, fol. 52vo-53. This case from Kolderveen from 1724 acquired jurisprudential status, see the notations in the copy of the *Landrecht* at the UBA (see note 25).

³³. The brawls in Kolderveen between inhabitants of other places in Drenthe and foreigners (that is, people from the Country of Vollenhove in the province of Overijssel) are not counted here. These brawls mainly occurred at the inns outside the village, when there had been a marketday in Meppel.

reported fourteen times. Twice the kind of insult was not specified and it was only written down that 'some insults had been passed' and that scolding had taken place.³⁴ Once the word 'hexe' was mentioned, four times words like thief or other names denoting larceny were used and seven times the expression 'schelm' (rogue) was used. In some cases more than one insult was aired within one slanging match. In February 1763 for instance Hindrik Jans [Ruiten] called Powel Claas [Bouwmeester] 'gauwdiefspak' (family of swindlers).³⁵ Other cases will be dealt with below. Apart from the obvious conclusion that 'rogue' seems to have been a popular insult³⁶ and that theft of property could be expressed in terms like 'weidedief' (thief of meadow) or the more general 'gauwdief', such an enumeration does not tell very much. It becomes a little more interesting when the gender of the people involved is taken into account. Apart from one case of a man who was quarelling with his sister, men insulted men (nine times) and women insulted women (four times). The scolding women blamed their fellow women twice of theft (of a piece of cloth and a loaf of bread).³⁷ In the third case it is not known exactly what was said and in the fourth case the words 'public whore and devourer' preceded the much heavier counter insult 'swarte hexe' (black witch). As will be clarified below, the word 'hoer' (whore) was not only addressed to women. But the title 'rogue' was usually used among men.³⁸

A closer inspection of the names of the insulters and insulted reveals that one man, Jan Remmels, was involved in the scolding matches of Kolderveen exceptionally often. Once as a witness, once as insulted, and five times as insulter. It seems therefore worthwhile to take his cases for a closer look of the scolding matches in that place. The reports at the *goorspraak* offer more information, but other archivalia, especially the registers of the *Etstoel* and local tax records, are also valuable for a description of Remmels' life and social position in

³⁴. RAD, archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 134, *goorspraak* Meppel 20 April 1776; *goorspraak* Dwingeloo 2 April 1778.

³⁵. RAD, Archive Van Heiden Reinestein, inv.nr. 347A, registers of the *goorspraak* April 1763.

³⁶. In his publications on the *Bokkerijders* (lit.: goat riders, 18th-century bands of brigands in the Southern Netherlands) Blok point out that the noun 'schelm' (rogue) referred to skinners and hangmen and had the same meaning as cadaver and carrion, see: Anton Blok, *De Bokkerijders. Roversbenden en geheime gebnootschappen in de Landen van Overmaas (1730-1774)* (Amsterdam 1991) 401; idem, 'De rol van vilders in de Bokkerijdersbenden', *Volkskundig bulletin* 7 (1981) 121-142, esp. 128. This may have some value from an etymological point of view, cf. P.A.F. van Veen, *Etymologisch woordenboek. De herkomst van onze woorden* (Utrecht/Antwerpen 1989) 664, it does not give any clue to the meaning of the word 'schelm' in specific situations.

³⁷. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 134, *goorspraak* Meppel 25 September 1762; *goorspraak* Dwingeloo 2 April 1778.

³⁸. A similar relation between gender and insult has been concluded from seventeenth-century scolding matches that were brought before the Amsterdam church council, see: Herman Roodenburg, *Onder censuur. De kerkelijke tucht in de gereformeerde gemeente van Amsterdam, 1578-1700* (Hilversum 1990) 351.

eighteenth-century Kolderveen.³⁹ No reconstruction can, however, exceed those matters that were so natural for its inhabitants that they did not put it on record. Only in the final instance it may be possible to add something from a remote, modern perspective.

III.

Jan Remmels, a son of Remmelt Thijs and Hendrikje Bartels, was baptized on 8 January 1724 at Dwingeloo.⁴⁰ He moved later to Ansen and to a few other places. On 19 March 1756, at the age of 32, he took out the banns with the then twenty year old Femmegien Geerts at Kolderveen. In Drenthe it was not unusual to marry at a late age since marriage depended on the means of subsistence.⁴¹ Through his marriage Jan Remmels acquired a farm in Kolderveen since his young wife was the only surviving child of Geert Roelofs and Lammechien Gerrits, and she had been staying alone with her mother on the farm since the death of her father in 1749.⁴²

The conflicts in which Jan Remmels became involved, can be divided into two episodes. The first one occurred in the years 1762-1764. The second string of fights became manifest in 1772 and more or less continued till Remmels' death in 1779. The insults brought forward at the *goorspraken* point at these conflicts, but they made up only a small part of them. In 1762 it was reported

that the wife of Jan Remmels had called Hillegijn Pieters a public whore and a devourer, and after the passing of half an hour Jan Remmels and his wife had again called Hillegijn Pieters a public whore and devourer, that further Jan Remmels had called Tij Roelofs a bandit and a roamer by night on other men's fields and ditches and that finally Hillegijn Pieters had called the wife of Jan Remmels a black witch.⁴³

In 1764 Jan Remmels called Gerrit Hendriks a 'meadow thief' and a 'rogue'.⁴⁴ Nine years

³⁹. Records of the local church councils have unfortunately not been transmitted, see: S.J. Fockema Andreae, 'De archieven in de provincie Drenthe', in: *De archieven van de Nederlandse Hervormde kerk* (Leiden 1960), 182193, esp. 188 (read 'Kolderveen' instead of 'Rolderveen'). The registers of baptisms, marriages and memberships did survive and have been consulted by me.

⁴⁰. He became an orphan very young. The burial of his father is noted at 19 May 1727, the one of his mother at 25 October 1733. The registers of guardianship of Dwingeloo are missing for those years. About the estate of Remmelt Thijs see: RAD, archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 134.01, *goorspraak* Havelte 24 September 1784.

⁴¹. 'By marrying relatively late, staying unmarried and, to a limited extent also by birth control, reproduction was adapted to the possibilities of a living as a full farmer,' J.A. Verduin, *Ontwikkelingen in de Drentsche bevolking gedurende de 17e en 18e eeuw* (Assen 1982) 63.

⁴². At 19 April 1756 Lammechien Gerrits sold the farm with everything it included to her daughter and son-in-law for the price of 960 guilders, RAD, Archive Schultengerechten, inv.nr. 145, vol. 4, fol. 464-465.

⁴³. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 134, *goorspraak* Meppel 25 September 1762.

⁴⁴. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 134, *goorspraak* Meppel 29 September 1764.

later he addressed Gerrit van Rabberinge as 'rogue, whore, and scum'.⁴⁵ In April of that year Jan Lambers reported that Jan Remmels had called Jan Woltman a rogue and at the same *goorspraak* the sheriff's assistant of Kolderveen, Berent Bouknegt, reported that on the 10th of December when he was serving papers on Jan Remmels he was called a 'rogue, scoundrel and rascal' and further everything that was bad.⁴⁶ Again half a year later, in the Autumn of 1774, Willem Jans Winters made known 'that Jan Remmels called him a rogue, which could be attested by Jan Lambers and his wife'.⁴⁷ Apart from the first one, these reports tend to be brief and monotonous and the patience of the modern reader is further tested by the enumeration of all sorts of names that at first sight seem irrelevant.

The first report becomes a little more transparent when the Kolderveen register of marriages is consulted which shows that Hillegien Pieters and Thij Roelofs had married in 1739. With this piece of information the scolding matches from 1762 can be understood as a quarrel between two couples. The family link also becomes evident in a few other reports that were made by Jan Remmels himself in 1762 and 1763.⁴⁸ According to him in 1762 Jan Thijn (son of Thij Roelofs) had been fishing with a *kra* [a kind of boat?] and Thij Roelofs had even used baskets. They also had been catching pigeons and possessed a gun. Thij Roelofs answered that Jan Remmels and his wife had also been fishing. Harm Thijn (another son of Thij Roelofs) had, again according to Jan Remmels,

said in the house of Gerrit Hendriks that he wanted to put away the sheep in the 'doghole' and that he Jan Remmels, who as witness on the 'rocht' of Albert Roelofs had been bending the truth, and that Jan Remmels did not mind a few lies and when Jan Remmels had asked him, that he should not insult and mock him anymore, Harm Tijn had answered, that he did not want to stop it.

In this way Harm Thijn voiced his family's opinion about the immediate cause of the quarrel between the two families, namely that Jan Remmels' appearance at the *rocht* of Albert Roelofs (who was a relative of Jan Remmels' wife) had been unjustified. This case indeed supplies hints of the setting of the conflict.

At the *goorspraak* of 25 September 1762 Albert Roelofs had filed an official complaint against Hillegien Pieters.⁴⁹ She had accused Grietje Jans, Albert's wife, to have stolen a shawl, and had said that Albert or one of his family had stolen 25 guilders from her. By writ of his solicitor Albert demanded a public revocation before the *Etstoel*. Hillegien should be condemned to

ask God, Justice and the insulted for forgiveness, and to declare that she knew nothing but every honour and virtue of the plaintiff and his wife, and that her heart suffered to have poured the afore mentioned atrocious injury against the plaintiff and his wife, next to pay an amend to the deaconery of Kolderveen.

⁴⁵. RAD, Archive Van Heiden Reinestein, inv.nr. 347A, *goorspraken* Autumn 1773.

⁴⁶. RAD, Archive Van Heiden Reinestein, inv.nr. 346, *goorspraken* April 1774.

⁴⁷. RAD, Archive Van Heiden Reinestein, inv.nr. 347A, *goorspraken* Autumn 1774.

⁴⁸. RAD, Archive Van Heiden Reinestein, inv.nr. 347A, *goorspraken* Autumn 1762 and Autumn 1763.

⁴⁹. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 134, *goorspraak* 25 September 1762.

The verdict pronounced by the Etstoel included not only the complaint, but also the explanations and answers. Hillegien, it appears, had said the words on the road to Meppel and had also declared Grietje Jans to be a public swindler and if witnesses would not affirm it, they would then be rogues and scum. Hillegien replied to this that she had indeed said to Grietje 'you are wearing my shawl, give it back to me', but she denied having said that Grietje had stolen it. The shawl was hers and she was also missing other things. Jan Remmels had been speaking about this as well and also that he 'had started the injury case against her to save the plaintiff [Albert Roelofs]'. Though Hillegien's words will be intermingled with those of her lawyer, their contents amply ring out (and were later repeated by her son). She further put to her defense that some time ago Gerrit van Rabberinge had brought some flax to Albert Roelofs and when he came to collect it the next day, he had found some of it missing. Grietje had taken three loaves of bread when she had right to only one and had returned the other two later. Furthermore a tool had been found in the barn of Albert Roelofs that was not his. Finally Hillegien's lawyer put forwards that there was 'common talk' in Kolderveen that Albert Roelofs (or his wife) was suspected to have stolen things from her. Moreover it was not proven that she had said that Grietje had stolen 25 guilders worth of cloth from her. Briefly summarized, she had not expressed the contested insults, but they were nevertheless true. The (attempt at) substantiating the insults by one party, however, comprised an extra proof of them to the other. Alberts lawyer immediately replied that the injury had been aggravated -- there was no evidence whatsoever for the thefts. As usual the case was settled out of court during the *lotting*.⁵⁰

A similar outcome could not be secured in the case that was simultaneously conducted by Jan Remmels against Hillegien Pieters.⁵¹ From it, it appears again that the scolding had been mutual.⁵² In view of the opinion of Jan Remmels two matters are relevant here. One is Hillegien's remark that Jan Remmels did also fight with others now and then. The second emerges in Jan Remmels' defense speech and concerns his explanation of the insult 'whore'. Hillegien had conceived a child while she was not married and Thij Roelofs had not wanted to accept it at first. The answer to the last insinuation was that 'although she had given birth before her marriage day, she did not deserve to be called a public whore, even less so since she had married her man soon afterwards'.

The last exchange shows a moral difference of opinion -- I will return to it later. The first argument tells us something about Jan Remmels' character: he apparently was not known as an easy man. Until 1762 his behaviour did not seem to have led to reports or complaints and he managed to constrain himself. But when he started to interfere with the case between Albert Roelofs and Hillegien Pieters, the feelings about him surfaced as well. They were not (yet) shared by every inhabitant of Kolderveen. The conflicts of the years 1762-1764 can be situated more precisely, when next to the family relations aspects of space are considered. The

⁵⁰. RAD, Archive Etstoel, inv.nr. 14, vol.54, fol. 138-139.

⁵¹. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 54, fol. 140vo-141. Depositions of witnesses in this case are kept in: Rijksarchief in Overijssel (RAO), Archive Schoutambt Wanneperveen, inv.nr. 2995, 8 October 1762.

⁵². A 36-year old case could be brought into memory without any difficulty, see: De Blécourt, *Termen van toverij*, 135-137, 155-157. This will have been the case more often. I have preferred a tight time frame here, however, rather than to try to trace every case back into time, which in principle could continue till there are no more sources available.

hearth register, a list of the principal inhabitants of the village that was drawn up every ten years from 1744 onwards, can assist here.⁵³ Although the dwelling place of every tax payer is not exactly indicated, it may be safely assumed that the compilers worked their way through the village systematically and that they visited houses that were situated next or opposite to each other successively. In the 1764 list most of the involved are mentioned in succession: Thij Roelofs, Jan Remmels and Gerrit Hendriks (van Rabberinge) were immediate neighbours. This also implied that the use of land played an important role in their mutual relationship. The different plots were divided by small ditches, but a few of them still had joint owners and problems could also arise about the right of way. Problems like these may have been present between Jan Remmels and Thij Roelofs (the latter was a peat bargee). They certainly were important in Jan Remmels' dealings with Gerrit Hendriks.

In 1743 Albert Claas (Middelbos) and Geert Roelofs (Jan Remmels' father in law) had split a part of their common land,⁵⁴ another part was still commonly used. In 1762 Albert Claas had become an old man who had remained alone on his farm and had rented (a part of) his land to Gerrit van Rabberinge.⁵⁵ When the latter had temporarily stored his flax at Albert Roelof's place, it not only signified a mutual service between fellow inhabitants, but it also referred to the relation of property (and kinship) between Albert Roelofs and the one who Gerrit Hendriks rented his land from. Two years later a similar incident occurred. Jan Remmels then complained that Gerrit Hendriks and Albert Jans Haarman (the son of another neighbour) had been grazing 'over thirty sheep' on the meadow he commonly owned with Albert Middelbos. They had forcefully prevented him to remove the sheep⁵⁶ and Jan Remmels now demanded payment. According to his complaint about the actions of Harm Thijn in 1763 there had been problems with the sheep before but these seem to have been layed to rest. Remmels' complaint did not reach the *Etstoel* and if there had been any more fights during the second half of the sixties, they would have been too insignificant to report at the *goorspraken*.

IV.

The second string of scolding matches during the years 1772-1774 transcended the 'local' character of the first one. Jan Remmels still had a troubled relationship with Gerrit van Rabberinge, but he also insulted other villagers who did not live next to him. Apart from the attitude of those involved, the escalation was related to two events. They can be arranged in the same categories as the events of ten years earlier. Again the main issues were the use of land and premarital intercourse. The similarity nevertheless does not imply that the specific utterings should not be regarded anymore. Within the context of a very broad synopsis of the meanings of the insults, it may be sufficient to refer to the two origins of conflict, but in the

⁵³. See: Paul Brood, *Belastingheffing in Drenthe 1600-1822* (Meppel/Amsterdam 1991) 69-71; cf. De Blécourt, *Termen van toverij*, 50.

⁵⁴. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 49, fol. 180vo; inv.nr. 134, *goorspraak* Meppel 27 September 1749.

⁵⁵. See for a burglary of which Albert Middelbos became a victim at the end of 1762: RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 9, box 17, file 262a.

⁵⁶. It was reported at the same *goorspraak* that they had threatened each other which knives.

kind of analysis I am advocating here, a microscopic attention to details is necessary. Not only because this constitutes a vital part of the proposed approach, but also because only then the dissimilarities of the individual events as well as their temporal sequence can become understandable. Why did Jan Remmels in 1773 call Gerrit Hendriks 'rogue, whore and scum' and why did he consider Jan Woltman, Berent Bouknecht and Willem Jan Winters to be rogues as well?

At the 1771 summer meeting of the *Etstoel*, the guardians of the children of Jan Roelofs (Beerties) and Fijgien Willems (who also had been living in the neighbourhood of Jan Remmels) filed a request to sell their cottery at Kolderveen, because of the debt of 346 guilders that was on it.⁵⁷ The *etten* granted this request. A little earlier, in March 1771, the guardians had already sold some 'peatland' to Jan Remmels and to the brothers Hendrik and Evert Gerrits (sons of Gerrit van Rabberinge) for apparently the same reason. Jan Remmels had paid the first instalment of the purchase price, but he refused to meet the second at the set date in May 1773. He could not reach the land in question and therefore found that it was not delivered to him. With the help of the verdict in the case which Roelof Pieters, the first guardian of the children of Jan Roelofs, eventually conducted at the end of 1774 before the *Etstoel* against Jan Remmels and the brothers Gerrits, it is possible to recount the different arguments and actions that were taken so far.⁵⁸ In them, also, a fourth party, to wit the widow of Thij Roelofs participated.

The cotteries that had belonged to Jan Roelofs and Thij Roelofs had been laying on the same estate and their pieces of land were intermingled to such an extent that one could only be reached by way of the other. To get to the land he had bought in 1771 Jan Remmels first had to cross the land of Hillegien Pieters and her sons and then that of the brothers Van Rabberinge. All this had been made clear at the sale; the land had been sold 'with its approaches and through roads'. Originally there had been two roads, one on the west and one on the east side. Jan Roelofs, however, had at one point dug a ditch straight through the western road and had since then used the eastern one. Later the brothers had extended the side ditch, which had made the eastern way useless as well. In the summer of 1771 there were hardly any problems yet. Jan Remmels had driven his horse and cart over a board that had been put over the ditch and had been able to collect his hay from the land. Afterwards he had got into trouble with Evert Gerrits and when in June 1772 he had wanted to collect his hay again he had been hampered 'because there was no board across the land of Evert Gerrits'. He then demanded of Roelof Pieters that he prepare a passage.

In the ensuing judicial fight Roelof Pieters and Evert Gerrits (who also represented his brother) hid behind each other. The first one pleaded that the side ditch had already been there at the time of the sale. The guardians had then even asked Hillegien Pieters to replace the road, but she had refused. At 11 September 1774 Roelof Pieters had suggested to Jan Remmels to nullify the sale and informed Hendrik and Evert Gerrits about it. The latter had then asked Jan Remmels whether he had wanted the road at the east or the west side. Evert Gerrits even put forward that in 1772 he had agreed with Jan Remmels that the road should run at the west side. If he should put a board over the side ditch, then it should have been a condition at the sale. He added (through the mouth of his lawyer) 'that Jan Remmels could not

⁵⁷. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 57, fol. 176vo.

⁵⁸. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 59, fol. 194-199.

possible read from the conditions of the sale that to his pleasure a board should be placed over the side ditch, to which Evert Gerrits never could be forced'. Later Jan Remmels put this even more pointedly. According to him Evert Gerrits had already said in 1772 'rather to lose a hundred guilders in a law suit than to place a board over the little ditch in favor of Jan Remmels'.⁵⁹

During the court case in December 1774 -- which Jan Remmels lost by the way -- other important opinions were brought forward as well, which I will deal with in the next section. First I want to pay attention to the question why precisely Evert Gerrits was obstructing Jan Remmels in 1772 and not a year earlier. In this all, we should not discount the fact that Jan Remmels was acting somewhat strange by contemporary standards. According to Roelof Pieters he had 'been confused in his head from the day of the sale'.⁶⁰ But there are no direct indications that others thought the same and there was a concrete reason for the renewed distancing of the neighbours anyhow, in which the whole of Kolderveen was drawn.

Evert Gerrits had married Hendrikje Jans on July 14th, 1771. Their first child, a son, was baptized on the 15th of December of the same year. Evert and Hendrikje should have paid the usual fine, if the case had been reported at the *goorspraak*. This had not occurred and on the basis of the Law the bailiff (who had been informed by Jan Remmels) at the summer *lotting* of 1774 demanded a fine of one gold guilder of each house in Kolderveen.⁶¹ The joint (male) inhabitants of Kolderveen⁶² now tried to transfer the responsibility of the reporting to Jan Remmels. Their arguments allude to Jan Remmels' role within Kolderveen. Being the 'nearest neighbour' Jan Remmels' wife had helped Evert Gerrits' wife at birth of her child. Jan Remmels thus had known about the (too early) birth and should have made this known at the meeting which preceded the *goorspraak*. The only other attendant had been the midwife, who had not known that it had been a case of premarital intercourse because 'the houses at Kolderveen were positioned far and wide from each other'. According to the inhabitants Jan Remmels had held his mouth on purpose and thus had acted 'in bad faith'. A day or two before the *goorspraak* he had reported the case to the local tax collector Jan Woltman. The latter had asked if he wanted to report it, to which Jan Remmels had answered: 'no, I will come again'. He had not done so. He should have said that Evert Gerrits had demanded not to report it (Jan Lambers should have witnessed that) and that 'he would take all the trouble and damage'. Thus the joint inhabitants. Jan Remmels' lawyer opposed that everyone was responsible for his own house. The whole of Kolderveen had known about the early birth because Evert and Hendrikje had been married in Kolderveen and their child had been baptized there as well. Jan Woltman had known about it and should have reported it. As

⁵⁹. RAO, Archive Schoutambt Wanneperveen, inv.nr. 2998, 12 August 1776.

⁶⁰. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 59, fol. 196.

⁶¹. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 59, fol. 148vo-149vo.

⁶². The original term is '*boer*', meaning farmers as well as inhabitants. In Drenthe it referred to the collective of (male) main occupants of the houses. It is not possible to provide a more precise picture of personal grouping and social demarcation, unless one takes the trouble to relate all the representatives at the *goorspraken* (eight each year, but only noted down in the records that are kept in the archive of the *Etstoel*) to the entries in the hearth registers, which could never provide more than an indication. Cf. J. Heringa, *De buurschap en haar marke* (Assen 1982) 65.

the final (and only preserved) description of this conflict covers a period of two years, it is not possible to date every action exactly. Jan Remmels denied 'that he had taken it upon himself to report this'. Those who had said so had been prejudiced. He also had not agreed upon it with Evert Gerrits. The inhabitants replied 'that if Jan Remmels had been so repressed in Kolderveen, as was pretended, a report should have been made in order to have the culprit punished'. Although the whole business started in the first months of 1772 when Jan Remmels had not yet discovered that the entrance to his new land had been denied to him, it seems reasonable to suppose that further complications only arose after the month of June of that year. One thing clearly led to another. In this case the *etten* acquitted Jan Remmels of the demand of the inhabitants and they convicted Kolderveen to pay the fine required by the bailiff. In this way they reinforced, for the time being, Jan Remmels' trust in the authorities of Drenthe, but they weakened his position within Kolderveen and above all his relations with the influential tax collector Jan Woltman. Everything thus points to the latter's revenge.

The opportunity arose soon. In 1763 Jan Remmels had borrowed 800 guilders from Albert Middelbos⁶³ and he was still repaying it. Meanwhile Albert Middelbos had died and his son Claas Alberts had been placed under tutelage because he had lost his mind. In 1774 Jan Woltman and Jacob Jonker were guarding the estate.⁶⁴ As Jan Remmels had been negligent in his repayments (the certificate had been falsified, he said), the guardians had his movable goods seized. Jan Remmels protested at the *Etstoel* in vain.⁶⁵

Against this background the reports of the scolding matches at the *goorspraken* gain more substance. In the view of Jan Remmels -- whether he was mentally deranged or not -- it becomes understandable that in the summer of 1773 he called Gerrit van Rabberinge 'rogue, whore and scum' and that when he was asked to answer for it he wanted to stand by the insult 'family of whores'.⁶⁶ The words Remmels addressed to Jan Woltman and the sheriff's assistant Berent Bouknecht do not need any further explanation.⁶⁷ Finally, the report of Willem Jan Winters in September 1774 -- Jan Remmels had said 'rogue' to him -- can be interpreted as part of the fight between the neighbours: on the 23d of October of that year Willem Jan Winters married Jentien Thijen, a daughter of Hillegien Pieters. As many of his fellow villagers later declared, Jan Remmels would, of course, have been better advised to hold his mouth. To him, however, insulting more and more became his last resort, even if it led to

⁶³. RAD, Archive Schultengerechten, inv.nr. 151, vol. 12, fol. 159.

⁶⁴. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 56, fol. 142-142vo, 199vo; vol. 57, fol. 174vo; vol. 58, fol. 48-48vo. See further: vol. 60, fol. 136-137, 166, 193-194.

⁶⁵. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 60, fol. 4vo-5.

⁶⁶. RAD, Archive Van Heiden Reinestein, inv.nr. 347A, *goorspraken* Autumn 1773. This fight had a bodily component as well: Jan Remmels drew his knife at Gerrit van Rabberinge, in his opinion only to defend himself, see also: Archive Van Heiden Reinestein, inv.nr. 346, *goorspraken* April 1774. It is remarkable that for Jan Remmels bodily violence was much less important than verbal violence.

⁶⁷. In order to give a complete picture, I have to relate that Jan Remmels reported in April 1774 that in May or June of the previous year he had caught Jan Woltman and his son Roelof at unlicensed hunting. Officially he should have told this half a year earlier and it is thus typical that he only did so when the 'boer' started the case against him. According to Jan Woltman it was not true anyway, RAD, Archive Van Heiden Reinestein, inv.nr. 346, *goorspraken* April 1774.

his death in the end.

V.

The Dutch historian Willem Frijhoff in one of his essays has delineated clearly the relation between the cultural and the material aspects of the past. 'Behaviour, attitudes, a habitus do not originate at random, and also not only because of the objective pressure of environmental factors as climate, food shortage, population density, spatial organisation and the like,' he wrote. 'They are no automatic answers, but more or less make up conscious choices, as answers to existential questions or problems, from the forms of behaviour which the person at that moment has to his disposal'.⁶⁸ Historical anthropological research is concerned, in other words, with elucidating the way in which people react to their surroundings and attempt to master them. These surroundings are not only defined by environmental factors. The deeds of other people, their mutual relationships and power struggles play an important role as well.⁶⁹ In the previous sections this has been discussed quite extensively. The question that still remains is how the depicted conflicts were linked to economic and demographic processes.

In several aspects seventeenth- and eighteenth- century Kolderveen is a place that is difficult to describe, at least when one entertains quantitative aspirations. The available sources need a lot of re-organising before one can actually count things. Ecclesiastically Kolderveen was linked to Dinxterveen in the province of Overijssel, which makes it quite complicated to count the number of birth and marriage registrations in the separate villages.⁷⁰ At first sight the hearth registers do seem to be directly suitable for statistical analysis. This source, however, is too broad in a different way, because it does not display the dividing lines within Kolderveen. The village roughly consisted of two parts, the proper village (with the church) and parallel along that, about two kilometers to the north-west, the so called 'Bovenboer' (upper village).⁷¹ Especially with a cultural analysis it is important to take account of these internal, at any rate spatial differences. Jan Remmels lived in the Bovenboer, Jan Woltman in what I will conveniently call 'the village'. The next differentiation, that can be

⁶⁸. Willem Frijhoff, 'Impasses en beloften van de mentaliteitsgeschiedenis', *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis* 10 (1984) 406-437, esp. 424. Cf. Blok, *De Bokkerijders*, 18: 'In a sense people are emprisonned in broader frames, spatial and social structures, or whatever name one wants to give to the figurations humans form with each other. But the same frames also gives scope for action -- not in the least because they are moving themselves. For one the scope of action is undoubtedly bigger than for the other, but there are always -- also for the less privileged -- possibilities for adaption, rebellion and change.'

⁶⁹. In his article cited in the previous note, Frijhoff does not pay much attention to the question of power, as he is mainly concerned with *collective* behaviour. See also: Willem Frijhoff, 'Inleiding. Historische antropologie', in: Peter te Boekhorst, Peter Burke & Willem Frijhoff (eds.), *Cultuur en maatschappij in Nederland 1500-1800. Een historisch-antropologisch perspectief* (Amsterdam/Heerlen 1992).

⁷⁰. Cf. Verduin, *Ontwikkelingen*, who refrained from counting the baptisms of Kolderveen. He did not use registers of marriages for any place, because they first demand a revision on the name of the partners anyway, cf. his argumentation on p. 26. In the nineteenth century Kolderveen was part of the municipality of Nijeveen, which also for the later period makes it necessary to divide people according to locality.

⁷¹. A third part can be discerned as well, namely the 'Zomerdijk' (litt.: Summer dike), flanking Meppel. It consisted of a handful of houses, among them several inns.

indicated on the basis of the hearth registers, is related to the height of the tax impositions. In Kolderveen three categories can be discerned: two guilders for farmers with two horses and cotters with a trade, one guilder for cotters, and nil for the poor. These categories point to differences in prosperity as well as in social status. Taking account of both types of differences (place of living and status) will make possible an analysis that is more differentiated and therefore also historically more relevant than has been undertaken so far.

According to the agricultural historian Bieleman the number of households in Kolderveen decreased by eight between the years 1774 and 1784. (Between 1764 and 1774 there was an absolute increase of 13 households, which he disregards). These developments were linked to a decrease of farming soil. Furthermore Bieleman signals for the year 1798 a strikingly big share of Kolderveen males over sixteen who were involved in the peat industry. He relates the decrease of households to an increase of impoverishment, for the rest he is mainly concerned with nuancing the general image of a growing population of Drenthe. In his mind the decrease of the amount of farming soil is linked to the effects of the peat works and the relative rise of the ground water level. 'Because of the lowering of the [maaiveld] much land that originally was suitable for the growing of rye, became so low that later it could only be used for growing grass. Locally this process was accelerated because the peat was dug out from under the farming soil'.⁷²

Bieleman's findings can be relativized in turn. When the Bovenboer is separated from the rest of Kolderveen,⁷³ and the level of tax impositions is taken into account, than it turns out that the big change in Kolderveen did not occur between 1774 and 1784 but a decade earlier. The changes mainly concerned the Bovenboer, where the amount of those taxed for two guilders dropped by over 50% (from 19 to 9) and where the amount of cotters rose by half (from 32 to 47). Among those who were taxed with two guilders were cotters with a craft as well as farmers, which does not elucidate directly where the most severe blows were falling. The hearth register of 1754, however, does provide the occupations (it is they only one that does), as does the list that was compiled in 1798 for the civil guards. Comparison of the two lists shows that mainly the amount of farmers was decreasing (from 19 to 6). In the village, the amount of people who were taxed for two guilders remained more or less stable (about 30). This picture of an increasing malaise at the Bovenboer is affirmed when one looks at the bankruptcies in Kolderveen, which were pronounced in 1776 and all concerned inhabitants of the Bovenboer.⁷⁴ The floods that hit Kolderveen between 1775 and 1778 possibly contributed

⁷². Jan Bieleman, *Boeren op het Drentse zand 1600-1900. Een nieuwe visie op de 'oude' landbouw* (Utrecht 1987), cit. 220. The other information mentioned is drawn from pages 65, 81 and 116.

⁷³. The split becomes possible when the names in the hearth registers are compared to the register of church members compiled in 1744. The minister at the time, Van der Meulen, did indicate the division between the different parts of Kolderveen. He also walked around in precisely the opposite direction as the sheriff and the tax collector usually did. It is also possible to discern the different neighbourhoods by comparing the hearth registers with the count for the militia in 1798 (RAD, Oude Statenarchieven, inv.nr. 1383, vol. 29). When the hearth registers start at the Bovenboer (at the west side) the compilers of the 1798 register walked through the village first.

⁷⁴. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 60, fol. 162-163, 215-215vo, 215vo-216vo.

to the recession.⁷⁵ But they were not vital since the most important changes had already taken place before 1774.

During the second half of the eighteenth century the amount of people in Kolderveen who worked at the extraction of peat will have increased. The hearth registers do not show peat 'makers' or peat 'farmers' (who were certainly in existence) and this source can therefore not be used to indicate an overall trend. But the big percentage of people who were involved in the peat business in 1798 will have been part of a relatively recent development, that again has to be situated at the Bovenboer. In the village only in two households, males were working as peat farmers and as peat makers in only six. At the Bovenboer the figures were eight and twentythree respectively.

Next to scolding and fighting matches the reports at the goorspraken are an excellent source for the study of extramarital intercourse, even if in this case the information is also very slight. In the period 1760-1780 illegal births were reported for Kolderveen fifteen times, in two of which unmarried mothers were involved (the son of Evert Gerrits and Hendrikje Jans is not counted here). This number is rather high in proportion to the number of marriages in Kolderveen in cases where the couples stayed in Kolderveen (two or three a year), that is to say, had their first child baptized as well. An exact account of the degree to which premarital intercourse was customary in Kolderveen is precluded here.⁷⁶ Apart from a possible answer to the question how 'normal' it was, it can be established that in most of the cases it concerned families of cotters at the Bovenboer. A few times it is even possible to indicate a family tradition, and this occurred precisely in those families who had got embroiled with Jan Remmels: a son as well as a daughter of Thij Roelofs (who also only had married Hillegien Pieters when she was already pregnant) had their first child too early according to the legal norm. A sister of Evert Gerrits even had a child when still single.⁷⁷

The experiences of Jan Remmels should be seen against the background of economic and demographic developments. They are in fact part of it. Remmels was one of the farmers of the Bovenboer who saw a drastic decrease of their numbers and who tried to take a desperate stand against the approaching peat extractions. For the cotters, who were also endangered, the making of peat was the most appropriate means to secure their existence, but this made it more and more difficult for the farmers to continue their enterprise. This is very

⁷⁵. RAD, Oude Statenarchieven, inv.nr. 15, fol. 73-73vo, 120-120vo, 151vo; see also inv.nr. 903.

⁷⁶. To uncover this, a precise reconstruction is needed of all (about 125) the families who lived in the place, which I could not carry out in the context of this article. The results of such an exercise, however useful, could not provide an exact picture either. People tried to avoid reporting by not having their child baptized in Kolderveen but at the other side of the border with Overijssel. Adversely women from Overijssel gave birth 'too early' in Kolderveen (altogether this concerns about half of all the cases). Obviously, the number of pregnant women that resorted to abortion remains unknown. This makes it all very awkward to reconstruct the percentage of premarital intercourse only on the basis of one local church register. Cf. amongst others: D.J. Noordam, *Leven in Maasland. Een hoogontwikkelde plattelandssamenleving in de achttiende en het begin van de negentiende eeuw* (Hilversum 1986) 162-166; Florence Koorn, 'Illegitimiteit en eergevoel. Ongehuwde moeders in Twente in de achttiende eeuw', *Jaarboek voor vrouwengeschiedenis* 8 (1987) 74-98, esp. 86-89.

⁷⁷. RAD, Archive Van Heiden Reinestein, inv.nr. 347A, *goorspraken* April 1767; inv.nr. 346, *goorspraken* April 1774; Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 134, *goorspraak* Diever 3 April 1780.

well illustrated by the conflict between Jan Remmels on the one side and Roelof Pieters and particularly Evert Gerrits and Hillegien Pieters on the other. Jan Remmels had bought 'peatland', but was using it to obtain hay. As he said: 'the lands had always yielded hay and the fields had been grazed by cattle'. The roads had become impassible because Hillegien Pieters and her sons, and Evert Gerrit likewise, had turned large pieces of land into peat. Evert Gerrits accordingly was of the opinion that he had bought 'peatland to gain peat from' and that one road was more than sufficient. He subtly remarked next 'that it made a big difference whether Jan Remmels had been sold a piece of hay and grazing land, or a piece of peat land, as was the case, adding to it, that you did not need roads for lands from which peat was taken'.⁷⁸

These differences in opinion about the use of land were linked to ideas that were mutually exclusive and to practices concerning premarital intercourse. The farmer Jan Remmels thought families of cotters and tenants who practiced pre-marital intercourse 'families of whores'. Both fields of conflict seem to me to belong together. Although there is no information available about the age of the couples that produced offspring too fast, these liaisons seem to have been aimed at reproducing a labour force.⁷⁹ The extraction of turf needed much more labour than agriculture. The two means of production each involved their own sexual morals; the peat producers needed many children while the farmers had to limit their offspring. The insults Jan Remmels delivered to his neighbours need thus to be interpreted as more than just neighbourly fights. They are an expression of fundamental economic and cultural differences, not only in the Bovenboer but also within the society of Drenthe as a whole. It is thus hardly surprising that the authorities of Drenthe who attempted to revive the production of peat⁸⁰ took the side of Jan Remmels' adversaries in this peculiar quarrel. Remmels got so carried away, that he next neglected every bit of caution.

VI.

The history of Jan Remmels did not end with his defeats at the hands of Roelof Pieters and Jan Woltman. Remmels' stubbornness makes it possible to consider the political connotations of scolding that extend far beyond Kolderveen, and to incorporate into the analysis the role of the authorities of Drenthe much more than has been done so far. Most of the time the authorities took an aloof stance in local conflicts. If they were not solved informally, formal sessions for reconciliation were held indoors as much as possible and public actions were avoided. The violent show of power was restricted to 'real' criminals, those who in a social-cultural sense were no (longer) part of the communities of Drenthe.⁸¹ It was different, however, when the authorities were subject to insults themselves.

Jan Remmels did not abide to the verdicts of the *Etstoel*. In 1776 he filed a request for

⁷⁸. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 59, fol. 194vo-199; the italics are underlined in the original.

⁷⁹. Cf. the different theories as described by Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and love in England. Modes of reproduction 1300-1840* (Oxford 1986) 305-307.

⁸⁰. See the summary in: De Blécourt, *Termen van toverij*, 56. Gerding...

⁸¹. A short description of the criminality in Drenthe during the period 1750-1811 is to be found in: M.G. Buist, 'Van oude vrijheid naar nieuwe eenheid, 1748-1850', in: J. Heringa, a.o. (eds.), *Geschiedenis van Drenthe* (Meppel/Amsterdam 1985) 475-546, esp. 494.

revision at the bailiff, passing the *etten*. The bailiff thus could only conclude that

the affaires being entaminated conform to the praescript of the Law, and being prosecuted, and the judicial decision had fallen and furthermore these cases being legally determinated and as such their sentences being overgrown, no repeal, revision or reauditing can take place.

He ordered Jan Remmels to conform to the verdicts 'like a good inhabitant' and to stop scolding.⁸² The man did not follow the advise but instead turned to higher authorities by contacting first the stadholder (by way of the bailiff) and later the *Staten Generaal* -- at least such was the tale he told his fellow inhabitants of Kolderveen.⁸³ It is hardly surprising that the bailiff was willing to pass the complaints on to Willem V.⁸⁴ He personally knew the stadholder and often stayed in The Hague. In this period he was busy at building up his own personel power, to produce 'an orangistic fortress of regency', and to do away with the rights of the inhabitants of Drenthe as much as possible.⁸⁵ The case of Jan Remmels, however, would have been too insignificant for the bailiff's political schemes and Jan Remmels himself, who by the time had begun to look at his world in terms of supporters or opponents, called the bailiff a 'licy jackall', or a 'rogue', or a 'filthy potentate', who 'was not so bad on his own, but had been misled by others'. But Jan Remmels was also extraordinarily angry at the sheriff of Meppel,⁸⁶ who he called a 'rogue' many times because he had sold him land without a road. In this phase his anger was not merely directed at his neighbours, but at the civil servants who had drawn up the agreements and had supervised the procedures, including the lawyers who had been working for him. He had not received any justice.

For the authorities financial motives seem to have tipped the balance. After Jan Woltman had seized Jan Remmels' 'movable' goods (his cattle, among others), there were still

⁸². RAD, Archive Van Heiden Reinestein, inv.nr. 718.

⁸³. Unless otherwise indicated the following words of Jan Remmels are quoted from the statements about them which were delivered by a large amount of (male) inhabitants from Kolderveen to the country scribe. He found these witnesses biased and when he was himself interrogated later, at 28 October in Assen, he mainly kept silent. See: RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 9, box 36, file nr. 385.

⁸⁴. According to one witness Jan Remmels had said that the bailiff had taken letters for him which had not arrived at the attended addresses. This could be the reason that neither the file, nor other papers about the case, reveal any trace of interference by non-Drentish authorities, which would indeed have been in flagrant opposition to the autonomy the country possessed in such cases. To look for possible traces elsewhere would amount to looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack.

⁸⁵. See about the connections of the bailiff and his policies of power: L. Buning, *Het herenbolwerk. Politieke en sociale terreinverkenningen in Drenthe over de periode 1748-1888* (Assen 1966) 44-47, 53-57; E. Doeve, *De laatste dagen van het herenbolwerk. Het bestuur van de kerspelen en buurschappen in Drenthe 1748-1795* (Assen 1983) 21-22.

⁸⁶. The then sheriff of Meppel was Jan Alting, cf. H.M.M. Jansen, 'Onderwijs in Meppel', in: M.A.W. Gerding, a.o. (eds), *Geschiedenis van Meppel* (Meppel/Amsterdam 1991) 277314, esp. 281. This sheriff is not listed among the sheriffs of Meppel in Beekhuis-Snieders, 'Bestuurlijke ontwikkeling', 197.

unpaid debts left, for most part due to the lost law suits.⁸⁷ The sheriff of Meppel wrote to the *Etstoel* on 14 June 1778, that it was impossible to collect them as Jan Remmels 'by malicious threats and other insults frightened away his debtors to such an extent that no one dares to be the first to touch him to liquidate his estate'. Haste was needed, 'since the estate deteriorates more and more'. The *Etstoel* thus decided the next day that Jan Remmels 'had to behave like a quiet and peaceful inhabitant and had to succumb to the judges and laws'. He would be prosecuted as 'a conscious offender of the laws and a disturbant of the common peace' if he continued his opposition.⁸⁸ At the same time the *Landschrijver* had been empowered to take information and the sheriff of Havelte was ordered together with the sheriff's assistant of Kolderveen and 'a reasonable number of soldiers' to take possession of the farm and its further belongings and, if Jan Remmels resisted, to capture him and bring him to Assen.⁸⁹

Meanwhile Remmels' position in Kolderveen had become hardly bearable. Many were concerned that he could have been insulting the authorities for so long without repercussions, some of them, among them the school master, warned him, others tried to avoid him as much as possible. One witness declared to the Scribe that he 'met Jan Remmels many times and had tried to avoid him, because he was usually talking in a shameful way and insulting the legal authorities'. Another 'had feared him and had avoided him many times so as not to be able to hear him'. Yet another made known 'that no one could be with him, that he was feared by the inhabitants of Kolderveen, and that he [the witness] was amazed about the leniency that had been shown to his person' (in total 25 witnesses stepped forwards, all of them male). The scribe, who was taking these and other depositions about the behaviour of Jan Remmels in the middle of August, also wrote that Jan Remmels had forced himself into the room during the interrogations, to ask whether he was finished yet. When he was asked to remove himself

Jan Remmels struck his hand to his breast, saying, I swear to you, you shall do me justice, and you shall return my goods to me, or otherwise you shall take my blood as well, I want to have the road to my land, or this head will fall, stroking his hand over his neck while saying this.

From the middle of September he was imprisoned in Assen, where he was interrogated on 28 October 1778. He was then only willing to say that the road was not given to him, 'I do not want to answer you more, you are my blood enemy, what are you Devils brood doing to me!' Three days later he was banned from Drenthe in perpetuity and convicted to six years in prison, 'to reign in his evil humours, to sustain the common peace, and to avoid probable disasters'.⁹⁰ Even by contemporary standards the verdict was severe and suggests a form of

⁸⁷. See for an account of the trial costs: RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 61, fol. 132-133; vol. 62, fol. 232.

⁸⁸. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 61, fol. 56.

⁸⁹. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 14, vol. 61, fol. 56-56vo.

⁹⁰. RAD, Archive of the *Etstoel*, inv.nr. 8, vol. 3, p. 44-47.

class justice.⁹¹ Political machinations cannot be excluded either. If the case could not be used to drive a wedge into the law system of Drenthe, granting a favour to Jan Remmel's rivals could yield political capital.

In November Jan Remmels was transported to Groningen where he died on 7th December 1779.⁹²

VII.

In this paper I intended to show how simple scolding matches were embedded in bigger structures. With the sole insults of one person as a point of departure, I have tried to illuminate in increasingly wider circles the biographic, social, demographic, economic, political and judicial contexts, without which the insulting words, in my view, remain petrified, uncoherent shouts which have somehow by change braced the centuries. Of course it has been an advantage that sufficient (but never enough) sources are available to give substance to this approach. But even fewer or less elaborate sources can also yield results.⁹³

A multi-biographical approach does not only clarify what insults referred to. It is also based on a particular concept of culture. In this sense it does not concern a more or less autonomous cultural system of a more or less differentiated group of people, but rather the daily practice of actual people of flesh and blood. In contrast to a symbolic approach to culture, my preferred option implies more attention to social aspects. The question who shared particular forms of culture and the one about the consensus within a community are less accentuated than its limits, the violation of norms, and conflicts. In my opinion it would be difficult to approach insults differently, as they are expressions of conflicts.⁹⁴ In the last instance they are set in present day discussions as much as in historical contexts.

⁹¹. This conclusion of Buist about all the verdicts between 1750 and 1811 is certainly applicable to this one verdict, see Buist, 'Van oude vrijheid', 494. The 'convocated *etten*' (a quarter of all the *etten* of the *Etstoel*) who had to pronounce a verdict in criminal cases usually only empowered a prefabricated one.

⁹². Rijksarchief in Groningen, Archive of the prisons, inv.nr. 7, vol. 8, fol. 152-152vo.

⁹³. Cf. De Blécourt, *Termen van toverij*, 99-133.

⁹⁴. A very inspiring book in this context is: David Warren Sabean, *Power in the blood. Popular culture and village discourse in early modern Germany* (Cambridge [etc.] 1984). Cf. Burke's review of it in *Social history* 11 (1986) 251-253.